Runaway Dragon
by Silverfox

Summary

Draco runs away from home and Severus finds him. This is about Draco, but we learn a few things about Sevi as well. Or did you know he lives in ...
’That Dog' in Diagon Alley

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A/N - Please don't get confused now. This isn't the sequel nor prequel to My Name's Severus or Harry Potter Hogwarts Caretaker. It doesn't fit in with either of those. It's that Draco fic I've been planning for so long.

You'll notice that Hogsmeade is quite a bit bigger in this story than in the books. It's not a village. It's a big town, not quite a city, but it's still inhabited by magical folk only.

And Snape will seem a little (OK a lot) OOC. That's because I'm showing him as a private man with a family and he couldn't be lonely and bitter for that. He's still the same old bastard to the Gryffindors, but he's kind and loving to his family and Draco is his favourite after all.

Runaway Dragon

Chapter 1: 'That Dog' in Diagon Alley
Draco Malfoy was sitting in his room at Malfoy Manor staring angrily out the window at a perfectly blue summer sky. He would have much preferred dark rain clouds. They would have suited his current emotional state much better.

He had only just arrived home from school about two hours ago. A chauffeur had met him at the train station and taken him home to Malfoy Manor without saying a single word. Draco suspected that the reason the servant hadn't even greeted him properly was that he had been fighting so hard not to burst into laughter at the sight of Draco after he'd been hexed by Potter and his gang on the train.

The family's butler who had welcomed him back upon entering the house had shown less self restraint. He had actually grinned and led Draco straight into the kitchen where the cook who also happened to be very good at wizard medicine had quickly removed all traces of the spells. Draco didn't really mind the butler's grin. It hadn't been a condescending grin. More a conspiratorially kind. The same grin he'd had when Draco had been younger and had scraped his knees climbing out of a window after his father had put him under house arrest one day. He had taken him to the cook back then as well. And never reported him to his father.

Draco liked the butler and he suspected that the butler liked him as well though they hardly ever talked unless it was about business. Lucius Malfoy did not approve of his son chatting with common servants.

"Your father has gone to London to take care of some business with the ministry, I believe." the butler had informed him once he'd been presentable again. "He will not be back until the evening and has suggested you have dinner without him, if he should not be back in time."

Draco had nodded. That meant that he probably was away on business for Lord Voldemort and not at the ministry. He wasn't sure if the servants had any idea of his father's affiliation with the dark lord. Probably not.

"And Mother?" he'd asked to take their minds off wondering what could be so important that Lucius was not present for the arrival of his son whom he hadn't seen since the Easter holidays. Not that Lucius usually was there to greet him when he arrived home from school.

"At some tea party, I believe."

Of course. Where else would she be? Narcissa Malfoy was always at some party or other. Unless of course she was just in the middle of getting ready for one. Draco hardly ever saw her. He knew that she loved him though whereas he wasn't all that sure about his father. Sometimes he thought that he was just some prestige object to his father. Like a trophy to show around and boast about among his friends and business associates. Draco was never sure which category the people his father sometimes introduced him to belonged in. The difference was hard to tell. Maybe Lucius Malfoy didn't have friends at all. Draco wasn't even sure if he had any friends himself. Somehow Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle didn't really fit the part.

As neither parent had been home to talk to, Draco had gone to his room to watch the house elves unpack his trunk and wait for his parents to come home. His mother had rushed in a few minutes ago. She had hugged and kissed him and raced off to have her hands manicured by her house elven maid. She hadn't had time to talk with Draco.

And that was exactly what Draco wanted right now. To tell somebody about his school year. About what Potter and his gang had done to him on the train ride home, about all the times they'd
teased him, about that horribly good broom Potter had, about needing a new broom as well to be able to beat him at Quidditch, about that annoying mudblood Granger who had come out top in all their classes again ...

Draco would have preferred to talk about these things to his mother. Mother never accused him of inadequacy when he told her things. His father's attitude towards his complaints was usually: 'I'm sure that it's all your fault. You're just a good for nothing little rat, but I have to keep up appearances to the outside.'

Appearances were the most important thing in the Malfoy family. That was the one thing both his parents had in common. In his mother's case it was her looks and in his father's it was the appearance of respectability and a well functioning family. That last thing included a well functioning son who was at the top of all his classes in school. Unluckily Draco couldn't comply. Hermione Granger was just too good for him. No matter how hard he tried, Hermione was always better.

And Professor Snape just didn't seem to understand. He kept telling him that he was a fine student and that he should stop working so hard and just enjoy himself sometimes, that it wasn't good for him to be studying all the time. Draco usually pointed out to him that he was after all on the Quidditch team and got enough physical exercise from his training. But Snape insisted that what he needed to do wasn't to get physical exercise, but to relax and have fun. 'And you're not having fun when you're playing Quidditch, Draco.' he'd say. 'I've watched you often enough. You're turning it into just as serious work as your studying. Sometimes I think you could get better results if you didn't try so hard.'

That could get really annoying. Not that he didn't usually like Snape. He was always there for him when he needed help or advice, but he absolutely hated it when Snape told him the exact opposite of what his father said. It confused him. He knew he had to obey his father. His father was of course always right. Why then did Snape disagree with him sometimes?

Well, right now neither Snape nor Narcissa was available to talk to so he had to wait for his father. Lucius was the only right address for requests for new brooms anyway. Narcissa might listen to those and nod sympathetically, but she wouldn't go out and buy him a broom. That was his father's job.

Hours passed before Draco finally heard a door slam downstairs. His father had arrived. Nobody else dared to slam doors at Malfoy Manor. It also indicated that his father was angry and would probably not be in the mood to listen to Draco's complaints, but Draco had waited too long. He was going to risk being sent back to his room briskly. He jumped up and raced down into the entrance hall.

"Father! You're home!" he yelled happily and hugged him.

And then he smelled it. His father was drunk. This was the very worst time to approach him. Lucius Malfoy was dangerous when he was drunk, very dangerous. Draco knew that he was to keep out of his father's way under those circumstances at all costs.

But it was too late. He, could no longer retreat. Lucius looked at him eyes gleaming with anger.

It was getting late. Severus Snape was strolling down Diagon Alley unsure what to do. The pupils had finally left and he had the whole summer to look forward to and enjoy himself, but his wife unfortunately had decided that this was the perfect time to 'get rid of that dog' as she'd put it.
'That Dog' was a cute little bastard of indiscernible descent. He had yellow fur with a few white spots. One ear standing up in a perfect triangle the other hanging down almost to his eye. He had, in Severus' opinion the cutest little doggy eyes and an adorable smile when he was looking up at him as he was doing right now. His long bushy tail was wagging excitedly. He was one very happy little dog.

Severus had found him a few weeks ago right here in Diagon Alley when he'd been shopping for potion ingredients for the school. The little dog had been limping badly and there had been nobody around who could have been his owner. Thus Severus had picked him up and taken him home to take care of the injured leg.

His wife however hadn't been too happy about it and thus Severus had promised to return the animal to his owner as soon as his paw was healed. And Sara had decided that this was the perfect day to do that.

Severus had been trudging through Diagon Alley and all it's little side branches for almost the entire day. He'd asked every shop owner and resident at least twice and annoyed lots of shoppers, but nobody knew who 'That Dog' belonged to. Nobody except 'That Dog', that is, who was quite convinced that he belonged to Severus and that nothing was allowed to stand between him and his master as one very angry pet shop owner had found out when he had tried to remove the animal from his shop after he had given his precious pure bred cats a nasty scare.

That shop owner of course had not proved to be very helpful and Severus had had to grudgingly agree to pay the mediwizard's bill. Sara would not be happy to hear about that incident. They were already short on money anyway.

Severus and 'That Dog' rounded the very last corner on Diagon Alley for the third time that day and Severus wondered slightly what to do next. He could either go home and come back another day, or he could try asking around in Knockturn Alley now which was a bad time, because it was already getting dark and that was when the customers usually began to arrive there. Of course he needed to ask as many people as possible if he really wanted to find 'That Dog's' owner, but somehow he didn't wish to talk to the particular sort of people who frequented Knockturn Alley. He'd rather keep 'That Dog'. Sarah on the other hand ...

Suddenly he heard soft sobbing. 'That Dog' started to whimper in sympathy. Severus followed the sound and found a small very familiar figure crouched in the far corner sniffing.

"Draco?" Snape asked surprised. "What are you doing here at this time? You're supposed to be at home. How did you get here anyway?"

Draco looked up at the blurry image of his teacher with tear filled eyes and continued sobbing. 'That Dog' whimpered even louder pitying the crying boy.

"Come on, Draco. I'll take you home." Snape offered.

"N ... no." sobbed Draco. "He'll kill me. I can't go home ... ever."

"Why not?" asked Snape confused. What was he supposed to do with the boy? He couldn't just take him to his dorm or Madam Pomfrey in the middle of the holidays.

"He killed her." sobbed Draco.

'He killed her?' thought Severus. Hadn't Draco just said 'He'll kill me.' before that?

"Who killed whom?" he asked the boy pronouncing every word very slowly and clearly. He
needed a clear answer.

"My f.. fa ... father." sobbed Draco even harder. "M ... m ... mother."

"What?" Now this was getting very confusing. Snape tried to remember if there was a spell to make somebody stop crying. Maybe Draco could explain if he could only stop sobbing?

"What about your father?" he tried patiently. What else could he do? He didn't know a spell for this and this was neither the place nor the time to brew a potion even if he'd had all the necessary ingredients with him.

"My father ... killed ... my mother." Draco finally got out.

"What?!"

"He was drunk. ... And I made him angry. ... He hit me. ... And then ... Then Mother came. She stepped in. ... I ran away. ... Father was shouting. ... I heard him hit her. ... And she screamed. ... And ... then I heard nothing and ... I sneaked back. And there was blood everywhere. Mother was lying on the floor and she wasn't moving and Father was standing over her. He looked at me and I just knew he'd kill me if... if I stayed. ... Please, don't take me back!"

Snape just stared at Draco during the whole halting speech. Lucius Malfoy hitting his son and wife? Well, he knew that Lucius was a stern and sometimes cruel man, but to lose control like this?

"Draco, calm down now. I'm sure it looked terrible, but you must have overreacted. Your father would never kill you or your mother. Maybe she just fell and hit her head. Head wounds do bleed terribly, but that doesn't mean she's dead. Come on. Lets just take you home and you'll see that your mother is fine. I'm sure she's been cured by now." he held his hand out to Draco once again.

"No. He killed her." Draco insisted shaking his head violently.

"Okay, I'll go in first and see how she is. You wait outside and if everything's fine I come back and get you." suggested Snape.

"No. He'll kill you too." Draco refused obviously scared by the very suggestion that Snape might enter Malfoy Manor.

"What? Do you want me to get the aurors to see if your mother's still alive?"

Draco nodded. He seemed to like that idea.

"Alright, I'll tell the aurors, but it will have to wait until tomorrow. They get rather grumpy when called about nothing at this late hour." But what to do with the boy in the meantime. "I'll just have to take you home overnight."

"No. Father'll kill me." shrieked Draco.

"Not your home." sighed Snape. "Mine."

Draco blinked at that, stopped sobbing and started to rub his tears off his face with his hands. Snape handed him a handkerchief.

"Thanks."

'That Dog' stopped whimpering and when Draco got up and gently pushed his hand into Snape's he started smiling again and raced around the two wagging his tail.
"Is that your dog?" Draco asked on their way back to the Leaky Cauldron.

"He thinks so." Snape sighed.

They took the floo network to the public floo station in Hogsmeade and suddenly Draco realised that he had no idea where Snape lived when he wasn't at Hogwarts. They weren't going to Hogwarts, this much he could tell. One might not be able to apparate to Hogwarts, but one could floo there just fine. Whatever place Snape lived in obviously didn't have its own fireplace. That didn't bode well. Even the Weasleys could afford their own fireplace, Draco knew. He suddenly wondered how much money his teachers made at Hogwarts.

Snape stepped out of the fireplace and set down 'That Dog' whom he had carried through the floo travel. Dogs could just walk through the fireplaces with their owners, but Severus didn't want to risk frightening 'That Dog' because he was so small. That's why he'd decided to carry him through like a cat.

'That Dog' laughed at the two humans and led the way down towards the small river that ran through the town. He obviously knew which way was home. Draco hoped that that meant that they didn't have far to go. Hogsmeade was a big town even though the Hogwarts students only visited its centre during their Hogsmeade weekends.

They soon reached the river and walked alongside it for a while. Draco had never been in this part of town before. There weren't any shops here that might interest children. 'That Dog' led them towards the bridge that crossed the river.

"We're not going over there, are we?" Draco asked Snape cautiously.

His father had warned him about crossing that bridge.

"I know it's not the best part of town, but you'll be okay as long as you stick close to me. They're not bad people if they know you."

Draco regarded Snape queerly. Not the best part of town was an understatement. According to Draco's father it was the exact opposite, a place where only the scum of the wizarding world lived. Squibs, mudbloods, werewolves and unemployed. Draco wondered how an actual professor from Hogwarts fit in here, but he didn't dare to ask. Maybe Snape had been born there and had just never bothered to move away? Somehow that didn't seem likely however.

They crossed the bridge and Draco soon saw what his father had meant. The houses were small around here and as they walked on they passed more and more shabby huts that were in bad need of repairs. They followed the river further and further away from the town centre and suddenly the houses got bigger again. Apartment houses Draco realised with a start. He hadn't even known that they existed in Hogsmeade Even the poorest wizards he knew lived in their own houses. Well, obviously he'd been wrong about that.

Snape now led him away from the river. This part of town was very dark, but Draco could make out the shapes of bushes and trees around him and he unconsciously stepped closer to Snape. This had to be the notorious Merlin Park, the poorest most crime ridden part of Hogsmeade Even aurors, Lucius had told Draco, didn't dare cross Merlin Park alone after dark. Snape however didn't seem to have any second thoughts about it. At least this was the very worst part of town. It would get better again as soon as they had left the immediate vicinity of the park.

But it didn't happen that way. 'That Dog' barked excitedly and raced off towards one of the apartment houses surrounding the park. He stopped in front of the door and waited wagging his tail
happily.

"Here?" Draco asked Snape doubtfully.

"I know it isn't what you're used to, but you need a place for the night and this is all I can offer."

Draco regarded the dirty entrance. It was better than sleeping on the floor in a street corner in Diagon Alley, he supposed. And at least he was no longer alone.

Draco watched Snape unlock the door with an ordinary muggle looking key. They stepped in, still led by 'That Dog'. The stairway was narrow and dark. And whatever was that smell? Draco wrinkled his nose, but decided not to comment. He was feeling more than slightly embarrassed at seeing all this. Especially when he thought about Malfoy Manor. He was sure that Snape would have done anything rather than show one of his pupils where he lived. Especially a rich kid like Draco.

There was a small red glowing spot on the wall right next to the door. What was that? Draco stepped away from it eyeing it cautiously. It didn't move.

"Is that supposed to be here?" he asked Snape who was relocking the door.

Snape looked up at him quizzically. Draco nodded at the red spot. ... And Snape laughed.

"Draco, that's just the light switch. It glows so that we can find it more easily in the dark."

"Light switch?" It seemed the object was supposed to be here and wasn't dangerous either, but otherwise Draco was none the wiser.

"You've never seen electric light before, have you?" Snape sounded slightly amused. "It's muggle technology. They use it to light their homes."

"Not very effective." Draco decided. "I can barely see a thing."

"That's because it's not active." Snape seemed to be fighting laughter by now. "That's what the light switch is for, to activate it. You have to press the glowing button. Like this see." He touched the glowing spot with his thumb and suddenly a round object above the door started to glow slightly, flickered a few times and then emitted a steady bright white light. It looked like a miniature sun. Draco stared at it, but that hurt his eyes so he turned towards the light switch once again. 'That Dog' was barking impatiently his voice resounding terribly through the whole house, but Snape ignored him. He was enjoying Draco's reaction to the little piece of muggle culture too much. Too bad he didn't own a TV. That would no doubt have fascinated the boy for hours at least.

Draco discovered that the glowing little red light was gone, but there was a small, dark, almost black button in the wall. Was that it?

"The lamps will continue to glow for a few minutes, then go out again to conserve energy. Then the red buttons will start to glow again. A clever little trick muggles use instead of a Lumos spell."

"What's it doing here? There aren't any muggles in Hogsmeade. We could have just used Lumos." Draco asked tearing his attention away from the switch.

Snape started to climb the narrow stairway and Draco followed him trying to ignore the dirt and graffiti on the walls.

"There might not be any muggles here, but there are a lot of squibs that live in this part of town.
And it's rather comfortable for the kids too. What would you do if I wasn't here with you? You're not allowed to use magic during the holidays."

"Oh, father always found a way around that stupid law. Can't you?"

"I suppose I know how he did it, but I don't have the kind of money needed to buy myself out of trouble if we'd get caught. I'd thank you to obey the law as long as you're staying with me."

Draco stared down at the dirty steps under his feet. He should try to avoid talking about anything that might have some remote connection to his father's money, he decided. It was strange. Normally Draco enjoyed boasting about his father's riches and embarrassing people for being poor. It made him feel strong and superior, but this time he felt embarrassed and guilty for bringing it up. As if there was something wrong with being rich and not with being poor. What was that feeling? Where had it come from so suddenly?

"Yes, Sir." he said meekly. "Don't worry. I won't be any trouble at all."

Snape smiled and bent down to pick up 'That Dog' who was exhausted from jumping around him all day and was suddenly finding it difficult to jump up all those steps.

And then without any advance warning they were standing in the dark.

"What happened?" Draco asked startled.

"The lights went out. I told you they only stay on for a few minutes. Don't worry. There's a light switch on every floor. Just look for another red glowing button."

They moved on in the dark and indeed Draco soon discovered another red glowing spot.

"Over there." he whispered excitedly.

Snape smiled in the dark. The boy sounded like he expected the switch to run away if he talked too loudly. He pressed the button and the lights came back on on the floors above and below them. Draco stared up at the lamp above their heads, waiting for it to come alight as well, but it remained dark.

"What's wrong? Why's this one taking so long?"

"Because it's broken." Snape explained with a sigh. He'd had no idea how long a fifteen year old boy could be fascinated with a simple electric light. "It hasn't worked in years."

"Why don't you fix it?"

"Because I'm not an electrician. I know how electricity works theoretically, but I can't actually build or repair electric gadgets."

"You know how it works? Wow! But why can't you just repair it with a spell?"

"Because I'd have to know exactly what's wrong with it to make the spell work. These things are rather complicated and most of it is hidden inside the wall. It would take an electrician to repair this."

"What's an electrician?"

"Someone whose job it is to repair electric things."
"There are people who do nothing but that?"

"Well, I suppose they'd do other things in their spare time." Snape smiled. The boy was kind of cute when he was confused.

"So why don't you just get one such electrician to repair that candle?"

Now Snape was actually laughing.

"It's not a candle. It's called a lamp. And I can't get it repaired, because it doesn't belong to me."

"Oh. Well, who does it belong to?"

"The owner of the house, I suppose." Snape shrugged.

"And why doesn't he get an electrician to repair that lamp?"

"Three reasons, I guess. He doesn't live here, so he doesn't care and probably doesn't even know its broken. He doesn't want to invest the money and it's really difficult to get permission to let a muggle into Hogsmeade" Snape started up the stairs once more and Draco followed him reluctantly.

"An electrician is a muggle?" he asked after only a few steps.

"Yes, electrician is a muggle job."

"Why? Wouldn't it be better to have some wizard electricians? Then it wouldn't be a problem to get them to come here."

"It's not a wizard job. Muggles need electricians to repair all their electric objects. Wizards don't need electric objects, so they don't need electricians and have no reason to become electricians." Snape explained patiently.

"But you're a wizard and you have a broken lamp on your stairs." Draco protested.

Snape turned right on the next floor and led Draco down a narrow hallway. It was as dirty as the stairway had been and seemed a bit dark to Draco. There definitely should have been more lamps here, he decided.

"Draco, it's not my lamp and not my stairs. They belong to the owner of this house."

"But you live here and you said that the owner doesn't."

Snape was about to reply to that, but at that moment the lights went out again. Draco looked around and discovered a red glow right next to him on the wall. He raised his hand slowly and touched the switch gently with a fingertip. Nothing happened.

"You have to push it in." Snape commented watching Draco's cautious approach with a very amused look on his face that Draco luckily couldn't see in the dark. "It moves into the wall a bit, if you push it a little harder. That's what starts the lights. Just tickling it doesn't work. It can't register your presence or that of your finger."

Draco touched the button again. He gave it a very tiny experimental push. Nothing. Draco pushed a little harder and suddenly he felt the button give way and seconds later the lights began to flicker on in the already familiar way. Draco grinned proudly.
"I did it!"

"Oh, great." Snape rolled his eyes. "You did something every four year old muggle does several times a day without even thinking about it."

Draco blushed slightly, but didn't stop grinning. They were only a few more metres away from Snape's door and Draco didn't have any more time to ask questions until they reached it.

Snape sat down 'That Dog', once again pulled out a very muggle looking key and opened the door. 'That Dog' slipped in the moment the opening was wide enough and disappeared into the flat. Snape stepped inside gesturing for Draco to follow and seconds later another lamp came on in the tiny room the door led to. Draco hadn't seen any red glowing buttons, but he supposed that Snape must have turned it on when he hadn't been looking.

Snape quickly took of his shoes and slipped into his house shoes, then looked at Draco who was still standing outside watching him through the open door.

"Come on in. There's nothing here's that might bite you. ... Well, at least I don't think the dog's going to bite. He seems to like you."

Draco hesitatingly stepped in. The room seemed too small for even one person to him, but then again he couldn't just keep standing around outside all night. He closed the door behind him, took of his shoes as well and then took another look around. There were two more doors leaving only one side of the room free. That was used to hang up cloaks. Neither Draco nor Severus had been wearing cloaks today though, as it was a very hot summer day. One of the doors was standing half open and Draco could see that it led into a very small bathroom.

'That Dog' had retreated through that door to give them some room and was peering out expectantly at the other door which Snape was opening right now.

Again the dog was the first person through the door and seconds later a woman's voice startled Draco. He hadn't expected anyone else to be here. Draco had to smile at himself. Why had he just assumed automatically that his teacher was single?

"Severus, didn't you promise to take that dog back to his owners? What's he doing here again?"

"Sorry, Sarah. I didn't find them."

"I knew it. He's another stray. Do you realise how expensive dog food is? What are we going to do with the animal?"

Severus sighed rolling his eyes at Draco once again.

"He's not a stray, Sarah. I just didn't ask the right people, yet. I'll find his owners next time. Something else got in the way today." Snape said and stepped into the room.

Draco immediately followed barefoot as he didn't have any house shoes with him. The floor under his feet was rather cold.

The room they entered now seemed to serve as both living room and kitchen at the same time. Draco looked around and thought that that combination had to be rather uncomfortable. The woman who had been scratching 'That Dog' behind his ears with one hand while attempting to open a can of dog-food with the other looked up startled.

"Who's that?" she asked eyeing him cautiously.
"That's Draco, one of my pupils. His parents had a row and I promised he could stay for the night."

"Not another stray!" Sarah protested angrily. "We've already got a cat and a dog." she glanced down at 'That Dog' who smiled up at her happily. "Not to mention the raven. And we've got Billy. We don't need a troublesome teenager."

Draco drew closer to Snape.

"I won't be any trouble," he promised. "I'll be asleep all night and I promise I'll find somewhere else to stay tomorrow."

"Oh, sure. I've heard that one before, boy." grumbled Sarah. She had finally managed to open the can and was now feeding 'That Dog' who was nearly ecstatic over her kindness.

"You're not going to find somewhere else, Draco. I'll take you home tomorrow." Snape declared and steered Draco towards the table with one hand.

Draco reluctantly sat down. He was feeling uncomfortable. He didn't belong here. Mrs Snape didn't want him. ... Well, Mrs Snape didn't seem to want the dog either, but she'd still fed him.

"You promised the aurors would check if mother's still alive first."

"And I'll owl them first thing in the morning. They'll be pretty annoyed though when they get there and all they find is that everybody's frantically looking for you."

"They'll find that Mother is dead." Draco insisted. "I saw it. He killed her."

Sarah who had been doing something in the kitchen stopped and looked over at Severus quizzically and slightly worried.

"Draco's convinced that his father beat his mother to death, but I know the man, Sarah. He's a cruel bastard, but too clever to do anything like that. He'd never risk Azkaban over a simple family squabble." Severus explained calmly. "I'm sure she just slipped and hit her head. She was probably only out for a few minutes."

Draco shook his head. He knew his mother was dead. Why didn't Snape believe him?

Sarah sighed deeply and served them a simple cold dinner. So she didn't only feed the dog even though she didn't want him, she fed Draco as well. Draco was normally used to more luxurious meals served and cooked by skilful house elves, but he was very hungry all of a sudden and somehow impressed by the very fact that Sarah knew how to prepare a meal at all. His mother would have been hopelessly confused if asked to perform such a task. Looking around the room once more he decided that Sarah most likely even knew how to cook. At least he didn't think there were any house elves or servants around to do the cooking for her.

Sarah herself was a rather plain woman. Small, rather plump looking, with mousy brown hair and eyes an indefinable mixture of brown and green. He wondered slightly what Professor Snape saw in her. Then again she knew how to cook and maybe she could do some other quite impressive things even if she didn't have his mother's looks. Snape would probably not have wanted a wife who didn't know how to cook no matter how pretty she was.

After dinner Snape showed Draco into a room that wasn't much bigger than the entrance room where he'd left his shoes. It reminded him strongly of Snape's office at Hogwarts even though that was about twice its size. It was just as cluttered with potion ingredients, vials and flasks. There was a small worktable with a cauldron and lots of finished potions standing around.
"Do you sell that stuff?" Draco asked surprised.

"Sometimes. Most of the time we just help out the neighbours for free, though. They couldn't afford to buy potions anyway." Seeing Draco's confused look Snape added. "They help us too, Draco. It's sort of like trading goods for goods instead of money. Nobody around here has any money, but everybody has something to give even if it's only a hand at repairs."

Draco stared down at the floor. No money. Why was he feeling so bad about being rich all of a sudden? It was something to be proud of. Wasn't it?

There was a small couch squeezed into one corner of the room and Snape quickly made Draco a bed on it.

"I know you're used to better than this, but it's just for tonight."

Draco wondered if he could sleep on such a small bed at all, but it was probably all the Snapes had to offer and he reminded himself that he'd be sleeping on a street corner on Diagon Alley tonight if Snape hadn't come by and taken him to this odd house with the strange lights. Which reminded him...

"Professor? Why don't the lights in the rooms go out like those outside in the hall?"

"Because they're made to be switched off so you don't have to switch them on again and again if you're spending a longer period of time in one room."

"How do you switch them off? I didn't see any red buttons in here."

"With this." Snape pointed at a strange white something on the wall. "Try it. Just press it like the button."

Draco stretched out his hand and touched the white something. It didn't feel all that different from the glowing light button in the corridor. Draco pushed it experimentally and the room went dark immediately.

"See, that's all there's to it. Now turn it back on." Snape sounded like he was smiling again.

Draco liked that sound. He also liked the idea that Snape was enjoying his exploration of a muggle artefact. His father wouldn't have approved of this at all.

"How? I still don't see a red button."

"The same way you switched it off. The switches in the flat don't glow, because we know where they are. They're used both for switching the light on and for switching it off."

"Oh." Draco pressed the switch again and indeed the light came back on. "So when I push one of the red buttons in the corridor when the light's already on it'll go out again?"

"No, those are only 'on-buttons'. This one here's an 'on-off-button'. The lights in the corridor wouldn't react at all. The buttons only work when the light's turned off."

"Why? How are those lamps different from this one?" Draco asked intrigued.

"I don't know. They just are." shrugged Snape.

"But you said you knew how it works."
"I know how electricity works. I don't know exactly how all the little electric devices use it. There are lots of them and most are much more complicated than a light switch and a lamp. I suppose the red buttons are connected to some sort of clock, but I really don't know."

"Who would know?"

"An electrician, I suppose," said Snape. "Here, you can sleep in this. You saw where the bathroom is, but don't use too much water. Clean water is rather expensive around here. Electricity costs money as well so please turn off the lights when you don't need them. You know how to do it now."

Draco took the large old muggle t-shirt Snape handed him and wondered for a moment who it belonged to. Probably Snape himself he decided. Sarah wouldn't want to share her clothes with him, would she?

"Thank you. Sir." he said softly. He wasn't used to thanking people, but he felt like he ought to this time.

"Good night, Draco."

"God night. Sir."

Snape turned to leave, when Draco suddenly remembered something.

"Professor?"

"Yes?"

"How does one become an electrician?"

Snape was startled. Draco's fascination with electricity was amazing and totally unexpected. What was going on in the boy's head to make him ask questions like this one?

"I suppose they learn it at some muggle school." he said. Where else would muggles learn their jobs anyway? "Or maybe from some older electricians? No, I think, a school most likely."

"What subjects do you think they have at that school?"

"I don't know, Draco. A lot of Physics I suppose."

"What's Physics?"

"A muggle science. It's actually rather interesting, but nothing a wizard would need to know."

"Is it about electricity?"

"Yes, among other things, it explains how electricity works. It's also about why things fall down when you drop them and how magnets attract things made of metal."

"What's a magnet?" Draco immediately asked.

"Another muggle toy. You really don't need to know about them. You're a wizard. You're above these things."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to annoy you."
"I'm just tired, Draco. I'll try to explain some more some other time, but I'm really not an electrician."

"That's okay, Sir. I'm just curious. That's all. Good night."

"Good night, Draco." Severus smiled and turned to leave. "Oh, and Draco."

"Yes?"

"You should have taken Muggle Studies."

Later when Draco was curled up comfortably in his strange bed on the small couch in the strange room trying to go to sleep he thought about that comment. Muggle Studies. Yes, it sounded really interesting. He'd love to know more about all the strange objects muggles used. But his father would most likely have killed him if he'd taken Muggle Studies. Well, his father was going to kill him anyway.

If they'd take him to some orphanage tomorrow or maybe to live with his great uncle in Scotland, maybe he could take Muggle Studies then? Would Dumbledore let him add a new subject in his fifth year? The class was two years ahead of him. Or would they let him take a third year class? Could he even still go to Hogwarts after what had happened? Maybe he would go to some other school. It might be easier to take a new subject when starting at a new school. But then he wouldn't see Professor Snape ever again. Would Snape mind if Draco sent him an owl every once in a while? Would he write back?

Draco finally fell asleep and dreamed of light switches and lamps and a muggle electrician who could repair absolutely everything.

A/N - So what do you think? Did Lucius kill Narcissa? Will Snape find the owner of "That Dog"? Will Draco take Muggle Studies?

In the next chapter: We meet the rest of the Snape family. Get a visit from a very impolite man and Draco wants to go to the park.
Three Pets And A Baby

Chapter 2: Three Pets And A Baby

A sudden weight dropping onto his chest woke Draco. He sat up quickly and promptly fell off the couch.

"Mrweow!" protested the sudden weight.

Draco glared at the large grey and white cat with badly torn up ears. The cat glared back, turned, swished his tail and stalked out of the room obviously disgusted with the intruder in his home.

Draco wondered why the door was standing half open for a moment, then remembered Pansy Parkinson's cat who had an uncanny knack for opening doors. And this was an easy one. All the cat had to do was jump at the handle and the door would open on its own.

Light was streaming in through the window and Draco could hear unmistakable sounds of activity from outside the door. He got up and looked out the window. He had definitely slept too long. The sun was shining brightly down at Merlin Park. He could see people walking through the park and there was a group of kids playing some game he didn't know on a large lawn beneath his window.

The park actually looked very nice and inviting in bright daylight. He wondered why his father had warned him about the place. The kids looked like they were having fun and not worried about their safety at all. They were all dressed in blue muggle clothes and wearing identical blue caps. There was one ball on the playing field and they all seemed to be chasing after it. Maybe it was a team game similar to Quidditch and this was a team training for their next game? That would explain the uniform though it didn't seem to be all that strict except for the caps.

Draco picked up his robes and padded out into the living room. Maybe Snape would let him go down to watch the kids play after he'd written to the aurors? It would take them some time to check Malfoy Manor.

But Professor Snape wasn't in the living room. Sarah Snape was sitting by the window sewing and there was a very small somebody crawling around on the floor.

"Good morning Mrs Snape." Draco said politely. "Good morning baby."

"Good morning." answered Mrs Snape.

"Da!" answered the baby.

"His name's Billy." Sarah explained smiling slightly.

"Hi, Billy." said Draco smiling too. Billy was a cute kid. He had his father's black eyes and hair, but his mothers rather unremarkable nose which in Draco's opinion was a rather lucky combination. Who'd want to have a nose like Professor Snape's?

"Da!" repeated Billy and Draco concluded that that was probably all the little guy ever said.

Draco had no experience with babies and therefore no idea how old Billy might be or what he might be able to do and not able to do. From what he saw at the moment he was quite good at
crawling about and no good at talking. He'd have to find somebody else to talk with. Well, the kids he'd seen in the park were certainly old enough to talk and he was very curious about that game they were playing anyway.

He padded into the bathroom to wash and dress and when he returned he found that Sarah had set out a plate for him and was just filling it with breakfast. Scrambled eggs. Mmmh! He'd had no idea he was this hungry. He sat down to eat and Sarah sent him another smile when she saw how hungrily he dug in. She'd probably cooked this herself, Draco realised once again startled. This took a bit of getting used to.

The cat was now in the living room as well having his own breakfast sitting beside the kitchen sink and Billy was still crawling about on the floor.

"Mmummy!" he said when he passed Sarah.

So Billy could talk. Or at least was learning to talk. Draco watched the baby with renewed interest. It wasn't entirely true that he couldn't walk either. Sometimes he'd pull himself up on some piece of furniture with his hands, then make a few unsteady steps and fall over once he had to let go of the supporting furniture.

Neither Professor Snape nor the dog had showed up by the time Draco finished his breakfast.

"Where's Professor Snape?" he finally asked Sarah. "He promised to owl the aurors about my mother today."

"Oh, he already did that hours ago. Sent Munin right off with the letter and then went to show the dog around in Knockturn Alley. I don't know why he bothers. He knows that dog's a stray. He's just pretending to want to take him back. I know we're going to end up with another pet." she eyed the cat angrily.

"He went to Knockturn Alley? Why didn't you wake me up? I'd have gone with him." Draco exclaimed.

"Oh, no, young man. Knockturn Alley is no place for good little boys."

"I'm not little!" protested Draco. "And I've been there before. Father always took me to Knockturn Alley with him when he went shopping."

"Then your father is a very irresponsible man. Taking a kid to Knockturn Alley. Really! What was he thinking? People who know what's good for them don't go there at all. But no, Severus has to go ask all those mad death eaters and monsters if they've lost a dog. The ministry's going to suspect him again if he goes on like this, but will he listen to me? No."

Draco listened to Sarah's rant for a while, then asked her when she was expecting the answer from the ministry.

"Sometime this afternoon, I suppose. But don't you worry about your Mummy. I'm sure everything's all right." Sarah said, but Draco had a feeling that she was just trying to calm him down.

"She's dead." he insisted. "I saw her lie there all surrounded by blood. Father killed her and he'd have killed me too. I know Professor Snape says Father would never do something like that in his right mind, but he wasn't in his right mind. He was drunk. I should have stayed away from him. I always do when he's drunk. But I'd just come home from school and I wanted to talk to him. Mother didn't have any time so I went to talk to Father and he got angry, because Hermione
Granger got better grades than I did again and he started to hit me and then Mother came and he killed her. It's all my fault."

"No it's not." said Sarah. "People do the strangest things when they're drunk. It's nobody's fault but their own for drinking too much. And I'm still convinced your Mummy's fine. You'll see when that letter comes in a few hours. You just wait and try not to think about it too much."

"Okay, I'll just go down and take a walk in the park until then."

"Oh, no, you don't!" protested Sarah at once. "Merlin Park is no place for little rich kids. It's all full of thieves and gangs and who knows what might happen to an innocent rich boy like you. Severus said you're not to leave the flat without either him or me with you and I totally agree. This is a very bad neighbourhood and you don't belong here."

"But I saw some kids play down in the park. They didn't look afraid at all and they didn't have any adults with them either."

"Those kids wee born here, boy. They know their way around."

"I just want to go down and talk to them. That can't be dangerous."

"Oh, yes it can. As I said, those are local kids. They're very dangerous, for little rich kids like you."

"I already told you I'm not little. I'm almost fifteen. And what makes you think I'm a rich kid anyway? What did Professor Snape tell you about my family?" he wasn't really sure why he was protesting against being called rich. It was the truth after all. Maybe it had something to do with that feeling of shame he'd had back when he'd arrived here. He didn't want her to think of him as rich.

"He didn't tell me anything except what you heard. You're one of his pupils. That means you go to Hogwarts, ergo you're a rich kid."

"So you just think that everybody who goes to Hogwarts is rich?" Draco didn't believe his ears.

"Of course. Poor people can't afford to send their kids to expensive private boarding schools. And Hogwarts is the very best. It's a place for rich kids."

"Oh really? The Weasleys' kids go to Hogwarts too, you know. You can't call the Weasleys rich, can you?"

"Yes I can. By our standards here they're rich. They even have their own house. The Weasley kids may be the poorest who can afford Hogwarts, but the point is that they can afford Hogwarts. And rich kid or not, you're, not leaving the flat and that's final."

"So what do you expect me to do all day? I didn't bring my school books, you know."

"What would you want with your school books anyway? I thought you've got summer holidays." Sarah sounded slightly confused about this.

"I've got to study to get good grades. Father insists that I have to be top of all my classes, but that stupid mudblood Granger is always better than me."

"Watch your language, boy!" Sarah scolded. "You will not use such words in my presence or that of my son. Understood?"
"Sorry." Draco said meekly.

"Where do you kids learn these words anyway?" Sarah started into another rant. "I'm sure your parents don't teach you such fowl language at home."

"Actually they do. Father's pretty much into the pure-blood issue. He's always going on about how muggleborns and squibs are beneath us and we have to keep the family pure and all that sort of thing. So that word's really okay to say around him."

"I'm beginning to really dislike your father, boy. He sounds like a very unpleasant person to be around. I sure hope he doesn't come here to get you. I wouldn't want someone like that in my home and who knows what a bad influence he might be on Billy!"

Draco regarded the baby once again.

"Billy looks a bit young to understand anything Father might say about pure-bloods and politics." he stated.

"Oh, you never know how much the little ones understand. That's why I insist that you watch your tongue from now on. I don't even want him to try to repeat what you said there."

Draco nodded. Billy crawled over to him, pulled himself up on his chair and threw some squishy baby toy into his lap.

"Da!"

"Actually my name's Draco, not Da." he told the baby. "Dra - co."

"Da-oh?"

"Well, that's much closer, yes." Draco giggled.

He took the toy into his hand. It felt very soft and rubbery and when Draco squeezed it slightly it emitted a soft squeak. Billy squealed with delight. So Draco squeezed the toy again and Billy laughed and clamped one tiny hand onto Draco's knee.

"Da-oh!"

He pulled Billy onto his lap and the baby cuddled against him happily.

"Da-oh!"

They played with the little baby toy for about ten minutes until Billy got bored and struggled to get off. Draco set him down onto the floor very gently feeling a little stab of regret in his heart at letting the cuddly little bundle go. He'd never known that babies were such adorable cute little creatures. Hadn't his mother always said that they were annoying and cried all the time? Well, maybe she'd meant the really small ones that were lying in their cradles all the time. It had to be boring not to be able to move about at all. No wonder the kids got cranky and demanded attention by annoying everybody else.

Once again bored he looked up at Sarah who was busy in the kitchen again.

Sarah seemed to feel his eyes on her. Or had she been watching him out of the corner of her eyes all this time?

"You could help me wash the dishes, if you're really bored." she suggested.
Draco jumped up and walked over to her.

"Okay, but I've never done that before. What do I do?"

"Here take this and dry the dishes I hand you." Sarah ordered handing him a towel. "It's not difficult. If Billy were just a year or two older, he'd do that. Doesn't your mother ever make you help her in the kitchen?"

"Er... no. She never goes into the kitchen at all herself. We've ...um... got a house elf who does all the cooking." He somehow didn't feel like mentioning that there were in fact several house elves and also a few servants. It somehow didn't seem right.

"A house elf. And you say you're not a rich kid?"

"Okay, so my family is rich, very rich to be honest, but I still don't see why that should make me any different from those other kids down there." Had he just said that? Had he really just said that? After all the times he'd teased Ron Weasley and also some other kids about being poor? But all of a sudden Draco really felt like there should not be any difference, like he should be allowed to play in the park with all the other kids no matter how much money his parents had.

"It doesn't really make you different, but it does put you in danger. Those kids would be after your money, you know. Just put that plate over there. We'll build a pile of them and put them away after we're done with the washing."

Draco nodded and started building a pile of plates. It was actually not so bad to wash dishes he thought listening to Sarah hum a happy tune while she was working. He tried to hum along a bit and Sarah smiled at him again. Maybe she liked him after all? Draco at least decided that he liked her. Almost as much as he liked Billy.

After they were done with the dishes Sarah showed him how to change Billy's diapers. That proved to be a lot trickier than washing dishes. Billy didn't mind having the dirty diaper removed at all, but he obviously didn't feel like wearing a fresh one. Maybe because it was so hot today? After several minutes of fighting Draco finally managed to hold the baby still while Sarah quickly fixed the new diaper. Billy protested for a moment, but then Draco found a little baby rattle that provided sufficient distraction.

Professor Snape returned around lunchtime to find Sarah busily preparing their meal while Draco was feeding Billy. To Sarah's surprise that undertaking had proven to be less messy than she'd expected so she'd left Draco to it.

'That dog' came back with Snape once again and with a loud bark and mad rush through the whole living room announced himself an official member of the Snape family. Severus had not been able to find his owner and had finally given up.

Sarah only sighed at the news. She'd been expecting it anyway and Draco suspected that she was secretly glad to keep the dog. At least the speed with witch she produced another can of dog food indicated that.

"Heard anything from the aurors, yet?" Snape asked Sarah and Draco.

"No, nothing." said Draco. "They wouldn't make me go back, would they?"

"Draco, your mother isn't dead. I'm sure of it." Snape insisted.
"Okay, you don't believe it, but if she were dead, would they make me go back to my father?"

"No, they wouldn't. They'd have to arrest him and they couldn't lock you into a cell with him." said Sarah.

"So what would they do with me?" Draco asked anxiously.

"I suppose you'd go to live with some relative." Snape said. "Are your grandparents still alive?"

Draco shook his head.

"No my closest relative would be Uncle Thomas, I think. He lives somewhere in Scotland."

"Well, that's most likely where you'd go then."

All through lunch Draco tried to remember everything he'd ever heard about his great uncle Thomas Malfoy. It wasn't much. His father didn't like him very much, but Draco couldn't really remember why. Maybe he'd never even known. He was sure that he'd never seen Uncle Thomas or any other relatives at any balls or soirées. He supposed that they all avoided all contact with dear old Lucius. Maybe they were all muggle lovers? That would be good, Draco decided. If he went to live with a family of muggle lovers he could take Muggle Studies and learn everything he wanted to know about electric gadgets.

Sarah's electric oven fascinated him. He wondered why there were all these electric things here and no fireplace. He'd ask Snape sometime he decided.

After lunch Draco quickly volunteered to help with the dishes once again, which earned him a surprised look from Severus and this time Sarah let him do the actual washing. Draco splashed about with the water a little more than necessary, but Sarah didn't reprimand him for that. Washing dishes was actually fun. Maybe being a house elf wasn't all that bad after all? Well, if one didn't belong to the Malfoys.

Then Sarah put Billy to bed for his midday nap and Draco began to feel bored again. Sarah had returned to her sewing and insisted that Draco couldn't help her with that as it required magic and he wasn't allowed to do magic during the holidays.

So Draco finally went to see what Professor Snape was doing in his lab. It wasn't a real surprise that he was brewing a potion. More interesting was the gas light he was using to heat the water in his cauldron. Draco remembered his earlier question.

"Why don't you have a fireplace, like everybody else does?" he inquired after Snape had shooed him away from the gas light for about the fifth time because he was standing in his way.

"Because the owner of the house doesn't allow it. Actually he doesn't allow the gas light either, but I didn't ask."

"Why? What's so bad about having a fireplace?"

"The fire. I think he's afraid it might burn down the house."

"Is that why there are all the lamps in here? Because candles require fire as well?"

"Exactly. Can you hand me two dragon teeth, please? They're in that big jar on the shelf right behind you."
Draco took two teeth out of the jar and held them out to Snape, who took them and threw them into the bubbling cauldron.

"What are you brewing?"

"Pepper-up potion. One of the neighbours has a bad cold and these things tend to be contagious so I'm making a larger amount just to be prepared."

"I didn't know dragon's teeth were needed to make pepper-up potion."

"Not for the regular kind, but this is my special version. It's a little more difficult to brew, but has less side effects and in my opinion it also tastes better."

"Side effects? What side effects?"

"The smoke coming from your ears. Or hadn't you noticed that? I always thought that's pretty annoying so I made up a recipe that doesn't smoke all that much."

Draco kept watching and amused himself with trying to come up with more differences from the version Snape had taught them in school. But after a while Snape was done with adding ingredients and began to patiently stir the potion which was rather boring to watch. Draco went over to the window and looked out again. The kids with the blue caps were nowhere in sight, but a little further away there was a group of kids with red bananas gathered under a tree.

They didn't seem to have a ball with them. Still Draco thought that they might be rivals of the first group. Maybe they'd just put their ball down somewhere under the tree where Draco couldn't see it.

A smaller child ran up to the group and was intercepted by two of the kids with red bananas several metres before he reached the tree. The boy flinched away from the bigger kids, said something. One of the two seemed to ask him several questions which the little one answered. The two exchanged a look and the one who had asked the questions nodded at his friend who then turned and walked over to the tree to talk to the boy at the centre of the group. Was he the team captain? Again there were questions and answers and then the kid came back to where his friend was waiting with the smaller boy and the two of them led the child to the kid in the centre.

"What are you looking at?" Professor Snape was suddenly standing right behind Draco. He hadn't noticed him sneaking up.

"Just a bunch of kids in the park." Draco said pointing at the gathering under the tree.

Snape looked at them through narrowed eyes.

"That's the Sharks." he said. "Wonder what they're doing there. I'm not even sure that's their territory"

"Their territory?" Draco asked confused. Why would those kids have some territory? And why did Snape call them Sharks?

"Yes, we live pretty much on the border between their territory and the Rakers'. Another reason why you shouldn't go out there. Especially not if the Sharks are trying to take over."

"Why are they called Sharks?"

"It's what they call themselves. Their leader's Mark the Shark." Snape pointed at the boy in the centre of the group who was now talking to the smaller boy. "They take their name from him I
suppose. Or maybe it's the other way round. I've never seen a reason to ask them. I don't usually bother with the gangs. That's kids' stuff and adults don't usually get involved."

Gangs? Those kids were a gang? Draco stared down fascinated. He'd always thought that gangs were always fighting or breaking into people's houses or something like that, but the Sharks looked rather peaceful to him.

"They don't seem so bad. Why can't I just go down there and say hi?" he asked Snape.

"Don't seem so bad? They're looking for a war with the Rakers down there. And they've never heard of neutrality. You're either with them, which means the Rakers are going to beat you up, or you're with the Rakers which means the Sharks are going to beat you up."

"So who are you with then?"

"Nobody. I already told you it's kids' stuff."

"Then why can't I just tell them I'm not with anybody either?"

"Because you're a kid, Draco. You can't explain to them that kids' stuff doesn't concern you. Around here kids your age just aren't safe if they don't belong to a gang."

"What if I promise to stay away from all the kids? I'll just take a little walk in the park."

"No, too dangerous. They're not going to stay away from you. Going out there is just asking for trouble."

"But I'm bored. I don't even have my books to study. What do you expect me to do all the time?"

"We'll hear from the aurors any minute now, Draco. Just have a little patience."

"I've been patient all day. At least then I had Billy to play with. Now I'm bored. How long do babies nap anyway?"

"As long as they're tired and I think you wore him out pretty much." Snape grinned.

"Hey, he was the one always crawling about. I wasn't asking him to."

"That's just the way babies are. If you really want to study, there are enough books in this room. They're aren't all suitable for you, but I'm sure you'll find something."

"What do you mean not suitable? What have you got here?" Draco asked intrigued.

"Mostly the books I need for my potions. Rather advanced literature for a fifteen year old, but there are some more basic texts around here somewhere. You'll just have to look till you find something you understand."

Draco gave the bookshelf a long look. It was crammed full and a closer inspection revealed that there was actually a second row of books hidden behind the first. Finding anything in there had to be complicated. Unless of course Snape had some system Draco didn't recognise.

"Or we could use all this to do some practical work. Brew me a sleeping potion using no other than these ingredients!" Snape put ten jars onto the worktable.

"I don't know any sleeping potions made from any of these." Draco protested. "You didn't teach us any."
Afraid of a little challenge? You've got all my books to help you. You can do it.

Draco took another close look at the ingredients. Some of them he'd never used before. He wouldn't even have known what they were if they hadn't been labelled. Knowing Snape half of those weren't even necessary and just meant to confuse him. He decided to start by finding out what each of his ingredients was good for. Maybe that would lead him somewhere. He picked the first book off the shelf hoping to find one of his ingredients in the index. The book however turned out to be written in ancient runes that were quite a bit more complicated than anything he'd translated in class so far.

Draco gave Snape a sidelong glance and returned the book to the shelf. He picked up the next book. Organic Chemistry? Whatever was that? He opened the book and found that it had to be written in some sort of code consisting mostly of capital letters and tiny numbers. He closed that book as well giving Snape a very puzzled look this time. His teacher was still grinning.

"I told you they aren't all suitable for you. Keep looking."

The next book proved to be a potions book and written in English. But Draco's triumphant smile lasted only seconds. It might have been English, but that didn't mean he understood it. Most of it seemed highly theoretical, probably even speculation. He was looking for a simple register of potion ingredients or spell recipes not advanced scientific texts.

The fifth book's title nearly made Draco forget all about the sleeping potion. 'Advanced Physics'. That had to be about such stuff as electricity. He leafed through it for quite a while, but again didn't understand a thing. He clearly lacked the basics. Maybe he could find a book titled 'Basic Physics' somewhere around here? Draco returned to looking through the books and this time found a potions book that wasn't altogether too complicated for him. It wasn't an easy text either though and Draco almost would have put it back as well if Snape hadn't stepped in.

"That's a good one. I'd stick with it, if I were you."

Draco sighed softly and searched through the index again. Yes, that book might work.

Still he required a lot of help from Snape to fulfil this task. Snape didn't look disappointed though which surprised Draco.

"Are we going to do stuff like that in class next year?" he asked when they were finally done.

"The potion yes. The guessing game no. It'll be in your book so it won't be difficult at all. No different from all the other potions you learned in school."

"So why didn't you just give me the recipe like you always do in school?"

"Because I wanted you to see what brewing potions really is like most of the time. You don't get a recipe and all the ingredients piled up nicely on the table in real life. Normally you just know what you want to achieve and you have only a certain number of ingredients available. Most of the job then is to find the right recipe to do it."

"That's exhausting." commented Draco.

"Well, I never said being a potions master was easy. Every job has its good and bad sides. It does get easier once you get a little experience though. I know most of the standard potions by heart by now and I know my books as well. Once you know where to look it's actually fun to try something new."
"That's what you say." grumbled Draco, but he had to admit that he'd most likely never forget that particular potion recipe again. "Is that thing at least on the OWLs or are you planning to torture us just for the fun of it?"

"Ah, if I remember correctly it actually is." said Snape in a very oddly vague tone.

Draco suddenly got the strange feeling that he'd better practice that potion a lot before the OWLs. It was nearly time for dinner by now and Billy seemed determine to keep Draco busy until then.

"Da-oh!" he exclaimed happily as soon as he saw Draco enter the room.

The baby let go of the chair he'd been using to hold himself upright and tried to run over to his new playmate. Draco caught him just in time before he fell.

"Da-oh!"

"You know something? Da-oh's pretty close, but actually it's Draco. Can you say Dra-co? Dra-co. Come on, you can do it." Draco said lifting the baby up and cuddling him.

"Da-ko?" Billy asked.

"Much better. You're really close now."

"Dako!"

"Well, he's even turned it into one word now." commented Snape. "Leave it at that. I don't think he can manage any better."

Draco didn't answer. He was busy swinging Billy around the room. Billy squealed with delight. That had to feel almost like being on a broom, Draco thought. He wondered if anybody ever had swung him around like this when he'd been a baby. Probably not. His parents would definitely never want to be seen doing something as silly as that and the house elves and servants no doubt had had better things to do than play with a baby.

"I took that horrible dog of yours for a walk while you two were playing around in there. Just in case you'd like to know." Sarah informed Severus.

"We weren't playing around. We were brewing potions." Snape informed her.

"Whatever. You could have thought of the dog anyway."

"I can take him out if you want me to." Draco offered immediately.

"No you can't!" scolded Sarah at once. "You're not leaving the flat. And I already took him anyway."

"It was just a suggestion." Draco pouted for a moment, but Billy quickly demanded his attention back and he forgot about going out for a while.

When there still hadn't been any answer from the aurors by the time dinner was over and Sarah had taken Billy to bed, they all started to get a little nervous. What was taking the aurors so long?

Draco began to fear that his father might have killed the auror that had been sent to investigate as well. Was Lucius Malfoy powerful enough to kill all of England's aurors? Sarah tried to distract him by making him wash the dishes all alone this time, but once this was done they all sat there
waiting, wondering what might have happened, once again.

Finally Munin the raven came back, but he wasn't carrying any message. Severus gently stroked his gleaming black feathers looking expectantly at the door.

"What's wrong?" Draco asked him. "Why didn't he bring a response?"

"Somebody has to be coming here in person." Snape answered not taking his eyes off the door. "I told Munin to wait for an answer and he wouldn't come back without one unless he's accompanying somebody else who's bringing the answer."

"But there isn't anybody here," stated Draco looking around as if the messenger might be hiding somewhere in the small room.

"Munin flew in through the window. Our messenger has to climb the stairs." Sarah explained. "He'll be here any moment."

Indeed a sudden BRRRING! sounded only seconds later and Draco jumped.

"What was that?"

"The door bell." Snape answered already half way to the door. "It's electric and has a button. I'll show you later." he added with a slight smile at Draco.

Snape opened the door and a very exhausted looking wizard stepped in.

"Couldn't you at least live on the first floor, if you can't get a fireplace?" he snapped instead of a greeting.

"You could have apparated." Snape answered voice neutral. "And you wouldn't have had to come at all. A simple letter would have sufficed. That's why I ordered my raven to wait for a response, you know."

"Are you at least going to feed me?" the stranger growled.

"I'm afraid you missed dinner, but I'll make you some bread and cheese, if you wait a few minutes." Sarah answered politely.

"Pah, cheap food." the guest scoffed, but he ate it anyway.

Severus waited patiently for the impolite man to finish his meal. Draco thought that they should have kicked him out the moment he arrived, but he followed Snape's example and waited. After all it was Snape's home and not his.

"You were right about Malfoy." the stranger finally barked. "We found the body of his wife and the butler and two house elves confirm that it was he who killed her. When we searched the house we found more then enough dark arts objects to supply the dark lord's entire army. He denies everything of course, but not even the best lawyers will help him this time. He's going to Azkaban."

Draco felt himself shake all over and wondered why. He wasn't feeling anything at all at the moment. Why would he? He'd already known.

Sarah gently put her arms around him.

"We'll be needing you as a witness for the trial tomorrow." the stranger said to Severus.
"What about the boy?" Snape asked calmly.

"If you and the butler tell a good story, he might not have to come. Judge Waller the old softie thinks it would be too hard on the kid to have to tell the whole thing again. He thinks the child needs protecting. Pah!"

Less than five minutes later the stranger was gone again, but not before he'd woken up Billy with his gruff bellows and stepped on the cat's tail. Severus had just barely managed to grab 'That Dog' before he could sink his teeth into the stranger's leg after that last transgression. Sarah had run into the baby's room and was now holding Billy trying to gently rock him back to sleep, but he wouldn't stop wailing angry about his disturbed slumber. The cat had retreated onto the highest kitchen shelf and was licking his mistreated tail and Draco for some reason couldn't stop crying. Snape was hugging him gently, trying to comfort him, but there wasn't much he could say this time.

"Who was that guy?" Draco managed between his sobs.

"An auror, I have the misfortune to be acquainted with." Snape answered gently rubbing Draco's back with one hand.

"Why didn't you kick him out? Why did you let him come in and behave like that?"

"I had to. I have to make nice with the aurors. They can do pretty much what they like with us."

"No, they can't." protested Draco still crying but tearing free of Snape's hold nevertheless. "They have to at least have a little respect for your home."

Snape smiled sadly and shook his head.

"I'll explain that some other time. It's a long story. But the bottom line is that an auror can do everything he wants and I'd better not cross them."

Draco tried to wipe off his tears with his sleeves, but more and more kept running out of his eyes and he still didn't know why he was crying at all. Snape wordlessly handed him a package of tissues. One handkerchief would probably not have helped at all this time. Draco cuddled up against him once again.

"I'm sorry." he sniffed softly.

"For what?" Snape asked him. "Whatever that auror does isn't your fault. And he drops by every once in a while anyway. I should have expected him, really."

"Not for the auror. For being so weak."

"Weak? What do you mean? You're not sorry for crying, are you?"

Draco nodded slightly.

"Draco, you're not weak. It's okay to cry. Hey, your mother just died. I'd be very worried if you weren't crying, you know."

"But I already knew."

"Knowing something and hearing somebody say it are two very different things. That's okay, Draco. Really. It's okay to cry."

Draco continued to snuffle for a very long time. Or at least it seemed very long to him. He heard
Sarah took Billy back to bed and say good night at some point, but he didn't react. Finally he felt like there were no tears left inside him and he just sat there quietly.

"Draco? Do you want me to take you to bed now?" Snape asked him softly.

He just nodded and Snape picked him up and carried him back into the lab and sat him onto his bed on the couch. Draco quickly changed into the old t-shirt again and curled up tightly in the bed.

"Tomorrow is market day, you know." Snape told him. "You can go shopping with Sarah, if you want. She could use someone to help her carry her shopping bags and watch Billy. There are some shops around here that sell all sorts of muggle stuff. Maybe you'll see some more electric things. And you can take the dog along too."

"Don't I have to go to Uncle Thomas' place tomorrow?"

"No, not until after the trial. They might still need you as a witness and they have to know where to find you for that. If it goes quickly, the trial might be over in one day, but I doubt it. With the number of lawyers Lucius can afford they'll probably drag it out for a whole week."

"Not longer?"

"Not with Waller as the judge. Waller's a nice guy, but he can't stand people who mistreat their wives and kids. Lucius really doesn't have a chance. He'll go to Azkaban for life and I think he knows it."

"And what about me? What are they going to do with me?"

"You're going to your uncle, like I already told you. I'm sure you'll soon feel at home there. Do you like your Uncle Thomas, Draco?"

"I don't know him. I think he doesn't talk to Father. Doesn't like the dark arts, I think."

"Well, that's good for you then. He'll teach you some real values, then. And he won't put you under so much pressure. He'll be good to you, Draco, I'm sure."

But Draco wasn't all that sure about that. After all Professor Snape had also been convinced that his mother was still alive. But then again living with Uncle Thomas had to be better than sleeping in a street corner in Diagon Alley or living in some orphanage. At least he would have some place he belonged. And maybe, just maybe Uncle Thomas had some electric things in his house? If he was a muggle lover, he just might have some muggle things.

A/N - So do you think Uncle Thomas has electricity in his house? Will Draco have to show up at the trial? And do you know where the name Munin comes from and what it means?

In the next chapter: We go to the market. Draco gets some new clothes and tries to learn some Physics.
This time it was Munin the raven who woke Draco in the morning and unlike the cat, he seemed to do it quite on purpose.

Munin knew exactly how to open doors. He was a clever bird and Snape had taught him all kinds of tricks. He just flew over and landed on the handle. That was enough for that door. One slight flap of his wings without letting go made sure that the door would actually open and Munin flew in, saw Draco asleep on the couch, where he usually perched while Snape was at work in his lab and landed right beside Draco's head. The boy slept on peacefully.

Well, no problem for Munin.

"Good morning!" the raven said right beside Draco's ear.

"Wha? What the?" Draco sat up and looked around confused.

"Good morning!" the raven repeated.

Draco stared at the bird for a moment. He hadn't spoken yesterday. Well, maybe if all he could say was 'good morning' he hadn't deemed that fit to say in the evening?

"Morning, Munin." he said and crawled out of bed.

"Fly!" said the raven and hopped onto Draco's shoulder.

"I can't fly. I haven't got my broom with me. You'll have to fly on your own. You've got wings."

"Caw?"

"I'm human." Draco explained sliding one finger over the soft black feathers on the bird's back. "I can't fly without a broom. You are a bird. You can use your wings to fly. I haven't got wings."

"Eat!" the raven announced and flew off into the living room.

This time Professor Snape was still there when Draco arrived for breakfast, but he was about to leave.

"Where are you going?" Draco asked him sleepily.

"To London for your father's trial."

"Can I come with you? I'd like to go back to the manor and pack some stuff I'll need."

"No, I'm afraid you can't. The manor is most likely sealed off anyway. They won't allow you to take anything out until they're done searching it."

"But I need some fresh clothes. I didn't take anything with me when I left. Can't I at least go get some clothes?"
"They wouldn't let you. Aurors can be really odd about these things."

"We'll buy you some muggle clothes at the market." Sarah interjected seeing that Draco was about to protest again.

"Muggle clothes?!"

"Most people around here wear them. It'll be fun. Like dressing up for a costume ball."

Draco had never been to a costume ball and the idea did sound like fun, but to be seen in muggle clothes?

"You won't stand out so much around here anymore if you wear muggle clothes." Snape explained. "All the kids around here wear muggle clothes. You'll look less like a rich kid if you do."

"Does that mean I can go to the park then?" Draco thought it couldn't hurt to ask.

"No, you can't. Even if you look like one of the local kids, it doesn't mean that you are one. Now, be good and stay close to Sarah when you go to the market. She'll be needing your help. And don't forget to take the dog along. He needs to get some exercise. I probably won't be home before dinner. Knowing Lucius this is going to be one very long trial."

Munin launched himself off the backrest of a chair the moment Snape opened the door and Draco could just see him land on Snape's shoulder before the door closed behind them.

"Why is he taking the raven along? Is he going to have to send letters during the trial?"

"No, Munin just likes to sit on his shoulder. He follows him everywhere he'll let him. That's why that raven loves the summer holidays so much. He isn't allowed to do that at school." Sarah explained lifting Billy off his chair and putting him on the floor to play.

"Dako!" squealed the baby at once and crawled over to Draco's chair.

"Sorry Billy, Dako can't play with you now. Dako's got to wash the dishes." Draco told the baby, but picked him up anyway.

"Wasssh!"

"Put him on a chair next to the sink and let him watch." Sarah advised. "But don't let him get close enough to reach the dishes. He'd brake them."

Draco nodded and grabbed a chair for the baby. Billy refused to sit in it however. He preferred to stand on it holding on to the backrest for support.

"Wasssh!"

"Right away, boss." giggled Draco. "I'd just like to get the dishes first. It's much easier to wash them that way."

"Dako! Wasssh!"

Billy proved to be very eager to help, but he had no idea how to do it and mostly got in the way. Draco finally decided to give him a towel and a freshly washed spoon. Billy first put the towel in his mouth, but didn't seem to like the taste and decided to drop it. Then he examined the spoon, put it in his mouth as well (the wrong end though as the other one was a little too big for his mouth) and then decided to use it to bang on everything in reach.
Sarah finally took the spoon away from him, because she couldn't stand the noise any longer and handed it back to Draco, who washed it once again and put it away quickly before Billy could demand it back.

Once the dishes were done they got ready to go to the market. Draco was very excited. He'd never done any shopping before except for the trips to Diagon Alley and Knockturn Alley to get his school things and the occasional stop at Honeydukes during Hogsmeade weekends. Going to the market had always been the house elves' job.

Billy was excited too. He saw that Mummy got out his baby buggy and started to squeal happily. He'd get to go out and see all sorts of interesting things.

The most excited of all however was 'That Dog'.

He was racing through the entire room, wagging his tail jumping up at their legs then again dashing to the door barking madly. Draco tried to capture and silence him, but he just wasn't fast enough. Sarah just laughed and picked up Billy.

"So Draco what do you want? Billy or the buggy?"

"Want?"

"To carry. We don't have an elevator so we'll have to carry them down the stairs."

"Oh, okay, Billy." Draco decided.

"Are you sure? He's heavier. And the buggy never struggles against your grip, you know."

"But Billy's cuter. And the buggy doesn't call me Dako," Draco said putting on his shoes and gently taking the baby out of her hands.

"Dako!" Billy squealed at once.

"What's an elvelator anyway?" Draco asked Sarah.

"Elevator Draco, E-le-va-tor. It's like a big box that carries you up and down the house. Another electric muggle toy, but one they don't have here in Hogsmeade."

"So how do you know them?"

"They have them in those large muggle buildings in London. Don't you ever go shopping in London?"

"Sure, in Diagon Alley and Knockturn Alley. Father would never go into a muggle shop. I thought you'd realised by now that he's a death eater. Death eaters don't buy muggle stuff. Don't you know that?"

"Severus di... er... Didn't you want to see the door bell, Draco." Sarah opened the door and they walked out into the corridor. It was still dark and smelly and she quickly hit one of the red glowing buttons to give them some light.

"See that little white button right by the door? That's the door bell. Push it and it'll buzz."

The button looked exactly like the glowing ones only it didn't glow and it wasn't red. Draco pushed it and heard the strange BRRRING! again that had announced the visit from the unfriendly auror the day before. He tried the door bell a few more times until he was satisfied that this must be all
that it did.

"What's it good for?" he asked then.

"It tells the people inside that there's somebody in front of the door. You push it if you want to be let in."

"Oh, it's just like knocking then?"

"Exactly. Only louder and a more unique sound. It can't be mistaken for something else. Well, at least not unless you have an alarm clock or a telephone."

"Alarm clock or telephone?" Draco asked curiously.

"We don't have them, Draco and I've never used them either. I've just heard that they are muggle objects that make similar sounds. Now come on. We still have to go to the market and I'd like to be back in time to cook lunch."

Draco nodded and followed her down the corridor towards the stairs. He got a chance to turn the lights on once again when they reached the third floor and Sarah smiled at his proud grin when they flickered on.

Still Draco felt like something was odd. Something important that he'd missed. He kept rerunning their conversation since they'd stepped out of the flat in his head again and again, but he couldn't come up with anything. When they reached the door and stepped out into the park he finally gave up.

And that was when it hit him. It had happened before they'd left the flat. That was why he hadn't come up with anything. Sarah had started to say something about Professor Snape, but caught herself and redirected his attention towards the door bell instead. What had she been about to say? What had they been talking about?

It had been something about his father. But what exactly had he said? He couldn't remember and pushed the thought away. Snape had told Sarah something about his father and she hadn't wanted to talk about it, because she was afraid to remind him of his mother's death. She probably thought he'd start crying again so she had shown him the door bell instead.

They were now walking through Merlin Park and Draco looked around curiously. The place still didn't look dangerous to him at all. There were trees and bushes and even a few flowers here and there. And there was that large square of grass the kids had played with that ball on yesterday morning.

This time the field was empty except for one very small girl who was kicking around an empty tin can imitating the older kids' game. Draco watched her curiously. She wasn't wearing a blue cap or a red bandanna. Did that mean that she didn't belong to a gang?

"Mrs Snape?" he asked Sarah cautiously. "Professor Snape said that it wasn't safe for kids to be in the park if they don't belong to a gang."

"That's right, but you're safe as long as you're with me. They wouldn't bother adults. At least not the adults they know are locals."

"But what about that girl? She isn't with a gang either. At least she doesn't seem to be wearing any uniform."
"Oh, but she is. She is to young to be really accepted into the big kids’ gangs so she isn't allowed to wear their actual insignia yet, but she's wearing a red t-shirt. Red is the colour of the Sharks."

"So she's a Shark?"

"No, but she wants to be one. She can't be a shark, because she's too young. They don't accept kids that haven't proven themselves, but the little ones who are hoping to become Sharks one day form a sort of gang of their own. You can identify them by the red shirts. They aren't exactly the same like the real Sharks' bandanna, but a uniform nonetheless."

"Do the Sharks protect her then?"

"Sometimes, but she can't rely on that. Right now she's most likely hoping that the Rakers won't be around for a while and will consider it beneath them to harm her as she isn't a real Shark. She'd better watch out for the wannabe Rakers though. She's on Raker territory. The Sharks definitely won't protect her here. They won't risk a gang war over a child that's not an actual member of their gang."

"Professor Snape said the Sharks seemed to be looking for a fight with the Rakers yesterday. Do you think she's here to start one?"

"Not likely. They'd send an actual member and they wouldn't do it on market day. Most of the kids will be hanging around the market today. On both sides. They'll fight there if they're going to fight at all."

Indeed the park seemed very empty and Draco soon discovered that they weren't the only ones heading for the market place. There were people everywhere and most of them were wearing muggle clothes or a mixture of wizard and muggle clothes. Draco felt people watching him. His clothing made him stick out among these people. Sarah obviously was right about buying muggle clothes.

The market itself was in the 'better' part of West Hogsmeade where there were actually small houses that seemed to be in a good state of repair. Still they were very small and a lot of them turned out to house shops. A bakery, a tailor, a carpenter and a so called 'muggle shop'. Draco stood in front of that one's window for a while staring at all the strange items on display. Some were simply curiosities like unmoving pictures or toys like miniature cars, but others were lamps or kitchen tools. Sarah explained a few to him, but then she insisted that they had to go on.

The market was quite a sight as well. Some shop owners had simply set tables in front of their shops and were displaying their goods on those, others had set up actual market stands with coloured tops some had come with magical carts and were selling their products right out of those. There were simple hand drawn carts and large ones with a pair of horses in front and everything in between. Draco even saw a muggle style van parked in the far corner of the square.

He soon realised why Professor Snape had said that Sarah would need his help. 'That Dog' dashed off into the crowds the moment they arrived and Draco had to accept that there was no way of finding him again among all those people. Billy was excited and curious and tried to grab for everything in reach and something was always in reach as they squeezed through the tightly packed spaces between the stands. Draco had his hands full preventing the baby from doing any unintentional damage while Sarah negotiated with the vendors. She was rather good at it, Draco noticed. He was surprised at the way the vendors were wiling to lower their prices when asked. He'd never have thought of doing anything like that. It seemed like begging to him. But maybe poor people just had to beg to get by?
There were a lot of children about in laughing, chatting groups or with their families helping with the shopping much as he was. Some kids however seemed to be alone ducking through between the bargaining adults and quickly grabbing for money pouches or wares. Two aurors were patrolling between the stands trying to stop those thieves, but it was obvious that they had no chance. They were a lot bigger then the kids which proved to be a major disadvantage when squeezing through the crowds and the area was much too large for only two aurors to keep all of it in sight all the time. The thieves simply slipped away when one of them approached and returned the moment the auror's back was turned.

Some of them even seemed to belong with some of the stands. The vendors would hide them whenever the aurors approached and be handed part or all of the loot in return. Others seemed to have come in groups. One of the older kids from those would stand a little ways off and watch the hustle and bustle of the crowds while the others would split up and return every once in a while to hand over whatever they'd stolen. Those older kids collecting the loot were the ones who seemed in the most danger from the aurors. They were rather obvious and stood apart from the crowd. Indeed one was nearly caught by an auror as Draco watched. The girl just barely managed to dash off into an alley.

The auror made a half hearted attempt to run after her, but when he reached the alley he looked back over his shoulder at his colleague and then decided to return. Were they afraid to get out of each other's sight? It almost seemed that way.

Once they were done shopping for food Draco and Sarah were both laden with heavy packages and Billy got even harder to control. How do you stop a baby from grabbing and dropping eggs from a tray, if you don't have a hand free?

Sarah manoeuvred them towards the outer rim of the market where the crowds weren't so tightly packed and to Draco's relieve 'That Dog' appeared by his side miraculously looking no worse for wear and carrying the rest of a sausage in his mouth. Had that been a gift from a friendly passer by? Or had he just discovered another thief? Draco decided that he didn't want to know.

He expected that Sarah would opt for going home now, but instead she steered them towards a tailor's shop that also sold used clothing. Draco had almost forgotten that he'd been promised some muggle clothes in all the excitement. He wasn't too happy about having to wear used clothes, but then again he wouldn't need them for very long and it was very kind of the Snapes to spend their money on him at all. Even though they were used the clothes were more expensive than the food had been and Draco knew he ought to be grateful for what he got.

Sarah bought a pair of trousers made from some rough looking blue material. Draco had seen that almost everybody was wearing them around here and therefore was curious to try them on. Apparently they were named jeans. Draco had no idea why. They looked like trousers to him. He also got to choose two t-shirts and a jumper he liked.

"Why the jumper?" he asked Sarah. "It's so hot anyway."

"Just in case. The weather might change and I don't want you to be cold. The central heating isn't really working and you know that we don't have a fireplace."

Draco had no idea what the central heating might be, but he decided to ask about that some other time and just picked a nice looking black jumper. Sarah sighed at his preference of black, but paid for the stuff anyway.

They finally dragged all their purchases back home. Strange how the way seemed to be much
longer now. Billy fell asleep in his buggy during the walk back and was very annoyed when Draco had to wake him to carry him up the stairs. It was nearly impossible to carry both the grumpy baby and all those shopping bags, but somehow they managed.

They quickly unpacked their purchases and Draco got his first closer view of the fridge. Sarah explained patiently while Draco explored it. Especially the little lamp that lit automatically whenever one opened the door fascinated him.

Cooking lunch was a less interesting affair, but Draco dutifully handed Sarah tools and ingredients. This was very similar to watching Professor Snape brew potions. Draco suddenly wondered if Sarah was good at potions as well. And could Professor Snape cook too?

Severus didn't return home for lunch. Sarah didn't seem surprised.

After Draco had fed Billy again, she put the baby to sleep and Draco once again got rather bored once he was done with the dishes. So he grabbed his new clothes and went into Snape's lab to try them on.

That proved to be easier than he had expected at first glance. He'd seen so many people wearing jeans today, that he knew exactly what it was supposed to look like. One leg through here, the other through there and they closed in the front. The zip puzzled him for a moment until he decided to pull at the little piece of metal attached to it and saw the result. Aha, that's how you close them! How to use the button was of course obvious. Draco had seen enough buttons in his life.

Now the t-shirt. Easy as well. One hole for the head, two for the arms. The question which side was which was easily answered as well. After all he'd chosen that particular shirt for the dragon design on the front. Dragon in the front with it's head up. There done! Draco went to the bathroom to admire his new look in the mirror. Yes, he looked exactly like a muggle.

Sarah smiled when she saw him and told him that he looked very cute in his new clothes then went back to reading her novel. Draco could have done without that remark. Cute! He wasn't a baby anymore. He wasn't supposed to be cute. But then again he knew that women had their own ideas about these things. Girls usually wanted their boyfriends to look cute. Maybe his new look would attract girls? But he already had a girlfriend and he couldn't let Pansy see him like this. She'd never accept him wearing muggle clothes, no matter how cute they made him look.

Then again maybe Pansy wouldn't even want him anymore now that his father would go to Azkaban? Nonsense he was still a Malfoy and probably the richest boy available. That was what Pansy liked about him.

And then he realised something else. If his father was in Azkaban and his mother dead, there was nobody left to order him to marry Pansy anymore. He might choose another girl if he wanted to. Draco thought that over. None of the other Slytherin girls in his year could compare with Pansy, but there were a few rather beautiful girls in seventh year. They all had steady boyfriends though and they might consider him a bit young. A younger girl? Well, maybe, if she wasn't too young. A fourth year might be okay, but none of the Slytherin fourth years struck him as particularly attractive.

A girl from another house might mean trouble, but without parents to tell him off it seemed like something he really ought to try. There were some rather beautiful girls in Ravenclaw and they certainly made good partners in conversation. A Hufflepuff was of course out of the question. Some of them were good looking, he admitted, but they were all much too dull to talk to. And a
Gryffindor? Now that would be a scandal. All of Slytherin would be shocked to the core. That might be fun to watch. And that little Ginny Weasley did look rather cute with her red hair and sweet little freckles. And what would Potter say if she suddenly started going out with Draco instead of continuing to swoon over him?

Draco grinned at his idea pretty sure that he wasn't really going to get another girlfriend at all. He'd known that he was going to marry Pansy someday for most of his life and didn't see any real reason to change his plans, but it was rather nice to speculate.

He went to present his new look to 'That Dog' who was thoroughly unimpressed. Obviously he didn't see a difference at all. Draco still smelled like Draco. That was all that interested 'That Dog'.

The cat wasn't available for comment at all and Billy was still asleep. So Draco once again retreated to the lab and looked out the window. The kids in blue caps, obviously the Rakers, were down there again playing that strange ballgame and under the tree where he'd seen the Sharks a little boy in a red t-shirt was sitting and pretending not to watch them. A Shark spy? Draco watched the game for a while trying to discern the rules. It seemed that there were two teams chasing after the ball and each group seemed to have one member who acted much like a Quidditch keeper though there were no hoops. He didn't find out how the goals were marked, but the players seemed to know exactly where they wanted the ball to go and the keepers did their best to stop it from getting there.

Draco wished he could go down there and ask them about the rules. Maybe they'd even let him play? He wondered what it was like to be a Raker. Were they very different from his Slytherin dorm mates?

After a while the wish to go down there and play with the other kids got so strong that it was almost painful and Draco decided that he needed to do something else to distract himself. He looked around the room. Should he try to brew that sleeping potion again? But Snape might object to his using his potion ingredients without permission. He'd rather not anger Snape. Not after he'd been so kind to take him in and keep him even though he now knew that it might be for an entire week.

But Snape had said that he could read the books. That couldn't do any harm. He remembered Advanced Physics and his hope of finding Basic Physics somewhere as well. He started to search through the bookshelves.

There were potions books in all kinds of languages. At least Draco assumed that most of them were potions books. He couldn't really read the titles to make sure. There were rune texts and ordinary muggle books, a few tomes on charms, one very small and simple book on transfigurations that looked almost new. It was the only one that didn't bear any signs of frequent use. Well, it was so simple compared to the other texts that Draco wondered what it was doing here at all. Snape probably had forgotten he had that book long ago. Draco was most interested in the muggle books. Most of them had that strange word Chemistry somewhere on the cover and the strange code of capitals and little numbers inside. Maybe Chemistry was the name of that code? There were some books with titles including the word science, some Mathematics and a few said Physics. Draco picked the one that seemed to be the simplest of those and retreated to his couch bed to read.

The Laws of Physics, an Introduction. Yes, that had to be what he was looking for. Draco read the first page and reread it and then read it once again. He thought he understood most of the words, but still he couldn't understand the text. He tried the second page, but had no more luck then with the first.

With a sigh Draco got up again and went over to the worktable. He'd seen some ink and parchment
there. Maybe if he started taking notes it would all make sense.

Sarah came in to check on Draco two hours later and found him still puzzling over those first two pages. He didn't even notice her entering and she decided to leave him to whatever he was doing. After all no normal fifteen year old boy would spend more than two or three hours studying a science book. Draco would drop this soon enough on his own.

Severus returned from the trial shortly before dinnertime. He looked exhausted, but wouldn't say much about what had been going on there. Apparently most of the day had been taken up by the introductions of Lucius' various lawyers. It seemed unclear if they quarrelled constantly because there were so many of them or if they were just doing it to drag out the trial. The only thing that was for certain was that they didn't agree which was driving everybody except for Lucius mad.

When Sarah told him that Draco had stayed holed up in the lab for the entire afternoon Severus decided that this required an investigation and went to talk to the boy.

He found Draco staring at the third page of the Physics book with several pages of notes beside him that consisted mostly of question marks.

"What are you doing? Trying to use up all my parchment?"

"Oh, no. I'm sorry. I never really meant to use more than one." Draco was startled to see the large pile of notes he'd built up beside him. Had he really written all of that? "I'm just trying to make sense of this book. It's so confusing."

Severus picked up the book, took one look at the title, closed it and then regarded Draco through narrowed eyes.

"What do you want with that?"

"You said it explains about electricity. I want to know how those lamps work. It says it's an introduction so why don't I understand it?"

"Because Physics is a science and to understand science you must know Mathematics first." That would stop the boy's interest in Physics once and for all. Severus was sure of it.

"Okay, what's Mathematics and how do I learn that?"

Severus shook his head in wonder. He thought he knew what fifteen year old boys were like. He'd been teaching them for almost ten years. But this one wasn't like all those other boys he'd taught. He reminded him strangely of... of himself. Well, there was a sure cure for that. Severus went over to the bookshelf, pulled off one book and handed it to Draco.

"You can start with this. That's Mathematics for beginners."

"Thanks." Draco grabbed the book eagerly and opened it right away to start reading.

"Not now, Draco." Snape stopped him hastily. "Right now Sarah would really appreciate it if you'd come out and eat some of her dinner."

"Dinner? It's dinnertime already? How long have I been in here?"

"Too long. Come on now."

"But I need to read that book. I have to find out about the lamps before I have to go live with Uncle
"You need to eat. I don't want you to starve yourself. And you can always borrow my books, if your uncle doesn't have any. The Hogwarts library is rather well equipped as well." Snape smiled. "And learning Mathematics in just one week is entirely impossible. It's as complicated a science as Potions is."

"As complicated as Potions? Do muggles learn that in school? Instead of Potions?"

"More like instead of Arithmancy. At least that's what it's closest to. Potions is more like Chemistry. Actually those two are very closely related. Both are branches of Alchemy. One magical, the other not."

"There are muggles who do Alchemy?"

"Oh yes. The separation began sometime in the middle ages. Wizards started pulling away from muggle culture more and more because of all the bad blood caused by the witch burnings and muggles tried to take their places in medicine and science. Some wizards started to take on muggle apprentices to teach them what could be done without magic. They felt that they had to give the muggles a way to survive without them before they deserted them."

"But Chemistry isn't part of Potions?"

"No, at that time both together were still known as Alchemy, but a few generations later wizards began to consider things that didn't require magic as beneath them and many Alchemists stopped doing Chemistry altogether. It was the pure-bloods of course. All part of the muggle hatred as are such things as death eaters and dark magic. Soon only Potions was taught at wizard schools anymore and true Alchemists became very rare. If you really want to understand Chemistry today, you have to go learn from the muggles. They've put much more time and energy into research and are far ahead of those few last Alchemists."

"I don't want to learn Chemistry, I want to learn Physics." insisted Draco.

"Well, Mathematics is the muggles' basis for both and you can't understand Chemistry without knowing at least the basics of Physics anyway."

"So that's why you've got all those books? You're actually an Alchemist?"

"Not really. At least not in the old sense of the word. As I said Alchemists are very rare these days. But in a way people like me are a new breed of Alchemists. We know both Potions and Chemistry, but unlike the old Alchemists we do not see them as one anymore. History has drawn a clear line between the fields and much knowledge has been lost by it."

"Lost? Lost how?"

"The knowledge the old Alchemists had about the how both fields interact. The muggles never knew anything about Potions so they never studied its influences on Chemistry or vice versa. The wizards cast Chemistry out of their lives and no longer understand its workings in Potions. The newer findings in both fields were never seen in any relation to each other at all. There was much that the old Alchemists knew about these things. That knowledge might be lost in time forever."

"But you're trying to retrieve it?"

"Yes, and so are many others, but we often work against each other more than together and unless we start teaching our findings in wizard schools again, they will get lost once again within one or
two generations."

"But to teach Alchemy again, would now mean to teach Chemistry. And if Chemistry can't be understood without understanding Mathematics and Physics..."

"It would mean four more subjects which would require teachers. Alchemists as I said are rare. Chemistry, Mathematics and Physics would most likely have to be taught by muggles in the beginning. The ministry of magic wouldn't approve of that at all, of course."

"Physics. You need wizards who specialise in Physics! Then you wouldn't need muggles to teach it. You need wizards to learn it at muggle schools!"

"And what wizard would want to do that?" smiled Snape sadly.

"I would. I will!"

"And what will you do, if no school agrees to hire a Physics teacher? They aren't even thinking about teaching Alchemy again at the moment, you know."

"Then I'll also be an electrician and repair that broken lamp on the stairs."

Severus smiled. Let the boy start on that Mathematics book and he'd change his mind soon enough. He wasn't going to discourage Draco's interest in muggle things though. It was a step away from the death eater prejudices the boy had been raised on.

'That's one less death eater for you, Voldemort.' Severus thought. 'You're not getting that one. Not if I can help it.'

"I hope you're not planning to slack off at school now. Going to muggle school is all very fine. I did it too, but you have to finish your magical education first." was what he said out loud though.

"But you said I could borrow your books!"

"You can study muggle things on the side as long as you still do okay at school. That's my opinion at least. You'll have to talk to your uncle about it as well."

"I don't even know Uncle Thomas. Why should he tell me what to do?" Draco pouted.

"Because he is going to be your legal guardian and pay for your education?" Severus suggested. "I know you grew up thinking that it's only natural that everybody goes to Hogwarts, but it isn't. Hogwarts is a very expensive school and your parents spent a lot of money on your education. With the kind of money you've got, you probably never noticed, but to people like me it's an unaffordable luxury."

Draco stared at Snape for a while unmoving. He wanted to say something, but wasn't sure what. He opened his mouth, closed it again. What was he going to say?

"But? But Billy?"

"Will go to West Hogsmeade Wizard School like all the other kids around here. It's not a bad school." he smiled trying to reassure Draco. He hadn't meant to shock and confuse him like that. "It just has a bad name."

"Bad name?! Why? What's wrong with it?"

"Well, it's in West Hogsmeade. That's what's wrong with it. The worst part of town and its students
all come from very poor families. But that's just prejudice. Some of their teachers are almost up to Hogwarts' standards. Maybe they would be if they had the money to buy all the materials we use everyday without even thinking about it."

"But Billy would get a better education, if he went to Hogwarts?"

"Of course he would. Hogwarts is the best school for magic there is. But we can't afford it and he'll get by fine with what he'll learn at West Hogsmeade. Sarah went there too, you know."

"But you're teaching at Hogwarts. Don't you think, if you told Dumbledore ...?" Draco looked up at Severus with big pleading eyes.

"Dumbledore has already done more for me than I can ever pay him back. Without him I'd be either in Azkaban or dead. I can't just go and ask him for even more."

"But..." Draco started again, but Snape just shook his head and gently pushed him through the door.

"Billy will be alright. He'll go to school with all the neighbour's kids. The same kids he'll grow up with and go to primary school with. Come on now. Sarah's waiting with dinner and I'm hungry."

"Dada!" squealed Billy when he saw them enter the living room.

The baby actually managed to run the three steps from the table where he'd just been about to pull down the table cloth over to his father upright and threw himself hard against Severus' legs.

Luckily Severus had been expecting the assault and managed not to trip. He picked Billy up and cuddled him. Billy snuggled close to him.

"Dada!" he repeated contentedly.

Draco watched the scene with a very strange feeling of sadness. Why, oh why, couldn't this cute little bundle go to Hogwarts like all the kids he knew? Why didn't Dumbledore pay his teachers better if the school had so much money anyway? And why didn't Snape just go and find himself a better job? With his qualifications he ought to be able to choose from lots of offers. Something wasn't right here. But could he dare ask? It had been Snape himself who had started talking about being poor this time and he hadn't seemed as uncomfortable about it as Draco would have expected. Maybe he wouldn't get angry?

Draco went to sleep still pondering the Snapes' financial situation and Billy's future education. Would Snape accept, if he offered to pay the school money for them so Billy could go to Hogwarts? Probably not if he didn't even want to ask Dumbledore for help. Maybe Draco could ask Dumbledore for him? Or would that make Snape even angrier than if Draco offered him the money? Maybe there was a way around that. Maybe he could find a way he could give Snape some money without making it look like charity?

Could he come up with some job he needed a potions master for? Or maybe an alchemist?

A/N - Will Draco really grow up to be a Physics teacher? Will Billy go to Hogwarts? What was it Sarah didn't want to tell Draco?
In the next chapter: We meet some of the neighbours, discover the washing machines and Draco gets to know Mark the Shark.
"Good Morning!"

"Morning, Munin." mumbled Draco.

He wasn't even surprised to be woken up by the raven. He just slid one hand over the gleaming black feathers of the bird and crawled out of bed.

Dressing in muggle clothes still took a bit of thinking, but he managed it more quickly than the day before. Once again Professor Snape was already getting ready to leave when Draco sat down for breakfast.

"Are you going to the trial again?"

Snape just nodded. He wasn't looking forward to talking about the trial with Draco.

"You didn't even tell me what happened yesterday." Draco complained.

Severus sighed and sat back down at the table. Billy crawled over to him and he picked up the baby and cuddled him.

"Nothing much." he said still looking at Billy. "As I expected, Lucius is trying to drag it out and he's wasting a lot of money on buying more lawyers than you would believe possibly fit into one courtroom. They are constantly at each other's throats and if you ever saw two lawyers quarrel you know what that means."

"No, I don't. They're not allowed to fight in the courtroom, are they?"

"Oh, but they're allowed to hold speeches. Long elaborate speeches. A good lawyer can make a three hours speech saying nothing more than that his colleague is a son of a bitch and all that without ever saying the word, because said colleague could sue him if he did. Of course then that colleague will make an even longer speech explaining that the first lawyer is a bloody bastard, again without saying the actual word. Then the court will take a short brake so the judge and jury won't starve while listening to pointless insulting speeches and after that they'll continue the trial by introducing yet another lawyer who will make another three hours speech calling all other lawyers present idiots. The attempt to silence the resulting uproar will take the rest of the day and thus hearing the witnesses will be postponed to the next day. And most likely I won't actually be needed today either, but protocol insists that I have to be there."

"So nothing actually happened?" Draco asked surprised.

"No, not yet. Unless you count that they read out the charges against Lucius."

"Charges? I thought he was only on trial for killing Mother?"

"For that, for attacking you and for possession of various illegal items that were found when they searched Malfoy Manor. Most likely they'll add a few accusations of performing dark magic on the way. But that's not really important. If he's found guilty of only one of these charges he's going to
spend the rest of his life in Azkaban and there's no way he can weasel out of all of them."

"So why are they accusing him of all of them?"

"Because that's how law suits work. The murder of Narcissa is the first thing on the schedule and the moment he's found guilty of that the rest will go pretty quickly and we won't have anything to do with that rest anyway."

When Draco didn't say anything to that Severus gently sat down Billy, said a quick good bye and left followed once again by Munin.

Draco had a lot to think about. If the court found Lucius guilty of murdering Narcissa, he'd go to Azkaban for sure, but what made Snape so sure that things would go quickly after that? All those lawyers would still be there to try and defend Lucius against the other charges. Would they possibly want Draco as a witness of some of Lucius' other crimes? He had seen his father perform dark magic, but he didn't really feel like talking about that. It had been scary and he wanted nothing more than to forget it. Maybe now that he was technically an orphan he could. Maybe he'd never have to see any dark magic performed ever again. Physics teachers or electricians didn't have much to do with the dark arts. At least he hoped they didn't.

Sarah smiled at him when he immediately set to washing the dishes after finishing breakfast.

"Do you want to come and see the washing machines?" she asked him when he was almost done.

"Washing machines? You mean there are machines that could wash the dishes for us?"

"Yes, there are. They're called a dishwashers, but we don't have one. The washing machines aren't meant for dirty dishes, they're meant for dirty clothes. So do you want to see them?"

"Are they electric?"

"Of course they are." Sarah grinned.

"Then I want to see them."

"Okay, then bring me everything you want washed."

Draco dashed into the lab, grabbed his robes and ran back to Sarah.

"Here it is! Where are the washing machines?"

"In the basement." Sarah laughed. "Just put it in here and grab Billy. We can't leave him alone in the flat."

Draco discovered to his surprise that Sarah had an entire large basket full of clothes to be washed and he obediently stuffed his robes in with the rest.

Billy was delighted at being picked up and carried out of the flat. Another adventure! Both he and Draco looked around wide eyed when they descended the stairs into the basement.

Draco had of course seen the basement before. Draco hadn't. It was even darker than the corridors and some of the walls weren't even painted. Those that were were covered in graffiti so badly that Draco concluded that repainting the whole basement might be a very good idea. Of course it all had to belong to the owner of the house and Draco had the strong suspicion that none of the inhabitants was going to paint walls that weren't even theirs.
Sarah led them into a dark room, fumbled around for the light switch, which for some strange reason wasn't glowing and finally managed to switch on a single lamp in the centre of the room. The light was rather weak, but enough that Draco could now see four strange rectangular boxes standing by the wall.

Draco stepped in front of one of them to investigate. It sort of reminded him of the fridge, but didn't have a handle or even a door to open it and there was a strange round window right in the middle. Draco regarded the box from all sides not sure if he could touch it. There was a hose leading into the back of the box which obviously came from the waterline and there also was a cable which was plugged in proving that this was indeed the electric thing Sarah had promised to show him. He looked back to Sarah expectantly.

Sarah smiled and went over to where the machine was connected to the waterline. She turned on the water, but nothing seemed to happen. Draco waited, but Sarah returned to her bucket and sorted through the clothes.

"What are you doing? Why isn't anything happening? Is the machine broken?"

"No, everything's just fine. I'm just sorting out the clothes. You can't wash white clothes with coloured clothes. They wouldn't stay white. So everything that's white will go into this machine and everything else into the one beside it." Sarah explained.

She opened the strange window and started to throw white clothes into the strange round compartment behind it. Draco went over to the next box and tried to open it the way Sarah had. Nothing happened. Draco pulled harder.

PLOPP! The door opened and Draco fell over backwards. Billy landed on top of him squealing with delight. What a great new game!

"Wha? No Billy, I'm not doing this again."

Billy looked slightly disappointed, but seemed to accept that. There were so many other exciting things to see.

Draco got back up and looked into the strange compartment. It was round and made of metal with little holes in it and three big rims. Draco tentatively reached the hand which wasn't holding the baby in and touched one of the holes. Nothing happened. He moved on to grip one of the rims and gave it a slight push. The whole thing turned! Draco quickly tried to pull it back into its original position, but it wouldn't move. He pushed in the other direction again and again the whole compartment turned. So it moved only in one direction. Strange.

Suddenly a strange gurgling sound came from the first box. Draco jumped back.

"What's that? What's it doing?"

"It's drawing water." Sarah simply said. "To begin its program."

She came over to Draco's box and started throwing the rest of the clothes into that one. Draco went over to check what the first one was doing. He could see water and some strange foam behind the window and then the gurgling suddenly stopped and the machine started to make strange sloshing noises and turn around the compartment instead.

FLOPP! The pile of clothes fell over and splashed into the water. The clothes soon started flying around wildly and the water was running in every direction. The machine changed the direction the compartment was spinning in. So it could move in both directions! Maybe the other one was
Draco watched the clothes spin around with gurgling, swooshing and splashing noises and the strange hum of the machine itself and suddenly he felt very dizzy. Billy began to struggle against his grip and he was no longer sure he could keep his hold on the baby. He quickly turned away from the machine and looked over at what Sarah was doing.

She was just throwing a knut into a slit at the side of the machine. Then she pressed a button and the machine started humming and moments later gurgling.

Sarah gently took Billy out of Draco's hands and set him onto the floor holding him upright by one hand.

"Mummy!" Billy announced excitedly and started walking through the room.

He could walk pretty well as long as Sarah held his hand, Draco saw. He was going to practise that with him. Maybe if Billy could walk well enough, Sarah would agree to take them for a walk in the park. But right now he was more interested in the washing machines. He watched the coloured clothes spin around until he was so dizzy that he had to hold on to the washing machine for a while until he was sure he could walk again. Was that what walking felt like to Billy?

The coloured clothes were a much better show than the white ones. The window kept changing colours as they were tossed about. Now it was blue, then yellow and green and then again black. Draco quickly turned his head away before he got dizzy once again.

He decided to watch Sarah and Billy instead. Billy was exploring the room and Sarah willingly followed him wherever he wanted to go only insisting that he kept holding her hand and didn't let himself drop to the floor. When he started resisting too much she picked him up again and cuddled him.

"What do we do now?" Draco finally asked as nothing new seemed to be happening.

"We have to wait until the machines are done. Then we have to dry the wet clothes."

"Oh, you're going to do a spell?"

"No, I prefer to do it the muggle way. It takes longer, but the magical way is more harmful to the fabric."

Draco returned to watching the clothes spin about. The machines had changed speed and what were those bubbles anyway? He decided to ask Sarah.

"Oh, that's from that powder I put in earlier. Its like soap, but don't let it get on your skin, if you can avoid it. It's meant for fabric and poisonous to people." she explained.

Powder? Draco hadn't seen her add any powder. He should have watched more closely when she'd started the machine. Maybe they'd come down here once more before he had to go live with Uncle Thomas? Then he could watch her more closely and see the powder.

The machines took quite a long time for their job, but Sarah insisted that they had to stay and watch the whole process. Something might break or someone might come and steal their clothes.

Draco was slightly confused about that second possibility. Who'd want their used, wet, soap bubble covered clothes anyway? He'd always thought that thieves only wanted money, and art objects and jewellery. Sometimes they also stole magical objects or broomsticks or furniture. But who'd steal
clothes? They could just buy them at the market. Then he remembered Sarah bargaining over food and little thieves darting around the market stands stealing both money and food. Food was cheaper than clothes. If people would actually steal food, they'd steal clothes as well.

He sat down on the floor leaning against the wall facing the washing machines and watched the clothes tumble about. Was it just his imagination or were the bubbles getting less and less?

"Dako!" Billy saw Draco down at his own level and toddled over as quickly as his still shaky baby legs would carry him. "Dako!"

Draco held out his arms to him and Billy let go of Sarah's hand and made two wobbly steps all on his own before he reached Draco and plunged into his arms.

"Dako." he said once more contentedly as he snuggled up against Draco's chest and fell asleep.

Draco sat as still as he could watching the sleeping baby. He barely dared to breathe for fear that he might wake him. Billy was so cute and so small.

'How is it possible that death eaters actually kill babies?' he wondered, 'How could anyone ever harm something this sweet?' And suddenly he knew that he would never really understand his father who he had always thought to be the closest person in the world to him. He could never have grown up to be what his father had expected him to be. All his life he had thought that he and his father were exactly the same on the inside as well as on the outside. Now he suddenly realised that he'd been wrong all that time. There wasn't much they really had in common at all. They were totally different. But if he wasn't like his father, who was he like?

He thought about his mother. Maybe he was like her. But then again he didn't even like parties and dressing up and chatting about nonsense for hours. Narcissa would never have taken the time to let little Billy sleep in her arms. She had loved Draco and died to defend him, but she never had actually taken time to get to know him. No, he wasn't like his mother either. But who else was there?

Professor Snape? His favourite teacher was an example in many ways. He could sneer and insult people even better than Draco and he also knew how to appear cold and intimidating. And he could also be warm and loving with his family. He wasn't above using muggle things and he'd even gone to muggle school. But then again Snape was a really great wizard. Draco couldn't imagine ever being as powerful as he was. It wasn't only that Snape was one of the greatest potions masters of his time. He was also highly intelligent and an expert in several other subjects as well. Draco on the other hand considered himself a fairly average wizard. He couldn't hope to ever excel in any type of magic the way Snape did. Yes, Snape was certainly somebody to look up to and to learn from, but they weren't the same.

Maybe, maybe he was like Sarah. Preferring the muggle way to magic in many things, stern and forbidding on the outside, but kind and loving to the ones she cared about. Draco looked up at her and smiled. He wished he could spend some more time here, get to know her better. Maybe that way he'd find out who he himself was.

The first machine finally stopped rattling and slouching and Sarah went to open it. She took out the clothes one by one wrung them out and put them back into the basket. Draco watched fascinated. That was quite a lot of water that came out of each piece of clothing.

Soon the other machine finished as well and Sarah repeated the process with all the coloured clothes. Then she picked up the basket.
"Come on, we've got to take those up to the attic."

Draco rose carefully trying not to rouse Billy who seemed to be half awake, but not really willing to wake up fully. Walking around for so long had to have been exhausting work.

"The attic? First we carry them into the basement to wash and then drag them up to the attic?" Somehow that didn't make sense.

"Yes, that's how we poor people do it. Come on, I'll show you how muggles dry their clothes."

"Do they use something electric?" Draco asked excitedly as they started to climb the stairs.

"No, sorry. Not this time. Their method is much simpler, but rather fun for children as well. Too bad that Billy can't walk on his own yet. He'd play Hide and Seek or Catch with you all day."

"What's Hide and Seek and Catch?" Draco asked confused.

"They're games. I'm sure you've played them. Maybe you had other names for them? Hide and Seek is when one person hides somewhere and another tries to find them and Catch is when one person runs away and the other tries to catch them. You can of course combine both into one game which is what the very little ones like Billy usually do. You know those games, don't you?"

"No," Draco shook his head. "I've never played those. I don't have any siblings so I never got to play games that require two players."

"But didn't your Mummy play them with you? And what about your friends?" Sarah asked sounding startled.

"Mother was always too busy."

"Too busy? But didn't you tell me that she had a house elf to help her with all her work?"

"Um ... Well ... Several elves to be honest. But she always had all these parties or if she wasn't at a party she had to get ready for a party. She never really had the time to spare. My father was different. He spent a lot of time with me, but he'd never have played with me. He had more important things to teach me than games."

"Like filthy language and prejudice?"

"Well, I guess so, if you see it that way. It was really important to him though."

"But what about friends, cousins, neighbours' kids? Didn't you play with them?"

"My father doesn't get along with his relatives, I think. I've never met any. We don't really have any neighbours. There's the village of course, but the village kids always stay clear of the manor and Father wouldn't have liked to see me play with them anyway. He chose some of his friends' sons to be my friends when I went to Hogwarts, but by then I was too old to play little kids' games and... they aren't really friends. They're useful associates, but somehow... I don't know. Just not what I'd call friends."

They'd reached the top of the stairs now and Draco felt exhausted. Why did some people build houses that were this high? And wasn't there any magic that could have lifted them up much more easily? Well, they were probably meant to apperate though he'd never seen either Snape or Sarah do that. He was sure that Snape knew how to do it though. But maybe Sarah had never learned. She hadn't even gone to Hogwarts after all. Maybe they didn't teach pupils to apperate at West
Hogsmeade Wizard School?

There wasn't a long corridor up here, just one single door. Sarah produced a key out of her pocket and unlocked it and they entered a large room that probably took up the whole length of the house. There were wooden beams and pillars that held up the roof and there were some small windows to let in light and air. They were all opened and the summer sun had heated up the attic until it was almost unbearable.

Sarah didn't bother to turn on the electric light. The sunlight was bright enough. Draco blinked a few times to get used to the light and then took a second look around. There were sections all around where ropes were tied about at the height of an adult's head. Were they meant to keep people from walking anywhere else than the middle corridor? If so it was a very strange method indeed.

Billy, suddenly wide awake, let out a delighted squeal and Draco nearly dropped him in his surprise as the sound bounced off the walls and resonated through the whole room. Billy struggled a little and Draco gently set him down onto his feet and took one little baby hand into his big one.

"Okay then. Lets walk."

"Wak!" agreed Billy and once again the sound resonated. Billy giggled.

"Wak!" he tried again and then: "Dako!" and "Mommmy!"

That last one disappointed him a little, because it didn't resonate as well as the other ones, but that little drawback didn't stop him from trying out his entire vocabulary.

"See, it's a perfect place for children to play." Sarah smiled. "They just love it up here."

She led them towards one of the roped sections and took out a small box filled with wooden pins which she used to pin the wet clothes to the ropes. Draco watched amazed as she straightened out each piece and then hung it on the ropes.

"Why do you have to straighten them first? It seems to take up a lot of additional time."

"Quite the opposite. If I didn't straighten them, they'd take much longer to dry and they'd have much worse wrinkles afterwards which would take me much longer to iron out. All in all that would cost me much more time then to take the time to hang them properly right now."

Billy was fingering Draco's wet robe curiously. He seemed fascinated by the wet fabric. Then he slowly lifted the rim and peered at his mother from under the robe. Draco walked once around it with him ducking under the ropes. Then Billy went on to examine the next item in the line. His own clothes were out of reach. They were much too small to hang down to baby level, but his mother's apron was another object that needed a thorough examination.

Draco went with the baby enjoying his wonder almost as much as he had enjoyed examining the light switches. He remembered Professor Snape watching him when he'd first encountered those. He hadn't understood his expression back then. Now he thought he probably knew what it meant.

"Okay, we're done here." Sarah announced suddenly. "Come on. It's past time we started preparing lunch."

She started to walk away and Draco followed her with Billy feeling a little confused.

"Are you just going to leave them here?" he asked nodding towards the clothes. "I thought someone
might steal them?"

Sarah just smiled and waved for him to step into the middle corridor and out of the section where they'd hung their clothes. Billy started to protest and struggle. He wanted to continue his exploration. Draco gently picked him up and carried him into the corridor. As soon as they'd left the section Sarah turned and cast a spell back at the clothes.

"There, that'll keep them safe. Most people around here don't bother to put protective spells on their laundry though. It's rather rare that something really disappears from here. The neighbours stick together, you know."

They walked back to the door and Sarah locked it again as soon as they were through. Draco was about to ask her why people might steal clothes in the basement, but not in the attic, but suddenly he heard steps on the stairs and they were coming their way. He'd never met anyone on the stairway before. The steps were light and fast with a slight bounce. Draco waited with baited breath. And then a girl came into view.

She looked about his age, was dressed all in blue and wore a blue cap over her short black curls. A Raker? Draco regarded her curiously. Blue eyes looked back at him equally interested. She was really pretty. Draco wondered who she might be.

"Good morning, Mrs Snape!" she said politely as she bounced by.

"Morning, Cathy!" answered Sarah. "All alone today?"

"I was babysitting little Martin. Mrs. Brown just came home so I got to leave early. And she even gave me full pay."

Sarah smiled a little knowing smile at that remark. Maybe it explained the bounce? Draco thought that maybe Cathy had needed the money to buy something her parents wouldn't give her and that now she finally had enough. A new broom perhaps? Or maybe just one of those balls for the game the Rakers seemed to play all the time?

"If you need someone to watch Billy for you, you know where to find me."

Oh well, maybe it wasn't enough yet. Draco wondered how much money one got for babysitting. Probably not much. Or Cathy was saving for something really expensive.

"But it seems you already got another babysitter." she continued with an odd look at Draco who was still carrying Billy.

"Oh, Draco's just a guest who's staying with us for a few days. I might still require your services again after that." smiled Sarah. She seemed to like Cathy.

"That'd be great. I can always use the money and I just love Billy. He's such a sweet kid! Just tell me whenever you need me."

Draco smiled at Cathy. Yes, Billy was definitely a sweet kid. And Cathy was really cute too.

"But now I've got to run and help with the cooking. Mum will be so happy to see me back early. Bye Mrs Snape! Bye Billy! ... Bye Draco!" she shot Draco one adorable smile and bounced off up the stairs. "See you at the meeting!" she called back over her shoulder just before she disappeared around the next bend.

"Bye Cathy!" Sarah and Draco just managed to call after her as her footsteps sounded further and
"Who's that?" Draco asked still a little dazed

"Oh, that's just Cathy Cat. Catherine McDougall, actually. She lives with her mother up on the fifth floor. She's a really nice girl and very reliable babysitter, but also a hopeless flirt. She has a steady boyfriend though. Jack, the leader of the Rakers gang. So don't make too much of her advances. She's only teasing you. She isn't likely to give up a guy like Jack for a good looking stranger like you."

"Why? Is that Jack someone special?"

"As I said, he's a gang leader. Girls just love boys with a lot of status in their gangs. All the Raker girls and Raker wannabe girls want to go out with Jack. And even girls from other gangs are likely to have an eye on him. Especially if they don't get along with their own gang's leader well enough, or if their gang's led by a girl."

"The little ones too?" Draco asked surprised. "Aren't they a bit young?"

"Well, maybe they don't want him for right now, but they all dream that they will be his girl someday."

Draco just shook his head in surprise. Why would anyone ... And suddenly he remembered how all the Slytherin girls were constantly after him. He could be considered the leader of the Slytherin gang. And whatever girl got to date him was considered the leader of the Slytherin girls. And every Slytherin boy then wanted her. Maybe he really ought to try for a girl from another house. Just to see what would happen to Pansy, if he dropped her and who'd lead the girls, if he didn't make one of them leader.

Draco secretly smiled to himself. Wasn't there a Ravenclaw fourth year who had just such black curls and blue eyes as Cathy. Her hair was a bit longer, if he remembered correctly and she wore glasses, but they were very tasteful glasses and kind of fit in with the Ravenclaw image. He really ought to find out that girl's name.

After having lunch and washing the dishes Draco once again retreated into the lab and started on the Mathematics book. He had learned simple calculating in primary school, but this turned out to be quite a bit more complicated. Decimals were confusing things and what the hell were negative numbers good for?

Still this was easier than the Physics book. He could do this, but Snape had been right about the time it would take. Draco once again used more parchment than he had intended to trying to solve the practise problems. He found that he made way too many little mistakes.

Rechecking a problem he'd gotten the wrong result for for the third time he finally realised that he'd written that four times four was twelve.

"Damn! Concentrate! That's the stupidest mistake ever." he decided to punish himself by doing the whole problem again.

The cat who had been dozing on the windowsill shot him a bewildered look at his outburst and sauntered over with his tail held high to investigate the source of the disturbance. Draco hardly noticed. This time he just had to do it right.

The cat sniffed at Draco's book, parchment and quill, but ignored the little bottle of ink. He probably already knew that it stank and didn't want to insult his nose like that. When Draco
continued to ignore him, he wrinkled his nose at the boy and stalked back to the windowsill where he curled back up in his original spot back turned to Draco as if to say 'What me? Go over to the table? No, never did that. Why would I? I'm not even the slightest bit interested.'

Professor Snape came home a little earlier than the day before and once again found that he had to pull the boy away from a book and drag him to dinner.

"So what happened today? Did they finally stop insulting each other and hear your story?" Draco asked him as soon as he came in.

"Of course not, but they did get through with the introductions of all of Lucius' lawyers. So that means they'll most likely get around to it tomorrow. And lawyers never stop insulting each other. They're worth than death eaters in that respect."

"What do you know about death eaters?" Draco asked surprised. What would his teacher have to do with those?

"More than I want to, Draco. A lot more than I want to or is good for me. And nothing good. Are you sure you want to continue with that Mathematics book? If you'd decide to just grow up to be a normal wizard like all your classmates, you wouldn't have to burden yourself with any of that. Going to muggle school is a lot of hard work and nobody expects you to. There are a lot of things you can do with your life without that. A lot of interesting jobs to choose from."

"I want to know about electricity." insisted Draco. "And I've made good progress with the book so far. It's been a while since I last did any calculating, but it's all beginning to come back now. I bet I'll do even better tomorrow."

Snape just shook his head at the boy's stubbornness. He'd give up sooner or later. A Malfoy wanting to be an electrician. That was certainly the strangest thing he'd ever heard. It couldn't possibly last. As soon as Draco left them and went back to the traditional wizarding life he'd surly forget this strange fascination with muggle objects.

"We're going down to the basement for a meeting." Snape announced after dinner. "Do you want to come along or would you prefer to return to your studies?"

"What kind of meeting?" Draco asked surprised. Who'd ever heard of meetings in the basement? Well, except for death eater meetings. Those were always held in strange places. But this couldn't be a death eater meeting. The Snapes would certainly never go to a death eater meeting and even if they did they wouldn't just invite him to tag along.

"Just a meeting with the neighbours to discuss the boilers." Snape explained.

"Boilers? What boilers?" Draco eyed the stove. Sarah boiled food there. Did that mean it was a boiler? Was this a meeting about stoves then?

"The hot water boilers."

Draco clearly didn't understand so Severus decided to explain.

"They're ..." 'Oh, no! I should have thought about that before I mentioned them!' "... electrical gadgets that provide us with warm water. You might have noticed that there are times when there isn't any warm water available."

"Electrical! Can I see them?"
"No, sorry, they're somewhere in the basement and we don't have a key."

"Oh." Draco pouted. Electrical things and he couldn't see them!

"Well, those boilers aren't working correctly and this meeting is held to discuss the problem and decide what we're going to do about it."

"Get an electrician?" Draco was suddenly very interested again.

"More likely write a letter to the owner of this house and ask him to get a plumber."

"What's a plumber?"

"Another muggle job. They repair all the stuff that has to do with water."

"Maybe they'll show us the boilers at the meeting." Draco said hopefully as he picked up the plates to carry them over to the kitchen.

"No, they won't. We're just going to talk about them. I don't even think anybody in this house has a key at all."

"Oh."

"So do you want to come or do you want to stay here?" Sarah asked getting a little impatient.

Draco grabbed for the sponge and the first plate. He opened his mouth to say 'No, I'd rather stay here and do some more Mathematics.' when suddenly he remembered a dazzling smile and the words 'I'll see you at the meeting!'. Cathy Cat would be there. He really wanted to take another look at the girl. Just so he could memorise her features and compare her to the Ravenclaw girl a bit better. But there still was that Mathematics book. That was a lot more important than some strange girl.

"Okay, I'll come." he said surprising even himself.

"You won't get to see the boilers, Draco." Sarah assured him once again.

"I still want to come. I'll just watch all the people. You won't even notice I'm there."

Sarah turned to Severus and shrugged helplessly. Severus just smiled back at her. He wouldn't have asked the boy, if he'd thought that it were dangerous for him to come to a house meeting.

"All right then. Hurry up with the dishes. We're leaving in five minutes."

And thus Draco walked down into the basement for the second time that day. This time however it was Professor Snape who carried Billy.

"Dada!" Billy announced happily when Severus picked him and the little squishy toy he was playing with up.

Severus smiled and kissed him on the forehead and Billy cuddled up to him tightly.

This time they went into a different room. It was a lot bigger than the one with the washing machines and packed full with people. Everybody seemed to know the Snapes and soon they were surrounded by their neighbours talking and laughing. Draco didn't see Cathy anywhere in the mass of people, but he heard more voices from outside.
Professor Snape gently pushed Billy into his arms when one of the neighbours asked him for a potion and disappeared with the stranger. Draco cuddled the baby and looked around for Sarah, but he couldn't see her. Suddenly he felt very lost and alone. Why had he come down here? He could have offered to stay in the flat and watch Billy. Then they both would have been spared this mass of noisy strangers.

Voices seemed to be coming from everywhere and Draco suddenly felt dizzy. What if he fell and got under all those feet? What if he fell and Billy got under all those feet? What if he fell on Billy? Draco slipped through the crowd as carefully as possible looking for the support of a wall. He wouldn't fall if he had a wall to help him keep his bearings.

Finally by some coincidence he reached the door and walked out into the corridor. He still heard the voices, but they no longer came from every direction at once and Draco felt a little better. There was a table pushed against the wall out here. It had probably been temporarily removed from the room to make room for all the people.

Draco lifted the baby onto the table and sat down beside him leaning back against the wall. That was much better.

Billy seemed to feel better here too. He crawled around on the table exploring it and leaving his little squishy toy lying beside Draco ignored. For a while Draco was worried that he might fall off, but Billy seemed to know just how close to the edge he could go and Draco soon relaxed.

After a while Billy got bored with the table and crawled back towards Draco.

"Dako!" he called happily. Obviously he'd already forgotten their ordeal in the meeting room. He wanted to play.

Draco however was still a little shaky and didn't feel up to it, but he didn't want to push Billy away either. What to do? His eyes fell on the squishy toy and he picked it up making it squeak. Billy squealed happily. Draco squeezed the toy a few more times then held it out to Billy. Indeed the baby grabbed for the toy and forgot about Draco for the moment.

Draco sighed softly and leaned back against the wall once more closing his eyes. He still heard the voices from inside the room, but now that it was just some annoying background noise he ignored it. Sometimes he could hear people walk past him and he watched the first few through half closed lids, but they just ignored him so he stopped paying them any attention as well. The sound of the squishy toy told him that Billy was still happily playing. Everything was all right.

"WAAHHHHH!"

Draco set up straight in a flash. "Billy!"

Billy was sitting near the edge of the table crying and at the same time trying to stand up and reaching desperately for his squishy toy. But the strange boy who'd obviously grabbed it away from him pushed him against the shoulder and Billy fell back onto the table wailing even louder.

"Leave him alone!" Draco used his most imperious voice.

The stranger turned his head and regarded him coldly.

"Why should I? This is fun." he said giving the baby another rough shove that almost pushed him over the edge.

"Because I say so!" Draco jumped off the table and stood in front of the kid.
Bad move. The stranger was quite a bit bigger than him. Still Draco kept his cool staring at him menacingly. Secretly he was sizing up his opponent. He was really big and seemed quite strong, but not as big and strong as Crabbe or Goyle. He was wearing muggle clothes like all the local kids and a bright red bandanna Mark the Shark. Damn. But Draco wouldn't back down. Draco couldn't back down. Mark was hurting Billy.

"And that's supposed to scare me?" Mark laughed and pushed Billy once again. Luckily in the other direction this time so he didn't fall off the table, but he was badly scared and screaming.

Draco heard Billy's scream and forgetting that he didn't have Crabbe and Goyle with him to back him up threw himself at Mark.

Mark was obviously surprised. He hadn't expected a much smaller kid to attack him and they both landed on the floor with Draco pinning Mark down. Mark struggled to get out from under the lighter kid, but Draco wasn't holding still. He was punching and kicking and even scratching sometimes in his fury.

"Ahh! Let go!" Mark screamed when Draco got a grip on his long hair and started tearing at it.

Suddenly a hand grabbed Draco from behind. He turned round still with one knee on Mark's stomach and stared up at two identical menacing faces wearing red bandannas. Damn. He hadn't noticed Mark had brought his gang. Maybe it wasn't even his entire gang. Maybe it was just these twins. But that was more than enough to put Draco in really bad trouble.

He skittered backwards off Mark hoping that maybe they'd be satisfied with having saved their leader and jumped to his feet. Another figure loomed to his right. Draco turned his head slightly to see what it was.

Another Raker was just rounding the fighting pair on the floor and slowly advancing on the twins. It was a girl Draco noticed with a touch of surprise. The largest girl he'd ever seen. She was even bigger and wider than Crabby and Goyle and the expression she was wearing on her dark skinned face could only be described as gleeful. This girl just loved to hurt people.

"We'll get you and your baby some other time Sissy." Mark hissed and the Sharks turned and ran down the corridor.

At least Mark and the twins did. The girl was still cut off from her comrades by Draco and the two Raker girls and the boy was still on top of her. He was retreating a little though and she climbed out from under him and sat crouched up on the floor while the others slowly formed a circle around her.

Draco took little Billy into his arms again and his loud wails immediately turned into soft crying.
"Why, hello there, Robin!" the Raker boy said mock friendly to the Shark girl.

The Rakers smiled down at her and she immediately rose to her feet looking around wildly.

"What's going on here?" demanded a sneering voice behind them.

Professor Snape was back with his friend. And that was his usual business tone which Draco had found strangely lacking in the last three days. He liked Snape the family man, but Snape the teacher made him feel protected and safe. He dashed over to his side a wide smile on his face.

The other kids didn't seem to share his feelings though. The Rakers stepped closer together all facing Snape now and Robin, the Shark, used the moment to dash past them and after her leader and the twins.

"We don't know anything." said the Raker boy defensively. "Honest, Dad!" he added with a side glance at Snape's friend. "We just came by and found your boy there facing off against four Sharks. Think we should have left him?"

Snape's eyes wandered over the three Rakers then came to rest on Draco who was standing beside him cuddling Billy as if the whole mess didn't concern him at all. Draco looked up at him. Snape's look was quizzical, not threatening and he didn't even seem to object to Draco being labelled his boy.

"Mark was bothering Billy. And he wouldn't leave him alone when I told him to." he explained. "I didn't see the others until I was on top of him." he added more softly.

Snape looked down at Billy who was still crying. Behind him Draco could hear the Rakers whispering.

"He attacked Mark?"

"And he even had the upper hand?"

"Cool!" that was the boy's voice.

Draco had to fight down a huge proud smile. 'Yes, I beat the leader of the Sharks. I can fight just as well as you gang kids.' He looked up at Snape who was still looking at Billy. What was going to happen now?

"Come on, lets take him to bed." was all Snape said.

A/N - Is Severus angry with Draco? Will he finally get to tell his story at Lucius' trial? Will Draco ever get to go to the park?

In the next chapter: Severus tries to stop Draco from studying too hard. The Rakers are getting curious about Draco and Draco is curious about Soccer.
Chapter Notes

A/N - For all those of you who liked Harry Potter Hogwarts Caretaker: Tubesox has written a slightly different version of that story, which I enjoyed reading very much. Go check it out! The title's Breaking the Heart of Darkness.

Chapter 5: Ball Games and Other Things

Draco curled up in his bed and stared at the wall. For once he had woken up before Munin or any of the other pets could wake him and he could hear the Snapes moving about in the living room, but he didn't feel like getting up and talking to them. He was feeling guilty for what had almost happened to Billy the day before. Professor Snape had left him to watch the baby and he shouldn't have let him out of his sight. He shouldn't have taken him out of the meeting room in the first place. They had been safe there surrounded by all those adults. Mark would never have dared attack Billy if there had been adults around to protect him.

Professor Snape hadn't said anything about it yesterday, but maybe he'd just been too tired then? What if he was planning to punish him now? What was Sarah going to say? Draco hadn't seen her anymore yesterday. He'd gone straight to bed after Billy had gone to sleep. Sarah had still been at the meeting unaware of the whole incident. Would she be very angry? If so what would they do? Would they send him off to his uncle right away? Somehow that seemed to be the worst punishment possible.

But he was supposed to go to his uncle anyway. He belonged there and his uncle was probably already worrying what had become of him. Lucius' arrest and trial had been on the front page of the Daily Prophet. There was no way Uncle Thomas could be unaware of it. Maybe he'd be really happy to see that Draco was safe.

Still Draco didn't want to go. He supposed that was because he didn't know what to expect. He didn't know his uncle nor did he have more than a vague idea where he lived. That was probably making him nervous. He knew the Snapes now, knew their small flat and their pets and even the market place where they bought their food. He felt safe here. Everything was familiar. Nobody meant him any harm.

Well, except for Mark the Shark. But he was supposed to stay clear of the gangs anyway. Sarah would certainly make sure that he didn't get out of the flat again now. Maybe she wouldn't even take him down to see the washing machines again. She'd just keep him locked up in the flat. But that was okay with Draco. He could practice his Mathematics and watch Billy. And if he ever really got bored he could watch the kids in the park through the window. He could watch Mark and his Sharks as much as he liked and he'd be perfectly safe.

He finally crawled out of bed and decided to do some Mathematics instead of going out and facing the Snapes. As long as they thought he was still asleep they couldn't punish him.

Munin fluttered in to find that Draco was already up and sitting at the table writing. He landed on
the table eyeing the parchment. Was that a letter he'd get to deliver? No, there wasn't any envelope visible anywhere and those strange symbols were hardly ever used in letters, he knew. They definitely weren't the only things anyone would write in a letter.

"Caw? Eat?" he suggested to Draco.

"No thanks, Munin," answered Draco looking up from his equation. "I'm not hungry. And I have to finish this exercise.

"Caw?" Munin cocked his head at the boy. He was supposed to stroke his feathers and come out to eat now. Why wasn't he doing what he was supposed to? And what was Munin himself supposed to do now? He couldn't just leave this be. It was wrong. He didn't know why it was wrong, but he knew that it was. Well, he knew who'd know at least. There was somebody who always knew what to do when something was wrong. He just had to tell him.

Munin flew back into the living room and landed on Severus' shoulder.

"Caw!" he announced and took off again circling Severus' head twice then flying over to the door of Draco's room and circling again.

Snape looked up at once. Munin was signalling 'Follow!'. He knew better than to question the bird despite the odd request. Munin had been his only companion and assistant during some of the most dangerous undertakings of his life. He'd always trusted his ravens with his life. They were well trained intelligent birds and had saved him often enough. Munin would not alert him if there wasn't anything unusual going on.

He got up and followed the raven into Draco's room. Draco was still sitting by the table in the old t-shirt Severus had given him to use for a nightshirt and doing equations. Munin once again landed on the table.

"Caw!" he complained. "Eat!"

"Really Draco, Munin's right. This is going too far. You can't just start skipping meals over that Mathematics book. It's only the fifth of July. You're supposed to be enjoying your holidays at the moment, not spending all your time studying. Now, get dressed and eat your breakfast and then please try to have a little fun!"

"But I've almost solved this equation." protested Draco.

Snape strode into the room grabbed both the book and Draco's parchment and with a flick of his wand made them disappear. Draco looked up at him startled.

"Hey!"


"But the book! My equation!"

"You'll get them back when I come home. If you promise to be a good boy and don't spend all your time on studying."

Draco grumbled something incomprehensible, but obeyed. Sometimes he just didn't understand Snape. Weren't teachers supposed to encourage their pupils to study? And what was that about using the holidays to have fun? Children were born to study and bring good grades to make their parents proud, weren't they? Children who didn't study everyday were neglecting their duty
towards their parents. Didn't everybody know that?

Well, Snape was even planning to send his son to an inferior school. So maybe he didn't.

Would Billy grow up studying only on school days? Somehow Draco envied him that chance even though it was something entirely unnatural to him. Everybody used the holidays to study, didn't they?

Draco was just done with the dishes when the doorbell rang. He looked to Sarah expectantly wondering who might be standing outside wanting in. Were they expecting anyone?

"Oh Draco, could you open the door please. I'm almost done changing Billy's diapers. I really don't want to have to start over again." Sarah called to him.

He? Answer the door? Strange, why hadn't that thought occurred to him before? Curiously he walked over and opened it. Outside stood the Raker boy who'd tackled Robin yesterday.

"Hi." Draco said feeling stupid. What was he supposed to do now? What did the boy want? His father was Professor Snape's friend, he remembered. Maybe he'd sent him?

"Hi, Draco!" the boy answered smiling. He didn't seem to feel awkward at all.

"How do you know my name?" Draco asked confused. He was sure that he hadn't introduced himself to the Rakers so how would they know?

"Well, Cathy told me. And my father mentioned it too. Uncle Severus told him about you."

"Uncle?" now Draco felt really confused.

"Oh, he isn't really my uncle. I just call him that. I don't know why. I've been doing it as long as I can remember."

"Oh."

"I'm Mike by the way. Clever Mike. That's what the guys call me, because I always come up with the best plans."

At that moment Sarah appeared behind Draco with Billy in her arms.

"Good morning, Mike. What can we do for you?" she said smiling.

"Morning, Aunt Sarah. I think I can do something for you." he said holding out Billy's little squishy toy to the baby. "I found this in the basement and I think I saw you playing with it yesterday. Right?" He squeezed the toy and it squeaked.

"Da!" announced Billy happily and grabbed for it and this time it wasn't pulled away. "Da! Dako!"

"Hey, I'd have gotten it back for you, if your Daddy hadn't come and dragged us off." Draco defended himself.

"Dada!"

"Right, Dada. It's his fault."

"Thank you, Mike. That's very nice of you. Maybe you'd like to come in and play with Draco a bit? I think some company from someone his age would do him good. He doesn't have any friends, you
Draco blushed. Did Sarah have to tell Mike about that? It would be nice to have someone to talk to until Snape came home with his book though.

"Actually I was going to ask Draco if he wants to come out and play Soccer with us."

"Soccer?" asked Draco. "What's Soccer?" That word sounded really odd.

"It's a ball game. We'll show you. It's real fun."

"Well Mike, if you want to drag Draco out into the park, you'll have to watch out for him. He's from some big lonely place in the country and isn't used to you rough city kids. He doesn't know how to protect himself from the Sharks."

"Right." grinned Mike. "He only knows how to give Mark the Shark two black eyes in the time it takes three Sharks to grab him and pull him off. ... Maybe he ought to change his name. Mike the Raccoon would fit him much better right now."

"He has two black eyes?" Draco asked surprised. He'd never seen that before.

"Yes, just wait till you see him. He looks so funny."

"Really, Mike. You have to watch out for him. He just doesn't know how not to get into trouble around here. I won't let you take him if you don't promise." Sarah insisted.

"Okay, okay, I promise."

Sarah looked slightly doubtful, but nodded anyway. It wasn't right to keep a healthy teenager locked up in a small flat for a whole week. During the holidays and bright sunshine at that. And as long as he was only on the soccer lawn and stayed close to the Rakers it couldn't be all that dangerous. She just hoped that he really would stay on that lawn.

Draco and Mike ran down the corridor towards the stairs where Draco discovered to his surprise that the two Raker girls were waiting. Cathy Cat greeted him with another wonderfully dazzling smile.

"Hey, Draco. Wow, you really handed it to Mark. He's so ashamed of his face he doesn't even dare to go out today." 

"But we saw him take out the trash in the morning, didn't we Mike." roared the large girl who was bigger than Crabbe and Goyle. "He was trying to hide his face behind the bin."

"Yeah, he should have jumped in the bin, though. Right where he belongs." grinned Mike. "Oh, I think you already know Cathy Cat and the giant's Bloody Mary."

"I'm not a giant." growled Mary wrinkling her big black nose at the thought. "I'm a half ogre."

Now that explained her size pretty well. Actually she was exceptionally small and delicate for an ogre. Maybe she wasn't fully grown yet. Draco wondered how old she was, but decided not to ask. She might get angry at the question and he definitely didn't want to mess with her.

"Come on." called Cathy Cat from down on the next floor. "They're waiting for us. I want to score some goals today."

They chased down the stairs trying to catch up to Cathy, but she had too big a head start and Draco
soon noticed that Mary was threatening to be left behind. She was very strong, but also slow it seemed. Well, she did have a lot of weight to carry around with her.

Cathy waited for them downstairs impatiently holding the door open for them. Draco followed Mary and Mike out into the park and took a good look around. It seemed nice enough in daylight. What could be so dangerous about the place? Okay, so it looked rather scary in the middle of the night, but that was mostly because it was so badly lit. It sure looked like a nice place to play right now.

The Rakers led him towards a very small wooden hut hidden by a few trees that looked like it might collapse any moment.

"What's that?" Draco asked them eyeing it doubtfully.

"Originally the gardener's shed, but he hardly ever comes here anymore since the roof's leaking. His tools would rust if he kept them here. We use it as our headquarters though." explained Mike. "It might rain in in some places, but we know the dry spots and it still keeps us warm and dry in winter."

"And out of sight of the spies." added Cathy grinning. "They'd have to sneak pretty close to find out what we're up to."

"Spies?" asked Draco confused. "Oh, you mean the Sharks?"

"Them and others. Mostly the little kids though. They're curious and know we wouldn't really hurt them in case they got caught."

"Oh? Wouldn't we?" growled Mary menacingly.

Draco wasn't sure if she meant it or not. Bloody Mary scared him a little. Good that the Rakers seemed to be on his side.

"The little ones sell information to the other gangs." Mike smiled at Mary's scowl. "That's why we have to scare them away, but we don't really harm them unless they get too bold."

A boy of about thirteen or fourteen years sat on a low branch a few paces from the hut. He lifted a hand in greeting as they walked past him towards the entrance. He seemed uninterested in them, but somehow Draco felt that he was watching him very closely out of the corners of his eyes.

"That's Matt, the guard." said Mike nodding back at the boy and walking on casually.

"Guard?"

"Against intruders." said Cathy. "The spies, you know. He scares off the little ones and reports the bigger kids he can't handle alone. You can't have a meeting without a guard."

'Oh right, like letting Gregory stand outside the door when we're discussing things in school realised Draco. Nothing new really. He'd just never thought of Goyle as a guard before.

Mike opened the door and Draco stepped into a small storage room filled mostly with cobwebs and dimly lit by the light coming in through a single small window. Three boys and a girl looked at him measuringly.

Draco tried to meet their eyes without blinking. Were those all the Rakers? Or were even more still to come? He wished he'd counted heads when he'd watched them play from his window.
"So you're Draco, eh?" asked the largest boy finally. "Funny name that."

Draco looked him up and down carefully, trying to judge his position. He was obviously the oldest. Draco estimated him to be about seventeen, maybe even already out of school.

"It means dragon." he answered with a slight undertone of challenge in his voice. He wouldn't let anyone make fun of his name.

"Cool!" exclaimed the smallest kid who was sitting on an upturned dusty flowerpot and looking at Draco with shining eyes.

The older boy shot him an angry glance.

"Hey, I'm just saying dragon's a nice name." the little one defended himself.

Draco decided to ignore him for now. He looked twelve at most and obviously didn't have much say in the gang yet. The big boy was definitely more important for him right now. Draco kept looking at him.

"Well, Dragon then." he conceded. "If you like that name." He said it as if humouring a small child.

Draco wished he could jump him as he had Mark the Shark, but that wouldn't be a good idea right now. Better to keep up a façade of nonchalance, pretend that kid couldn't get to him.

"Whatever." he shrugged. "I'm more interested who you guys are right now."

"I'm Jack the Ripper." claimed the big boy.

Draco burst out laughing. The group stared at him. Mike grinned.

"What's so funny about that?" Jack demanded angrily.

"You don't really think anyone's going to buy that, do you? Jack the Ripper? Why really, can't you think of something a little more original?"

"You think Dragon's more original?" Jack challenged.

"It's what my parents named me." Draco shrugged. "But if you think about it. Do you know anybody else by that name?"

"Who gives a damn what you think of my name anyway. I'm Jack the Ripper and I'm the boss around here." Jack shouted.

"Okay, whatever you say, boss. You're Jack the Ripper." Draco shrugged again.

Jack kept glowering at him, but turned to introduce the rest of the gang. Draco suddenly got the feeling that Jack didn't want a fight with him. He seemed almost afraid.

Just how dangerous was Mark the Shark that Jack would feel afraid of Draco? He hadn't even beaten Mark. Or had he?

"That's Charlie the Dancer," introduced Jack nodding towards the girl. "Little Larry and Sammie."

"Sammie the Weasel." amended the small boy. "Cause I'm fast. Nobody can catch me."
Draco looked him up and down, but decided not to comment. Sammie was too young. It wouldn't
look good to get too close with him. He'd stick with Mike. After all Sarah seemed to like him and
Professor Snape hadn't objected to seeing them together either. He was friends with Mike's father
after all.

Draco turned his head to sneer at Little Larry. Larry was almost as big as Goyle, but not quite as
fat. More muscled and probably more intelligent he looked like a dangerous opponent in a fistfight.
No match for Mary in size, but most likely faster and more agile. No, Draco didn't want to cross
him, but he wouldn't show fear.

Charlie was a rather plain girl despite being very well shaped. Her hair colour though it was
difficult to make out in the dim light was some indefinite colour between blond and brown that
didn't shine at all and looked almost grey most of the time. Her eyes were greenish brown. It
looked as if she couldn't decide on any colours so everything about her was a mixture of two
different shades.

"Dancer?" he asked still sneering.

"Ballet." she explained. "I'm the best dancer in my class. Maybe I'll be a professional someday."

She said that with a slight shrug feigning indifference, but the look in her eyes betrayed her true
feelings. It was her big dream, probably the only way she'd ever be special in any way. If she could
move gracefully enough, she'd appear beautiful on stage even if she'd never be in real life.

Draco shrugged.

"I don't care much for ballet myself. I guess it must be a girl thing. I heard one can get really
famous through it though. Is that what you want, Charlie?"

What a strange name for a girl. Charlie. He wondered what her real name might be. Charlene?
Charlotte? Or maybe something entirely different? It was impossible to guess and Draco decided
not to ask. It was none of his business.

"I just want the same as everybody else." Charlie answered still feigning indifference.

"And that would be?"

"Money, of course. Famous dancers are well paid and they get to see all the world."

"You can see all the world by apparating." Draco shrugged.

"You can." said Charlie this time really indifferently. "I'm a squib. I need muggle transport and that
costs muggle money which I could earn by dancing."

Draco had to admit that that made sense. And it reminded him that he'd need muggle money too, if
he was going to go to muggle school. Well, you could buy that at Gringotts, but Charlie most likely
didn't have any wizard money either. Draco did. He never had to worry about money.

"So?" he asked Mike. "Didn't you promise to teach me that game of yours? Soccer I think is what
you called it."

"You don't even know what Soccer is? Don't you have Sports at your fancy school?" Jack tried to
intimidate Draco with a sneer of his own.

Draco almost laughed. Jack needed a lot of practise if he ever wanted to sneer as well as Draco.
Then of course Draco had learned from the best. Lucius' sneers could really scare people and even he was no match for Severus Snape.

"Of course we do. I'm Seeker on the Slytherin house Quidditch team. But we don't play that Soccer stuff. Too muggle, I suppose."

"Muggle games are the best." declared Charlie.

"For you for sure." sneered Draco. "It's hard to play Quidditch, if you can't ride a broom."

"Hey, that's low!" protested Cathy. "Charlie's a great pal, you know. Even if she can't do magic."

"Okay, sorry, if I've offended you guys. I just meant to say that Charlie has no way to compare as she's never played Quidditch."

"None of us have as far as I know." Mike said. "Our school has only five brooms, you know. Enough to teach us to fly on, not enough to play Quidditch."

"Don't any of you have your own brooms?"

"Those who can afford them usually can afford to live in a better part of town and go to a better school."

"But Professor Snape said West Hogsmeade had a very good school?"

"Yes, but it's a school for poor people. Rich people don't want their kids to have contact with such as us."

"We're dangerous, little rich kid." growled Jack. "We hang out in mean packs and beat people up."

"Oh?" Draco grinned up at Jack. "And you think we at Hogwarts don't?"

That silenced them for a moment. They looked at each other surprised. Draco could almost hear what they were thinking. Yes, they'd always thought that rich kids didn't fight, but then again how had Draco been able to beat up Mark the Shark like that? Mark was one of the best fighters they knew and Draco was a lot smaller than him. It couldn't have all been luck.

Jack finally shrugged and picked up the ball which had been lying in a corner.

"Okay then, lets play."

Draco soon found that Soccer wasn't as easy as it looked. The first time he kicked the ball it just flew off to one side and disappeared in the bushes. Draco stared after it confused. He'd intended to kick it straight ahead.

"What? How do you steer this thing?" he asked Mike and the whole gang laughed.

"Try kicking it with the side of your foot, not the tip of your toes for starters." Mike advised him through his giggles.

"The side?" Draco thought that idea very odd at first, but the gang insisted and after a few more attempts and demonstrations he managed to send the ball in roughly the direction he wanted it to go.

"You're still not up to a real game though." Cathy commented. "Maybe you could be the referee instead."
"He can't be." protested Jack. "He doesn't even know the rules."

"He could try keeper though." suggested Mary to everybody's surprise.

She had been watching silently the whole time and Draco had concluded that she was a rather quiet person that only ever got excited over a fight.

"Keeper? We didn't even explain that position to him yet." snarled Jack.

"We don't have to." insisted Cathy. "He says he plays Quidditch. They've got a keeper in that game, too. And he's used to catching balls with his hands. They don't use their feet in Quidditch."

"He doesn't play keeper on his team." growled Jack getting even angrier.

"That doesn't mean I can't do it. I've just never played it on an actual team."

"Lets give it a try. Jack. We can still change positions if it doesn't work out." suggested Mike.

Jack glowered at them, but agreed to let Draco try. Mike showed him the stones that marked the positions of the goals and which Draco hadn't been able to see from his window before and quickly explained to him that he was allowed to use both his hands and his feet to block the ball from going through between the stones.

Draco found that keeper was a lot easier for him and he proved to be quite an obstacle to the opposing team. They were used to facing either Mary or Larry as keepers who were both able to block most of the goal with their size, but rather slow to react. A quick, agile keeper like Draco was entirely new to them and Draco's team won easily. Jack left after the game wearing a big frown, but Cathy, who had been on the losing team as well came over to them wearing a huge smile and congratulated Draco on his performance.

"You're a great keeper, Dragon. This is the first time in years that I haven't gotten a single shot through during an entire game. Next time I want to be on your team."

Draco found that her smile was contagious. He was really beginning to like Soccer. Maybe he'd teach that game to his classmates. But then again it was too muggle for them to appreciate. Maybe he'd just try to switch his position on the Quidditch team to keeper. Then he wouldn't have to put up with Potter all that much anymore.

"You should try to be a little nicer to Jack, though." advised Mike as they climbed back up the stairs. "He's the boss, you know. It's not wise to challenge him."

"I didn't challenge him. He challenged me and I won't just back down without a fight." protested Draco.

"He feels challenged by your victory over Mark." said Cathy. "You defeated a gang leader already. You might go for another."

"I fought Mark, because he was picking on Billy. I couldn't let him hurt the baby. I was responsible for him. And why would I want a fight with Jack at all?"

"To take over the gang." Mike said calmly.

"What? Why would I? I'll only be here for two or three more days."

"I'll try to remind Jack of that, but you still ought to try and be more submissive." Cathy promised.
"Submissive? Never."

"And I'm supposed to keep him out of trouble." Mike sighed and shrugged at Cathy and Mary. "I wish I hadn't promised that."

Draco smirked at him and rang the doorbell of the Snape's flat. BRRING! He still loved to do that. Electric things were so much fun. He wished he could understand that Physics book. Just where was Professor Snape with the Math book? Draco wished he'd come home soon.

"So, did you have a nice time?" Sarah smiled as she let him in.

"Oh yes. What's for lunch?" Draco asked hungrily.

"I'm not quite done with the cooking yet, young man. You're going to have to help me, if you're hungry."

Lunch however was ready ten minutes later and after that Draco once again began to feel bored. He even found himself wishing that there were more dishes to wash. Professor Snape was still at the trial of course and the Math book with him.

Draco went into the lab and stared at the bookshelves for a while, but there was nothing that seemed interesting to him except for the Physics books and those he couldn't understand yet. He tried several other Mathematics books, but they were all too advanced for him. Not knowing what else to do he went over to the window again and looked longingly down at the park. It looked deserted. Everybody seemed to have gone home for lunch. No Rakers, no Sharks, not even any of the little wannabes.

Suddenly there was a knock behind him and Sarah came in carrying Billy. Draco turned around in surprise. Were they going somewhere? Maybe another visit with the washing machines? That would really ease the boredom.

"Draco, I'll be gone for a few hours and I don't want to take Billy with me. Would you mind watching him till I get back?"

"I'd love to!" Draco exclaimed. 'That's it. I can play with Billy.'

"Oh thank you. That's a lot of help, you know. He'll need his nap right now, but you'll have to stay close so you know when he wakes up. You know how to change his diapers?"

"Of course. You showed me how, remember?"

"Good. Don't let him in here unsupervised even for a second. With all those glass jars and potion ingredients lying around that's much too dangerous. He might break something or eat poison or hurt himself."

"Okay, I'll just leave the door closed then so he can't get in at all. No problem."

"Don't let him play with any of the electric stuff. And don't leave the flat. Okay, I'll just put him to bed now and run off."

"That's okay. I can put him to bed. You just go wherever you're going and don't worry about us. We'll be fine." Draco promised gently taking Billy out of her arms.

"Oh, thank you, Draco! That's so nice of you. I don't know what I'd do without you. Bye!" and Sarah dashed out the door.
"You'd most likely hire Cathy Cat and make her very happy that way." Draco told the closed door smiling.

He wondered what was so important to make Sarah run off like this. He'd never seen her get this hectic before.

"I just hope everything's all right." he said to Billy.

"Dako?" Billy sounded tired.

Right. Time for his nap. Draco quickly undressed the baby and then fought a little to get him into his pyjamas. Billy seemed to prefer to sleep naked on such a hot day, but Draco wasn't sure if he should let him. Sarah always dressed Billy in his pyjamas for his nap so he thought it better to do the same.

He finally managed and gently laid the now very tired baby into his little bed and tucked him in.

"Eddy!" Billy protested sleepily.

Draco looked around. Just where was Billy's teddy? Oh, there. On the floor. Billy had to have thrown it out of the bed during the night. Draco went and picked it up. It was a little dusty and he quickly brushed it clean with his hands.

"Eddy!" demanded Billy again.

Draco smiled and gently placed the teddy in Billy's little arms. Billy grabbed it tightly, rolled up and went to sleep within seconds.

Draco sat down on the bed and watched the baby sleep. Billy looked adorable like this, but it got a little boring after a while. Draco yawned. Maybe he could go to sleep as well? If he slept right here, Billy would no doubt wake him once he woke up himself. But he couldn't just go to sleep on the Snapes' bed, could he?

BRRING!

Draco started. What was that? Oh right. The door bell. But who would come to visit them right now?

Draco quickly got up and raced to the door. If whoever was out there got impatient and rang again, the sound might wake the baby.

It was Mike once again.

"Hi." he smiled. "I just thought you might want to come out with me again. I could show you around a bit. You know, show you all the places we usually hang out around here. Do you want to come?"

"I'd love to, but I can't. Mrs Snape had to leave for a few hours and I've got to watch Billy for her. I don't know when she'll be back." Draco sighed.

He'd have loved to spend some more time with Mike. Those local gang kids somehow were a lot more interesting than his classmates in Slytherin. They weren't really all that different actually, but they knew all this exciting muggle stuff and for once he wasn't Lucius Malfoy's precious son and future death eater. For once he could befriend whoever he liked and nobody saw him as an important contact for the future. He was just another kid.
"So let's take Billy with us. We can just put him in his buggy and go. A little fresh air will do him good."

"No, we can't. He needs his nap and I promised we wouldn't leave the flat anyway."

"Oh. Well then, maybe I can help you with Billy?"

Draco smiled. Now that was an idea.

"Billy's asleep right now so it's rather boring. ... We could play with the dog though."

'That Dog' jumped up at hearing the word dog and started to bark. 'Yes, yes, play with me! I'm bored, bored, bored.' He raced through the living room wagging his tail excitedly.

"Will you shut up!" Draco growled racing after him. "You'll wake the baby."

He tried to grab 'That Dog' and silence him, but the dog was faster of course and Draco was left racing through the room grabbing at thin air.

Mike watched the situation from the door for a moment, then walked in casually closing all doors. 'That Dog' was now limited to staying in the living room. Satisfied with that Mike sat down on the floor and watched. 'That Dog' gave the place he was sitting a wide berth the first few times he raced past, but when Mike didn't move he started coming closer and closer with each round.

Draco made another lounge for 'That Dog'. 'That Dog' jumped aside and straight into Mike's arms.

"Got you!" Mike announced happily.

'That Dog' shut up immediately and licked Mike's hands asking to be forgiven. Mike scratched him behind the ears, but didn't let go.

"How... How did you do that?" Draco panted.

"That," Mike grinned. "is why they call me Clever Mike. I told you I always have the best ideas."

"Yes, but how? I tried so hard to catch him and you manage with one single try."

"Well, you can't outrun a dog, you know. You've got to trick him. I didn't go for him so he forgot I was there. He thought I wasn't going to attack. I just took him by surprise."

"I'd never have caught him, would I?"

"I don't know. I guess he'd have gotten tired of the game eventually. Shouldn't we better check on Billy? See if we woke him up?"

"He'd be crying already if we did, but let's check on him anyway. He looks adorable when he's asleep."

Billy was indeed still fast asleep and cuddling his teddy. Draco carefully pulled up his blanket which had been beginning to slip away then stopped to just watch him for a little while.

"You really love babies, don't you?" Mike whispered into his ear after a while.

Draco still noticed the slight chuckle in his voice.

"I guess it's just that I've always wanted a little brother. My parents never agreed though. They
thought one was enough."

"Well, raising a child is kind of expensive." Mike mused. "All the money for food and clothes. And school's very expensive too. You've got to understand that."

"So? The Weasleys could afford to send seven kids to Hogwarts. My parents could have afforded two easily."

"The Weasleys are pretty rich, you know." Mike commented.

"Well, my father always said they were poor. We're richer than them so the money can't have been the reason." Draco complained.

Mike didn't say anything. He just sat down on the bed, where Draco had been sitting until he had arrived putting 'That Dog' in his lap. The dog seemed to like it there. He yawned and lay down comfortably. Mike scratched his head absent-mindedly. He was probably trying to wrap his mind around the idea that Draco was a rich kid. Snape and Sarah both had told him so before, but Draco suspected that Mike had never really known any rich people before. It had to be rather hard to get used to that.

Draco sat down beside him with a sigh.

"I think they just didn't like me. That's why they didn't want any more children. Maybe I was too unpleasant. Too much of a burden."

"Nonsense. Rich people always adore their children. They give them everything. Like toys and even brooms. I bet you have your own broom. Right?"

"Yes, but right now the ministry has it. They've confiscated everything. But they never really spent time with me like the Snapes do with Billy. They just bought me stuff to keep me out of their hair. ... Mother must have loved me a little though. She died for me after all." Draco suddenly felt tears rise in his eyes.

Had Mike heard his voice catch? He hoped not. He shut up quickly so his voice couldn't betray the tears he was fighting. Still one tear escaped and ran down his cheek. Draco quickly wiped it away again hoping that Mike hadn't noticed.

"Hey, where do you sleep anyway?" Mike asked suddenly changing the topic.

"In the lab. Do you want to see it?"

"Sure."

Severus arrived back home before Sarah to find Draco and Mike sitting on the living room floor with Billy playing with squishy baby toys. They were so up wrapped in the game that they didn't even notice when he arrived.

Severus smiled. Two teenagers playing with baby toys. What a cute scene.

Munin however wasn't content to just watch. He fluttered over to them, landed on the floor beside one of the toys and regarded it with a very intent queer bird look.

"Caw?" he said prodding the toy with his foot.
Munin jumped and hopped backwards. Then he stopped craning his neck to regard the toy even more intently and slowly edged closer again. What a strange object!

"Munin!" exclaimed Draco in surprise. If the raven was back, did that mean?

The boys looked up to see Snape looking down at them.

"I see you've taken my advice, but where's Sarah?" Severus looked around.

"Don't know." shrugged Mike.

"She said she had to leave for a few hours, but didn't say where she was going," explained Draco.

"And she didn't say when she'd be back?" Severus asked surprised. Usually Sarah didn't run off like that. She'd at least leave a note where she was.

"No. She just came into the lab about an hour after lunch and told me she had to go and that I should watch Billy. She seemed in quite a hurry. Do you think something's happened?" Draco asked feeling worried all of a sudden.

"Well, the dark lord didn't attack. That much I know for sure. As for what actually did happen we'll have to wait until Sarah gets back."

Both boys shuddered at the mention of the dark lord. Draco was surprised at his own reaction. He was a pure-blood and the son of a death eater. Why should he be afraid? But then again Lucius was going to jail, he was consorting with squibs and muggle lovers and the Snapes most likely supported Dumbledore. Voldemort wouldn't be too pleased with them. Severus saw Draco's reaction and for a moment an almost proud smile lit his usually stern face. But then again Draco had hardly ever seen him look stern in the time he'd been here. At home it seemed Snape smiled quite often.

"I don't suppose you thought of cooking dinner?" Snape asked probably to take the boys' minds of death eaters and the looming danger of war.

"Cook dinner?" Draco asked bewildered. "Who? Me? You expect me to cook? I've only ever handed Sarah ingredients. I don't even know the difference between a recipe for soup and a page in my potions book."

"In that case I think I'll have to give you some extra Potions lessons while you're here," threatened Snape.

"Extra Potions lessons? Hey, no, I didn't mean it that way. I've got to learn Mathematics!" Draco almost panicked.

And Snape laughed. Draco blinked then stared at him. He was really laughing. Severus Snape could laugh? Draco couldn't believe it.

"You ought to see your face, Dragon." giggled Mike. "You look like ... like ... I don't even know what you look like."

"I didn't really mean that, Draco. I never expected you to know how to cook." Snape assured him.

"Do you?"
"Do I do what?"

"Do you know how to cook?"

"Luckily yes. Else we'd have to ask Mike to cook our dinner for us."

Mike started.

"You really wouldn't want that, you know. I'm a very bad cook. The only thing I haven't managed to burn yet is salad." he protested.

"In that case you'd better start practising. At your age you should be able to prepare your own meals." Snape advised.

"Why? Draco can't either."

"Draco can afford a house elf to do it for him. You can't." Snape declared checking the content of the fridge.

"Mike's a boy." Draco jumped in. "He'll have his wife to cook for him."

"So he's going to get married the moment he leaves school? And his wife's always going to stay at home? I don't think so. Lesson one boys: How to prepare emergency dinner relay quickly."

Cooking with Professor Snape turned out to be a lot more difficult than with Sarah. Sarah had always been contented with Draco handing her ingredients. Snape was not. Luckily he decided that it was Mike who had to learn how to use the stove. Draco only ended up cleaning vegetables, stirring the soup and setting the table. Still it was hard work and Snape insisted that they both remember the recipe. Cooking reminded Draco of Potions more than ever.

Once they were almost done Snape sent Mike home to tell his family that he was eating with the Snapes and just as he dashed out the door Sarah came in. She stopped in the door staring after the boy in surprise.

"What was he doing here?"

"Cooking." said Snape simply. "We'll have to wait with dinner until he gets back. Draco, lay out another plate for Sarah!"

Draco who had been cuddling Billy quickly sat the baby back down on the floor and grabbed another plate.

"Dako?" Billy looked up at him with big pleading baby eyes.

Sarah went over and picked him up.

"Mummy!"

Five minutes later dinner was served and Draco noted to his surprise that it tasted just as good as anything Sarah had cooked. Professor Snape really did know how to cook.

A/N - So, do you think Draco will ever make friends with Jack? Will he learn to play Soccer better or will he have to stick to being keeper? Will he come to like it better than Quidditch?
In the next chapter: We get to know the Rakers better, go swimming and see the Snapes at breakfast.
Draco didn't find time to ask Snape about the trial until breakfast the next morning. Somehow he hadn't even thought about it while Mike was still there and after his new friend had left he'd been too eager to catch up on his Math exercises.

Severus had handed the book back to him with a sigh. Sometimes that boy really worried him. Well, at least he'd had some fun with Mike and the Rakers. That had been quite a surprise to Severus. He'd never have expected the local gang kids to accept Lucius Malfoys pampered son. But then again if he thought about his recent discoveries about the Malfoys' family life, Draco probably never really had been pampered. He wondered how much of Draco's story Mike had learned from his father. And how much had he told the other Rakers?

"So, did you get to tell them your story yesterday?" Draco asked trying to push Munin away from his plate which the raven was eyeing hungrily.

"No, but the butler finally did. They'll get around to it today. I'll take you to your uncle on Sunday. I bet he's already worried about you." Severus added when he saw Draco's unhappy face. "You'll like it there, Draco. I'm sure of that."

"I just wish I knew at least what he looks like. It doesn't feel like going to live with a relative at all. He's a total stranger to me." sighed Draco.

Munin realising that Draco was momentarily distracted quickly dove in and grabbed a slice of toast off his plate.

"Hey!" Draco yelled angrily and grabbed for the retreating raven.

Munin however hopped away easily. He grinned at Draco. Of course ravens can't grin with their beaks, but the way he was holding his head and blinking at him was definitely a grin. Angrily Draco tried to catch him again. No chance. Munin just hopped about on the table evading him easily. Draco was getting more and more desperate.

"Munin, let go!" Snape ordered calmly sounding almost bored.

The raven immediately opened his beak and the toast fell onto the tablecloth.

"Couldn't you at least have taken a piece that wasn't already buttered?" Sarah scowled at the bird. "There are enough in the breadbasket. We might even have let you have one of those."

"That's not what he wanted." Severus commented dryly.

"Right, he's just trying to be a pest again." complained Sarah shooing Munin away from her plate just in time.

Disappointed the raven turned towards Severus' breakfast. He hopped in from the side hoping that Severus hadn't seen him yet. Severus gently pushed him back with his arm. Hopping over the arm Munin tried again.
"Oh, drop dead." Severus scowled.

And to Darco's horror the raven dropped flat onto his back feet stretched into the air above him.

"Munin!"

The raven didn't move. His eyes were closed one wing had dropped away from his body. Snape continued to eat as if nothing had happened.

"Munin! Come on Munin, please move!" Draco called again near tears.

Snape looked up from his plate at the frightened boy. He snapped his fingers.

"Here, Munin!" he called softly.

The raven's eyes flew open. He turned over onto his feet and hopped onto Snape's arm in one quick movement. Snape gently stroked the ruffled black feathers flattening them back into form.

"What happened?" Draco gasped completely confused.

"Oh, that's just another of his little tricks. Just like opening doors." Snape explained casually. "When I tell him to play dead he won't move for anything until I call him."

"Really? Wow, I've got to teach that to my owl!" decided Draco.

"You can't. Owls don't do that kind of tricks. Some owls can be trained to sit still in a certain spot until they're called, but you can't teach them to drop flat on their backs or to obey a command only when it's given by a certain person."

"So why does Munin do it then?"

"Munin is a raven. Ravens can learn almost anything. They just love doing tricks and they're a lot cleverer than owls to start with."

"Then why does everybody use owls? If ravens are so much cleverer shouldn't more people have them?" Draco asked intrigued.

"Owls are easier to keep and train. In fact they are usually bought already trained. It's just buy and use. Ravens are a lot more work. If you really want to be able to rely on a raven you have to raise and train him yourself. And you've got to know what you're doing when you raise a raven. They can develop some very annoying habits."

"Like eating off your plate." commented Draco.

"They tend to steal more valuable things than food. It's their curiosity. They're attracted to things that glitter so they just grab them and fly off to take a closer look elsewhere and once they're done with them they just drop them."

"Does Munin do that?" Draco eyed the bird suspiciously even though he didn't have anything valuable with him that he might steal.

"No, he knows not to carry anything off without permission. But he is curious and sometimes grabs stuff to examine it. He'll always give it back though."

"Are you taking him along to the trial again?"
"Oh yes, that way I have at least one intelligent person to talk to when all those lawyers start acting up again."

Draco regarded Munin. He still looked like an ordinary big black bird.

"He doesn't really answer you, does he? I mean, I know he can talk, but he doesn't understand what he's saying, does he?"

"Yes, he does." Snape smiled proudly. "He doesn't usually repeat words he doesn't understand."

"But... ?"

"He doesn't understand most of what we say, but he does know and mean what he says."

"Oh, really? Then what does he mean when he tells me 'Fly!'? I already told him I don't have wings. If he's so clever he ought to know that humans don't usually fly."

"It means 'Let's go!' or 'Come on!'. Or maybe 'I fly. You walk.'"

Munin who had been listening closely to their conversation suddenly flapped onto Snape's shoulder.

"Fly!" he cawed.

"So what does he mean now?" Draco challenged.

"He means: If we're going to the trial again, we'd better go now or we'll be late. And he's right as usual." Severus explained getting up. "Now, have a nice day. Don't spend all your time studying and don't go walking through the park alone. Wait for Mike to take you."

Draco nodded obediently and started clearing off the table wondering if Mike would really come over again. Sarah took off the stained tablecloth as soon as he was done and stuffed it into the laundry basket.

"If things keep going on like this, I'm going to have to wash the laundry tomorrow." she grumbled.

"Oh great! Can I come along and see the washing machines again?"

"Maybe. Just hurry up with the dishes. Mike will probably be here any moment now and you're not leaving until you're done." Sarah declared sternly.

Draco almost burst out laughing. By now he knew that she didn't mean it, but he did want to have the dishes done before Mike arrived, if he really did. It was a little bit of work that he could do for Sarah to make up for the lot of additional work his presence meant for her. The Snapes didn't have to be so nice to him after all.

Mike indeed showed up only a few minutes later accompanied to Draco's surprise by Cathy Cat. Bloody Mary however was nowhere in sight and she wasn't waiting for them on the stairs either. Neither Mike nor Cathy seemed to be worried about that fact in the slightest however. So Draco decided not to ask. Maybe Mary never did come out on Thursday mornings.

This time they didn't meet in the old shed Draco noted with interest. They walked directly to the soccer lawn instead and Mike once again tried to teach Draco how to guide a ball with his feet. Draco tried his best, but his shots kept going far off target. At least they did go in roughly the right direction by now though.
Jack arrived last except for Mary who didn't arrive at all. He sneered at Draco's efforts and wondered loudly why Mike was even bothering to teach Draco at all.

Draco glared at him, but remembering Mike's advice to try to be nicer to Jack didn't respond. Jack glared back and against what he'd said the day before didn't chose Draco for his team. Instead he chose all the good players and put Sammie in charge of the other team.

Draco remembered that Sammie had been the only one on their new team who'd come close to scoring a goal in his first game, but he clearly didn't have any leadership qualities at all. It was obvious that he didn't know what to do with the team and the others simply ignored him most of the time. Draco however was getting more and more used to his position as keeper and managed to keep Jack's team from scoring. Almost at the end of the game it seemed like there wouldn't be any goals at all today.

Then Cathy made another go for Draco's goal and Draco once again caught the ball easily and threw it over to Charlie who looked like she'd been getting bored, because being the worst player in the gang she never managed to get at the ball. Draco thought it couldn't do any harm to include her in the game that was practically over anyway.

On the other side Larry started yelling at Cathy for not scoring again. Cathy cursed back at Larry and he raced out of his goal still shouting insults at her.

Charlie took off with the ball going in the direction of Larry's goal. 'Well, at least she's trying.' thought Draco. 'Nice effort, Charlie, even if you don't have a chance to score.'

Cathy turned and ran back towards Larry eyes gleaming with rage. Jack turned towards the pair as well. Whatever Larry had said must have really hurt Cathy, but Draco had been too far away to understand what he was really yelling.

Charlie unexpectedly passed the ball to Sammie at the same time Cathy slapped Larry hard across the face. Jack stepped between the two saying something to Larry and pointing back to the goal. Larry turned. Sammie shot...

And the ball went in.

Jack was furious. He yelled at both Larry and Cathy and when Mike tried to calm him down he nearly punched him in the face. Larry again shouted at Cathy and Mike had to restrain Cathy physically to prevent her from going after either Larry or Jack. It wasn't entirely clear which one she was more angry with at the moment.

Only a few paces away from Jack's raging team Charlie and Matt were hugging Sammie delighted and surprised at their victory. They hadn't even expected to manage a draw against that team. Much less to win.

Draco ran over to his team to congratulate Sammie as well. Of course he'd only scored because Larry had been stupid enough to leave his goal unprotected, but Charlie would probably have missed it anyway, if she'd shot herself. Any other player would have gone for the goal and the glory, but Charlie had passed the ball knowing that Sammie had a better chance of getting it in.

"Well done, Charlie!" the words were out of his mouth before Draco had realised he intended to say something at all. "We couldn't have won without you."

"Without me? But Sammie scored the winning goal."

"Because you passed him the ball at precisely the right moment. Don't get me wrong, Sammie did
really well, but I don't think that was the most difficult score he's ever made. Larry wasn't even there. You're the one who made a last run at the goal, when we all thought we'd already lost and you're the one who passed the ball to the right player for the score. You managed to sneak the ball past the other team without them noticing."

"Yes, that's right. I wouldn't have made another go at the goal, if Dragon had passed the ball to me. You at least deserve credit for seeing and using the last chance to score." confirmed Matt.

Draco was beginning to suspect that Matt liked Charlie. Somehow those two stuck together a lot.

Sammie too admitted that there hadn't been much difficulty in his shot. Mostly their victory was due to Little Larry being unable to control his temper, but that didn't stop them from gloating. None of them had ever had a decisive part in winning a game before and it just felt good to be able to rub it in.

Jack left for lunch in an even worse mood than he'd arrived in announcing that he had better things to do than to hang out with them this afternoon.

"Hey, lets go swimming today then!" suggested Matt at that.

"But I don't have my swimming trunks." Draco protested.

"No problem." said Mike still looking a little glum. "I've got an extra pair you can borrow."

"Thanks. ... I'm sorry about gloating all that much about our victory." Draco said while they were climbing back up the stairs.

Mike was trying hard not to look too down and Cathy was still fuming. He hadn't meant to hurt either of them like that.

"It's okay." said Mike softly. "It isn't really loosing that's upset me. It's the way our team couldn't take it. Larry and Jack were behaving like total idiots about it. That's what's really getting to me."

"Serves them right, too." ground out Cathy. "They aren't only sore losers. Jack was practically cheating. He took all the best players for himself just to force you to lose. He wasn't even giving you a fair chance. It serves him right that his plan backfired. And now he runs off to sulk. What did I ever see in that guy? I can't believe I thought I was in love with him."

"You're not saying you're breaking up with him?!!" Mike almost shouted.

"Yes, I am. I don't want a guy who turns into a complete idiot, just because he doesn't like Dragon. He's a bit too old for that. I can understand such behaviour from the children I babysit. They're supposed to be immature. That's why they need a babysitter after all. But my boyfriend ought to be a little more mature. I mean. Jack's 17 and he's behaving like a five year old. Honest, even Sammie can take a defeat with more grace than Jack and he's only 12!" she walked off still muttering angrily to herself.

"Wow, Cathy Cat sure can get angry." Draco stated still feeling slightly confused.

"Yeah, well, have you ever met an angry cat? She doesn't have her name for nothing, you know,"

grinned Mike having obviously forgotten his own anger. "What really counts though is that she's available. And everybody's gonna know she was the one who broke up with Jack."

"Oh, think you've got a chance with her now?"
"Probably not. I would, if Larry was my only competition. He's not exactly the most intelligent or good looking kid around, but I bet Matt's going to try for her as well and he's a lot better looking than me. Then again she might not want to date a squib, but there's always the chance that she'll fall for a Shark. The twins aren't bad looking either, Mark himself isn't all that fond of Robin anymore and then there's Pretty Ricky. He's quite the girl magnet as well."

"Pretty Ricky?" now that was one odd name. Even more ridiculous than Jack the Ripper.

"He didn't really chose that name, you know, but he's such a narcissist. The only boy I ever met who carries a mirror and a comb with him all the time. That's the one thing girls don't like about him. He's so much in love with himself, that he can't really love anybody else. Still he'd be quite a trophy for Cathy. He's practically Marks second in command too."

"Guess he wasn't there when I met them in the basement. I can't remember him at least."

"No, he wouldn't have been. He lives in another house. Number 14, I think. I saw only the ones from our house there that day, Mark, the twins and Robin. He tends to avoid fights though. It might damage his looks if he got beaten up, you know. He doesn't like to risk that."

"But he's the best looking so Cathy would want him anyway?"

"Yeah, too bad you're not staying."

"Huh? Why?"

"Because she'd most likely go for you. You're good looking, but not such a sissy as Ricky and you beat Mark. And you're a nice guy, too. That'd really give you points with her after the way Jack just lost her."

"A nice guy? I'm a Slytherin, Mike. We're known for a lot of things, but definitely not for being nice. I'm particularly famous for my insults and sarcasm."

"You're still a nice guy. Just look at the way you treated Charlie. Everybody else always tries to keep the ball as far as possible away from her, because she always loses it, but you not only gave her the ball, you even credited her with part of the victory."

"She deserved that. It may have been Larry who handed us the chance and Sammie who actually shot the ball, but she's the one who kept trying and saw the chance. We only got so close to the goal, because none of you really noticed what she was doing and then she actually gave up her chance at scoring in favour of Sammie, because he was more likely to succeed. I only gave her the credit she deserved for her efforts for the team."

"See, I told you you're a nice guy. You could have claimed the victory for yourself, you know."

"I? What did I do? I wasn't even close to your goal."

"No, you just kept us from scoring. We had a lot of better chances and the better players, but you didn't let us get a single shot through. If it hadn't been for you, you'd have lost despite that one goal."

"I could only have achieved a draw at best. It was still Charlie and Sammie who won the game."

"You should have led that team. You're almost as clever as I am."

"I'm what? Oh, shut up!" Draco swiped at Mike playfully with one hand and Mike quickly dove
away pulling a key out of his pocket and darting towards a door only two doors over from the Snipes'.

"You're still a nice guy, Dragon!" he shouted just before he closed the door behind him. "See you after lunch!"

Sarah was quite surprised to see the way Draco was grinning from ear to ear when she opened the door.

"I suppose you won that game?" she asked him pretending to be indifferent.

"Yes, we did and now Cathy's going to dump Jack and Mike even said I'd have chances with her, if I weren't leaving on Sunday."

"Oh, you expect me to believe that Cathy's leaving Jack just because you won a Soccer match? Draco, she's not that kind of girl."

"She's not leaving him because we won. She's leaving him, because he's a sore loser and he yelled at her and blamed her for Larry's mistake. She says he's too immature for her and she wants somebody nicer."

"And you're nicer?" Sarah asked dubiously.

"Well, Mike claims that I'm nice. Just because I said we owe it all to Charlie." complained Draco.

"Well then, be so nice and hand me the salt and I'll need some milk and..."

Draco sighed softly to himself. Cooking again. At least cooking with Sarah was a lot easier than cooking with Professor Snape. Draco was beginning to develop something akin to respect for house elves.

Mike arrived even before Draco was done with the dishes this time. He was barefoot wearing only his swimming trunks and had a towel slung over his shoulders.

"Here," he said pressing another pair of trunks into Draco's hand. "Hurry up and put these on. The others are already waiting downstairs."

"But I have to finish washing the dishes first!" protested Draco. "I can't just drop everything and run off."

"I'll finish the dishes." declared Mike as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Maybe it was. Draco suddenly remembered Sarah telling him that if Billy were only a little older it'd be his job. Mike had probably been washing dishes as long as he could remember.

Draco regarded the swimming trunks. They were the same blue as the Rakers' caps, but instead of the whole name of the gang there was only a white R stitched onto them on the right front side. He wondered if he was really allowed to wear these. They were obviously part of the Raker uniform and he wasn't a Raker even though he played with them. Jack would probably throw a fit if he saw him wear these. But then again. Jack wasn't coming with them anyway and Mike and the others probably didn't own any others he could borrow.

He changed quickly then helped Mike dry off the last of the dishes. As they left he considered putting on his shoes for a moment. He wasn't used to running around barefoot outside, but then
again Mike must have had a reason not to bring his shoes and he couldn't wear them into the water
anyway.

"Wait a minute!" Sarah called after them when they were almost through the door. "You're not
going swimming without a towel. What are you going to sit on? And don't you dare come home
dripping wet either. I don't need you getting the floor all wet and dirty."

"Sorry."

"Sorry." shouted Draco racing back and grabbing the large towel she handed him. He didn't mind
her scolding anymore, but he knew he'd better obey her without questioning. She'd been kind
enough to take him in. He didn't need to give her any additional trouble.

They raced down the stairs the hard steps nice and cool under their bare feet. Draco had a nasty
suspicion that they were probably very dirty as well though. He wondered how Sarah would react
if he left dirty footprints on the floor when he came back in.

The others were indeed all already waiting for them including Mary who looked even more
intimidating in her blue bikini. Draco wondered for a moment what she might look like in a muggle
dress. Womanly clothes definitely weren't meant for half ogres.

Cathy Cat on the other hand looked adorable. She could afford to show lots of skin in Draco's
opinion. The Raker blue went well with her eyes as well and the way she smiled and winked at
him...

Cathy was definitely... er ... well adorable for lack of a better word. Draco thought she was
definitely something more than that, but he just didn't know what to call it.

Charlie would have looked a lot more interesting like this as well, if she hadn't been standing so
close to Cathy. She was just as well shaped as her friend, but Cathy's beautiful black curls and
shining blue eyes outshone her easily. Still Draco made a point of greeting her warmly. She'd won
that game for their team and he wanted her to know that he appreciated that.

Little Larry seemed to have forgotten the morning's defeat. He laughed and chatted with the others
as they walked through the park in the direction of the river.

Draco felt slightly uneasy about that. They weren't going to swim in the river, were they? It wasn't
really wild, but the current was still rather strong and Draco didn't think it was safe to swim in. He
didn't like the idea of being carried off into the sea and he hadn't even brought his wand.

The pavement was uncomfortably hot under his feet and every once in a while he stepped on a
small stone. The others didn't seem bothered by this at all. They were clearly used to running
around barefoot and Draco tried his best not to limp too obviously whenever it happened again, but
he began to secretly wish he hadn't gone with them. He could have stayed at home and learned
some Math or played with Billy.

After what seemed like an eternity to Draco, but was probably just a few minutes they arrived at a
small pond surrounded by a bit of green. There were lots of kids already there splashing and
shouting. Most of them were younger then they though and quickly moved over to make room for
them. Draco saw no Shark bandannas anywhere, which he supposed was good. Then again none of
the Rakers were wearing their caps either. Draco doubted he'd recognise the Sharks without their
bandannas. Well, maybe Mark and possibly Robin as well, but he had never even seen most of
them at all.

The grass was dried out and spiky from the heat and stung Draco's feet, but it was a lot better than
stepping on stones had been. The others just dropped their towels under a tree and ran out into the
water. Draco followed their example and found that the bottom of the pond was covered with even more and bigger stones, but the water was nice and cool and the stones stopped being a problem once he was far enough in to swim.

He noticed the others all turning in the same direction and followed them again. They were headed for a large tree trunk that was for some reason drifting in the pond. Matt reached it first and climbed onto it, but Cathy was right behind him and when she grabbed for one of the branches and pulled herself up the whole trunk turned in the water and Matt fell off with a startled squeak. Now Cathy was almost up, but Charlie grabbed her ankle and pulled her back in. Cathy retaliated by dunking Charlie under the water. Then Draco had reached the tree and saw no more of the girl's activities as Larry greeted him with a huge splash of water in the face. Draco blinked the water out of his eyes and went after Larry who dived away and disappeared.

Unable to find Larry again Draco instead dunked Sammie who dived away and held on to Draco's arm trying to pull him down with him, but had to let go when he collided with Mary under the water. Draco left those two to fight it out and made a grab for the tree. The soaked wood proved rather hard to climb. Draco constantly slipped off and the whole tree kept moving away and turning whenever somebody caught a hold of it. Add to that several splashing kids who constantly try to pull or push you back in and it becomes quite a laborious task.

It took a while until they were all safely on the tree. Larry finally pulled Sammie up and there they sat floating through the water on a wet tree and panting. Draco would never have thought that this could be so much fun. Actually he had never imagined that anything could be this much fun before. He listened to the other's conversation and laughter with half an ear while watching the reflections of the sun dance about the water dangling his feet in and wondering idly what the fish might think of his toes intruding into their realm. They were most likely used to it, though.

Cathy sat right behind him leaning against one of the branches one foot on the trunk so close that, if Draco would have leaned back only slightly they'd have touched, the other hanging into the water and occasionally splashing Draco with a quick kick.

Mike had watched them for a bit sitting on Draco's other side, but then had turned over to joke with Matt and Sammie who were constantly climbing about and threatening to throw each other or maybe even the whole gang off with their escapades. Mary and Larry were sitting at the broad end of the tree leaning against each other and obviously enjoying the company.

Charlie was sprawled on her stomach over the tree arms and legs dangling and looked almost asleep.

Yes, this was the life. It couldn't possibly get any better than this.

The peace and relaxation ended when they finally were rested enough to get bored and jumped back into the water. Splashing and laughing and dunking each other they made their way back and to shore where they laid out their towels and sat in the sun watching the other bathers. There was a group of kids accompanied by two toddlers not much older than Billy splashing around in the shallow water.

The babies were wearing strange red objects on their little arms. They looked like the poor little ones shouldn't be able to move their arms at all with these things on them, but obviously they weren't quite as hard as they looked. Draco wondered what those things might be. He was also feeling a little worried. Those two didn't look old enough to know how to swim. Wasn't it dangerous to take them this close to deep water?

There were some older children wearing those strange plastic things as well. At least they didn't
"What are those red things?" he finally asked Mike.

"Red things? What red things?" Mike seemed confused.

"You mean the water wings?" Cathy asked from behind them. "Those little plastic wings on the kids' arms?"

Draco nodded. "What are they for? They look pretty uncomfortable to me. Especially for those babies. They're much too large."

"No they're not. They're meant to protect their lives." laughed Cathy. "They're actually little plastic bags filled with air. So when the child gets into deep water they float and therefore keep the head up. That way even a baby that can't swim can paddle through the water without being in danger of drowning."

"Oh, that's good. But what happens if they rip?"

"They're pretty strong, but you have to check them every once in a while." Mike answered this time.

"They still look rather uncomfortable to me. Why don't they use those plastic hoops instead. I had one of those when I was little and it was really comfortable."

"Maybe so, but it's also dangerous. The child has to hold on to the hoop if they let go they can still drown. The water wings hold on to the child. They have to be pulled off to get rid of them and when they're fully blown that's rather difficult for a baby to accomplish. They get really tight."

Draco went back to watching the babies play. He hoped that the wings weren't tight enough to hurt them, but they seemed perfectly happy waddling around by the water together. One picked up something from the ground and went to show it to one of the older kids probably his sister Draco supposed. She didn't look too thrilled with the object however and mostly ignored the little boy. Draco felt sorry for him.

"Dragon? Hey, Dragon!" Cathy called.

"Huh? Oh sorry. I was lost in my thoughts."

"You really like children, don't you?" she smiled at him. Draco felt himself blush.

"I was just thinking about how nice this would be for Billy. There's so much to see here for a baby."

"We wouldn't be able to swim out to the tree if we had to drag a baby along, you know." commented Matt scowling slightly. "It would have been too far for him water wings or not."

"It'd still be nice to have him here. He's so cute when he goes exploring."

"Pah, cute!" scoffed Matt. "Stupid baby."

"Never mind Matt." said Cathy gently. "He's just jealous of his little sister, because she gets all the attention right now."

"Stupid baby!" Matt repeated, this time with more vehemence. "Everybody's always going on about how cute she is and how she's got to be magical and everything. They're already talking about what
kind of wand she'll have and what she's going to be when she grows up. Little nuisance. All she ever does is cry."

"Oh come on. You can't really not like your little sister. I'd love to have one," said Draco. "Babies are so adorable."

"Adorable? They're nothing but trouble." insisted Matt. "And she isn't even really my sister." he went on. "She has a different father."

"I thought you liked your stepfather?" inquired Sammie sounding confused.

"I did. As long as he liked me. But now it's all 'Lorah this, Lorah that.' They don't even know I exist anymore."

"I sometimes thought my mother didn't know I existed either." said Draco suddenly. "And now she died for me."

"She died for you? Really?" Sammie asked excitedly. "How?"

Draco rolled onto his back and stared up at the single small cloud visible in the sky. "I really don't want to talk about that."

There was silence for a long moment. Draco wondered what his companions were thinking.

"I like my step-dad" Mary finally said. "Even if he's human and hardly ever talks to me. He brings home some extra money and he doesn't make the whole house shake when he walks. It's easier for Mum now, too."

"But don't you sometimes wish you could know more about your ogre relatives?" Cathy asked her a wishful tone in her voice that Draco couldn't interpret.

"Yeah, sometimes, but it's good to have a father who actually works."

"Didn't your real father work?" asked Draco.

"Oh, of course he did whenever he could, but few people would hire an ogre. Most of the time he was just sitting at home getting drunk."

"I still wish I had a father." sighed Cathy.

"You don't have a father? How that?" asked Draco. "You've got to have one. Otherwise you wouldn't be here at all."

"Oh, sure I have one. I just don't know anything about him. I never met him, you know." Cathy sat up and crouched on her towel chin on her knees, arms slung around them.

"Didn't your Mum ever tell you about him?" asked Sammie. "Dad's always telling me stories about Mum."

"No, she doesn't like to talk about him. All I know is that he was Irish and that I look a lot like him. That and that people always stare at me when I tell them my last name and that I'm Scottish. Most of them never say anything about it though, I guess they think I'm adopted. I hate not having a dad. I'd much rather have a step-dad than none at all."

"Having a dad isn't all that great either. I'm glad that mine's gone now." said Charlie ripping at the grass beside her towel. "I just hope he doesn't come back when he gets out. Either that or that they
arrest him right again. He always got so horrible when he drank. He'd start yelling at us and then he'd just grab one of us and start hitting her until he finally passed out."

"Yeah, my Dad got drunk again yesterday and then Bobby dropped a plate during dinner. It didn't even break, but Dad hit him anyway." commented Larry.

"I'm glad my sister moved out. Now Dad at least can't get to her when he comes back from Azkaban." said Charlie with a sad smile. "I wish I were old enough to move away too. Or maybe I just wish he never gets out."

"So your Dad's in Azkaban for attacking you and your sister?" Draco asked surprised.

Those kids really weren't all that different from him, even though they didn't seem the slightest bit afraid to talk about these things. He suddenly wondered how many kids at Hogwarts were hiding similar stories. Could it be that they all were, he thought for a moment. That all those perfect families that people so often talked about were just façades hiding some sinister truth. Then he thought of the Snapes. No, those perfect families did exist. The question was just how many of them there really were. Most likely they were a lot rarer than everybody thought.

"No, of course not! He's in Azkaban for stealing. You don't go to Azkaban for drinking and hitting your children or wife." stated Charlie obviously convinced of her facts.

"My father will." said Draco.

They stared at him.

"Well I guess he'll actually go there for accidentally killing my mother when he hit her, but in the end it's the same thing. Professor Snape said there's no way he's not going to Azkaban even despite all those lawyers he has."

"Didn't you say she died for you?" Cathy asked softly.

"Yeah, she got between us when he was going to hit me. She tried to protect me and he killed her for it."

"I thought your family was rich?" Larry said sounding totally confused.

"Yes, so what? That's why he can afford all those lawyers, but that's just buying him time."

"But I thought rich people don't hit their wives."

"Well, whoever said that was probably some rich guy who didn't want to admit that he was doing it." sneered Draco.

"Does your Dad drink too then?" asked Sammie.

"Yeah, but he's not my Dad. He prefers to be called Father."

"Your Dad won't even let you call him Dad?!!" they stared again.

"So what. It's just a word. It doesn't really make a difference what I call him."

"I don't know." said Charlie. "Father sounds kind of cold. So unloving."

Draco shrugged. Had his father ever loved him? He didn't think so. He'd pretended to, yes. But had he actually ever felt something for him? Draco doubted it.
Jack's unexpected arrival ended that conversation before they could get any more depressed about their lives. He dropped his towel beside Cathy and flopped down on it.

"So what's up?"

Cathy quietly got up and demonstratively pulled her towel into the small space between Mike's and Draco's. They both scooted over to make room for her.

"Cathy?" asked Jack bewildered. "What's going on?"

"Nothing. We're just having a nice chat by the pond." Cathy snapped. "Weren't you going to play with the other children in the sandbox today?"

"I was helping my Dad repair the living room window, if you have to know. What's wrong with you? Aren't you going to kiss me?"

"No, I'm never going to kiss you again. We're through, Jack. Leave me alone."


"Why? Because you're an immature idiot. That's why. Just because Dragon's team won a single game you're behaving like a two year old. Thank you, I can get a better man than that."

"Oh, so you're after the rich kid's money. Is that it?"

"This has nothing to do with Draco at all and I don't care about money. I care about the way my boyfriend treats his friends and me just because he lost one little game. You think you can yell at me for not being able to score against Draco and then come back a few hours later and tell me to kiss you and pretend nothing happened? Well, think again! I'm through with you. I'll find someone nicer. Good bye! I'm going for another swim." Cathy jumped up and ran back into the water.

"Hey wait!" Sammie called after her. "I'm coming with you."

"Yes, me too. Lets go swimming everybody."

Jack sat on his towel mouth hanging open as all the others jumped up and followed Cathy into the pond. When he had almost reached the water Draco turned and looked back at him.

"So are you going to come with us or are you just going to sit there and stare?" he smirked.

Jack just got up, grabbed his towel and walked off. Draco grinned and finally followed the others into the water. Cathy had a big head start and was already about to reach the tree. Sammie and Charlie were gaining on her though. The last thoughts of Jack disappeared from Draco's mind. He had to hurry up if he didn't want to miss out on the water fight.

Fore some strange reason the stones didn't seem quite as sharp to Draco on the way back as they had on the way to the pond. Had his feet adapted to running barefoot already? Or maybe it was just that he'd had so much fun and was so tired that he just didn't feel them all that much anymore.

They were late. It was already beginning to get dark and Draco had the slight suspicion that some people were going to be very angry with them, but he still felt perfectly happy. This had been a perfect day. Somehow he even felt good about that talk they'd had about their parents. It had made
him feel better about his dead mother and cruel father to find out that he wasn't the only one with a broken home. He'd always thought that everybody else had a perfect family life and that he was the only one left out. Here it seemed that Mike was the only one who had that perfect family. Or did he? He was the only one who hadn't complained, but did that mean that he was happy? Maybe he just hadn't wanted to talk about it.

They trudged up the now cold feeling stairs and Draco wished he had brought his wand to dry his hair with. Then he wouldn't be so cold right now. Then he remembered that he wasn't allowed to do any magic anyway.

When they trotted past the dead lamp on the third floor Draco suddenly remembered his wish to learn Physics and the Math book. He hadn't done any exercises at all today and he was already feeling so tired. He should have taken the book and some parchment to the pond with him. He could have studied while lying in the sun. Charlie had brought along a novel to read as well and Sammie and Matt had played some strange game Draco didn't know. It had to be something muggle. Maybe he could convince them to explain it to him sometime? But there wasn't any time left. On Sunday he'd have to leave to go live with his uncle.

Draco sighed. Somehow he wished he didn't have to go yet. Maybe Professor Snape was wrong and the trial would take longer, but then again the Snapes probably would be glad to be rid of him again. After all he had made a lot of work for them, cost them money for food and clothing and now he was even worrying them by staying out so long.

Sarah opened the door when he rang and looked him up and down mock critically.

"Are you sure you belong in here?" she asked him hiding a smile.

"Sorry." Draco mumbled. "I guess I'm kinda late."

"You missed dinner." Sarah declared calmly pointing her wand at him and drying his hair with one quick wave.

Draco suddenly felt his stomach growl. Oh damn! He'd missed dinner and he was almost starved. He looked up at Sarah unhappily. Would begging help?

Sarah grinned suddenly. "I'm only joking. We waited for you."

She gestured for him to go through into the living room and grabbed his towel of this shoulder as he walked by. Draco supposed that it was just another item to wander straight into the laundry basket. Had Sarah washed the laundry today? He'd wanted to go with her and learn more about washing machines.

"Eat!" announced Munin in a very hopeful tone the moment Draco entered the living room.

The raven was perching on the back of Sarah's favourite chair and had probably been eyeing the empty plates set out on the table.

"Shut up, bird. I already fed YOU." Severus who was sitting at the table as well cuddling Billy growled at the raven, but Draco could hear clearly that he was only joking.

"Dako!" Billy announced happily and struggled to get off his father's lap.

Severus lifted him down gently and Billy ran towards Draco arms stretched out towards him.

"Dako!"
Draco picked the baby up wondering how he'd managed to run through the whole room without falling. He hadn't been able to do that back in the morning. Draco was quite sure of that. He held Billy away from him and regarded him closely.

"Did you grow while I was away?"

"Nam nam?" asked Billy in response.

"Oh great, you're hungry too?"

"Well, he was expecting you to be back in time to feed him." Snape commented sternly.

"I'm sorry. Really. Where's his dinner?"

Sarah pointed at a plate standing beside the sink.

"He refused to let either of us feed him and kept calling for you. He must think you're his big brother or something like that."

Draco stared at Billy for a moment. His big brother? What he wouldn't give to have a little brother like that and now he'd left Billy waiting on one of the last days he had with him.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Billy. I didn't mean to do that. I'll never leave you hanging again, Billy, never, I promise."

He sat the baby into his little baby chair and fed him without the slightest problem.

Severus smiled at Sarah. "Just what are we going to do when he leaves us on Sunday?" he whispered.

Sarah shrugged. "Do we have to give him back? They don't seem to be missing him anywhere." she whispered back.

"He doesn't belong here, Sarah. He's used to living in a huge manor with a family that can buy him anything he wants. And they are going to start looking for him sometime. He's no stray dog you can simply keep."

"I know." Sarah sighed. "It's just that he feels almost like ours to me."

When Draco was done feeding Billy he finally sat down at the table with Billy, who didn't want to let go of him, again sitting in his lap and they finally started dinner.

"So, what happened at the trial today?" he asked between two bites.

Severus and Sarah exchanged a quick worried glance.

"Things aren't looking entirely good at the moment." Severus said finally.

"You mean they're going to let him go"?!

"Oh no, Lucius is going to Azkaban, that's already fixed. The problem is that they've started to look into his other crimes and found that a large part of his fortune was made from deals in dark arts objects or actually by practising the dark arts. They're talking of confiscating that money as well as the manor and returning it to the victims, but of course most of them will be dead and the money will stay with the ministry."
"So? Father won't be able to use the money in Azkaban and what difference does it make who gets it?" Draco shrugged.

"The difference is that you're the one who's not going to get it. We're talking about most of your inheritance and your home here."

"I don't really care much about the manor. It's big, dark and ugly. I'd probably have bought myself a new house anyway and I can't even live there for three more years. I'll find something else. And there's still a lot of money left that Father inherited from his parents. The Malfoys have always been very rich so losing a bit of money won't be a problem."

"Draco, Lucius is definitely spending a lot of money on all those lawyers. I have no idea how much exactly, but it has to be several millions at least. They wouldn't want anything to do with such a losing case unless it paid unusually well and their pay is definitely not coming out of the money the ministry is going to confiscate. There might be nothing left for you, if they go through with this."

"You're not going let them do it then, are you?" Draco asked suddenly frightened. He didn't like the idea of being poor all of a sudden. What would the Weasleys say? Ron Weasley at least would be delighted.

"I can't influence that, Draco. I have told them all they wanted to hear from me and none of it had anything to do with the dark arts or the money. All I can do now is watch and hope."

"Do I at least get my stuff back? I kind of miss my clothes and broom and everything." Draco tried not to sound too desperate, but failed miserably.

"Nothing's been decided so far, but you can't use those things here anyway. Kids here don't usually wear robes except to school and your new friends don't own brooms so you wouldn't have anyone to go flying with." Severus tried to console Draco.

"I could go flying alone."

"And make everybody jealous? They'd hate you for it. You don't want the Rakers to get angry with you, do you?"

"No, I just want to have some of my stuff with me. Something I don't have to borrow from somebody else."

"Ah, I should have thought of this earlier." decided Severus. "I'm sure they'd have let you keep a teddy bear, if we'd thought to ask. It's only one more day though. If you don't get your stuff back tomorrow, I'll ask about that teddy."

"Teddy? I don't even have a teddy."

The Snapes looked shocked.

"You don't?" Sarah asked incredulously. "How can you not have a teddy?"

"Oh I had several when I was little, but when I started school my father took them away, because he said I was too old to play with baby toys. I'm not a baby. I don't need stuffed animals."

"Draco, stuffed animals aren't necessarily baby toys." Severus said. "They're made for children of all ages. Even many adults keep a favourite stuffed animal as a mascot. I'd probably still have my old teddy if I hadn't lost him during the war."
"And I have a little stuffed bunny on my keys." said Sarah. "They just make life more fun."

"Still, I'm no baby. I don't want a teddy, I want my broom." Draco insisted. "Or maybe my owl. Do you have any idea what happened to him?" he asked Severus hopefully.

But Severus shook his head sadly. "He's probably still at Malfoy Manor, though. I'll ask for him, if they don't give him back tomorrow."

Draco nodded unhappily. He wanted something from home now, but he knew that Snape couldn't just apparate to the manor in the middle of the night and bring something back to him.

He sighed softly hoping that the Snapes didn't hear him. Why was he feeling so depressed all of a sudden anyway? He'd had a great day and been perfectly happy when he'd gotten home. Why was he feeling so down now?

A/N - Is Draco going to lose all his money? Will there be a big showdown between Draco and Jack? Will Lucius finally go to Azkaban?

In the next chapter: Draco and Sevi have a talk. Draco takes the dog out and considers blackmailing a bird.
Draco decided to try to distract himself by studying some Math before going to bed. So he retreated into the lab right after he'd finished washing an putting away the dishes and took out the Math book. At first he found it rather hard to concentrate and had to redo several problems, but after a while he managed to forget everything around him and didn't even hear the door open when Snape came in two hours later.

"Draco?"

Draco jumped at the sudden voice behind him.

"I really think it's time you went to sleep, Draco." Snape said sternly.

"I just want to finish this one problem. I ..."

"Now, Draco! Or do I have to confiscate that book again?"

Draco sighed and put away the quill. Snape wouldn't be persuaded, he knew. He was used to having to send teenagers to bed. The Slytherins hardly ever kept the 'lights out at ten' rule unless checked on and reminded repeatedly. Snape usually ignored them until eleven, but he still had them all in bed before midnight. When he wasn't around to send them to bed however some Slytherins were known to stay up until three in the morning despite all efforts of whoever happened to stand in for Snape.

Draco remembered Trelawney once actually going to Dumbledore for help. The headmaster however hadn't been happy about being woken up in the middle of the night and had kicked her out of his room telling her to go to bed. Draco had fallen asleep beside the fireplace in the common room that night where Snape had found him upon his return in the morning. After that Trelawney had never again been asked to substitute for Snape and Draco wasn't sure whether that was because of Dumbledore not wanting to be woken up again or because of Snape thinking her incapable of keeping his students in check.

Severus sat down in the chair Draco had just vacated and absent-mindedly regarded the open book on the table while Draco changed. He knew better than to leave Draco to go to bed alone. He'd return to his Math problem the moment he closed the door behind him.

Draco had gotten surprisingly far with his exercises, Severus saw. Obviously he'd been wrong about it putting Draco off his plans of studying Physics. Well, he'd see if the boy would stick with it once he moved to his uncle's and away from all the fascinating muggle objects.

He didn't really regret showing Draco the way he lived and getting him in contact with an almost muggle like world. Draco had been raised to despise muggles and cherish the dark arts and Voldemort's evil followers. This experience would steer him away from the dark path his father had started him on, but Snape didn't think it would be taken well by the other Slytherins if Draco went to the other extreme. Well, it was most likely not going to happen anyway. If moving in with his uncle wouldn't make Draco forget about his dreams of being an electrician returning to Hogwarts and studying for the OWLs surely would. And after all he had found some other kids to play with and distract him from his studying as well. Thinking of which...
"I met Jack on my way home today."

"Oh, did you?" commented Draco climbing into his bed.

"Yes, he returned from the lake early and in a bad mood it appears."

"He's always in a bad mood." Draco scowled.

"You don't like him much, do you?"

"He doesn't like me. All because I laughed at his name. Jack the Ripper. Honest, that's so ridiculous."

"He's the gang leader, Draco. You're not supposed to laugh at him. Treat him with a little respect."

"I'm trying to, but he's never doing anything to respect him for. I'm staying out of his way as best I can though."

"Are you? Then why did he glare at me like I was the reason for all his problems? What happened to make him return early today?" Snape fixed Draco with one of those stern looks that made you feel like he was looking right through you. "What did you do?"

"I didn't do anything."

"I didn't do anything." claimed Draco knowing exactly that that wasn't entirely true. "He ran off because Cathy broke up with him. I even asked him to stay, but he just ran off."

Severus could imagine quite well how Draco had asked Jack to stay. He'd watched Draco pick on the Gryffindors and even on other Slytherins often enough.

"And why did Cathy brake up with him? They seemed quite happy together only yesterday. That wouldn't have anything to do with you, would it?"

"Of course not!" protested Draco. "She broke up with him, because he's a bad loser. She said she wanted somebody more mature, someone who could take a defeat at Soccer with some grace instead of screaming at her and everybody else because of it."

"And what exactly happened to make him scream at her?" Snape insisted.

Draco finally sat up in bed again and told him the whole story of the morning's Soccer game. He knew Snape wouldn't leave it alone, if he didn't.

Severus nodded and moved over to sit on the bed beside Draco.

"It's not my fault." Draco ended his story defensively.

"Not, it isn't, but you have to understand Jack's reaction as well. He is the gang leader, because others respect him and some are even afraid of him. That fear and respect of a gang's leader are what keeps the other gangs out of their territory. Mark and his gang are afraid of Jack, but Jack's also afraid of Mark and so are the rest of the Rakers. In a fight with the Sharks it would be expected of Jack to fight Mark. The others wouldn't, because they're afraid and they respect Jack the most, because he dares to fight Mark. Now here you come and take on Mark all on your own looking entirely unafraid. You're younger and you're alone, but still not scared. Jack's losing respect here when compared to you. If you'd stay, you'd have a serious chance to take over his gang."

"But I'm not staying and who says I wasn't afraid? I'd have run if it hadn't been for Billy."
"Ah Draco, you ought to know this. It's just like Hogwarts really. It's not about not being afraid of Hagrid, it's about pretending not to be afraid of Hagrid."

Draco looked up at Snape totally surprised. He'd had no idea that his head of house understood his relationship with the Care for Magical Creatures teacher this well.

"Okay, so maybe in their eyes I am as good as Jack, but I'm still not going to stay so what's the problem?"

"You're not going to stay, but Jack has lost some of the Rakers' respect. He's trying to regain it by putting you down, but his attempt fails. So he tries to stomp any subordination by picking on those most influential in the pack. Cathy takes objection to his unprovoked attack and rebels. Now he has exactly what he didn't want. He's weakened his position in the gang instead of strengthening it. ... Cathy has a certain position in the group as well." he explained when he saw Draco's confused look. "Losing her made him lose even more respect and whoever she chooses as her new boyfriend will rise considerably in the eyes of the others. With Jack running off and the gang acting on their own, by following Cathy into the water instead of sticking with Jack and Cathy currently unattached the Rakers are in complete chaos. A new kid in the gang usually causes some shifting of rank, but you managed to upset the very top. A new leader might rise even if it isn't you."

"And who would that be? Who'd have enough respect from the others to overthrow Jack, if they didn't before?"

"Well, Mike's won some respect for being your friend. If Cathy should chose to go out with him, that might give him enough status to override Jack's authority. Then again Cathy could chose someone who doesn't have a chance to take over, maybe even someone from outside the gang and lead herself. The gang followed her today and as a girl she wouldn't be expected to face off against a male gang leader all on her own. She could fight Mark two on one without losing respect."

"It's all up to Cathy then?" Draco asked surprised.

"It might be. Jack still might be able to get the rest of the gang back behind him and regain control. Right now the situation is rather explosive. Watch out for the Sharks. This looks like an ideal time to attack for them." Snape got up and walked towards the door. "Good night, Draco. Sleep now. The Rakers will work it out once you're gone."

"Professor?" Draco asked when he was almost out the door.

"Yes?"

"What do I do if the Sharks attack the Rakers?"

"What would you do if the Gryffindors attacked the Slytherins?"

"Fight?"

"Fight." Snape nodded and closed the door.

Draco dreamed of Slytherins, Gryffindors, Sharks and Rakers that night. He didn't quite remember what exactly had happened in that dream the next morning, but there had been a big fight and something about Neville Longbottom and a washing machine, maybe he'd stuffed Neville in there? Draco laughed at the thought and startled 'That Dog' who'd followed Munin into the lab.

"Eat!" was Munin's insistent comment. The raven didn't seem to like the fact that humans had to wash and dress before breakfast.
"Hey, I wasn't born all dressed up in feathers like you. Can't you just give me a few minutes to get ready?" Draco protested when Munin followed him into the bathroom repeating his order once again.

"He wasn't." commented Snape from outside.

Draco opened the door again and stuck his head out.

"Who wasn't what?"

"Munin wasn't born covered in feathers. In fact he wasn't even born, he was hatched. And he hatched all naked."

"How do you know?" growled Draco grouchily. "Were you there to see it?"

"Yes."

"Really? What did he look like?" Draco grinned. Now there was some material to blackmail the bird with. ... Er ... blackmail the bird? What was he thinking?

"Well, he looked like any newly hatched bird. A big pink ball with two long thin bird feet and two odd shapes sticking out where the wings are going to be, a very thin neck with a much too large and heavy second pink ball that has a large beak and two big dark spots where the eyes are going to be."

"Caw!" protested Munin fluttering out of the bathroom and landing on the kitchen table to present his beautiful black feathered wings and well proportioned body.

"Ha! Got you, bird!" laughed Draco quickly slamming the door shut behind him locking the raven out.

He should have remembered to lock it however as only seconds later it opened again and Munin fluttered back inside to land on Draco's head.

"Eat!"

"You," observed Draco swiping at the raven, "are a nuisance."

Munin hopped off Draco's head to sit on the tap instead.

"Eat!"

"How do you shut this bird up?" Draco asked when he finally arrived for breakfast, late because Munin had held him up by constantly getting in his way.

"Hush!" Snape told the raven who was riding happily on Draco's shoulder and Munin stopped in mid caw.

Draco stared at the raven in surprise, then back at Snape.

"Another one of his tricks?"

"Exactly. Here, Munin!" Snape nodded and held out a piece of toast to the raven. Munin hopped off Draco's shoulder and across the table to get it.

"Thanks!" he cawed grabbing the bread.
"Well, it doesn't work too well." commented Draco. "He's already talking again."

"He's talking again because I said his name. That's the permission to speak again."

"What if I'd said his name? Would he talk then too?" asked Draco quickly grabbing a bit of toast for himself while Munin was still busy with his own piece.

"No, he obeys only me. That's what I like so much about ravens. They know exactly who they belong to."

"Just you wait. I'll buy myself a raven too and then I'm going to let him bother you all the time." threatened Draco.

"You'll have the trouble of hatching, raising and training him first." stated Snape calmly.

"I'll buy one already trained." taunted Draco.

"Then he won't obey you."

"I'll find one that does."

"Well, I won't hold my breath waiting, that's for sure. I know ravens, Draco. You can't buy them trained. They aren't even sold that way."

Draco shrugged and focused his attention on breakfast. He'd get his own raven somehow. Maybe he could buy one in the muggle world? Did muggles keep ravens for pets? He'd have to go to a muggle pet shop someday and find out.

This time Sarah even let Draco go out alone after he'd finished the dishes on the sole condition that he took 'That Dog', who was being particularly bothersome this morning, with him. He quickly slipped on his shoes and dashed out holding open the door for the dog.

'That Dog' could hardly believe his luck. Going out with the boy had to mean that he'd get to do a lot of running around and barking. He had obviously decided to get a head start on both and jumped after Draco barking loud enough to wake the whole house.

Draco had been hoping to get to ring Mike's doorbell, but of course 'That Dog's' noise spoiled that plan. Only seconds after they'd left their flat Mike peeked out into the corridor.

"Don't tell me we have to take him along!"

"Sorry. He was being a pest and Sarah decided he needed some air. I got to chose between staying home watching Billy and doing the housework or going out and taking the dog. And I don't know how to do housework."

"Well, lets hope he knows how to play ball without getting stepped on." Mike decided stepping out into the corridor. "Bye Mum and Dad!"

Draco had a nasty suspicion that Mike had raised his hopes considerably too high, but decided not to comment, on it. Maybe 'That Dog' would be good for once and everything would be fine.

Of course 'That Dog' wasn't good. He started by dashing up and down the stairs barking madly and causing Mary to cover her ears with her hands and growl at him in a tone any canine normally understood. 'That Dog' wagged his tail at her madly and continued to bark.

That behaviour finally got a little more bearable when they got out of the house and the sound was
no longer amplified by the empty staircase. 'That Dog' immediately shot off to sniff the next bush which forced him to silence for a few seconds.

"Dragon, that dog is impossible." Mary informed Draco calmly.

"I know, but I had no choice. It was take the dog or stay home, sorry."

Mary glowered at 'That Dog' and Draco wondered what she might be thinking. Maybe she was pondering what he might taste like? Ogres were known to eat all sorts of things and dogs were comparatively normal food for them. He supposed that Mary would be polite enough not to eat her neighbours' pets though. She was half human and living with a human family after all.

The rest of the gang weren't happy to see 'That Dog' either. He had finally stopped barking by the time Jack arrived however which was a great relief for Draco. He'd been worried about Jack's reaction after the explanations Professor Snape had given him in the night.

Jack insisted on the same teams as last game. He was obviously looking for a rematch. Mary however protested that she hadn't been there and wanted to play today and thus Jack decided to make her his team's keeper with an evil grin at Draco who just shrugged at him nonchalantly.

"That's not fair." protested Sammie. "You've got more players than we do."

"Well, we're an uneven number so one team will always have more players than the other." Jack grinned back at him. "Unless of course you want to step aside and watch?"

"Now wait a minute, we've also got all the weaker players, so we should be the ones to have more." argued Matt.

"You won yesterday."

"That was because Larry left the goal not because we're the better team. He won't make the same mistake again." said Charlie.

"Very well, you can have Mary." Jack conceded with a smirk.

"No, they get me." stated Cathy calmly walking over to stand beside Draco. "Mary and Dragon, both play only keeper and you can't have two keepers on one team. And besides I don't want to be on your team anyway. I don't like getting yelled at."

Jack shouted and screamed at her, but Cathy stayed adamant and calm. She simply refused to play on the same team as Jack. Jack finally gave in under the condition that she would not be allowed to be the team captain.

"Okay," said Cathy with a shrug. "Dragon can be captain."

"Dragon?" Jack sounded startled.

"Yes, why not? It'll be a new experience for him. Or are you afraid of being beaten by a beginner, Jackie?"

"I'm afraid of nothing! And don't call me that, Cat!! I'm Jack the Ripper!"

"Yeah, sure boss." said Draco pretending to be bored. "Whatever you say."

He knew he shouldn't tease Jack, but sometimes he just couldn't resist it. He was used to leading the Slytherins and few people had ever tried to challenge him over that. Even back in first year his
father's name had given him enough authority to usually get what he wanted. That gang was so much like a class of Slytherins that sometimes he just had to act like he did at Hogwarts. Jack seemed to be the only one who really had a problem with that and Draco would be gone in two more days anyway. Why not enjoy this while it lasted? Who knew when he'd get to spend some time with other kids again. Maybe Uncle Thomas lived as secluded as his father had. Then he'd have to wait until he got back to Hogwarts.

And what if Uncle Thomas didn't want him to go to Hogwarts anymore? Maybe he'd want him to be home schooled. That wasn't a very comfortable thought. He might never see Professor Snape or Hogwarts or his fellow Slytherins again after Sunday.

He most certainly wouldn't see the Rakers again. They'd just go on and forget him. Somehow that thought hurt. He wanted to see them again. He wanted to stay here and go swimming a few more times, play with Billy some more, learn to play Soccer correctly, but he couldn't well ask the Snapes to let him visit them every holidays, could he? Their flat was small enough for a family of three as it was. They didn't need a visitor to take away even more space.

Draco sighed and returned his attention to the game. He was captain. That meant he had to come up with some sort of strategy and coordinate his team.

"Okay, Cathy Cat you're the one with the best chances to score. I want you and Sammie to stay close to the other team's goal. Don't come back over here. I want a permanent presence in their territory. Sammie, I know you're a good shot as well, but if anyhow possible I want you to pass the ball to Cathy instead of shooting at the goal. Try to confuse them by pretending to go for the goal, then pass to Cathy at the very last moment. Use your speed to get some distance between them and the ball and give Cathy some room. It'd be a good idea, if Cathy remained closer to the goal than you, but stay in their half," he decided. "Charlie, you're best at slipping by unnoticed so I want you to get the ball through to Sammie and Cathy. Matt and I will try to pass it to you as unobtrusively as possible. Try to stay around the centre or near our goal and pretend to be invisible. Matt, stay in our half and try to get the ball away from them when they attack and over to Charlie. I'll pass it to you, if I can't get it to Charlie. Don't get too far away from the goal."

They all nodded dumbfounded. They'd obviously not expected such a detailed strategy. Good hopefully the other side hadn't either.

Jack put Mary in the goal as expected and came for their goal together with Mike and Larry. They tried to stay at about the same height and pass the ball among them a lot, which proved to be a problem for Matt who had to constantly run from one to the other, never knowing who'd actually attack. Having to wait for Larry slowed them down however and Draco still managed to catch all their balls.

He soon gave up the idea of passing the ball to the exhausted Matt and threw it directly to Charlie instead who cleverly decided to stay behind Jack and his team mates most of the time. That way she didn't have to get past them, just run fast and pass the ball on to Sammie, who in turn passed it to Cathy.

Mary held well, but thanks to Sammie's speed and Larry's slowness Cathy usually had a free field and could pick whatever angle she wanted to shoot from. It was only a matter of time when the first shot got through.

'That Dog' was obviously determined to play equally against both sides. The moment he'd first seen the ball roll over the lawn he'd raced after it regardless of everything else around him. He was always after the ball and always getting between the feet of whatever player happened to have it.
"Damn it! Draco, can't you put your damn dog on a lead?" Jack yelled after the third time 'That Dog' had tripped him.

"That isn't my dog and he doesn't even have a dog collar." Draco shouted back "Anybody have a rope I might use?"

They didn't and therefore had to continue to put up with 'That Dog'. Luckily he was already panting heavily and finally dropped into the grass somewhere around the middle of the lawn gasping for air. He made only short half hearted spurts after the ball after that, but presented an obstacle nevertheless. Especially Charlie and Sammie were held up by having to detour around him.

Draco expected Jack to change his plan of attack any moment and leave Larry to stay behind and help Mary the way Draco was keeping Matt close to his goal, but strangely it never happened, not even after Cathy scored the first goal of the match.

It had been a good manoeuvre. Everything had gone exactly as Draco had planned it. Matt had gotten in Jack's way when he'd been about to shoot at their goal and forced him to pass the ball to Larry. Larry should have passed to Mike, but decided to shoot himself. Draco had caught Larry's shot and thrown the ball over the attacker's heads to Charlie. Charlie had stayed on the right side of the field to avoid 'That Dog' and raced straight over towards the goal. Halfway there she'd quickly passed the ball to Sammie, who'd gone straight towards Mary from the right. Mary had concentrated on him and not seen Cathy move in from the left. The moment Mary had stepped out of the goal towards Sammie had passed the ball on to Cathy who'd immediately shot it into the goal not giving Mary enough time to even turn around and see what had happened.

Jack requested a time out after that and Draco was sure that they'd come back with a new strategy, but all that occurred was a shouting match between Jack and Mary. Jack was fuming while Mary insisted that she was doing her best, but couldn't be expected to hold every ball with two opponents constantly in front of her and her team mates nowhere around. She wanted help in her half of the field, but Jack didn't want to provide it.

Draco just shook his head at it all. Jack's rage made him blind to the actual reason behind their problem even though Mary had laid it out to him clearly enough. He just didn't understand how anyone could let themselves be that blind.

And suddenly he remembered the time Harry Potter had caught the Snitch right beside his ear.

'Never again. Potter. I swear I'm never going to play like Jack again.' he swore to himself. Wouldn't the Gryffindors be surprised when Draco suddenly ignored his taunting to go for the Snitch instead. This year Gryffindor would find that it wasn't as easy to beat Slytherin as they'd come to believe.

"Okay, we're about halfway through the game and we're in the lead." he told his team. "Try to keep this up as we've planned. Should you notice that Mary starts concentrating on Cathy shoot for the goal yourself a few times, Sammie. That'll confuse her again. Lets try for another goal just to be comfortable. Then we won't get in trouble if they do get one through. Matt?" he addressed the boy who was sitting in the grass at his feet trying to catch his breath.

Matt looked up at him expectantly too exhausted to answer.

"Are you okay Matt? They've kept you running around a lot."

"Can you keep this up for the rest of the game?"

Matt shrugged. "I'll try."

"No, don't." decided Draco. "Concentrate on Jack. He's their best player. If he can't shoot I only have to deal with Mike and Larry and Larry isn't so hot. I think I can handle that."

"What if Jack gets frustrated with that and decides to stay back in their half?" asked Cathy.

"Then you'll have to work around him. I'm expecting them to post someone to hinder you sooner or later, but personally I'd chose Larry. He'd be a lot more trouble for you and he's slowing their attack down. Matt, if they do come at us without Jack, go for Mike and let me handle Larry. Just keep an eye on Jack anyway in case he suddenly tries to rejoin the attack once you've attached yourself to Mike. You're going to have to judge, if you can manage to switch to Jack in time or if you'd better stick to Mike. Don't leave both of them unguarded though. I might not be able to hold that."

"Are you sure you can hold anything Larry and Mike throw at you?" Sammie asked uncertainly.

Draco smiled back at him widely. "Of course not, but I think I've got a good chance."

All that strategy talk proved to be unnecessary however. Jack and his team kept playing just the way they had for the rest of the game even though Draco noticed that Mary was getting increasingly frustrated and Mike tried to have a talk with Jack several times. Jack kept trying to score himself despite Matt being in his way which resulted in him losing the ball to Matt more and more often.

Cathy managed to get the ball into the goal again with a lucky shot and Draco was beginning to actually enjoy being captain of this team. They might not have the best players, but they made up for that by working together and sticking to their game plan. Unlike the Slytherin Quidditch team they never let their egos get in the way of strategy. It gave Draco something to think about. The weaker players could prove to be stronger, if their opponents couldn't form a real team. He wished there were a way he could teach that lesson to his Quidditch team colleagues.

Jack was beside himself with fury. He stalked off after blaming Mary, Larry and Mike some more. Mike just barely managed to keep Mary from attacking Jack. 'Ogre temper.' thought Draco with a smile while he thanked and praised each member of his team for their efforts. That had worked well on Charlie the day before so why shouldn't he try to use that method on the rest of them as well.

It proved to be rewarding as well as motivating when Cathy actually hugged him saying how much better he was as a captain then Jack.

Mike, Mary and Larry finally trudged over to them looking terribly embarrassed.

"Okay, yesterday might have been luck, but today you guys controlled the game." Mike said to Cathy. "What did you do?"

"What Dragon told us to, Mike. That's all. It's called sticking to the game plan."

"I know what it's called. Jack does it too much. I tried to convince him to change strategy several times, but nobody listened." he sighed. "I don't know what's wrong with him. He used to be open to suggestions."

"I am." said Draco calmly.
"What?"

"I am what's wrong with him. He hates me so much, he's thinking only of proving he's better than me. It's the same mistake I tend to make with Potter. I try to out-fly him so much, I forget to look for the Snitch."

"Potter?"

"Harry Potter. I think you might have heard of him? He's the Gryffindor seeker and well, Slytherin and Gryffindor don't get along."

"Oh, why not?" asked Larry confused.

"Why don't you get along with the Sharks?" Draco asked back.

"Why, because they're stupid idiots." declared Larry.

"See, that's why."

"Ah."

"Larry can ask pretty stupid questions sometimes." Cathy commented on the way home.

"Yes, well, so he isn't particularly bright. We can't all be geniuses." said Draco picking up 'That Dog' who was way too exhausted to climb the stairs.

"You handled his stupid questions pretty well, you know." interjected Mike.

"I'm used to it. My friend Gregory from school makes even Larry look intelligent."

"Really? You know somebody even slower than Larry. How does he get through such a difficult school as Hogwarts then? Larry has lots of problems in our school. He's even had to repeat a year once." asked Mary.

Her grades probably weren't much better than Larry's, Draco suspected. Then again she had understood his strategy easily back in the game. Maybe she was just so quiet that people tended to underestimate her. That was at least true for Vincent Crabbe. The fact that he usually let Draco speak for him and hung out with Gregory most of the time led people to think that he was just as stupid as his best friend. In truth Vincent wasn't exactly a genius, but clever enough to get by.

"Well, we help him a lot in classes and I usually let him copy my homework. That way he manages to scrape by most of the time."

"Don't your teachers notice that?"

"Some do, some don't. Of those that do some mind, some don't, but they all understand why we do it. I guess most of them feel sorry for Gregory too. It's not his fault that he's stupid after all and they know that he tries."

"You've got really nice teachers then. Are they all like Uncle Severus?"

Draco noted with a touch of surprise that Mary called Snape Uncle Severus as well.

"Actually, Professor Snape can get really mean. Not to us Slytherins of course, but some pupils are really afraid of him. I think he's the least popular teacher in school. ... Well, with the exception of that Trelawney woman perhaps. Luckily I don't take any of her classes."
"What does she teach, then?" asked Cathy intrigued.

"Divination."

"Oh, we don't have that at West Hogsmeade. They didn't find a teacher who was actually good at it."

"Well, at Hogwarts they didn't either. They say Trelawney is an old fraud that has made only one true prediction in her life, but that one was so big that Dumbledore's keeping her around just in case she might make another one."

"So why does anyone take Divination at all, if they all hate the teacher and she's a fraud?"

"Because it's an easy 1*. You've just got to make up some convincing lies to get by. It's mostly the Gryffindors and the Hufflepuffs that take it though Gregory does too. It's one subject he doesn't have to worry about especially since he takes it with the Hufflepuffs. They're all nice and stupid which means the teachers have to go easy on them and they help Gregory out whenever he gets in trouble."

"Well, that's really nice of them." said Cathy.

"Hey Draco, if you want we could show you our school after lunch. It's not far from here and we could show you all the other places we hang out too." suggested Mike.

"That'd be nice, but won't Jack be angry, if you don't show up?"

"So?" laughed Cathy. "Let him. The way he just stomped off he shouldn't be surprised we don't want to see him."

"Yes," growled Mary. "I'd probably just strangle him anyway after the way he yelled at me. Who does he think he is? I told him I needed help, but would he listen? No. He's lucky he had me, you know. I'm rather proud you didn't get more shots in. You had enough chances, really. I held at least as many as Dragon today. It's not my fault they let you shoot more often."

"Of course it's not your fault, Mary." Draco tried to calm her. "You're a good keeper, but I had Matt to help me."

"Matt isn't really good at anything." stated Mike.

"Maybe he has no particular talent, but he's certainly good at standing in people's way when they want to shoot. He kept one attacker off of me during the whole game."

"Yes, and that unnamed someone decided to hand him the ball as a reward." grumbled Mary.

"He didn't do that on purpose." commented Mike.

"Maybe not, but he did it a lot and then blamed us for losing. I really don't feel like seeing him again right now."

"Okay, then that's settled. We meet here again after lunch and go for a walk." grinned Mike.

Draco had to ask Mike to ring the doorbell for him this time, because 'That Dog' had fallen asleep in his arms and threatened to fall off, if Draco removed a hand from under him. Sarah was quite surprised when she opened the door and Draco held a sleeping dog out to her.

"Could you hold him for a moment, please? I can't take of my shoes with him in my arms and I
don't want to pad into the living room with dirty feet."

Sarah accepted the dog with a long suffering look at Mike.

"Why don't you just drop him?" suggested Mike grinning. "That'd wake him up sure enough and spare you all the trouble."

"Drop him?" asked Sarah horrified. "I can't. ... I mean, Severus would never forgive me, if I hurt his poor innocent little dog."

"Little maybe, poor perhaps if he really got hurt, but innocent? Are we talking about the same dog?"

"He looks pretty innocent, now that he's asleep." commented Draco.

"Well, if you say so. See you later." and with that Mike closed the door.

Draco gently re-accepted the dog from Sarah and placed him on a blanket in the living room where he usually slept. Sarah opened a can of dog-food and set his lunch in front of the blanket. 'That Dog's' nose twitched once, but he didn't wake up.

"Whatever did you do to the poor animal, Draco?" said Sarah looking down at the sleeping dog.

"Nothing. We just played Soccer and he just wouldn't stop chasing the ball about. It just turned out to be a little too much chasing and he exhausted himself."

"Well, couldn't you just have tied him up somewhere so he wouldn't?"

"Sure, if you'd given me a lead to go with the dog. We couldn't just conjure up a rope to tie him with, you know."

To Draco's surprise Sarah turned wordlessly and went to dig through her sewing basket. She searched for quite a while until she finally came up with a strip of leather with a close attached that looked like it might once have been part of a sandal.

"There." she said triumphantly. "How's that for a dog collar?"

"Great, but we still need a lead we can fix to it."

Sarah searched some more and after a while presented some gold ribbon of the kind one uses to wrap Christmas gifts to Draco. Draco sneered.

"Well, the only alternative was bright pink." she explained. "I don't think he'd particularly like that. On the other hand, 'That Dog' likes everything and everyone."

Draco quickly took the ribbon before she changed her mind and did chose the pink one instead.

"There, now how about you try to figure out a way to fix it to the collar while I start the cooking. Look through the sewing basket for some material. I'm sure you'll find something you can use."

Draco obediently started sorting through all the strange objects in Sarah's sewing basket.

"Dako!"

Billy stood in front of him looking up at him with big pleading eyes and holding out his favourite squishy toy.
Now what should he do? Draco squeezed the toy a few times then tried to hand it back to the baby and return to searching for ways to fix a lead to a dog collar.

"Dako!" Billy protested.

Draco sighed and lifted Billy up onto his lap. Holding the baby with one arm he tried to continue his search with the other hand and finally found a small metal ring that he could slip onto the collar. Now he could tie the ribbon to that, but every time he'd want to let 'That Dog' off the lead he'd either have to open the collar to slip off the ring or untie the ribbon.

Billy was struggling to get to whatever 'Dako' found so interesting. Draco finally gave in and handed him the collar to prevent him from taking an interest in the sewing basket. He suspected strongly that something with needles in it was not a good baby toy. Billy immediately put the collar into his mouth which was probably not very good for the leather, but luckily he didn't like the taste and consequently dropped the collar reaching for his squishy toy again.

'Good.' thought Draco 'That's definitely safe for both sides.' and returned to his search. He finally found an old, slightly rusty snap-link that looked a little large for the small gold ribbon, but would serve its purpose.

But how long was a small hyperactive dog's lead supposed to be? He'd probably get dragged about if he made it too short, but if it was too long he'd get tangled up in it. Or maybe 'That Dog' would tangle himself, or tie himself to a tree or bush. How could he find out how long to make the lead?

He decided to ask Sarah for advice.

"I don't know, but you can always shorten it later so I think you should make it rather long at first. You'll learn from experience what length is most comfortable for both of you." was all she said.

So Draco measured out a rather long piece of ribbon. He folded it once and tied it securely to the snap-link then made another knot near the other end to form a loop so he could hold it more comfortably. There, now all that was left to do was to fix the dog collar to 'That Dog'.

That last part proved to be the most difficult of the whole project and Draco was glad he hadn't contented himself with tying the ribbon to the metal ring.

'That Dog' had woken up in the meantime and was busy with devouring his lunch, but not busy enough not to fidget and hop about and duck away when Draco tried to fix the collar around his neck. Billy tried to help, by petting 'That Dog' which made everything even more difficult.

In the end Sarah left her cooking for a while to hold 'That Dog' for Draco and he finally managed to close the collar around his neck. Sarah also quickly checked that it didn't seem too tight or loose enough that 'That Dog' might be able to pull it off over his head. It looked fine though and she promised to look for a way to fix the ring more permanently to the leather so it would stop sliding about all around the collar which made it more difficult to find when it was needed.

While Draco fed Billy, Sarah quickly finished cooking, but still they had only just finished their lunch when Mike, Cathy and Mary arrived at their door asking what was taking them so long.

Sarah rolled her eyes at their impatience and declared that Draco wasn't allowed to leave until the dishes were clean, properly stored away and Billy's diapers changed. Draco wondered for a moment what she meant about the diapers, but caught her wink just in time. Sarah was determined to exploit his friends for a little housework.

Indeed they all volunteered to help and Sarah ordered the boys to do the dishes and the girls to
change the diapers. However it soon turned out that Mary had no idea how to change diapers and Billy was scared of her and started to wail. Frightened at his protest Mary nearly dropped him thinking she'd hurt him in some way.

Alarmed by Billy's scream Draco dropped his towel and raced over to the baby's side. He told Mary to dry the dishes in his place and offered to change Billy's diapers himself. Thus Cathy held the baby while Draco changed the diapers.

Mary started drying dishes, but had to ask Draco where every piece belonged until Mike, who remembered most of that from their cooking lesson offered to take over the drying, if she'd do the washing instead. That combination finally worked with only a little more advice from Draco and five minutes later they were ready to leave.

"Don't forget the dog!" Sarah called after them.

"But Aunt Sarah," protested Cathy. "He'll just race off again and we're going into town. He might get lost or run over by a carriage."

"Oh no, he won't." Sarah grinned at her. "We just fitted him out with a lead." She held the gold ribbon out for their inspection.

Cathy and Mary looked doubtful and even Mike wrinkled his nose at their construction, but they didn't protest.

Draco snapped the lead onto the dog collar and they were off. 'That Dog' jumped out the door with a happy bark and stopped dead in his tracks startled by the sudden pull at his neck. The pressure lessened as Draco stepped out after him and 'That Dog' tried again. He dashed off in the direction of the stairs only to come to an abrupt halt after only two jumps. That pull was back.

It disappeared again as Draco walked past him, but this time 'That Dog' had decided not to move. Maybe it would stop again, if he sat still for a while. Suddenly the pull was back and this time it was pulling him forward. He refused to move and was dragged along for a bit.

That was rather uncomfortable. He decided to walk.

The pressure lessened again as he hopped past Draco down the stairs and then it was suddenly pulling him back again. 'That Dog' looked up at the humans around him. This seemed to be somehow connected to his boy. The one his owner and the woman who fed him called Draco. There was no pressure when he stayed beside Draco, but it always pulled him back towards him whenever he tried to get away from him.

He gave Draco a pleading look. 'Please, let me go.' But it didn't help.

"Believe me, it's better for you this way." Draco told him.

"Woof!"

Nobody seemed to care about his protest. 'That Dog' sighed a long disappointed dog sigh and trotted after Draco. After all there wasn't much else he could do.

They went down the stairs and by the time they left the house 'That Dog' was following Draco obediently and hardly bothered them at all anymore.

"You know, he really should have gotten a lead a long time ago." Mike stated looking down at the peaceful and calm dog. "He looks almost cute when he's like this."
West Hogsmeade Wizard School turned out to be not far from West Hogsmeade Market Place. Obviously that was a sort of town centre for the region. The school didn't look much different from the apartment houses. It was as long and high, but the main entrance was much bigger and Draco supposed that, if they'd been able to go inside they'd have found a wide staircase much like the ones at Hogwarts and nothing at all like the dark smelly staircase the house in Merlin Park had.

Still Draco found it difficult to imagine that this was a school just like Hogwarts. There were no towers and turrets, no thick stone walls. It was just another building like all the others around here. He wondered, if the school at least had a dungeon. Probably not. Was Potions taught in the basement then?

He tried to imagine his classes being held in light modern classrooms. Professor Binns in front of a white board you wrote on with felt pens? Cathy and Mike tried to describe it to Draco, but he just couldn't imagine a blackboard being any colour but black and written on with anything but chalk. The school used electric light? And just what was an overhead projector?

All the descriptions and stories didn't help. Draco couldn't imagine what classes at West Hogsmeade were like.

He tried to explain Hogwarts to the others. The maze of corridors, scores of unused old classrooms, dungeons lit by candlelight and a History of Magic teacher who walked in through the walls. They didn't understand either.

After they'd finally given up on understanding each other's schools, they went on to explore the market place which looked very different without the stands and bustling activity that Draco had seen on market day. Still there were some people about and Mike pointed out a few buildings to Draco. There was the aurors' outpost usually manned by only one auror during the day and deserted by night, but during market day there were actually two aurors.

Yes, Draco remembered seeing them and also how ineffective they were in the large crowd.

That over there was the district administration. There were people walking in and out of that one a lot Draco noticed. Mike explained that there were only three district administrations in all of Hogsmeade and West Hogsmeade was densely populated, which explained all the people coming and going.

There were also some shops that were of particular interest to the kids, the homes of two of their teachers at West Hogsmeade Wizard School and the building in which Charlie had her ballet lessons. Sometimes Charlie's class demonstrated their skills at the little theatre next doors. Maybe Draco could get permission from Dumbledore to come to Hogsmeade to see the next show? It was usually held on a Saturday evening.

Draco thought about that. Maybe if Professor Snape took him to see it, Dumbledore would allow it? But then other pupils would start asking for special permissions to visit Hogsmeade on non Hogsmeade weekends as well. No he didn't think the headmaster would want all that trouble.

They got home late again that day, but not as late as the day before. Draco was still in time to feed Billy and help to set the table for dinner. Professor Snape however didn't arrive on time and Sarah finally decided that they should eat anyway.

Munin fluttered in during the meal carrying a letter saying that the trial was going to last late into the night and Severus wouldn't come home before he'd heard the verdict. He told them not to stay up and wait for him, he had a key after all.
Draco went to his Math studies a little worried over the outcome of that trial, but managed to block out those thoughts after a while as he tackled negative numbers and decimals.

He heard Professor Snape come home in the middle of the night, but he didn't come into the lab. Draco supposed that he assumed that he was already asleep. He really should have been.

Thus he slipped into bed quietly trying not to worry about whatever had taken so long at the trial. Snape had said that Lucius was going to Azkaban and that was all Draco really needed to know. There wouldn't be a problem with the money. There couldn't be!

* A/N - I'm using the Austrian grading system, because I have at least a vague idea how it works. My attempts at figuring out the English one for 'My Name's Severus' failed entirely and I don't really understand any other ones either. So 1 is the best grade and 5 means failing, 3 is what you get most of the time.

In the next chapter: Sevi takes Draco to the Hogwarts library and ... the Gryffindor common room! And we finally get to hear the results of Lucius' trial.
Where do I Send my Owl

Chapter 8: Where do I Send my Owl

Draco didn't sleep well that night. He dreamed that his uncle was making him live in a cupboard, like some far fetched rumours said his Muggle uncle was doing to Harry Potter. He wasn't allowed back to Hogwarts and was terribly lonely, but then for some reason Ron Weasley showed up and laughed at him. He finally lounged at Ron trying to make him shut up with his fists, but Ron turned as insubstantial as a ghost and Draco fell through him and ...

... landed on the floor beside his bed in Severus Snape's lab.

For a moment he just sat there trembling and feeling very relieved that it had all been just a dream. When he'd finally calmed down a little he got to his feet and walked over to the window. It was still very dark outside and except for the occasional street lantern there was nothing to see outside. Draco looked at the lanterns and the stars for a while breathing deliberately slowly and deeply to calm himself.

He ought to go back to bed and sleep some more. It had to be very early still to be that dark outside, but he didn't feel like sleeping and dreaming again. Maybe he could study some more? He turned on the light and sat down at Snape's worktable, but somehow he still felt very uncomfortable and lonely. So he decided to get up and go to the living room.

'That Dog' and the cat were asleep side by side on 'That Dog's' blanket. They both opened their eyes shortly and made some bewildered and cranky sounds when Draco switched on the lights. The cat then pushed his head half under 'That Dog's' back and that dog covered his face with his paws and they went back to sleep.

Draco sighed and padded on into the bathroom to wash. It had to be really early if even 'That Dog' was still too tired to bark and hop around.

The plumber obviously hadn't been here yet as the water was cold. Draco decided to wash only the most important body parts and hope for better luck in the evening. He washed very quickly then got dressed and went to sit in the living room and wait for the Snapes to get up.

After a while of just sitting there staring expectantly at the closed bedroom door Draco got bored and went to get his Math book and some ink and parchment from the lab.

When Severus and Sarah got up that morning they found Draco sitting there bent over his exercises with the cat sitting on the table staring at the book almost as intently as Draco and 'That Dog' sitting in the chair beside Draco looking at him pleadingly.

"Draco?" Snape asked him surprised. "What are you doing here?"

"I couldn't sleep." grumbled Draco.

"You mean you've been sitting here all night?" Sarah sounded shocked.

"No, I woke up from a bad dream and I couldn't go back to sleep, so I decided to get up and wait for you."
Severus glanced at all the used parchment lying on the table. Draco had to have been at it for at least three hours to write all of that. He pulled out one of the chairs that weren't occupied by 'That Dog' and sat down beside the boy.

"What did you dream?" he asked as gently as he could manage.

"About Uncle Thomas. He didn't want me to return to Hogwarts, but he didn't really want me either and I had nobody to talk to. Nothing much really, just that I was terribly lonely there."

Draco didn't want to mention Ron somehow. It felt wrong to let Snape know about that part.

"I'm sure he'll let you come back to school, Draco and you'll make a lot of new friends soon you'll see."

"Oh really? What makes you so sure of that?"

"Well, just look at all the friends you made here. A week ago you didn't know any of them either. In a week or two you'll be telling me about all the new friends you have and how you don't want to come back to Hogwarts and leave them again."

Draco laughed. "That'll never happen. I'll always want to come back to Hogwarts. I even wish I could show it to Cathy and Mike. They just won't believe me when I try to explain what it looks like."

"They've seen the castle before, Draco. They've been living here all their lives." Severus reminded Draco.

"Not outside. I want to show them what it looks like on the inside. They told me so much about their school yesterday and it all makes no sense to me. I can't imagine what it's like. I bet they can't imagine Hogwarts either."

"Well, I'll be going to Hogwarts this afternoon so if you want to bring the Rakers along just tell them to be here after lunch."

"Really?" smiled Draco. "I'll ask them. How many can I bring?"

"As many as you want." laughed Severus. "The castle is big enough after all."

"But, won't the headmaster object? I mean..."

"Albus isn't even home at the moment. He's gone to Durmstrang about Karkaroff's disappearance. The castle's empty except for Filch and I'm not going to let him stand in our way."

"Oh, well then. ... But if Dumbledore isn't there, why do you have to go there at all? Don't tell me you're worried that Filch might be feeling lonely."

"Filch? Filch has his cat. He doesn't even want to see anybody besides her."

"So why are you going there then?"

"To check up on Filch for Albus. He had me promise to keep an eye on his castle while he's gone. To chose your potions books for next year, get started on some lesson plans and to find out your uncle's address. We need to know where we're going tomorrow after all."

"You can find that out at Hogwarts? Where?"
"In the library, Draco. Where else?"

"In the library? What book would that be in?"

"Well, I'd suggest looking in 'The Register of British Wizards', but if you don't like that one you can always check the genealogy section."

"Genealogy section? There is such a thing?"

"It's part of the History of Magic section, yes."

"And that would have a book on my uncle's address?"

"That would have several books on your family and I don't see why they wouldn't mention your uncle and his home in the more recent ones."

"There are books on my family at Hogwarts?" Draco couldn't believe it.

"Of course there are. There are books on all the most important wizarding families and even on some unimportant ones as well."

"Wow! And I never knew! Are there books on ... the Weasleys too?"

"Of course there are."

"And on the Goyles and the Parkinsons and the Crabbes and the Potters and..."

"Yes, Draco on all of them and a few hundred more, but please don't ask me to tell you all of them."

Draco wisely shut up at that. This was quite a surprise for him even though, if he thought about it, it made perfect sense that there would be books about something as important as the Malfoy family. It was kind of ironic, he thought, that he could have found out about all his relatives a long time ago, if only he'd spent some more time in the History of Magic section of the library. Then again that was one of the least frequented sections after all. Professor Binns might be dead boring, but he was also known for giving the easiest tests in all of Hogwarts. He'd probably noticed a long time ago that too many students tended to fail his tests, if he asked for more than the most basic facts. Hardly anybody ever used anything besides their own school book to study for History of Magic.

After breakfast Snape took Billy and 'That Dog' shopping. Munin of course rode along on his shoulder as well and Draco took off with Mike to play Soccer with the Rakers one last time.

They sat in the grass on the lawn for half an hour waiting until they finally accepted that Jack wasn't going to come. Draco didn't really feel sorry for that at all, but he was a little worried about their game.

"So do we play without him or what do we do?" he asked the gang.

"We play of course." decided Mike.

"But who's going to make the teams?" asked Sammie.

"Well, I suggest we make Mike and Dragon captains. They're best a strategy." said Cathy.

"And our teams?" asked Mike.
"Choose." grinned Cathy.

Mike and Draco looked at each other. Now that was a new concept.

"Then I want Cathy!" Mike shouted recovering first.

"Damn." cursed Draco. He'd have nobody who was really good at attacking. "Larry then." he decided. He'd need someone to stop their attackers.

Now Mike wasn't looking too happy. "Matt." he chose to everybody's surprise.

Draco looked at the rest of the players for a while. He had no use for Mary and Mike knew it. That was why he hadn't chosen her yet. But which of the others to chose? Then he realised he'd get both of them anyway unless Mike wanted to be left without a keeper.

"Charlie." he decided finally.

"Difficult choice?" Mike asked grinning.

"Very." confirmed Draco. "I'd really want them all, you know."

"Mary." decided Mike laughing and Draco sighed with relief.

He wouldn't have anyone to attack, if Mike had chosen Sammie, but then again Mike wouldn't have had a keeper so maybe Charlie or Larry could have scored for them.

Larry proved to be a problem. Sammie and Charlie played as well as Draco had come to expect them to, but Matt was constantly getting in their way and Sammie really didn't stand much chance against Mary on his own. Larry however wouldn't stay where he was supposed to be. He refused to pass to Charlie at all and much too often tried to score himself leaving Draco alone to defend their goal.

Mike and Cathy played very well together and by passing the ball between them repeatedly managed to confuse Draco and finally actually to score. Draco sighed. If he'd chosen Matt instead of Larry that goal would have been impossible, but Larry had been too far away after his last attempt at Mary's goal.

Draco requested a time out and tried to explain the strategy to Larry once again, but it appeared to go a little over his head. He stuck with the game plan for a few minutes after that, but then chased off once again. So that was why Jack hadn't tried to post him in a defensive position yesterday. Larry wouldn't obey. He wasn't even consciously disobeying Draco's orders. He just couldn't think that far.

'Next time I'll know better then to chose Larry.' Draco thought. 'He may be a good player, but he can't play with the team.' And then he remembered that there wouldn't be a next time.

He tried not to let his unhappiness about that show however. He'd learned to lose from all the times Potter had beaten him for the snitch. His team looked at him with big frightened eyes. Did they expect him to shout at them the way Jack did?

He smiled. "Well, sorry."

"Sorry?" Charlie asked him. "Sorry for what?"

"I let Cathy and Mike get the better of me there."
"That's cause Larry wasn't there to stop them." accused Sammie.

"It's not Larry's fault, Sammie. He tried. We all did. I wish I could say we'll do better next time, but since I'm leaving to live at my uncle's tomorrow I don't know, if I can ever come back to play with you again."

"You can visit us on weekends once you're back at school." said Cathy. "Can't you?"

"We only get permission to go to Hogsmeade a few times a year and I still don't know if my uncle will let me continue to go to Hogwarts at all, but I'll come if I can. I promise."

"Where does your uncle live anyway?" asked Sammie.

"I don't know." said Draco staring at the grass before his feet. Very interesting and... well green.

"You're going to live somewhere and don't even know where it is?" asked Matt incredulously.

"Yes and I've never even met Uncle Thomas either. I have no idea if he wants me at all."

"Well, why don't you just go and live with someone you know instead?" suggested Larry. "Why don't you just stay here in the first place? We all want you."

"I don't know any of my surviving relatives and I can't stay with the Snapes, because I'm not related to them in any way and I cost them a lot of money that they were probably saving for Billy's education or something." Draco sighed. "I'm going to find out where my uncle lives this afternoon though. Professor Snape is taking me to Hogwarts and we're going to look it up in the library. He said you can come too, if you want."

"There are books about where people live?" Sammie asked surprised.

"Apparently, since Professor Snape says so and he seemed pretty sure of it too. So do you want to come and see Hogwarts?"

"Sure!"

"Do we get to see where you sleep when you're in school?"

"Can we see the dungeons?"

"Will you show us your teachers?"

"I don't know about the dorms and the dungeons. You'll have to ask Professor Snape if he'll let us in. The passwords have probably already been changed. And the teachers aren't there, Larry. It's summer holidays."

"Passwords? What passwords? Why do you have passwords?"

"There are passwords for all the rooms that aren't open to everybody, like the common rooms, the teacher's rooms, the headmaster's office ..."

"Oh wow! That's cool!"

"Okay, if you want to come, come to the flat after lunch."

"Come to the flat? Hey wait a minute! Just where exactly do the Snapes live? We've never gone to visit them before, you know." shouted Matt after them when they returned to the house.
"Just come to my place!" Mike shouted back just before the door fell shut behind him. "It's practically next doors."

Billy had returned from the shopping trip with a brand new squishy toy and 'That Dog' now was the proud, or rather not so proud, owner of a real dog lead. He still wore Sarah and Draco's hand made dog collar though which Sarah had improved by sewing the metal ring to the collar so it didn't glide about anymore.

Munin didn't seem to have gotten any gifts, but maybe he'd simply gotten something edible.

A real reason for Snape's shopping trip however wasn't apparent. Draco doubted that he'd actually just wanted to buy a lead for 'That Dog'.

"Oh, nothing big." was all Severus answered when Draco asked him what he'd really gone to buy.

Draco sighed. "Well, how did the trial go then?"

"Not too well for us. Lucius went to Azkaban of course, but they confiscated just about everything."

"Everything? You... you mean I've got nothing left?" Draco was shaking all over all of a sudden.

Severus put an arm around Draco pulling him close.

"They left you a certain amount of money as compensation for the loss of your mother, but it isn't much. I've got the key to the vault, but I think it's better if I hand that over to your uncle and not to you."

"Why not? It's my money!"

"It is, but as I said it's not much and I don't think you should spend this right now. You might need it once you graduate."

Draco swallowed hard. "And what am I supposed to do right now, if I don't have any money?"

"Your uncle will pay for you just as your father always did."

"But what of the money you spent on food and clothing for me?" Draco protested. "What if Uncle Thomas doesn't want to pay for that?"

"I don't expect him to." Snape said calmly. "And I'm definitely not going to ask him or anyone for it. I never expected that back, Draco. Forget about it."

Forget about it? Could he do that? What about Billy?

"I don't want to. I want you to have it back."

"And I won't take any of your money, Draco and that's final. You need that money."

"So does Billy."

"Billy? Billy is just fine, Draco. He won't starve."

"But he won't go to Hogwarts either."

"No, but that has nothing to do with the money we spent on you. He won't go to Hogwarts with or
without it. Forget it, Draco. Consider it a gift if you want, but you can't make me accept any money from you."

Draco was very quiet during lunch and washing up. He had a lot to think about and it wasn't just about owing the Snapes and not being able to pay them back. There were his classmates in school. How would the other Slytherins treat him now that he no longer had his father to back him up? Would Pansy still love him, if he didn't have any money left? Would Vincent and Gregory still be his friends, if he could no longer buy them any candy? Well, Gregory still needed his help with his school work so maybe he had one friend left. And what about the Gryffindors? What would happen if the Weasleys ever found out that he'd lost all his money?

Then he realised that it was most likely all over the Daily Prophet already. Snape hadn't brought any papers home during this whole week and Draco suddenly suspected that there was a good reason for that. The Weasleys of course would have read everything about the trial already. Maybe Ron Weasley was dancing around their house right now thinking up ways to tease Draco. How he wished he'd never teased anybody about being poor!

The arrival of the Rakers finally put an end to all those thoughts. They didn't mind Draco losing all his money at all. Why should they? They'd never had any themselves either.

"Did anybody tell Jack where we're going?" Mike asked as they were getting ready to leave.

"I went over to see him, but he wasn't home." said Larry. "His Mum was very surprised. She thought that he was with us. I told her I hadn't seen him and that Dragon's taking us to Hogwarts today and she promised to tell him when he came home."

"His mother didn't know where he was?" Draco suddenly felt a little worried. What was that? He didn't care about Jack at all, did he? "Do you think something might have happened to him?"

"Nope, he's probably just gone to see his Dad." shrugged Cathy. "His parents divorced five years ago and they still won't even great each other if they meet in the street. Jack always alternates between living with his Dad and living with his Mum, but he never mentions one of them to the other. If he's decided to move in with his Dad right now he might not have gotten our message, though. Maybe we ought to send someone to his Dad's place and ask him to come?"

"I don't know." said Mike. "Remember what happened last time we made our own decision on what to do and asked him along? He just ran off fuming."

"You mean when we went swimming with Cathy?" asked Sammie.

Mike nodded. "He didn't take that too well. Lets just go and not tell him at all. Larry did leave him a message and if he didn't get it, that's not our fault."

Severus had decided to leave 'That Dog' behind. He didn't want him to get used to Hogwarts. He'd only cause trouble, if he ever decided to follow him to work. Munin however was as usual perched on his shoulder. He had the privilege of being allowed to school as he delivered Severus' mail as the student's owls did. During the school year he spent most of his time in Severus' quarters in the castle as he was much too proud to live in the owlery. Munin considered owls to be beneath him and they had that annoying tendency to suddenly burst with activity the very moment any sensible raven went to sleep. No, rooming with owls wasn't Munin's thing at all.

It was quite a walk from West Hogsmeade to Hogwarts but time seemed to fly for Draco as he answered all his friend's excited questions and teasing.
Severus watched them with a slight smile on his face that would have sent most of his pupils to hide under their worktables in fear, if he'd ever worn it in class. He wasn't planning any mean schemes against the Gryffindors this time however. He was just amused at the Rakers' playing around and glad to see how they'd brought Draco out of his shell, he'd crawled into after finding out that he had lost all his money, without even noticing.

They were good friends for the boy. And he'd tried to keep him away from them, because he'd thought that they might harm him.

The inside of the castle came as quite a surprise to the Rakers. It seemed they had never seen a place with so many paintings and armours standing around before. Draco began to wonder if they'd ever even been inside a castle.

For him seeing Hogwarts for the first time hadn't been as overwhelming as it was for many others. To him it looked very much like a bigger version of home. Now comparing it to the Snapes' flat he understood for the first time why his classmates had been so in awe staring around with wide eyes. Trying to see his school through his friends' eyes let him see everything in a different light.

Snape led them into the great hall explaining that this was where the pupils had their meals and pointing out the artful enchantment of the ceiling. Sammie's mouth hung open at the sight.

"But why would anyone go to all this trouble just to decorate a lunch-room?" asked Mary after staring for a while.

"The great hall isn't just a lunch-room" Snape explained patiently. "As Hogwarts is a boarding school three meals a day are served here and it also serves as a feshall for special occasions. It's the community centre of the school."

"It still seems unnecessary to decorate it with this much effort. Something like this would do even the ministry proud." insisted Mary.

Severus decided not to comment on this. The great hall might well have been built with the intention of showing off a little. He often wondered which of the founders had had the idea of enchanting the ceiling. The idea seemed like something Slytherin might have come up with, but then again the enchantment itself looked more like something Gryffindor would have done.

They went on to the dungeons and into his office which impressed and surprised the Rakers even more. They'd never seen this many potion ingredients in one place before.

"Don't you have Potions at your school too?" Draco asked them in surprise when Cathy mentioned that fact. "Wouldn't your potions master have such stores as well?"

"There are a lot of things here I never use in class at all and a lot more of everything than is actually required. West Hogsmeade wouldn't buy anything more than is absolutely necessary. They don't have the budget to buy fanciful stuff like these." Snape answered in Cathy's place pointing at a very dusty looking cupboard in the back. "Some of those are extremely rare and expensive and definitely not to be squandered on simple practice potions brewed by students."

"So what do you use them for?" Draco asked intrigued.

"Some of them are simply collector's items. Others are here because they might come in handy in an emergency. And others again I need for my personal experiments."

"And all of them are bought by the school?" Matt sounded very impressed.
"Oh yes, I could never afford even a small portion of this."

"They just let you buy anything you want with the school's money?" asked Mike.

"Yes, I know Dumbledore's spoiling me, but he insists on making up for my low wages by using the money he saves that way on my equipment."

"Er... The headmaster thinks you're underpaid?" Draco asked surprised. This was getting rather confusing and enlightening at the same time.

"Yes, I am." Snape answered curtly obviously unwilling to elaborate.

"So why doesn't he just pay you more?" Draco kept on regardless.

"Because the ministry won't let him. Now why don't you show your friends around the dungeons a bit while I check on my stores. It won't take long, if you leave me alone to work a bit."

Draco sighed and obediently led the Rakers to the entrance to the Slytherin common room.

The ministry wouldn't let Dumbledore pay Snape as much as Dumbledore thought he deserved? What say did the ministry have in the Hogwarts staff's wages at all? Hogwarts was a private school and it's finances were the business of it's headmaster and maybe the board of directors, not the ministry. Something wasn't right here.

The passwords hadn't been changed yet and so Draco led the Rakers into the Slytherin common room which impressed them to no end even though it seemed terribly empty and quiet to Draco. There was no fire in the fireplace and the room seemed much too big and dark, but Draco sat in his favourite chair by the fire anyway and watched his friends explore one item after the other.

It took quite a while until they finally developed an interest in what lay beyond the common room and Draco led them up to his dorm.

It looked empty and much too big as well without all the pupils' trunks, but it still felt very much like home. Draco let himself drop onto his bed and wished he didn't have to leave again. It would be so nice to just stay here and attend classes like normal instead of having to go to some strange uncle's place.

The Rakers stared at the huge beds with the green hangings. Slowly they came over to sit shyly on the two beds beside Draco's.

"Is that your bed?" Mike asked seeing how Draco was lying relaxed on his back as if he belonged there.

Draco only nodded.

"Whose am I sitting on then?" asked Mary.

"Gregory's. You know the boy Larry reminds me of a bit."

"Really? I remind you of one of your friends? You never told me that." Larry walked over to sit beside Mary. Gregory's bed seemed to interest him very much all of a sudden. "What's he like?"

Draco knew that he had to chose his words very carefully now. He thought about it for a bit.

"Gregory? Well, he's very loyal ... big and strong. Not as agile as you are, though. He's a good friend to have when you get in a fight."
Larry seemed to like this description.

"And who do the other two beds belong to?" Mike asked a bit too casually.

What was going on? Why were his dorm mates so important to the Rakers?

"You're sitting on Vincent's bed. Vincent's Gregory's best friend. He's almost the same size as Gregory and quite good in a fight as well. ... He's a bit of a quiet type so people tend to underestimate his intelligence. Gregory's not too clever, but Vincent knows how to use his brain when he feels like it. Most of the time they expect me to do their talking for them though."

"And the last bed?"

"Blaise. Blaise Zabini. ... You know, after four years in the same dorm, I still don't know what to make of Blaise. He keeps to himself most of the time. A loner with a mean streak, I think. I can never tell what he's thinking. He does think a lot and I suspect everything he does is very deliberate. Blaise has plans, but I don't know where he's going with those." Draco regarded the empty bed thoughtfully. He ought to watch Blaise more closely. If Gregory and Vincent deserted him now that he no longer had a lot of money and an influential father behind him, Blaise might get dangerous.

Anyone might get dangerous. Draco didn't have any real friends. He had no guarantee that anyone would stick with him now.

"You don't like him, do you?" Mike suddenly asked.

Draco had to think for a moment to remember who he was talking about.

"Blaise? No, he's too mysterious. I like to know what a person's motives are and he's letting nothing shine through. Vincent always say we're too much alike to really get along. Blaise is a quiet schemer, though. I'm usually the centre of attention."

"Who's your best friend then?" asked Mike suddenly.

Draco gave him a puzzled look.

"You said Gregory and Vincent are best friends and you don't like Blaise. So who do you hang out with?" Mike specified.

"Gregory and Vincent. They follow me around like dogs sometimes. I think my father made their fathers tell them to watch out for me or something."

"That doesn't count." insisted Mike. "You've got to have somebody you like to talk to, someone you confide in, someone who understands you better than everybody else. That's not Vincent, is it?"

"Of course not. Vincent may not be as stupid as people think he is, but he isn't exactly good at understanding others either. He's a friend, but he doesn't understand most of the things I think about."

"Who then? Who'd understand your thoughts? Who'd you trust with your problems?" Why was Mike so insistent about that? "There has to be someone."

"Professor Snape I guess then. He's the only one who really understands, but I don't think you could call him a best friend. I mean he's a teacher, an adult. Friends are supposed to be people your
"Friends are people you like and who like you back." said Cathy.

"But do you really confide in Snape?" asked Sammie. "He's still a teacher."

"Well, I don't exactly tell him when I intend to break the school rules. ... Most of the time." Draco added remembering the time he'd asked Snape for a potion he'd used to play a prank on Professor Lupin.

That had been safe. Everybody had known how much Snape hated Lupin and it had been a rather harmless little joke, just to annoy the teacher.

The Rakers looked at him strangely.

"You're odd. Dragon." said Mary finally. "I mean having adult friends is cool and all, but having your teacher for a best friend is really strange."

"I told you he isn't really my best friend." Draco defended himself. "He's just the only one who really understands me."

"Do you have a better one?" asked Charlie in an almost challenging tone.

"Well, ..." Draco thought hard. "Not really, no."

"Then he is your best friend."

Draco looked around. They all nodded their agreement with Charlie's statement. Snape his best friend? Could one call a teacher friend? Did Snape see them as friends? Most likely not. He had to think about it though. It was kind of a strange discovery that he didn't entirely object to the idea of calling Snape his friend.

The door opened suddenly and they all jumped. Who'd come in in an empty school?

It was only Professor Snape of course. He had obviously finished his shopping list and gone looking for them.

"So do you want to come with me and see the library?" he asked smiling at their surprise.

Draco wondered if he might have heard some of their conversation. Snape was really good at sneaking up on people and he didn't think he was above listening at doors before making his grand entrance.

"Is it true that Hogwarts has Europe's greatest magical library?" asked Mike. "Even bigger than the Ministry's?"

"Well, yes I think it's the biggest official library. There are some private collections I've seen however that might be even bigger." answered Snape glancing over at Draco. "Or at least better equipped on particular subjects."

Draco wondered what was going to happen to his father's library. It was stocked mostly with dark arts books. He could well imagine that some of those would be burned, but others were very valuable. Would the ministry be greedy enough to sell those? Could it be that some of his father's books would end up here at Hogwarts?

He might have found out from Snape, but didn't really feel like asking right now. So he followed
Snape and the Rakers through all the familiar, but strangely deserted hallways to the library. They had to stop several times on their way as the Rakers discovered more and more fascinating decorations.

Matt was particularly taken with the candles that lit up magically whenever someone entered certain passages. During the school year they were usually used only in the dungeons and other particularly dark areas that were not visited frequently, but now that there were hardly any people around Hogwarts at all, most of the castle had been outfitted with them.

"It would be a waste to use the normal candles that burn all the time when there's nobody here to need them." Snape explained. "The magical candles are slightly more expensive, but they also last a lot longer."

Entering the library was a shock for the Rakers. They just stood in the door and stared at the room for a while.

"This room must be bigger than the market place!" Sammie finally exclaimed.

"Not much." said Snape. "It appears larger, because there aren't so many people crammed into it, but in reality they're about the same size."

That didn't do much to help the Rakers deal with their surprise however. Mary was the first to tentatively set foot into the library and the others followed her example slowly and carefully moving a few paces into the room step by step. Snape closed the door behind them with a wave of his wand as they'd obviously completely forgotten about it.

Mike was the first to discover the ceiling. "Look!" he shouted pointing upwards and they stood gaping once again.

Draco took a very good look around himself trying to imagine what the library looked like to his friends. He'd never given the rich decorations a second thought before and the frescos on the ceiling, though very beautiful were nothing compared to the powerful enchantment of the great hall. Still the library was quite a piece of art if one looked at it that way.

Severus however had seen and admired the decorations often enough. He walked straight towards one particular shelf and pulled down a book without even searching. Draco suddenly remembered that he'd once heard somebody say that Professor Snape and the Headmaster were probably the only people who could find a particular book in the library faster than Madame Pince. It seemed there was some fact behind that rumour after all.

He followed his teacher to a nearby desk and tried to catch a closer look at the book.

"Is that where you're planning to find Uncle Thomas' address?" he asked.

Snape wordlessly held out the book to him so he could explore it. 'The Register of British Wizards' read the title in big golden letters and a little smaller beneath that 'or Where do I Send my Owl'.

Draco suddenly remembered his trusty eagle owl. How he wished he could have him with him now. He wondered what the ministry would do with him. Probably make him an official ministry owl, he thought sadly. He was certainly impressive enough.

He opened the book and found it filled with long columns of addresses in alphabetical order. The large book didn't seem to contain anything else. What a lot of wizards! Draco had of course known that Britain had one of the largest magical populations in the world, but it was still quite impressive to see the tiny script and the size of the book.
He quickly found the M pages and scanned them for Thomas Malfoy. There! Maleric Douglas... Mallory Elizabeth... Where were the Malfoys? Draco looked up at Snape with a very confused and frightened look on his face.

"He's not here. And neither is Father."

The Rakers who had come over to them one by one while he'd been searching the book exchanged puzzled glances. Mike and Cathy leaned over the table to take a closer look at the page as if they were hoping to see something different than Draco had. The others all stared straight at Snape who glanced at the page quickly nodded and turned towards the History of Magic section.

"Secret address." he commented casually. "I might have guessed."

"Secret address?" repeated Mike puzzled. "How can an address be a secret?"

Draco shrugged and raced after Snape who was now pulling books from the very last shelf in the History of Magic section. The Rakers followed him at once.

"What's a secret address and why isn't it in the book?"

"It's not in the book, because it's secret and a secret address is one that isn't in the book." said Snape with a slight grin that only Draco would recognise.

The Rakers exchanged even more confused looks. Draco however just shrugged and decided to try from a different angle.

"I thought all British wizards were listed in that book. At least it seemed that way from the title."

"All British wizards except for those who paid not to be in there." said Snape putting the books he'd chosen onto another desk.

Draco quickly scanned the titles: The History of the Malfoys, The Malfoys, The Malfoy Family and Estates, ...

Ah, so these were the books about his family Snape had spoken of.

"Why would anyone pay not to be mentioned in a book listing addresses?"

"Because they don't want to be bothered by visits and owls from strangers, advertisements per owl, salesman, reporters, thieves... The more determined of those last three groups will usually find them anyway though and so will we." Severus picked up The Malfoy Family and Estates. "This one ought to have addresses somewhere."

Draco grabbed another book from the pile with a sigh and opened it. He appeared to have landed with The Malfoys while Mike and Cathy were sharing The History of the Malfoys.

"What exactly are we looking for?" asked Charlie tentatively stroking the cover of another book.

"The address of someone named Thomas Malfoy and living somewhere in Scotland." explained Snape.

"I'm not entirely sure of Scotland." Draco admitted. "I just think I heard someone mention it once."

They spent almost an hour looking through those books. Mary, Larry and Sammie got bored and wandered off after a while to explore the library some more. Draco wished he could have gone with them. He already knew most of what The Malfoys had to say about his family and was
terribly bored as well. The only thing that might have been interesting were the family trees that were in here, but those didn't give Thomas Malfoy's address and Draco had no time to just check them for the fun of it.

It was Professor Snape who finally found a smaller estate in northern Scotland. The name of the current owner wasn't given as the book was already a hundred years old, but a look at the family trees in The Malfoys confirmed that the owner mentioned in The Malfoy Family and Estates was indeed Thomas' father and therefore it was very likely that this was what they'd been looking for.

"Well, we'll have to take the train north tomorrow then." Snape stated calmly.

He'd probably been expecting that, Draco thought. He craned his neck to see the pictures of his uncle's estate in Snape's book. Snape pushed The Malfoy Family and Estates over to him with a slight smile.

"It doesn't look much different then what you're used to. You ought to feel right at home." he commented.

Draco looked at the house critically. It appeared to be slightly smaller than Malfoy Manor, but that didn't really make much difference, most of the Manor had been unused for centuries as far as Draco knew anyway. He had a slight suspicion that not all of the unused rooms had always been as deserted as his father had wanted him to believe, but Draco had never needed them in any way so what could be the problem with living in a house with a few less rooms?

On the whole the place looked rather nice. A little cold and forbidding, but that was indeed what Draco was used to and from what he read the village was closer than it had been at Malfoy Manor. That ought to be nice. Maybe he would find some friends there.

The region appeared to be inhabited mostly by Muggles, but that shouldn't be a problem. It would give Draco a better chance to get to know more about Muggle ways and after making friends with two squibs and a half ogre he didn't think he'd have any problems getting along with Muggles either.

The region looked to be rather cold, though. He'd need to get some very warm robes for the Christmas holidays, but he supposed that Uncle Thomas would see the need for those himself.

On the whole it might be a very interesting place to live.

Snape left Draco to regard the pictures for a while and went to find the Rakers who'd drifted off into various sections of the library some still admiring the decorations of the walls while others had taken an interest in the books themselves.

He brought them back to where Draco was still sitting and did a quick head count without them even noticing, a skill many teachers acquire after a few years of searching for lost pupils on every school trip. 'Everybody there, fine lets go before someone runs off again.' that thought came automatically with the counting.

"So, would you like to take a look around Gryffindor tower on our way out?" he asked and Draco's head shot up. "Just as an example to compare with the Slytherin dungeons?"

"We can't get in there." Draco reminded him at once. "We don't know the password or even the exact location of the entrance."

Snape grinned. "You might not, but I do."
"You know how to get into the Gryffindor common room?! How?!!" Draco exclaimed baffled.

"How?" repeated Severus mock innocently. "You mean, how does one get in or how do I know?"

"Er... both. But mostly how do you know? It's probably the best kept secret in all the school."

"Actually not. I know of a few things that are a lot more secret than the entrances and passwords for the common rooms, but those are not for students to know. As for how I know: I'm a teacher and head of house. We all know how to get into all the common rooms."

"So you can go in there whenever you like?"

"Theoretically, Draco, only theoretically. I don't usually do it as I have no business being there, but now that there's nobody here I suppose it won't hurt anyone if we take a quick look around."

Draco nodded excitedly and Snape took off towards the door the kids following behind him.

"Hey, what about the books you took out!" Matt called after them. "Are we supposed to just leave them lying around on the tables?"

Snape turned to look back at the library over his shoulder. Indeed the books about the Malfoys still formed an unorderly heap on one desk in the History of Magic section while the address book was still on another table in the front of the room.

Severus smiled and with a quick, casual wave of his wand sent them flying back onto their shelves. "Better?"

Matt just nodded open mouthed. He'd been living around magic all his life, but the ease with which Snape used it simply amazed him. He himself couldn't work any magic at all of course, but he was pretty sure that neither of his parents could have banished back the books like that. Floated them back one by one yes, but sent them all home with just one single wave and without saying a spell? Nope, not likely.

Snape led them through a few more beautifully decorated corridors up another staircase warning them not to step on the third step and finally stopped in front of a large portrait of a very fat woman.

Draco thought the picture was quite disgusting and tasteless, but was polite enough not to mention that to her.

"Lion's paw."

Snape told the portrait and to Draco's surprise it swung away from the wall to reveal a hole he'd never suspected might be there. He'd walked past this corridor often enough during the last four years, but never seen anyone go in or out, but then again he'd never have thought of looking for a secret entrance behind a portrait as the Slytherin common room was simply hidden behind an ordinary looking wall panel. He'd expected it would be the same for the other houses' common rooms as well.

Feeling slightly nervous about intruding into enemy territory he stepped through the hole behind Snape and the Rakers and stopped short in shock.

He took one very slow look around the Gryffindor common room and recoiled in disgust. Instead of the cool elegance of the green and silver he was used to from Slytherin everything here was a screaming mess of red and gold. It looked indecent and much too forceful and bright to him.

Draco was glad that there wasn't a fire burning in here as well. Even more red would have hurt his
"This place is horrible." he scowled at Snape who as he knew very well could in no way be held responsible for the Gryffindor house colours. "It looks like a whore house."

"Can we see what their dorms look like?" asked Sammie curiously.

Snape nodded and led them up a disgustingly red carpeted staircase towards the boys' dorms. With a slight smirk in Draco's direction he opened the door that still read 'fifth years' and gestured for them to enter.

Again Draco felt assaulted by all the red. Still he forced himself to look. This was where Harry Potter slept.

The Gryffindor dorm had a window. He'd have liked that too, but his dorm was underground. There was nowhere the window could have looked out to. The red hangings of the beds were just disgusting though. No, Draco definitely didn't want to have to live in Harry Potter's dorm.

The way back home was strangely less pleasant for Draco and still he suddenly longed to stop time and make it last forever. He had to say good bye to his new friends at the end and he wasn't sure if he was ever going to see them again. Of course he'd promised to visit them on his Hogsmeade weekends, but what if Uncle Thomas wouldn't let him return to Hogwarts?

That fear kept nagging even though he'd told himself a hundred times at least, that that was highly unlikely. He had only three more years of school left ahead of him. Why should he have to switch schools now?

He trudged along behind Professor Snape quietly lost in his thoughts oblivious to the Raker's banter all around him.

"Owl us as soon as you know where you're gonna live, okay."

Draco looked up at the words in surprise. Mike and Cathy had fallen into step on either side of him.

"We'll just hire a post owl to write back. If we all put our money together we ought to be able to afford writing every other week or so."

"Jack's not going to help you." Draco commented still feeling slightly depressed.

"No, but we don't need Jack. Each of us has a little money from somewhere. Babysitting, paper rounds, deliveries, ... We get by." Cathy shrugged.

"I'm just not sure if I can owl you. My owl has been confiscated by the ministry along with everything else and I don't know yet if my uncle will let me use his owlery."

That was another thing to worry about. If he couldn't get to an owl, he couldn't even write to Professor Snape. The thought scared him.

"If he doesn't treat you right run away and come back." suggested Mary from behind. "We'll always be good to you."

Draco smiled. "I'll miss you guys. I wish I could have stayed longer."

There were so many things he'd still wanted to do. Spend some more time at the lake, play some
more Soccer, get to know more of West Hogsmeade. Maybe he'd come back and live here some
day. If he was going to be an electrician it would be a good idea to live where people had electric
things for him to repair. And if he was going to be a Physics teacher he'd try to get a job at
Hogwarts and live in West Hogsmeade during the summers just like Professor Snape did. Or
maybe he'd get a job at West Hogsmeade Wizard School. Then he'd have a really good reason to
live here.

"We'll miss you too." said Cathy softly.

"Yeah," grinned Sammie. "You're the only one who could really show it to Jack."

"I think Jack's going to miss you too, you know." said Mike. "He just won't admit it, but you're one
of us now."

A/N - So what do you think Sevi really went to buy? What will it be like at Uncle Thomas'? Will
he be good to Draco or lock him in a cupboard?

In the next chapter: We meet a very annoying man on the train. Sevi tells Draco a bit about his past
and we finally get to see Draco's uncle.
A/N - Yes, here he finally is: Uncle Thomas, but he might not be exactly what you expect.

Chapter 9: A Bear on The Train

Draco once again didn't sleep well that night. He dreamed he wanted to talk to the Snapes and the Rakers about something very important, though he didn't really know what it was, but they didn't seem to see or hear him. They just walked through him as if he were a ghost.

When Munin came to wake him Draco startled the poor raven with an attempt to hug him. Munin cawed in alarm and retreated onto Severus' shoulder for protection. Birds don't like being hugged.

Instead Draco got up and went to cuddle Billy on the living room floor. Sarah had to remind him repeatedly that he ought to get dressed and eat breakfast. He was to wear his robes again which Sarah had ironed carefully for the occasion.

"We want you to make a good first impression on your uncle, after all." she'd said.

His new muggle clothes and the Math book were quickly stuffed into an old backpack which Snape told him he could keep. To Draco it felt like a really great gift despite it's shabby appearance. It was something to remember the Snapes by.

On his way to the table for breakfast Draco happened to come across the cat and to the animal's great surprise grabbed and cuddled him as well. By the time the cat finally got away breakfast was cold, but Draco didn't even notice. All he could think of while eating was that this was his last meal in the little flat and with Professor Snape and Sarah. He wondered if he'd ever see Billy or 'That Dog' or even the cat again.

When Draco wanted to take the dishes over to the sink to wash them Sarah shook her head at him and pulled his plate out of his hands.

"I'll do that. You'll miss your train if you don't hurry." she scolded.

"But..." Draco tried to protest, but the doorbell cut him off.

Draco ran to open the door and found the whole Rakers gang standing outside including a very sour looking Jack.

"Hurry up Draco." Snape told him. "We have to go."

Mike pushed through the mass of Rakers and smiled at Draco. "We just wanted to give you this before you go. Just so you don't forget where you belong."

Draco almost reverently took the blue Rakers cap from Mike's hands. That was probably the
greatest gift ever. Better than all the brooms in the world could have been.

"Thanks." he said softly hardly believing that it was really his.

"For what?" asked Mike pretending to be confused. "You're one of us and you've got to show the world. No reason to thank us for giving you what's rightfully yours anyway."

"Draco, get going. The train won't wait for us."

Draco quickly grabbed for his shoes and managed to put them on hurriedly while Severus caught 'That Dog' and put him on his lead. Sarah pulled him into a tight hug just before they dashed out the door.

"Good bye, boy. Don't let them mistreat you and don't forget to owl every once in a while, you hear."

"I won't." Draco promised and moments later they were out the door and hurrying through the dark filthy corridor towards the stairs.

Draco wished he could have stopped for a moment to take a last look at the house and the Soccer lawn, but Professor Snape insisted that they had to hurry, if they didn't want to miss the train. Maybe it was better that way anyway. Draco felt like he might cry, if he stopped to think about it and he didn't want to cry in front of his friends.

The Rakers followed them to the station hoping that they might get a last chance to talk before the train arrived, but it was already there when they arrived. They'd really almost missed it.

Draco, Snape and 'That Dog' quickly climbed aboard and found an empty compartment. Munin fluttered in through the window giving them his special bird grin as if to say: 'See how much more comfortable it is to have wings?'

"Aw, don't look so smug." Draco grinned back at the raven. "What would you have done if Professor Snape hadn't opened the window?"

"Fly!" declared Munin.

"Right, you think you can fly as fast as a train?"

Munin decided it was beneath his dignity to answer that and made himself comfortable on Severus' shoulder instead.

Draco just shrugged at the bird and leaned back out the window to wave a last good bye to his friends as the train slowly pulled out of the station. He watched as they went faster and faster and only when the last houses of Hogsmeade had disappeared from view behind the mountains did he sit down and return his attention to his companions.

Snape was sitting beside the window calmly watching him, Munin still perched on his shoulder while 'That Dog' was sniffing around the compartment excitedly which kept him quiet for once. Maybe smelling and barking at the same time required too much concentration.

He didn't stop hopping around and wagging his tail though. Those were two things he hardly ever stopped doing unless he was either drop dead tired or asleep. Draco tried to concentrate on watching him to keep his mind off leaving Hogsmeade and going to live with his uncle. For some strange reason he was beginning to feel lonely and sad again even though Snape was still there with him.
Severus saw his unhappy look and turned to look through his bag. Draco looked up in surprise when he handed him a wrapped parcel.

"Just a little going away gift." Severus explained feeling slightly uncomfortable at showing such open affection to the boy. "Something so you won't feel so lonely until you get to know your new family a little better."

Draco slowly reached out and took the parcel. A gift? From Snape? He could hardly believe it.

He felt the present carefully. It was lighter than he'd expected from the size, irregularly shaped and felt strangely soft to the touch. Draco gave Snape a confused look.

Snape just shrugged and nodded at the parcel. "Just open it. You'll see."

Something so he wouldn't feel lonely? He began to unwrap it and found that it was only held closed by the ribbon tied around it. The moment he'd stripped that off the wrapping paper unfolded and a brownish grey teddy-bear looked back at him with big black eyes.

Draco again looked over to Snape in confusion and wonder. A teddy bear? The Snapes were poor enough without making him gifts and they'd already given him clothes and a backpack. Why would they waste their money on a toy? He didn't need a teddy bear. They weren't necessary to survive and he was too old for one anyway.

He looked back down at the teddy. It looked soft and cuddly and almost as cute as Billy. Draco smiled at it. The teddy appeared to be smiling as well, he noticed. A soft, gentle, welcoming teddy bear smile. It had to be very nice to hold and cuddle that bear. Billy would love something like this. Draco gently picked the bear out of the wrapping paper and held him close. Yes, a very furry and soft feeling. Really nice to hold.

"Thank you." Draco said looking back at Professor Snape. "But why?"

Severus smiled back at the boy who was tightly hugging his teddy without even being aware of it.

"Because you needed it."

"No, I didn't. It's a really nice teddy and very kind of you to give it to me, but I don't really need it. I'm not a baby anymore. Billy needs toys. I could survive without them."

"Accept it or not, but you are still a child, Draco." Snape smiled at him. "And just look at the way you're holding that teddy. I think you've needed something to cuddle for a long time."

"Oh... er.... well ... It is rather nice and soft and I really like it. Almost as much as I like cuddling Billy." Draco grinned suddenly. "You could have saved some money and just taken Billy along."

"Oh, so you were planning on arriving at your uncle's doorstep saying: Hi, I'm your nephew Draco and this is my pet baby. You don't mind if I move in here, do you? Well, sorry Draco, but I'm not letting you take my son. I'm much more willing to part with that teddy and it'll be accepted much more easily at your uncle's." Snape told him mock sternly while the train slowed down arriving at another station.

Draco suddenly saw the scene before him how he arrived with Billy in an owl cage. He tried to answer Snape, but was laughing so hard he couldn't force out a single word. Seeing how Draco was struggling to speak Severus started laughing as well.

An old witch entered their compartment and 'That Dog' immediately jumped up onto a seat tail...
wagging to greet her. Unluckily the train started again that very moment and 'That Dog' was thrown off by the sudden movement and fell back to the floor. Not trusting the moving ground anymore 'That Dog' crawled under Severus' seat belly close to the ground, just in case it happened again.

"Sorry, dog." giggled Draco. "Trainquake area."

They laughed even harder at that.

The old witch glared at them angrily and sat down by the door as far as possible away from the merry duo.

"I guess she must think that laughter is contagious." Severus whispered to Draco which of course caused even more laughter.

Later neither of them would have been able to say what exactly had been so funny, but they kept laughing for almost the entire journey and would definitely have agreed that they'd had a wonderful time.

'That Dog' remained under Snape's seat peeking out only occasionally and spent most of the trip feeling scared. He wasn't used to his master being so happy and still didn't understand why the world was moving and rattling and shaking. 'That Dog' was definitely not having a good time.

Neither was the old witch. She was a stern old woman who didn't approve of frivolity at all and was thoroughly disgusted at people behaving as if they were under a tickling spell on a public train. Severus and Draco didn't let her angry looks spoil their fun however and that made her even angrier.

Munin the raven was the only one who paid her some attention after 'That Dog's' unlucky fall at all. He fluttered over onto the back of her seat and stared intently at her glasses for a while. When she pushed slightly away from him not sure what to make of a large black bird who travelled with two indecently happy people he gently picked the gleaming object from her nose to get a better look.

Once he'd gotten them off he realised that they were only glasses after all and suddenly lost interest in them. He dropped them into the witch's lap and fluttered back over to Draco hoping to convince the boy to let him try out his new Rakers cap. Instead they ended up playing a game of catch the cap much to Severus' amusement.

The old witch was left to put her glasses back on and glare some more.

About an hour or so later another traveller came to sit in their compartment. It was a middle aged round little man wearing stern grey robes and a strict expression. Draco's subconscious immediately labelled him 'ministry wizard'. His sense of humour seemed to be even more underdeveloped than the old witch's and the two soon got into a whispered conversation shooting scandalised side glances at Draco and Severus every once in a while.

They successfully kept ignoring the glares for quite a while until the small round bellied wizard suddenly drew himself up in his seat and addressed Severus.

"Excuse me, Sir. I am quite aware that simple folk like you cannot be expected to behave as well as us people of higher station in life and I would be the last to look down upon anybody, but you must understand that an important ministry official like me who has over twenty years of experience working for our government and even advises the minister's advisers at times is used to certain standards people around him ought to adapt to. Therefore if you are unwilling or unable to
conform to the normal code of conduct, which would by the way set a much better example for your son. I would greatly appreciate if both of you would at least have the decency to leave this compartment to us people of better upbringing and continue your frivolities with the other common people outside in the corridor.”

Draco immediately raised an eyebrow and sneered at the stranger, but Severus gently grabbed his arm and shook his head at him with a slight wink.

"Do you have children, Sir?" he asked the 'ministry wizard' with an expression he usually reserved for questioning Neville Longbottom, his least favourite student.

"Yes, as a matter of fact I have two very well behaved children, who would never, I assure you, even dream of indulging in such indecent behaviour even though they are quite a bit younger than your boy here. But correct behaviour is mostly a matter of upbringing and willingness to adapt to the family's standard as I always say. Children of an important man like me have to conform to certain standards naturally and my wife always tells me what a good father I am and how lucky she is to have me. She had some big problems when she first met me, but I knew that she was such a fine woman and I helped her through. She always says she couldn't have done it without me. My daughter Patricia is only eight, but she knows how to conduct herself properly and my son David will be starting at Hogwarts this year."

A dangerous gleam appeared in Snape's eyes at the mention of the word Hogwarts, but the 'ministry wizard' who had no idea how devious Snape could be continued smiling patronizingly totally unaware of the danger.

"The poor children!" Severus commented. "Laughter and happiness ought to have a place in everybody's life in my opinion, and they are particularly important for children. But then I rarely advise the ministers official advisers"

"Indeed my opinions are very well respected by all who know me and believe me that frivolous laughter would never be allowed at such an exclusive school as Hogwarts."

"Did you go to Hogwarts yourself then, Sir?"

"Sadly no. My father didn't understand the importance of a higher education and I had to take evening classes later on to make up for his mistake, but I still worked my way up to almost an academic title. I've learned and done a lot of things in my time."

"Ah, very well. We'll leave you to your seriousness then. Come on Draco, we're obviously not wanted here." Severus grabbed his bag and pulled 'That Dog' out from under the seat to put him back on his lead.

Just as they walked out the door he turned back to the 'ministry wizard', who was puffing out his chest in front of the old witch basking in his victory over the two troublemakers, once more.

"Say what was your name again, Sir?"

"Director Smith, why?"

"Merely curious, Mr Smith, merely curious. I'm looking forward to meeting your well behaved son." and with that Severus closed the door behind him so Mr Smith never got a chance to ask whatever he'd meant by that last comment.

The moment they were out in the corridor Draco turned to Snape.
"Why did you let him kick us out? I thought you knew better how to handle little peasants with a bloated ego."

"Oh, I was going to, but when he mentioned his son was starting Hogwarts I changed my mind. I believe I shall have a lot more fun taking this out on Mr David Smith, through all his eight years at Hogwarts."

"Er ... seven years." Draco reminded his teacher.

"Oh no, eight. The stars tell me that poor unfortunate David is going to fail Potions in his seventh year and have to spend one more year with us to make up for it." Severus said in an almost perfect imitation of Professor Trellawney, which set them off laughing once again.

They were still laughing when the train pulled into the next station.

"Come on 'son'!" laughed Snape. "This is where we get off."

"I can't believe he thought I'm your son." gasped Draco climbing off the train still laughing. "We don't look anything alike."

"I don't think it was, because of what we look like. It was the way we were acting."

Draco looked up at his teacher in surprise. "My father never acted this way with me."

"Well, he wasn't a very good father."

"He taught me a lot of important things." Draco protested.

"Like how to sneer at people and call them mudbloods? Or do you mean forbidden curses that you could go to Azkaban for?"

Draco stared down at the ground in front of him. Yes, maybe the things his father had taught him weren't as clever as he'd always thought they were. At least his father had gotten himself into quite some mess that way.

"Shouldn't we change into muggle clothes?" Draco asked suddenly looking around the empty platform. "And what way do we get out into the muggle world?"

"No, we don't have to. We're not going into the muggle world at all." explained Severus. "See that path over there? It'll take us straight to your uncle's doorstep and is entirely muggle safe."

Draco followed the path that led directly off the platform with his eyes. It led through a forest up a hill and there right on top of the hill was Uncle Thomas' manor. It looked really close.

Draco hesitated.

"Are you sure that's a muggle free path? It looks terribly open."

"Yes it is. All the muggles see over there is very dense forest. Much too uncomfortable to walk through."

"So we have to go now?"

Snape looked at Draco. They really ought to, but ...

He took another look around the empty platform. Nobody else had gotten off the train here and the
only thing in sight were a few benches and a very small wizard pub that most likely never saw much business.

"Maybe we'd better have lunch first." he suggested. "From what I've read the manor shouldn't be as close as it looks from here and the path probably makes a few little detours that we can't see yet either. We might have to walk for quite some time and who knows when your uncle normally has lunch."

"Oh yes," Draco nodded at once. "I'm already feeling a little hungry."

So they went into the small pub and ordered a simple meal. (Not that there was anything else on the menu.) The old wizard behind the bar beamed at them happily and hustled off into the kitchen.

"Do you think he cooks himself?" Draco asked Snape.

"Most likely. Take a look around. I'd be surprised if he gets much more then ten customers a day. He can't possibly afford to hire any staff."

They were indeed the only ones there and the tables in the corner looked very dusty. They were probably never used at all. Most customers would eat at the bar, Draco suspected. That gave the lonely barkeep a little chance to chat with someone for a while and spared him having to dust off the tables.

Draco looked around curiously taking in every little crack and cobweb on the walls. Lucius Malfoy would never have allowed his son to eat at such a shabby pub and most likely Uncle Thomas wouldn't set foot into it either. Professor Snape obviously had a little more sense of adventure and he probably considered this a good chance to save some money. Eating here couldn't possibly turn out to be expensive.

The old wizard took his time with his cooking, but the results were surprisingly good. Still Draco ate as slowly as possible to stretch out the time until he had to meet his uncle. Snape didn't mind. He listened to the old wizard's chatter for a while making a few encouraging comments on his tales of bad business and people always being in such a hurry to catch their trains. Then they went on to talk about the muggle village and Snape learned of all the little scandals in town.

After a while of that Severus casually mentioned the mansion on the hill and the old wizard reacted at once. Yes, that was the house of old Mr. Malfoy. He lived there all alone ever since his son had moved out about... well, that had to have been at least forty years ago.

And didn't the old man feel lonely then, Severus wanted to know.

Oh, yes, sometimes he would and then he'd come down to visit the village, but he wouldn't stay at the pub at the station of course. He'd walk into the village to eat at the muggle inn instead. Or else he'd go down to the market place.

"He comes to meet the people, of course and there aren't many here, you know." the old wizard said sadly.

"He likes to chat with the muggles then? He must be a well liked man around here."

"Oh, yes, he's a good man all right. A little grumpy at times and he does have quite a temper, but on the whole he's a good man. And at his age a man has the right to be a little grumpy I say."

"See, he's muggle friendly. He'll be good to you too." Severus whispered to Draco as they walked out.
"He's also grumpy and has a temper." Draco added doubtfully.

"Well that's still a lot better than anything that people would say about your father."

That was true of course. Draco couldn't deny it, but he didn't feel like confirming it either. So he said nothing.

The path turned out to really be a lot longer than expected as it meandered through the forest seemingly without any direction. Many feet had cut short-cuts here and there, but by some unspoken agreement Draco and Severus ignored them all and just kept following the original path until they finally arrived at the large gate that led onto Thomas Malfoy's property. Well, most likely the path and forest belonged to him as well, but this was the first clear mark of ownership they'd seen.

There was no visible or audible alert, but the moment they stopped at the gate a small house elf popped out of nowhere to ask their business.

"Tell your master that I'm bringing him his nephew Draco as he is the boy's closest living relative aside from his father who is currently in Azkaban." Snape glowered at the little servant.

He hadn't meant to be impolite to the little creature, but he never had gotten along with house elves very well. It wasn't that he didn't appreciate their hard work and loyalty, but their usual cheeriness and heartiness annoyed him to no end and their inability to use the simplest grammatical structures correctly was almost as unbearable to him.

The elf fluttered her big ears, stared at him through big round eyes and beamed excitedly.

"Yes, Sir. Flopsy is tells Master Thomas Malfoy rights aways. Sir!" and with that she popped away again.

Severus sighed. Oh of course, he just had to run into a particularly excitable elf with particularly bad grammar. He tried to remind himself that it wasn't the elf's fault, that she was trying her best to be helpful and that he really ought to be a little nicer to her.

It didn't help. She was still too cheery and couldn't speak English. Severus steeled himself for her return. He'd at least try to control himself enough not to insult her.

Draco who'd been keeping as close to him as he possibly could was clutching his teddy bear tightly and staring fixedly at the point where Flopsy had disappeared. Severus gently touched his shoulder to bring him out of it.

"It'll be all right. He won't bite you."

Draco gulped. "I sure hope so." But what else might he do instead?

'That Dog' barked at him happily and jumped up his leg smearing his robes with mud. Draco smiled nervously and bent to scratch the animal's head.

Snape glared at 'That Dog's' muddy paws for a moment, but couldn't really be angry with him for distracting Draco from his fear. Where was Flopsy? She should have had ample time by now to relate his message to her master and return to let them in.

And then suddenly somebody apparated to the gate. It was however not Flopsy nor was it another house elf. It was an old wizard and his clothes were definitely not those of a servant. Thomas Malfoy had come to meet them himself and he didn't look happy.
He took one quick sneering look at Severus, Draco and 'That Dog', regarded the teddy coldly and then turned to Snape.

Snape sneered back and Thomas almost took a step backwards in surprise. He'd never met anyone outside of his own family who could out-sneer him. He switched to glaring to avoid a hopeless competition.

Severus stuck with the sneer. He could exchange glares with the very best, but hadn't come here intending to antagonise Thomas.

"So! You expect me to take in Lucius' spoiled little dark arts brat, do you?" barked Thomas Malfoy.

"You are the boy's closest relative and he has nowhere else to go. I can understand that you don't like his father, I don't either, but he is family and Draco isn't Lucius. He's a very nice boy really once you get to know him."

"He's still Lucius' child. I don't want to know any of the stuff that old monster taught him."

"And now you have a chance to teach him something better. You'd do the boy some good if you'd give him a chance to live in a normal environment for a while."

"I'm an old man. I have neither the time nor the patience to deal with all of Lucius' mistakes. I can understand that you want to be rid of the kid, but I'm not willing to take him and that's final. There's a lot of other Malfoys running about in this country. Go bother my son for example. I'm not getting involved with anything that has even a remote connection with Lucius."

"Well, in that case, where do we..." Snape started to ask, but Thomas had already disapparated.

Draco stared at the place he'd been standing only seconds ago for a moment then turned to Severus.

"What do we do now?"

"Go home until we figure out where his son lives?" Severus shrugged. "He could really have stayed long enough to give us an address."

"How would we find him? I didn't even know he had a son before now and he didn't bother to mention his name."

"We just need to find your family tree. That shouldn't be too difficult. Wasn't there one in that book you looked through yesterday? 'The Malfoys' I believe was the title."

"Yes, but that won't tell us where he lives. It had no addresses anywhere."

"One of the others will. Or else we'll find some other relative of yours and if we don't we can always ask the ministry as a last resort. All wizards and witches have to be registered there."

"But would the ministry part with the information?"

"Not too readily, but if I get Dumbledore to ask them for us it ought to work."

"But that means we have to wait till Dumbledore comes back from his holidays. How long will that be?"

"Oh, he'll be back in time to prepare for the new school year and we have some other options left before we have to turn to him. We can always to knocking on the door of one of the Malfoy estates
Draco shuddered at that suggestion.

"I'd rather know who I'll be living with before I get there."

"Don't worry. I won't really do that. I want to know who the people I hand you over to are myself. Asking the locals as we did at that pub today might be a good idea though. They usually know every little scandal and can give you a good impression of people's worst sides."

"Oh great."

"You just have to remember they're exaggerating at all times. Gossip is quite informative if you know how to read it." Snape smiled slightly.

"And you're sure you do?"

"Trust me. I'm a professional." Snape winked at Draco.

"You are a teacher." Draco insisted. "I know that for a fact."

"And a few other things on the side. None of the Hogwarts staff are entirely what they seem. Well, with a few exceptions perhaps, but Dumbledore has other uses for most of the people he hires."

"Really? So what do you do?"

"Collect information, but that's a secret, Draco. It wouldn't work anymore if people even suspected anything."

Draco laughed. "That sounds as if you were a secret agent or something. You know infiltrating the enemy troops, copying top secret documents ..."

"No, not like that anymore. I blew my cover after Voldemort's first defeat. They all think I sold out to the ministry so I can't go back to that. The dark lord would never trust me again. I'm a less interesting sort of spy now, but still useful for Dumbledore."

Draco stared at Snape for a while. They'd started walking back towards the station sometime during their conversation and were deep in the forest right now. That was probably why Professor Snape dared to speak of these things at all. That and the fact that Draco's father had most likely known and would someday have told Draco, if he hadn't gone to Azkaban instead. Snape had once been a double agent spying on the Dark Lord? And he'd lived to tell of it? Draco had often heard people talk about the ring of spies that had been Dumbledore's most powerful weapon against Voldemort, but for some reason he'd never before thought about the implications. There had been people so unafraid that they'd dared to lie to Voldemort again and again, lie to everybody. His father had often told him of the power of the Dark Lord of how he was the only thing all death eaters were afraid of. And he was on their side. They were his heroic fighters, his father had said, the most courageous people in the world, because they dared to face Voldemort again and again.

But there had been people who'd lived even more dangerously and why had nobody ever told their story? Somehow it just had seemed natural that Dumbledore had had spies and that all death eaters had been loyal servants of Voldemort, but how could both be true?

"What became of the others? Were all the teachers spies once?"

"Of course not. Some of them were already teaching at Hogwarts at that time. Each of them has a
story and each of them has had a place in the war, but I'm the only one who actually was a spy. The others had other jobs and most of them were official. You can read about what they did in old newspapers. They're in the library. Just ask Madam Pince."

"I don't care about what the teachers did. What happened to the other spies? Did they all die?"

"Some of them did. Others never were caught and are still at it. Some went on to other things. A few were hired by the ministry. ... There never were as many of us as the public generally believed. We just had our people strategically placed. I was a member of Voldemort's inner circle and most of the time privy to his plans. I'm the one who gave Albus the lists of his intended targets. It was quite easy to get at them for me."

"And the others? Who were the others?"

Snape just shook his head in silence and Draco understood. That was dangerous knowledge.

"Just tell me of some that are known to the death eaters already. There can't be any harm in telling me what I'd have learned from Father anyway." he begged.

"Well, I never knew the other agents back then. I was the most likely to be caught and tortured so I was kept in the dark so I couldn't betray them. I reported to Albus directly even though that was a great risk at that time. I always knew about Moody though. Everybody knew that he and Albus were close friends and I suspect that he kept Albus informed about the ministry's actions. He already was an Auror as you might know. Voldemort suspected the Potters to be part of the operations as well, but they weren't field operatives. Maybe they were part of the planning group, but more likely James just served as a go between for Albus and Lupin. The werewolf kept an eye on Knockturn Alley and other meeting places for dark wizards. He was a dark creature and easily accepted and he knew how to blend in with the shadows and listen in on conversations."

"But he didn't actually infiltrate the death eaters?"

"No, the information on the action of those on the dark side not affiliated with Voldemort was important as well and it was less risky for someone known to be a friend of Dumbledore. He could never have gotten into Voldemort's operation. Or so Albus thought at the time. Wormtail came as a complete surprise for all of us."

"Wormtail? Whatever is Wormtail?" Draco felt confused. Professor Snape had said it almost as if it were a name, but who'd have a name like that?

"You might call him my counterpart on the dark side, Voldemort's spy against Dumbledore. He's the one who sold out the Potters. They were always so careful that I wouldn't know anything and then he was the one who betrayed them all. They'd never even considered the possibility he could turn against them."

"But if that Wormtail betrayed all your secrets to the Dark Lord, how did you survive? It seems to me he'd have gone after all the inside spies first before he went after the Potters."

"Oh, but Wormtail never knew of me. I wasn't told about the other spies and they didn't know about me either. They might have suspected or even known that there had to be another inside spy, but they never knew it was me. What should Wormtail have told Voldemort? 'I think you've got a leak somewhere.'? That's not a safe thing to say to the Dark Lord. Voldemort had been after the Potters for a while and the Potters were what Wormtail gave him."

"So he told him to recruit Black and then Black... "
"No, Black never had anything to do with that. At least that's what the latest story says."

"But he was the Potters' secret keeper. Nobody could have found them without his help."

"Apparently he wasn't. For some reason he didn't want the job and the Potters went and asked Wormtail instead, because he seemed such an unlikely candidate they thought Voldemort would never think of him at all."

"Then why did Black go to Azkaban and Wormtail didn't?"

"Because everyone knew that the Potters had asked Black to be their secret keeper and Wormtail disappeared before anyone ever thought to suspect him. Rumours say Voldemort keeps him in place of a house elf these days."

Draco grinned at the thought. A human house elf? That had to be fun. He almost wished to see that someday, but then again that would mean to meet the Dark Lord and Draco wasn't all that sure he wanted to know that guy anymore.

"He'd want to kill Charlie and Matt, wouldn't he?" he asked voice trembling slightly. That sounded so impossible. Why would anyone want to harm Charlie? All she wanted to do was be a famous dancer. She'd never cause anyone any harm.

"Yes, that's what Voldemort wants, to kill all the squibs and muggleborns. ... He'd kill Mary too, you know."

"What!? Why'd he do that? She's magical and her mother's a witch, too. He has no reason to harm her."

"But she isn't a pure-blood To Voldemort a half ogre is just as much an abomination as a squib."

"But... but..." This was impossible. Why would anyone want Mary dead? She'd be a great fighter if Voldemort got her on his side. She was stronger than Crabbe and Goyle, but still had more of a brain. "He wouldn't harm the others as well would he?"

"Not at first, but if he did succeed at killing all the muggles and muggleborns he might start to get even more selective. He might start killing people for being not intelligent enough for his liking, or not strong enough, or not tall enough... or maybe just for being poor. There's a million reasons he could come up with to kill somebody, but the one thing he won't do is stop killing. He enjoys it too much you see."

"So if he got his way where would he stop?"

"Nowhere. He can't stop and he can't die. He'd just keep killing until he was the only living thing left in the world."

"But that means he'd kill his own followers as well!"

"Of course it does. Voldemort doesn't care about people. He just cares about killing and it doesn't really matter to him whom he kills. He might think that now, that all he wants is to see all muggles dead, but once they'd be gone he'd realise it wasn't enough. It'd never be enough."

"Then why do people still follow him? If he'll just kill them too they ought to all be against him."

"Because they just don't realise what Voldemort really is. They believe his promises of power and money and will continue to do so until either they die or somebody kills their master."
Draco thought about that for a while.

"You said he can't die," he finally said.

"Not of natural causes as far as we know, but almost everything can be destroyed. Lily Potter almost did it once. The key is to find a spell even stronger than hers."

Draco thought about that. So it had actually been Lily and not Harry Potter who had defeated the Dark Lord. But what spell had she used and what might be stronger than it? He considered asking Snape, but if his teacher had known the answer to that he'd have killed Voldemort a long time ago.

And what was he doing anyway? Thinking up ways to destroy the man he'd been raised to serve? But what if what Snape had said was true? What if Voldemort would just go on and kill him along with everybody else? What would he do then? What side was he really on?

Draco was still very quiet and thoughtful when they arrived back at the train station. Severus didn't bother him. He knew he'd given the boy a lot to think about. That had been his intention. It took his mind off his uncle's rejection and it forced him to reconsider his loyalties.

Severus had always suspected that Draco was just following his father into Voldemort's service blindly and had never really considered the consequences. The way Draco had made friends with the Rakers had convinced him that Draco didn't truly believe in the death eater's ideals, but he needed Draco to realise that on his own and that would take time.

They went back into the pub to chat with the old wizard some more while they were waiting for the train. Not that either of them was truly interested in what he had to say, but it helped them pass the time as they had to wait for almost an hour and even 'That Dog' was looking bored with sniffing the dusty corners by the time their train finally arrived.

The train was almost full to capacity at this time and they had to share their compartment with a family with two small children who were delighted to see 'That Dog' and Munin. The raven was obviously not happy with this situation. He fled onto Severus' shoulder and looked distrustfully down at the children from there.

'That Dog' on the other hand was even more delighted than the children. He was wagging his tail so hard Draco expected he would be all sore the next morning. The children sent one last longing look Munin's way and then got down to the important business of petting 'That Dog'.

"Don't worry. He's harmless and used to babies." Draco whispered to the worried looking mother.

She smiled back at him gratefully. Like most witches and wizards she was obviously not familiar with dogs. Cats, owls and even toads were well known pets in the wizarding world. Dogs however were rather unpopular pets in the old wizarding families. They were known as popular muggle pets of course and a lot of muggleborns kept them, but they had no magical qualities at all and were therefore mostly ignored by everybody else.

Draco wondered once again how Snape had gotten to take in 'That Dog' in the first place.

The children's parents proved to be very friendly and Draco talked with them during most of the journey. They were on their way to visit the children's grandparents in some town near London. Yes, they had a very long journey ahead of them, but it was so difficult to travel by floo powder with a squirming child in your hands and they really enjoyed watching the scenery rush past through the train window.

Draco told them that he and Professor Snape were from Hogsmeade and that they were on their
way back after visiting his uncle. It didn't even feel like a lie, he just wasn't telling the whole truth.
They didn't need to know who he really was. They might get as scared as his uncle had.

They too seemed to just assume that he and Snape were related or something. At least they never asked.
Maybe they just thought they were father and son just like Director Smith had? Draco didn't really care
as long as they didn't ask questions he didn't really know how to answer.

When they reached the last station before Hogsmeade Severus pulled out ink and parchment
and started writing a short note which he tied to Munin's leg and when the train began to slow down
entering Hogsmeade he opened the window and let the raven out.

"Where did you send him?" Draco asked curiously.

"Home, to tell Sarah that we're coming back. Or did you want to surprise her?"

That would probably not have been advisable Draco thought remembering the way she'd greeted him
the first time he'd arrived at her door. Better that she knew in advance to expect him back again
and could scold the cat about it instead of him.

They walked back from the station slowly to give Munin ample time to deliver his message.

"Are we going to Hogwarts again tomorrow?" Draco asked as they crossed the bridge into West Hogsmeade.

"I don't think we'll have the time. It's market day again and we'll have a lot of shopping to do for
this week. I've got some appointments to keep on Tuesday, but I might find some time to drop by
the castle and pick up some books on the way back if all goes as planned. If not we'll just get them
on Wednesday. We'll have found another family member to take you to by Sunday."

"Then I'm staying here another week?"

"I guess so, yes. Do you mind much?"

"No, not at all. Now I can play with Billy and the Rakers some more and see the washing machines
again and go swimming and..."

Severus smiled slightly at Draco's enthusiasm. He liked the idea of keeping the boy a little longer
more and more. West Hogsmeade was doing Draco good and the boy even seemed to like it. How
could anyone ever have believed that he'd grow up to be a death eater? Snape was almost beginning
to take his interest in becoming an electrician seriously.

When the first apartment houses came into sight both Draco and 'That Dog' got eager to get home
and started to go faster. At least it felt like home to Draco. He could hardly remember that he'd felt
lost and slightly appalled the first time he'd seen the apartment houses.

Severus couldn't believe it. After all the walking they'd done today Draco still looked willing to run
the rest of the way.

They didn't run of course. Severus kept his slow pace and didn't let Draco or 'That Dog' push him.
Why should he? He still was the only one who had a key and Draco couldn't use an Alohomora
spell during the holidays. As for the dog, he couldn't even open an unlocked door on his own.

Draco slowed down again to wait for his teacher, but he had to stop himself from running ahead
just like 'That Dog' a few more times. Finally they reached the door of their flat. Snape pulled out
the key.
And that was when Draco suddenly remembered something and dashed off. For the first time he really got to ring the doorbell of Mike's flat.

Severus who had looked up confused when Draco had suddenly run off stopped in the corridor to watch smiling slightly to himself. 'That Dog' barked madly in protest, but it didn't help any. The door remained closed for the time.

Mike opened the door. "Draco?!!"

"I'm staying another week. Uncle Thomas doesn't want me." Draco grinned happily.

"Doesn't want you?" Mike asked still a little confused. "Why ever not?"

"He is an old man and not too fond of Draco's father and his ideas on how to raise a child." Severus explained for Draco. He wasn't sure the boy had really understood why his uncle had reacted like this and he saw a good chance to explain here. "He just didn't think he could deal with all the problems he thought raising Draco would bring at his age."

"So you're staying here then? Forever?"

"No, just for another week until we find another relative who might want me."

Draco sighed. Another week sounded great, but when he thought about it, it was a very short time and what would Uncle Thomas' son be like? He didn't even know where he lived.

"Oh, well that's still great. Come on, we have to tell Cathy Cat and Bloody Mary right now!"

"No you don't. Sarah most likely already has dinner on the table and is waiting for us to eat it. You can go play with your friends tomorrow, Draco."

"Sorry." Draco mumbled to Mike and turned to trudge into the flat behind Snape.

"Dako!" Billy greeted him the moment he entered the living room and Draco immediately forgot all his anger at not being allowed to take off with Mike. It was great to be home.

He picked up the baby and swung him around a few times until he started to feel a little dizzy and had to put him down again. Billy looked a little disappointed at being set down again this soon, but then his eyes fell on Severus.

"Dada!" and Billy took off again.

Sarah gave Draco a short hug. "Don't you worry about your uncle, Draco. I'm sure he didn't mean to be as harsh as he sounded and Severus says there are still a lot of other relatives who might take you. We'll find you a much better place this time, you'll see."

"It's okay, Mrs Snape, really. I didn't like Uncle Thomas' place anyway. I wouldn't want to have to walk all that long way through the forest all the time and his house looked terribly dark and lonely. I'd much rather have a real family with children and a lot of neighbours. Maybe Uncle Thomas' son even has a baby Billy's age. I'd like to live where they have a baby."

Severus looked up from cuddling Billy at that.

"I don't think he would. He'd most likely be only a few years younger than your father so his kids would probably already be in school, maybe even your age or older."

Draco looked disappointed. He wanted a baby not a bunch of school kids.
"They'd still be a lot of fun." Sarah tried to cheer him up again. "Maybe even more fun than Billy, because you could really play with them."

Draco thought that he could really play with Billy as well. Sarah however kept insisting that older kids were more fun to play with and he didn't want to argue with her. Older kids were better than no kids for sure and that's what he'd have gotten at Uncle Thomas'. He decided not to worry about it all so much. After all he had a whole week ahead of him before he'd have to face this problem and he intended to enjoy this week as best he could.

A/N - Will Draco ever find a new home? Will Jack ever accept him into the gang? And what will Draco name his teddy?

In the next chapter: We go to the market again, 'That Dog' and Munin quarrel over lunch and Sevi brews a potion. (Well, what else did you expect a potions master to do?)
Chapter 10: The Market once Again

Munin woke Draco early that next day and Draco couldn't shake the suspicion that he'd been told to do so. The Snapes were hoping to get to the market early to be there before the large crowds and thus breakfast was hurried and Draco had to leave the dishes to wash after they got back.

Sarah even packed some sandwiches for lunch and Draco realised this would be a really long shopping trip.

Draco ended up leading 'That Dog' this time while Severus carried Billy down the stairs and Sarah took the buggy. He cast a longing glance at the baby even though 'That Dog' was probably the most comfortable charge to get down the stairs as he didn't need to be carried.

Billy however just crowed "Dada!" happily and ignored Draco entirely. Well, he hadn't seen much of his father this past week and had probably missed him.

Cathy Cat dashed past them on the third floor with a happy "Good morning, everybody! So glad you're still here Draco, but I've got to run." and another very dazzling smile.

"Are you coming to the market?" Draco called after her hoping for some pleasant company while Sarah was bargaining again.

Cathy stopped on the second floor.

"Sorry, I can't. I'm babysitting little Martin all day while Mrs Brown's out shopping. Knowing her the market will be long closed by the time she gets back. I'll see you tomorrow on the Soccer field though." and she dashed off again.

Draco sighed softly. Why would Mrs Brown shop longer than the market would stay open? Where could one still shop after it closed? Or had Cathy meant that she was actually going to do something else? Was she unfaithful to her husband perhaps? Then again he'd never even heard anyone mention a Mr. Brown at all and sometimes the majority of families around here seemed to consist of single parents and their kids. A lot of kids had step-dads or step-mums though. So maybe Mrs Brown was unfaithful ... Or maybe she just had a bad leg and needed a lot of time for the way back, Draco thought when he saw an old lady limp through the park on her walking stick empty shopping bags in both hands. That woman would take a long time just to get to the market.

The Snapes however walked pretty quickly and arrived while some of the vendors were still setting up their stalls. They hadn't managed to beat the crowd however, Draco realised at once. Shoppers were already all over the place under the watchful eyes of the usual two inefficient aurors. The thieves were milling with the crowd and snatching some fruits or bread here and there, but they didn't seem as busy as Draco remembered them and they weren't going for the shoppers' money just yet. The crowds were probably not dense enough this early on and they didn't want the aurors to notice their hiding places.

Large groups of mostly women were standing around some of the stalls chatting apparently without the intention of buying anything. In the large crowds last week Draco hadn't noticed those. They obviously used the market as an occasion for social gathering. Draco sneered at them. Did they have to block almost entire stands? They had to wind through between two of the groups to
get to a small stall where Sarah claimed they sold the best and cheapest apples. Couldn't those people just move over into one of the alleys to give the shoppers some room?

'That Dog' was trying to get away from Draco most likely hoping to grab another sausage somewhere and was constantly tangling his lead around the stands or even the people's legs. Draco had to keep apologising and almost lost sight of the Snapes in the crowd several times while untangling the dog.

He wasn't worried too much about that though. He knew the way home by now and would just have to wait in front of the door until they got back, if he actually lost them. Or maybe he'd just go visit Mike if he did.

This time it was Severus however who took over the bargaining and Draco noticed that he was even more successful than Sarah. Sneering at the goods was obviously a winning argument.

They walked on to another stand where they had to stand in line to get potatoes. Draco had by now picked up 'That Dog' and was carrying him to avoid further tangled legs. Some people had gotten really angry and yelled at him because of the dog's behaviour.

"Hey Dragon!" Sammie dashed over to him from behind another stall munching on a carrot and held another one out to him.

Draco took the gift deciding not to wonder where Sammie might have gotten it. He was petty sure it wasn't legally bought.

"Hi, Sammie! Is everybody else here too?"

The market had begun to fill up now and was almost as crowded as Draco remembered it from the week before.

"Jack's somewhere over that way prancing for some girls and pretending it wasn't Cathy's decision to break up with him. Not that they really believe him, but they might be impressed with his looks. Mike has managed to get house arrest, so we won't be seeing any of him today. Cathy's babysitting again and Matt got to stay home as well and watch his little sister. You can imagine what kind of mood he's in. Little Larry's helping his Mum with the shopping. His Dad's probably still asleep since the pub's not open yet and somebody has to carry all those shopping bags for the poor woman. She's rather slender and delicate, you know, and getting beat up so often doesn't exactly help any. Mary's helping some old witch who doesn't have any family left with her shopping. I heard it pays pretty well if you're big and strong and can carry a lot of weight."

"You mean that old witch's paying Mary to carry her bags?"

"Yep, she's just a weak old lady and with a strong teenager along she can buy a lot more than she could, if she had to carry it all herself. And buying at the market is a lot cheaper than going to the shops during the week." Sammie grinned. "If I were as strong and slow as Mary, I'd probably do the same, but as I am I wouldn't get such a job. The old ladies want the really strong kids. So I just see what I can nick here and there. Maybe Charlie's gonna help me with a little double teaming later on once the market's full. Right now she's off chatting with a few of the girls from her ballet class. There aren't enough people about yet."

This time Sarah and Severus both bargained with the witch selling the potatoes and managed to reduce the price to less than half the original amount. Severus caught Billy just in time before he pulled a tray of tomatoes down over himself. Looking up from the baby in his buggy his eyes fell on the carrot Draco was nibbling on.
"Where'd you get that?" he demanded sternly.

"From Sammie."

Severus turned his piercing gaze on Sammie who smiled back at him widely.

"So what?" he shrugged. "I didn't take it from you."

Snape glared some more, but didn't comment. Instead he shifted his attention back to Draco.

"You'll have to take either Billy or the potatoes. I need a hand free for shopping."

"I've already got the dog," protested Draco. "He's constantly struggling to get out of my arms and if I put him down he just tangles his lead around people's legs. He'll trip somebody sooner or later."

Snape regarded Draco and 'That Dog' for a moment.

"Put him in your backpack."

"What?"

"Just hand me the dog and turn around." Snape ordered.

Draco did as he was told and soon only 'That Dog's' head was sticking out of the backpack peeking over Draco's shoulder while his paws were safely tucked away with no way to wriggle out.

Draco pushed Billy's buggy through the tight crowds as best he could on the way to the meat stands. They passed another group of chatting witches and Sammie pointed at the centre of the group and leaned over to whisper into Draco's ear.

"Look, it's the vicar. He's always one of the first to appear in the market, but nobody's ever seen him buy anything. He just comes to swap rumours. If you want the whole of Hogsmeade to know something all you have to do is mention it to the West Hogsmeade vicar. ... Of course that means you'd better not confess any sins to him."

"Confess sins? Why would I confess sins to anyone?" Draco wondered.

He had only a very vague idea what a vicar was anyway. It had something or other to do with religion and religion was a concept he'd never really understood. His parents had never bothered with it and had only told him that it was for muggles and mudbloods, not for their kind. Crabbe and Goyle however had seemed to have some experience with it, though Draco had given up on trying to get any explanation from them when they'd started to talk about some son of God who was immortal and long dead. How could anyone be immortal and dead at the same time? And who was that God guy they were always talking about, but had no other explanation than 'Well, he's God.' for?

Draco had subsequently decided that Gregory had obviously misunderstood something once again and he had to have been the one who'd explained the whole thing to Vincent. It had surprised him a little that Vincent would believe any such nonsense about dead people who were not ghosts helping the living, but that was none of his business.

The other Slytherins hardly ever talked about religion and Draco had never really dared to ask openly. Never let on that you don't know something was one of the most important survival rules in Slytherin.
He could of course ask Snape or Sarah, but then again it didn't really seem all that important to him. Why bother.

Sammie, who had no idea how little Draco knew about these things, grinned at him. "Exactly, your sins are nobody's business but your own and God's. I'm off to see if I can't find Charlie. It looks like we could make some money today. See you later."

Draco watched Sammie slip away through the crowd. He felt a little worried about him and Charlie. What if they got caught by the aurors? What would they do to them? He remembered well how inefficient those two had been the week before, but they still might get lucky. Maybe he could ask Professor Snape what the aurors did with thieves? He ought to know these things. Snape knew practically everything. Then again he hadn't looked happy about Draco eating that stolen carrot so maybe it was better not to remind him of the incident. Draco didn't want a lecture on associating with thieves.

Where had the Snapes gotten to anyway? He'd lost sight of them when Sammie had pointed out that vicar person that couldn't keep a secret. As if Daco'd go and tell a stranger any secrets anyway.

Draco looked around, but couldn't find them anywhere. 'No problem.' he reminded himself. 'I can still go home and wait for them, if I don't find them here.'

He tried to wind through the masses in the direction they'd been going last, but Billy's buggy made that rather difficult. He had to take a detour around the vicar and his group of talkative witches.

"... and so that's why she...." "... Now I told her she shouldn't..." "... just won't listen ..." "...It serves him right really. ..." he heard while passing by them.

Were they all talking about the same thing? It sounded almost as if each of them was conducting a conversation entirely her own and didn't mind that none of the others were actually listening to her. The only one who looked like he might have been listening was the vicar, but Draco wondered which conversation he was listening to. Or did he have the rare ability to listen to two different trains of thought at once? Now that would be a useful talent to have.

He finally managed to find his way around the group. Now where should he go? The Snapes had been going towards the meat stands. Maybe they were still standing in line there. Draco followed the disgusting but very significant smell of raw meat to find the stands, but soon realised that his chances weren't exactly good. The meat stands weren't as crowded as the vegetable and fruit stands were. That made it easier to get through and also to find people, but it also meant that the customers didn't have to stand in line all that long. The people of West Hogsmeade didn't eat meat very often. It was too expensive.

Draco remembered that Sarah served cheese much more often and if the stands were in the same spots as last week, the cheese stands were just around the corner from here.

"Come on Billy." Draco said to the baby. "Lets see if Mummy and Dada have gone to buy some cheese."

"Eeeese!" Billy crowed happily.

It seemed he liked cheese even though Draco doubted he'd ever eaten any yet. It didn't seem to be a common ingredient of baby food. Milk, pudding, yoghurt yes, all these were parts of Billy's usual diet. But cheese? Well, if Billy thought so.

Draco turned the buggy towards the cheese stands. There were a lot of people there again which
meant the Snapes would have to stand in line for a long time giving Draco time to find them.

He was sure that they'd come here eventually, but what stand would they prefer? Draco saw at least six of them, but it was hard to see in between all those people. There might have been more and he couldn't manoeuvre the buggy through the crowds here as well as he could at the meat stands.

"Draco! There you are. We already feared we'd lost you."

Draco turned surprised and found that the Snapes were right behind him. Why had he never considered that they might be looking for him?

"You shouldn't run off like this around here. It's quite easy to get lost in the crowd." Sarah told him.

"I didn't run off." Draco protested. "I had to take a detour because the buggy takes up too much space. It's pretty hard to manoeuvre it past all the people. And I didn't get lost either. I knew you'd come to buy cheese sooner or later and I could always have gone back to the house."

"Are you sure you'd have found it?" Snape asked sternly.

"Of course I would have! It's kind of hard to overlook a house that big and the park's hard to miss too. Anyway, I've been here before. I know my way around."

Sarah and Severus exchanged a glance. They'd expected Draco to be lost and frightened, but it seemed the thought of running all alone through West Hogsmeade didn't bother him at all.

"Okay, let's get the cheese then." suggested Sarah with a slight shrug. If Draco didn't mind getting lost in the market, it was probably better not to make a big affair of it. Maybe it was best to just treat him like one of the local kids. He didn't appear to be all that different from them anyway.

Draco got another bag to carry which meant that now he had only one hand free to prevent Billy from mischief. The baby was rather peaceful at the moment though and appeared half asleep. Maybe he was tired from getting up so early. Still Draco wished he could have packed the meat into his backpack and kept his hands free. ... 'That Dog' would most likely have been in favour of that idea too though.

Attempting to stuff anything in there with the dog didn't seem like a good idea to Draco anyway. Even if it wouldn't have been of any particular interest to 'That Dog' he'd most likely have done some damage out of simple curiosity or boredom for looking over Draco's shoulder was beginning to bore 'That Dog' terribly. He'd begun struggling when they'd passed the meat stands which Draco had put down to the animal's taste for raw meat. To him the area had probably smelled great. But 'That Dog' hadn't stopped kicking around on his back now that they were safely in the less interesting cheese section.

"Will you stop hopping about all the time!" Draco growled at him. "You're beginning to get really uncomfortable."

"He's been in there for quite a while." Sarah commented with a pitying glance at the dog. "He probably just wants to stretch his legs a bit."

"We'll take a break and have lunch as soon as we've got the cheese." Severus decided. "We can let him out while we eat."

"We're having lunch here?" Draco asked. "There isn't even a place to sit."
His feet were beginning to hurt from all the walking around and he was really looking forward to
the next chance to just sit down and rest his feet for a bit.

"Oh, yes there is." Sarah laughed. "Just wait and see."

They had to stand in different lines for almost half an hour however until they had all the cheese
they'd need for the next week. 'That Dog' was getting more and more restless during all that time.
... Or was it just that Draco's shoulders were getting sore from his constantly shifting weight? His
feet were definitely getting worse by the minute and he was beginning to feel he wanted to scream,
because of all the people bustling around him and bumping into him all the time.

Draco concentrated on Billy to distract himself from his discomfort. The baby had fallen asleep and
Draco decided it was his duty to see that nothing woke him. He didn't understand how anyone
could sleep in all this chaos himself, but it was good for Billy that he could.

"Okay, that's it." Professor Snape finally announced. "Let's go."

They fought their way through the crowd as Snape led them into one of the Alleys leading off the
marketplace. Draco saw a few smaller stalls when they entered it. They seemed to sell mostly
refreshments and little snacks.

This part of the market was a little more quiet and after all the noise in the main marketplace it felt
almost empty and peaceful to Draco despite the many people that were still around. The vendors
obviously deposited empty boxes they used to transport their goods around here and the people
were using those to camp on. It wasn't what Draco had originally expected when Sarah had
promised a place to sit, but as tired as he was it looked like paradise right now. Draco took off his
backpack at once. He held himself back from throwing it down and dropped onto one of the boxes.
That felt much better. Severus bent over the twitching pack and freed 'That Dog' who came dashing
out overjoyed raced around them a few times and jumped up at everybody in sight. Severus had to
use a light stunning spell to stop him so he could attach the lead to his collar.

Sarah dug out the sandwiches and some baby food for Billy and started feeding the baby. Draco
just sat and watched her much too tired to feel hungry at the moment. He closed his eyes for a few
seconds and when he opened them again Snape and 'That Dog' had disappeared along with Munin
who'd been riding on Snape's shoulder as usual giving everybody cold disapproving bird stares.

Draco looked around for them, but didn't find them. He shrugged to himself and returned to
watching Billy's meal. Snape and Munin wouldn't get lost around here. He wasn't all that sure
about 'That Dog', but he'd found them again last week and he was wearing his collar and lead
anyway. What should happen to him that way?

Billy finished eating and Sarah handed him his bottle which he took with obvious delight. Billy
could drink out of a cup if properly supervised, but for the trip Sarah had brought his bottle along
just to be safe.

Draco suddenly realised that he was thirsty, but Sarah hadn't brought any drinks along except for
the baby bottle full of juice. He looked around again. Was there a waterline somewhere nearby? Of
course not. Should he get up and look? No, he felt much too tired. ... But he was so thirsty...

Draco was still debating the issue with himself when Severus showed up again and solved the
problem for him by handing him a big cup of iced pumpkin juice. Where? Oh right! Draco
suddenly remembered the refreshments stands they'd passed when entering the alley. He should
have guessed that they were there and not in the more crowded part of the market for a good reason.
'That Dog' looked up at them with big pleading eyes and whimpered a little when Sarah handed out the sandwiches and they began to eat. Sarah finally opened the bag of newly bought meat and held out a sausage to him which he celebrated with a lot of jumping up and down and wagging his tail at her, but thankfully without barking as he'd have had to drop the sausage for that.

It took 'That Dog' a while to actually settle down and eat. Munin got a few beakfulls of Severus' sandwich then fluttered down to sit right in front of 'That Dog'. The dog growled and tried to cover his sausage with his paws, but Munin was faster. He darted forward and grabbed a bite out of the sausage right under 'That Dog's' nose. 'That Dog' jumped at him barking and Munin flew off.


Draco watched that game until Munin had picked up the last crumbs and returned to Severus' shoulder looking very satisfied and happy with the world. Neither Sarah nor Severus intervened. 'That Dog' had to fight his own battles. He'd gotten enough to eat so he wouldn't starve and Draco didn't remember Munin ever going for the dog-food 'That Dog' usually ate at home. Either dog-food was beneath his dignity or he just didn't like the taste. Either way 'That Dog' would have his normal evening meal all to himself again.

Draco leaned back against another box and closed his eyes. He felt tired and his feet were still hurting. The day was almost unbearably hot and he wanted nothing more than to sleep for a while. The voices of all the people coming into the alley to eat and rest and the noise drifting in from the marketplace itself kept him awake however.

Snape finally shook his shoulder to rouse him.

"Come on, Draco." he said when the boy reluctantly opened his eyes. "We still need to buy potions ingredients, tea and some more clothes for you."

"Clothes?" Draco asked sitting up.

Snape simply pointed at Draco's jeans which he'd be wearing for an entire week now with the sole exception of the day before when he'd carried them around in his backpack. They were covered in green grass stains and mud from playing Soccer. Well, maybe they did need washing.

"I've still got my robes, though." he suggested tentatively. He didn't want the Snapes to spend this much money on him now that he didn't know when he'd be able to pay them back. That money should be kept for buying clothes for Billy after all.

"You can't wear those around here." Sarah told him sternly. "What would your gang say if you showed up to play in robes?"

"They're not my gang." Draco corrected.

Severus just grabbed Draco's Rakers cap and pushed it down over the boy's eyes. "Of course not. That's why they gave you this."

Draco had to laugh at that. He pushed the cap back in place. So he was a Raker now? He hadn't really thought about that until now. Had Jack really accepted him into the gang? It seemed like it of course, but remembering how much the gang leader hated him Draco could hardly believe it. He had been leaving when they'd given him the cap though. How would Jack react when he showed up to play tomorrow?

They took off again back to the marketplace where even more people seemed to be bustling about
There actually were more people as those that worked nearby were using their lunch break to do some shopping and many part time workers were finishing work around lunch time and slowly beginning to arrive at the market as well. Draco however didn't know any of this. He'd never had anything to do with people who worked, aside from his teachers of course, and had never given a thought to the fact that market day was a normal working day to them. Thankfully they'd already bought most of the food they needed and didn't have to squeeze through into the centre of the market where most of the food stands were for the potion ingredients and tea. Both were sold in a small shop at a corner of the marketplace and it was a lot easier to just go around the market than to get into it's centre.

The shop was crowded as well, but the customers were standing in line patiently and not pushing and shoving as they were in the marketplace itself. Draco and the Snapes had to stand in line for a very long time, but once it was their turn things went rather quickly. The shopkeeper obviously knew Severus and they were very welcome customers which didn't surprise Draco when he heard the sheer number of things Snape ordered. Some of that stuff was so rarely used in the commonplace potions people made every day that most of the other customers had never even heard of the stuff and regarded Snape with obvious curiosity.

The shopkeeper happily hustled about among his wares to bring the requested specialities It had to be quite a break from his daily routine.

Snape ignored the curious and some annoyed looks from the other customers. He took the time to check the quality of each item before it was packed away, but found everything in order.

No bargaining was necessary here however. The shopkeeper made them a very good price without being asked which caused more customers to glare at Snape wondering what one had to do to get this special treatment.

"Well, that was easy." Draco commented when they'd left the apothecary. "Why was he so cheap?"

"Because he knows me and knows that he can count on me to buy all the unusual stuff he can't sell much otherwise." Snape explained. "It's only a small shop, you see and most of the customers there only buy the most commonplace ingredients. He still has to keep the more unusual stuff in stock though, or he might lose those customers who'd buy it and those are the ones who buy large quantities. Those ingredients don't stay fresh forever though and being able to sell them cheaply to the school is preferable to throwing them away. Thus it pays for him to keep good connections with teachers ... aside from the fact that he can always boast about the Hogwarts potions master being a regular customer in his shop."

Draco grinned. Now that was a lot like going to Knockturn Alley with his father. Having Lucius Malfoy come into their shops had always been considered an honour by the shopkeepers there. Diagon Alley had been different tough. The shopkeepers there had still been very friendly, but they'd always seemed very relieved to see them leave again. Had they always known that Lucius was a dark wizard? Had they just been too afraid to kick him out?

Draco was beginning to wonder what people thought about the Malfoys now. What kind of welcome would he receive from his classmates and teachers when he returned to school?

Their arrival at the clothes stands took those things off his mind for now though. Buying a new pair of jeans was rather exciting. It took quite a while to find the right pair and Sarah also suggested that he ought to get another t-shirt as well.
Choosing that took even more time than choosing the jeans. There were some really good looking black t-shirts, but in the end Draco decided on a blue one. These clothes were meant to make him fit in with his new friends and the Rakers' colour was blue after all.

They had to stand in line again to pay for the clothes and while they were waiting Sarah picked out a few nice baby clothes for Billy.

"Aren't those a little too big for him?" Draco asked her eyeing her choice critically.

"That's why I picked them. Billy's growing so fast they'll be too small before you know it." Sarah explained.

"Oh. What do you do with them then?"

"Some we keep in case we have another baby sometime and the rest we sell to Mrs Brown. Her little boy Martin is three months younger than Billy and can always use some new clothes."

"Why doesn't she just buy them at the market herself?"

"She does, but we're cheaper. It helps her save some money and she can really use that."

Draco thought about that remark for a long time. Were the Browns even poorer than the Snapes then? But the Snapes only just managed to get by. How could the Browns survive on even less? ... And what about his Raker friends? Which ones were richer or poorer than the Snapes?

He went over the list in his head. Cathy was probably poorer, he decided. She only had a Mum and she was trying to make money by babysitting. She even took money from the Browns which indicated that she was most likely even poorer than they were.

Mike's family might be richer than the Snapes. At least he seemed to own more stuff then most of the other Rakers. Draco remembered the swimming trunks Mike had lent him. None of the others owned two pairs as far as he knew.

Mary might be poorer. The way she'd talked of her real father not getting any work made it sound like her family had been in really bad trouble back then. She'd also said that they were better off now that she had a step-dad, so maybe they were richer than the Snapes now, but she was definitely used to being very, very poor.

What of Sammie and Matt then? Draco realised that he couldn't tell. He'd seen nothing to indicate either way. He knew that Sammie missed having a mother and Matt was jealous of his little sister, but he didn't know how much money they had. Most likely that meant that they weren't all that terribly poor he supposed. He'd have noticed something, if having no money actually bothered them.

Charlie with her father in jail was most likely very poor. Her father was a thief after all and she was stealing at the market herself. That reminded him of Sammie once again. Maybe Sammie was poor after all? He did steal too.

That left only Little Larry and Jack. He wasn't sure about it, but felt that both were poorer than the Snapes as well. Larry, from what he'd heard appeared to have at least two siblings he had to share with and his drinking father probably didn't bring home much money.

Jack's odd way of alternating between parents who didn't seem to care much where he was was slightly disturbing. Most of the others seemed to have at least one person who cared about them.
'And whom do I have?' Draco thought all of a sudden. 'Mother cared, but she's dead. Father wants to see me dead. Uncle Thomas doesn't want me at all. Who'd care, if anything were to happen to me.'

Then he remembered the Snapes coming to look for him when they'd lost him in the crowded market. Well, he'd had Billy with him back then, but they'd also bought him clothes, tried to keep him away from the park, because they'd thought the gangs would do him harm and Professor Snape had even given him a teddy-bear without any good reason at all. Strange as it was the Snapes did care about him. It was good to know.

"Are we done shopping now?" he asked Snape when they'd finally paid for the clothes. "Can we go home?"

"Not quite." sighed Snape eyeing the dense crowd in the centre of the market place wearily. "We still need to buy bread."

'Bread?' Draco remembered seeing bread sold somewhere near the other food stands, right where the market was the most crowded.

"Oh no!" he moaned. "You mean we have to go in there again?"

"I'm afraid so, but it's our last stop for today. After that we'll go home and you can get back to your Mathematics book if you want to."

Yes, right now Mathematics sounded great to Draco. He felt much too tired even to go to the park and he supposed the rest of the gang wouldn't be there anyway. Studying was just the right thing right now.

They tried to squeeze through the crowds in the direction of the bread stands, but with Billy's room requiring buggy and the many packages they were carrying it was almost impossible to get through. Severus finally picked Billy out of the buggy and carried him while Sarah folded the buggy up and dragged it along behind her. That meant they got through a little easier, but it also meant that both Sarah and Severus now had their hands full and Draco had to take over some of their packages. 'That Dog' was beginning to get testy once again and was struggling and whimpering in Draco's backpack.

'This is the last one. After this we'll go home. We're almost done.' Draco kept telling himself as he was pushed and shoved about by what appeared to be more and more people every second.

The wait for bread was the longest of the day. Or did it just seem so long because he was so tired? Draco didn't know. All he knew was that he wanted to get home and sleep for the rest of the day. Right after this he'd be able to do that... right after this.

It didn't work out like that of course. After they'd finally gotten their bread they first had to squeeze back out of the marketplace which was getting more and more difficult as everybody else seemed to want to get into the centre. Draco tried to remain right behind Professor Snape who was having the least trouble clearing a path through the crowds. Most people shrank away from his angry glances at once even though he wasn't using his worst. Those were reserved for the most obnoxious Gryffindors, such as Harry Potter for example. In his wake Draco managed to get through more easily, but he still got elbowed and shoved about every few steps and 'That Dog' was whining again.

Draco ignored 'That Dog' until they'd managed to dig their way out of the market and its immediate vicinity and could walk more easily. By now even the surrounding alleys were crowded and hard to
get through, but the situation was improving quickly as they walked further and further away from the market.

Once it looked like there weren't all that many people anymore Draco asked Sarah to let 'That Dog' out and put him back on the lead. Severus led them to the side of the alley and Sarah pulled 'That Dog' out of Draco's backpack and stuffed in as many of their packages as she could. Draco took the dog's lead with a feeling of relief. He didn't really have a hand free as there were enough bags left to carry, but he finally felt like he could move freely once again.

Severus however decided to keep carrying Billy rather than put him back in his buggy. They'd have to take him out and refold the buggy again as soon as they reached the house and that just wasn't worth it. Billy would only get annoyed with being moved about so much and start to cry. Right now the baby was happily snuggled into Severus' arm and obviously feeling quite comfortable.

Draco smiled when they finally reached the park. Home at last. The dirty smelly corridors had never looked this good before though dragging all their packages up the stairs was quite an ordeal. For a while Draco thought they'd never end, but then they did reach their floor and soon after that they were finally back in the flat.

Going straight to sleep however wasn't an option. Even just dropping all the packages right at the door wasn't. Draco had to help store away all their purchases.

Most of them were stacked neatly in the fridge, but some belonged in various cupboards and the potion ingredients had to be added to the stores in the lab. Billy was rather cranky after all the excitement of the market and Sarah put him to bed to sleep.

Draco was hoping for a chance to follow Billy's example once everything had been put away, but no such luck. Sarah decided she had to start cooking dinner right away as they'd only had a few sandwiches for lunch and would soon be getting hungry and Draco had to help.

Draco sighed, but didn't protest. An early dinner did have a certain appeal to him at the moment after all.

After dinner he had to wash the dishes of course and while he was doing that Professor Snape went into the lab and started brewing some potion. So much about going to bed right after dinner.

Thus Draco decided to do his Mathematics while Snape was still working. Snape was blocking the whole table with his potion ingredients and cauldrons and so Draco knelt on his bed instead using the windowsill for a desk.

The cat who'd been resting there comfortably until the moment Draco had suddenly placed a book and ink bottle right in front of his face wrinkled his nose at the smell, gave the boy an accusing look, jumped down to the floor and stalked out of the room tail held high.

Draco almost laughed at the annoyed animal. Well, that left more room for him. And he laid his stack of parchments right where the cat had been sitting only moments ago.

He worked silently for about an hour only sneaking curious glances over at his teacher every once in a while. Whatever Snape was brewing had to be the most complicated potion he'd ever heard of. Never before had Draco seen anyone work on one potion for that long. Well, yes, there were some potions that had to be left to boil or simmer or cool for hours or even days before they could be finished, but Snape seemed to be constantly adding ingredients.

At first Draco had thought that Snape was actually brewing two different potions at the same time.
One that needed boiling and one that strangely did not. When he'd first come in Snape had been adding ingredients to the cauldron that wasn't on the fire, then turned to add something to the other one, gone to cut some leaves and added them to the first, then stirred the second for a few moments...

Then after about half an hour of this Snape had suddenly taken the hot cauldron off the fire and put the other one on. He'd left the hot cauldron to cool and Draco had concluded that that potion was done. But after about ten minutes of concentrating on the formerly cold cauldron, Snape had suddenly returned to the other one and poured their contents together.

And now he was adding even more ingredients!

What was the most surprising of all of this was that Snape never hesitated once or checked any books or notes. He seemed to know exactly what he was doing despite the complicated recipe.

Finally Draco decided that he'd learned enough for today and packed his notes and book away to watch Snape more closely. Maybe he could figure out what his teacher was brewing from the ingredients he was using?

But he soon discovered that he couldn't even name most of the ingredients, much less say what they were used for. So he climbed off his bed to take a closer look. After all all the jars and boxes were labelled.

Snape looked up when Draco approached his work area, but returned to his work without a word. Draco looked closely at every jar and box on the table. He read all the labels and finally picked a few of them up and sniffed at them cautiously.

It didn't help much. He had no idea what most of them were used for and couldn't even guess at the effects their combinations might have.

A bundle of dried plants that lay right in the middle of the whole chaos caught his attention. It wasn't labelled at all and seemed to be of essential importance judging from its position and size.

Curiously Draco reached out a hand to touch it. It felt just like any normal bundle of dry plants. Maybe the smell or taste could give him a clue? Draco carefully pulled of a leaf to sniff at.

"Don't!" ordered Snape sharply and Draco dropped the leaf in fright. "That's highly poisonous! Don't play with stuff you don't recognise. This room isn't like the students' supplies cupboard at Hogwarts. The things I keep here can be quite dangerous. Some of them I wouldn't even be allowed to bring into the school at all."

Draco glanced around the room with new respect. He knew that Snape kept poisonous and explosive ingredients locked up in his office in school, where the students couldn't reach them, but he'd never have guessed that he also had stuff that was so dangerous that even those safety measures weren't enough.

He abandoned his investigation into unknown potion ingredients and peered into the bubbling cauldron instead. The vapours that rose from it didn't appear to be dangerous as Snape didn't make any attempt to avoid contact with them at all. They didn't reveal any clues either, though.

"Just what are you brewing with all that stuff anyway?"

"Wolfsbane potion." Snape answered curtly.

"Wolfsbane potion? Whatever's that good for?"
"It keeps werewolves harmless during the full moon."

Draco started. Werewolves? He walked once around the whole table staring at everything on it from a safe distance while he tried to figure out why Snape would brew a potion for werewolves. He didn't find an answer though. Unless ...

"Do we have werewolves among our neighbours?" he finally asked.

"Not at the moment, no."

"Then why are you brewing a potion for them?"

"It's for Lupin. I make him a larger supply every once in a while so he won't bother me about it every month." Snape explained with a sigh.

Draco stopped to peer into the cauldron once again. Nothing had changed in there.

"I thought you didn't like Lupin?"

"I don't, but this isn't about liking people."

"Then what is it about? You can't just supply all the world's werewolves with free wolfsbane potion. Or does he actually pay you? I wouldn't think he could afford it."

Severus shot Draco a warning glance. 'Don't make fun of poor people. We're not that rich either.'

"Sorry." mumbled Draco suddenly remembering that for the moment he was relying on the Snapes' kindness as well. "But why do you give him that potion for free. I thought it was really expensive and it's obviously a lot of work."

"As I said it has nothing to do with liking him, because I don't, but Dumbledore does and I know I can trust him even if he doesn't like me any better than I like him."

"So it's a favour to Dumbledore? Well, he could pay you at least."

"He can't." said Severus curtly. After a moment he added. "I already told you he wants to, but he isn't allowed."

"But why..." 'not' was what Draco was going to ask, but Severus cut him off hastily.

"And it's not a favour really. Albus has us working together and with the potion there are a few things a werewolf can do that are rather difficult for me. I'm helping myself as well that way."

"I thought the potion only affects werewolves in their wolf form?" Draco asked surprised.

"That's right. It does have a few slight side effects on the human form as well, but its purpose is to keep the wolf under control."

"So what can a wolf do that you can't. It's just an animal. It can't even do magic."

"A wolf's senses are even keener than a dog's and if paired with human intelligence can be put to all kinds of uses. Also very few creatures would actually challenge a werewolf in wolf form and wolves can travel almost every sort of terrain a lot faster than humans. They're the perfect wilderness scouts."

"Why? Do you regularly visit uncharted jungles?" Draco asked sarcastically.
"Some of the best potion ingredients are found in uncharted jungles actually and one of them's called the 'forbidden forest' which, yes indeed, I visit regularly for just that reason. It's a lot more comfortable and safer to send a wolf in in those cases and searching it for lost pupils requires a very good nose for tracking which again wolves have while wizards do not."

"And what do you do, if it doesn't happen to be a full moon when somebody gets lost?"

"Then we have to rely on Hagrid's Fang. His nose is usually up to the task, but unfortunately his courage and intelligence are not. ... And there are still some other tasks where the wolf comes in handy."

"Like what?"

"Oh, all sorts of things. Can you put those jars back on their shelves for me? The table's getting a little cluttered and I can't stop stirring right now."

Draco obediently picked up a jar and regarded it for a moment.

"So where do I put this one?"

"Second shelf from the top, third from the right." Snape responded continuing to stir the bubbling cauldron evenly.

With the help of Snape's directions Draco put almost all the ingredients away until only the dried plants and two jars remained. The lab looked almost orderly once again.

Snape kept on stirring, while Draco watched over his shoulder, until the potion suddenly turned a strong dark blue. Draco started and looked to Snape unsure what to think of that, but Snape just stopped stirring and turned to chopping up the dried plants as if nothing at all had happened.

Obviously the potion was supposed to turn blue.

Once he was done with the plants Snape pulled the cauldron off the fire and quickly added the final ingredients. Then he returned to stirring once again.

Draco continued to watch, but the minutes ticked by and nothing exciting happened.

"So what happens next?" he finally asked Snape getting impatient.

"Nothing much. I keep stirring for about another hour and then take it to Lupin tomorrow."

"One hour? You're just going to stand here and stir this for one hour?" Draco felt disappointed. There was no use in watching that.

"Yes, what's wrong with that?"

"It's boring."

"Well, in that case. Why don't you try and ... turn that jar invisible." suggested Snape indicating an empty jar that was left on the worktable waiting to be refilled.

Draco stared at the jar. Turn it invisible? He picked it up and studied it closely. A normal glass jar one used for potion ingredients, either unused or cleaned out perfectly. Draco knew of course that keeping all containers for potion ingredients perfectly clean was very important. Leftovers from other ingredients could diminish or even alter many ingredients' magical qualities. But what was he to do with the jar now? He looked back to Snape.
"How?"

"If you don't know, check the library." advised Snape nodding towards the bookshelf.

Draco decided to start with the easiest book and picked up the Transfigurations book. There was nothing in there that he hadn't known since his second year however. With a sigh he closed it again and regarded the cover doubtfully. What was this book doing in here anyway?

"Not that one." Snape confirmed. "If there is a way to transfigure something to turn invisible it wouldn't likely be in that book and I have never heard of it being done anyway."

"You mean it's impossible?" Draco asked curious. McGonagall always went on about all the things one could do by Transfiguration, but she'd never mentioned the things one couldn't do. There had to be some though.

"I wouldn't know." Snape shrugged. "I do know there are potions that can do it though."

"But you're a teacher! You have to know if it can be done!" protested Draco.

"I'm a Potions teacher. Besides that I can teach Defence Against the Dark Arts, Herbology, Ancient Runes, Chemistry, Mathematics, Basic Physics and if it absolutely has to be the Dark Arts, Arithmancy, Astronomy, Alchemy and even Charms. I might manage Care for Magical Creatures or Muggle Studies if you give me a good book to go by, but at Divination and Transfigurations is where I have to draw the line. I haven't the slightest talent for either subject. So if you have questions concerning Transfigurations, I suggest you ask either Professor McGonagall or the headmaster instead."

"Dumbledore?"

"Yes Dumbledore. He used to teach that subject and probably knows it better than even McGonagall. The Gryffindors seem to have quite a knack for it."

Draco thought that over for a moment. Now that Snape had mentioned it, it seemed only logical. To become headmaster Dumbledore had to have been a teacher once and Transfiguration did seem to fit his personality.

What really surprised him was that Snape claimed not to know Transfigurations. Divination required a special talent and not every wizard could learn it. Also it was a very unpopular subject among Slytherins in general as it was much too unreliable. Had Snape really put Transfigurations in the same category as Divination?

"And who should I ask if I have questions about Divination? McGonagall as well?" Draco asked grinning. 'Let's see where this takes us.'

"Not if you really want your question answered. She does have some good arguments against teaching the subject however.... Maybe the witch who keeps the Divination stand at the market." shrugged Snape. "I don't think she has the gift either, but she might know the theory which I very much doubt Trellawney really does."

"Don't you know anybody who really has the gift?"

"One wizard, but he's in Azkaban and I can't say I'm unhappy about that. A diviner who dabbles in the Dark Arts is never a good thing. Especially if he's as clumsy as that guy was."

"Oh. Did he work for You-Know-Who?"
"Not even Voldemort would have wanted to risk having anything to do with that one. He was more
dangerous to the people on his side than to his opponents with all the accidents he caused."

"Was his name Longbottom perchance?" Draco giggled.

"No, it was Lockhart, Asparagus Lockhart. I believe he was the father of that idiot Gilderoy
Lockhart. They certainly have a lot in common."

Draco remembered his second year DADA teacher and frowned. That guy's father was supposed to
have been an actual diviner?

"Are you sure the guy was for real?"

"He certainly seemed to be, but then again he was a Lockhart and I as well as any other reasonably
sane person avoided him as much as I could. You never knew what kind of disaster would strike
next around Asparagus Lockhart. But I suggest you forget about Divination for the moment and try
a Potions book instead. I might not be sure about Transfiguration, but I know that you can't divine
something into invisibility."

"I don't know. Gregory tells me Professor Trelawney's really good at divining her class' attention
into invisibility." grinned Draco pulling out the book that he'd used last time.

"Invisibility? Or was that inexistence? There is a difference between the two."

"I don't know. I don't take the subject. Father said it was a waste of time." grumbled Draco
searching the book for an index of potions by effect.

"If you don't have the gift, it most likely is. And if you do you'd probably do better by finding a
private tutor after you've finished school. Even Dumbledore doesn't think much of Trellawney. ... That book won't help you much unless you already know what potion you're looking for, by the
way. I'd try another one."

With a sigh Draco returned the book to its place on the shelf and pulled out another. A quick look
revealed that it was written in runes however and he put it back as well looking around for one that
had an English title on its spine.

"Then why doesn't he hire somebody else?"

"Who? I told you the only real diviner I know's in Azkaban. Granted Albus probably knows some
others, but I doubt any of them are available. Real diviners are very sought after and well paid
specialists. They wouldn't agree to work for a teacher's wages."

Draco passed by 'Organic Chemistry' and a very thick volume that looked like it might be written in
Greek and finally found a promising looking book.

"Isn't the same thing said of top potions masters? You could do better than this, I'm sure. Why are
you still here?"

"That's different. I told you I'm Dumbledore's spy. I couldn't get paid any more, no matter what I
do."

"So you're just sticking with Dumbledore for old times' sake?"

"Dumbledore trusts me." Severus said softly. "And he might well be the only one that does."
Draco stopped scanning the new book's index for anything sounding remotely like 'invisible' or 'disappear' and looked up at his teacher. Snape suddenly sounded so sad and tired as if this really hurt him. And why wouldn't people trust him?

"I trust you and all the other Slytherins do too!"

"I wouldn't be so sure of that if I were you. Slytherins are distrusting by nature and that is one of our best qualities. We do not trust just anyone and we are not to be trusted."

"Okay, so maybe not all the other Slytherins trust you. At least not all of the time, but I do."

"Then maybe you're too trusting." suggested Snape looking down into his cauldron.

"No, I'm not." argued Draco. "Not in this case anyhow. You've done a lot more for me than you had to. You're letting me stay here even though my own uncle doesn't want me, you're feeding me, giving me everything I need and even a teddy-bear I don't need. You wouldn't do anything to harm me."

"But would you trust me to do the same for... Harry Potter, for example?"

"Who cares about Potter?" Draco shrugged the argument off.

"A lot of people do." Severus said softly still intent on his cauldron.

"Well, I'm not one of them."

Snape didn't answer and Draco returned his attention to the book. There! Vanishing potion! That had to be what he was looking for. He quickly searched for the correct page and stared at the list of ingredients. This looked almost as complicated as the wolfsbane potion.

"Oh no! I can't do that."

"Of course you can. I wouldn't have suggested it, if I thought you couldn't."

"That? There must be over fifty different ingredients listed on this page alone!"

"You exaggerate. You'll need about fifty ingredients altogether, but that's as complicated as this potion gets. The actual brewing is easy. You just have to cut everything up and throw it in in the right order. Just read the instructions and follow them. There's nothing that can really go wrong. ... Unless you add the beetle eyes after the newt tails that is."

"I'm not that stupid." growled Draco remembering the explosion Neville Longbottom had caused in their second year doing just that.

"See, no problem at all. Just do it step by step."

With a slight sigh Draco got out another cauldron and got to work. It really wasn't all that difficult once he'd sorted out all the ingredients so he wouldn't get them confused all the time. Still, it wasn't as easy as Snape had made it sound. Some of the ingredients proved quite difficult to handle. Especially one root that always crawled away from him whenever he wasn't looking gave him a lot of trouble.

"Are we going to need that for our OWLs as well?" He asked Snape pulling the root out from where it had hidden under one of his jars after its latest excursion.

"No, I'm not even doing it in class."
"Why not? You said it wasn't all that difficult."

"It takes a lot of ingredients that aren't in the students' supplies which means I'd have to let a lot of students dig around in my office where I keep the dangerous stuff. That's never a good idea. It requires a lot of ingredients in glass jars sitting on worktables with a lot of kids running around and pushing them off, then trampling on the spilled ingredients and strewing them all over the classroom and I doubt Filch would like to clean that up afterwards. Also I don't like the idea of having that many invisible objects lying around in my classroom. Somebody'd have to trip over something sooner or later. And lastly, can you imagine the chaos Longbottom could cause with this? He could blow up the class again, turn his cauldron invisible or even spill the potion over somebody, maybe even himself. I really don't want an invisible student running around especially not one as clumsy as Longbottom."

"So why are you making me do it?"

"Because it's a good exercise in dealing with a large number of ingredients and it's really no problem to teach to just one student. Also, the idea just came to me when I saw that jar standing around."

Draco tried to glare at his teacher angrily, but didn't quite manage to look threatening. He just couldn't really feel angry for this. He knew the experience would come in handy. If he could handle fifty ingredients, twenty wouldn't be a problem ever again. He could already see the rest of the class still moaning about the number of ingredients for the cough potion or searching desperately for a misplaced jar while he was calmly putting the finishing touches to his own potion. Wouldn't Potter be upset, if he strolled over and offered him some help?

A/N - So what do you think Jack's reaction will be? Will the next relative be willing to keep Draco? Will Draco be willing to keep the next relative?

In the next chapter: Sammie is feeling down. Draco meets a little spy and the Sharks attack.
Chapter Notes

A/N - Any of you remember my first fic 'My Name's Severus'? If you liked it read 'War of the Hexes' by Black Rose and Emerald Star. It's already got 15 year old Sevi and Greenie might make an appearance as well. Even if he doesn't the fic's really worth reading.

Chapter 11: Meeting the Enemy

When Draco came down to meet the gang the next morning, 'That Dog' once again barking and jumping up and down right beside him, and saw the scowl on Jack's face he almost wished he'd turned himself invisible instead of that jar.

"So your uncle didn't even want you, did he?" Jack attempted a sneer.

Draco sneered back at him, just to show him how it was done. He could do an almost perfect imitation of the famous Snape sneer and thought that he could use a little practise to perfect it.

"I didn't want him either. Turned out he's a grumpy old man, who enjoys living alone." he shrugged.

"So are you staying here then?" Sammie asked eagerly.

Draco smiled at the small boy. "No Sammie, I can't just stay with the Snapes forever. I'll just move in with another relative."

"Then why are you still here?" growled Jack. "Why didn't you just go there already?"

"I don't have an address for any of them yet. Professor Snape said he'd bring home a book from the Hogwarts library to look them up tonight."

"So you're going to leave us again tomorrow?" asked Cathy.

Draco regarded her closely. Had she really sounded sad when she'd said that? Or was that just wishful thinking? Did Cathy care about him?

Probably not, he decided. Why would she? Well, maybe she did care about losing a good keeper, or even a pal she could talk to. He suppressed a sigh at that thought.

"Probably not," he answered. "I think Snape has better things to do tomorrow than to drag me through half the country to meet relatives and even if he didn't it will most likely take some time to chose the right one."

"It didn't take you long to pick that uncle you went to on Sunday." challenged Jack.

"That's just because I'd heard his name before and mentioned him when Professor Snape asked me
about my relatives. This time we'll try to find one who's actually the right age to have a kid."

"Pick one who's married then." suggested Mike. "Then you'll have two parents like it should be."

"But they'd probably have kids of their own and wouldn't want another." argued Matt. "Especially not somebody else's. I say pick an unmarried aunt, if you have one. Someone who's old enough not to be likely to have kids of her own anymore. Witches like that love to have other people's kids around and they usually spend all their time on finding new ways to spoil them."

Draco laughed. "I don't even know what kind of relatives I have yet. Let's wait with the suggestions until we know who to chose from, okay?"

"Can we start to play now?" Jack growled weighing the ball in his hand. "I don't have all day, you know."

"Sure!" laughed Draco.

"What teams?" asked Mike.

"Same as last time!" announced Jack. "You got lucky then, Dragon. This time you lose!"

Draco just shrugged and gestured for his team to assemble over by their goal. He didn't want Jack to overhear their strategy.

"Do we play the same as last time?" Cathy asked him as soon as they were a safe distance away from the other team.

"For the moment, yes, but I don't expect Jack to stick with his old strategy as well. He's had enough time to cool down and think about it. He'll probably leave Larry by the goal, which might be a problem for you, but as I said last time, if that happens you have to work around him. You're both faster than he is and he's likely to abandon his post every once in a while. Try to outmanoeuvre him and if he gets in your way, pass to Sammie and let him shoot. You may have better aim, but that doesn't mean Sammie can't get a shot in as well. Give him a chance. Charlie, you play the same as last time. That was perfect. Matt, you stay with me again and concentrate on getting in Jack's way. Maybe he'll get impatient again and lose the ball. Even if he doesn't, it will keep him from shooting at the goal and I can concentrate on Mike."

Draco watched proudly as his team ran off to take their positions. He knew he could rely on them to stick to his plan and not let their excitement carry them away from their assigned task. Jack's team might be the better players, but the only one he really envied him was Mike.

Larry was too unreliable and despite his abilities more a hindrance than an asset in Draco's eyes. Mary was a good keeper, but Draco didn't need a keeper. He couldn't play any other position himself and, he realised with a start, he didn't even want to. He was good at this and his position gave him a good view of what was going on on the whole field which was a great advantage for a captain. Jack who spent most of his time in the front of his team never saw the strengths and weaknesses of his team and strategy as clearly as Draco did.

But then again. Jack himself was in Draco's opinion perhaps an even greater weakness than Larry. Larry might have problems playing with a team in the heat of the game, but when the momentary excitement was over, he'd return to his assigned post. Jack let his temper run away with him and once he started making mistakes, he only got worse with increasing frustration. Jack was a good player as long as his team was clearly winning, but a problem once they were behind.

To everyone's surprise Mike stayed near his team's goal to help out Mary. Draco scowled at that.
He hadn't expected that little trick. It certainly weakened their opponents' attack, but their defence was strengthened much more than Draco had expected. Mike was fast enough not to let Cathy outmanoeuvre him the way she could Larry and he wouldn't be coaxed into abandoning his post either. Cathy was entirely blocked from action, by Mike's persistent interference and Draco had to call for a time out only a few minutes into the game.

"I don't know what to do!" Cathy complained. "I just can't shake him."

"No problem." smirked Draco. "I don't even want you to. Jack and Mike are the only ones that really give me problems in the goal. Matt's keeping Jack tied over in our half, while Mike's attached himself to you. Just keep him busy and try to distract Mary by running around and pretending to go for the ball every once in a while. We've still got Sammie free to score for us while they only have Larry and he's too obvious to give me much trouble. Sammie, stay a little closer to their goal, but try not to change your game too obviously and Charlie, you'll have to take the ball further into their half and pass only to Sammie. Pretend to go in Cathy's direction sometimes, but don't risk losing the ball to Mike. Don't get nervous everybody. We've got everything under control and one goal is all we need to win."

"But what if we don't get that?" asked Sammie anxiously.

"A draw isn't a bad result either. If they keep playing the way they do now and we stick to our strategy, that's the worst that can happen."

"And if they change their strategy?"

"That would mean, they'd have to exchange Mike for either Larry or Jack. The first option would improve our chances, while the second wouldn't really change anything at all. Matt would just cover Mike instead of Jack and Cathy would keep Jack busy. The only real chance to score for them would be if both Jack and Mike attacked our goal, but they aren't likely to do that, because it'd leave Cathy and Sammie free to score as well and we've already had that situation last time and back then we clearly won."

"They could use Larry to stop us." suggested Cathy.

"They could." conceded Draco. "But Larry doesn't like the job and he's too slow to block you the way Mike does. If they assign Larry to follow you, that would improve our chances to score as well as theirs. Just keep playing the way we planned and don't get nervous, if it takes us a while to score. It doesn't really matter. It'd be great if we won, but a draw's fine with me."

They smiled at that and returned to the game looking a lot more relaxed about it. The game resumed and for a while nothing exciting happened. Both Larry and Sammie made about an equal number of attempts at their respective opponents' goals, but neither got the ball through. Neither Cathy nor Jack risked to shoot themselves at first, but after a while of this Draco could see first signs of frustration in Jack.

Jack was beginning to try in earnest to shake Matt, but Matt had become quite accustomed to his manoeuvres over the last week and didn't fall for them anymore. That only served to fuel Jack's frustration even more and about twenty minutes into the game he made a first attempt at the goal. Matt stopped the ball easily and sent it off to where Charlie was waiting with a quick kick.

Jack and Larry dashed off after Charlie with an angry scream, but it was too late, of course. By the time they'd caught up with Charlie, she'd already passed the ball to Sammie and he was about to shoot.
Mary caught that ball easily and threw it out to Jack again, but that didn't really matter to Draco at
the moment. Jack had lost his patience and the ball once now. He'd do it again.

Indeed the same sequence of events was repeated more and more often and Draco found he had
less and less to do while Mary was getting busier all the time and beginning to tire. She didn't have
Larry's stamina and all her strength was useless if she wasn't in the right place at the right time.
Charlie's and Cathy's feints kept her running to the wrong side of the goal and having to race back
every time Charlie passed to Sammie instead.

Mary wasn't as stupid as she seemed at first glance though. She did realise that Cathy never really
got the ball after some time and began to concentrate only on Sammie. Draco decided to content
himself with a draw. Sammie wasn't good enough to score against Mary, if she saw him coming
this early on.

And then Charlie surprised him once again and passed the ball to Cathy despite Mike's hampering
presence. Draco perked up at this. Charlie was clever! Now Mary would have to take Cathy
seriously again and maybe tire herself enough to give Sammie a chance to score after all.

Cathy however was having trouble after Charlie's unexpected pass. She zigzagged across the lawn
with the ball sometimes running away from the goal, sometimes towards it trying to shake Mike
long enough to pass the ball on to Sammie or even back to Charlie so they wouldn't lose it to Mike.

Mary was following her manoeuvres in her goal confused about what Cathy was planning and
tiring rapidly. Draco grinned. Charlie's little idea was looking better by the second.

Cathy was just passing by the goal again in an attempt to get a free shot at Sammie when Charlie
came into view somewhere to her right. Maybe she could surprise Mike with a sudden shot towards
Charlie? But Mike had seen her as well and moved over to block her right side cutting her off from
both Sammie and Charlie again and coming in almost taking the ball with a quick swipe.

Defensively Cathy turned pushing the ball towards the left and turning her back on Mike at the
very last moment. And suddenly she realised she was facing the goal. Without a moment's thought
she just kicked at the ball as hard as she could, Mary lounged for it at once, but her exhaustion
slowed her down just enough for the ball to plunge through.

For a moment everyone just stopped in their tracks and stared. Not even Draco would have given
Cathy a chance to score with Mike on her tail like that, but it had just happened.

Mary lay on her side panting and staring incredulously up at Cathy for a moment who was staring
equally surprised at the ball which had been stopped by the trunk of a large tree and was now lying
still between its roots.

Having caught her breath a little, Mary climbed to her feet to get it and as if that were the signal
they'd been waiting for the others started to move again. Jack started cursing and yelling again, but
that was drowned out by Draco's team's shouts of joy and congratulations to Cathy.

"Great idea, Charlie!" Draco yelled to be heard over the distance separating the two goals once the
noise had died down a little. "Now keep it up for a few more minutes and we'll win this one."

Draco tried not to rub it in this time, but it was difficult not to grin triumphantly at Jack. He forced
himself to concentrate on cheering up Sammie who was deeply disappointed that he hadn't played
a more decisive role in their victory instead.

"Everybody else had a part in it. Cathy's the one who scored. It was Charlie's idea to pass her the
ball. You and Matt kept the others from scoring. I did nothing." Sammie told him staring at his feet.

"You did a lot, Sammie." Draco tried to reassure him. "You confused Mary and kept her running about tiring herself. If it hadn't been for you, Mike would most likely have intercepted Charlie's pass and taken the ball back to Jack or Larry in the first place. It only got through, because he was expecting her to pass to you like she'd been doing all game."

"It's still not the same as actually scoring."

"Oh come on, Sammie!" Draco tried to laugh it off. "That's something I'd expect Larry to say. You know better than that. A game isn't won only by those who score. If it were, we'd never stand a chance against Jack and Mike. I've never scored in my life and do you see me complain about that?"

"You're keeper. That's different."

"Okay, take Charlie then. Or Matt. Neither of them even got a chance to score and still we couldn't have won without them. Actually that's why we won. We have players who're willing to let others score in their place. Look at what Mike did today. He stayed in back even though he's probably the best player on the field. He decided that helping Mary defend the goal was more important than scoring himself."

"Jack plays better than Mike." stated Sammie.

"Jack shoots more precisely, but even that only when he's staying calm. Once he loses his temper he's actually the worst player in the gang. The moment his team is behind he starts shooting without thinking and loses the ball at precisely the worst possible moment. His team has the better shots, but still the worse players, because they're all playing alone and not making use of their teammates' strengths."

"You'd still rather have Jack, or Mike, or Larry on your team than me, wouldn't you?"

Draco thought about his answer for a moment, then decided to be honest. Sammie deserved that and it would help him more than any obvious lies.

"Well, I guess you're right about Mike there. As I said, he's the best player. He shoots better than anybody on our team except perhaps Cathy and he can come up with a really good game plan on short notice as well. So yes, I'd probably trade any of our players for him, but that's got nothing to do with you specifically. As for the other two, I've had my chance to play with Larry and found that he can't stick to a strategy he doesn't like. He tries, but that's not good enough. I prefer a lesser player I can rely on and I'm not even sure he's better than you at all. He shoots more precisely, but he's too slow. I always see him coming long before he actually shoots. You can surprise an opponent with a sudden shot, he can't. And I meant it when I said Jack's the worst player under pressure. I wouldn't want to have either of them. They cause too many problems for their own team."

"But you'd still rather have Mike."

"Yes, I'd really, really love to have Mike, but I can't and I don't have any players I don't want so I'm fine with the team as it is."

A little girl of about nine or ten years came running towards them from the edge of the lawn at that moment. Draco had noticed her watching them play a little while ago, but since her blue t-shirt
clearly marked her as a Raker wannabe and he remembered seeing her around before, he hadn't thought anything of it. After all she was probably just watching her heroes dreaming of the day she'd play with them herself.

She stopped a few paces away from them, smiled shyly at Draco and then turned to address Sammie.

"The Sharks are going to attack the garden shed. I think they're planning to set it on fire." she reported staring wide eyed at Sammie.

"What?!" gasped Sammie "When? ... How?"

Draco realised Sammie was completely confused and Jack was almost out of shouting distance, if he didn't call him back now...

"Jack!" he yelled after him. "I think you'd better hear this!"

Jack turned to glower at him, but Draco decided to ignore him and returned his attention to the girl instead, he didn't want to make this situation a staring contest. It was bad enough as it was, if she was telling the truth.

"The Sharks are gonna attack! You have to do something!" she sounded nearly hysterical by now.

Draco gently put a hand on Sammie's arm to stop him from asking even more confused questions. That would only agitate the little wannabe even more.

"Okay, we're listening." he told her calmly. "Now calm down. Susie, is it?"

She nodded surprised and proud that he knew her name. "Yes, Dragon."

Now Draco was surprised. Who'd told the wannabes the name only the gang called him by? Then again knowing everything about the gang seemed to be their main interest in life and he'd remembered her name from the occasional mentions a wannabe got in the conversations of the gang.

"You'll have to tell Jack what you know, Susie and he'll want the whole story. So I suggest you start at the beginning."

The whole gang had come over by now and he and Susie were practically surrounded. 'I'd probably get scared, if I were her right now.' Draco thought.

Susie just looked up at Jack who was standing right behind Draco and glowering down at her.

"You'd better have a good story to tell for stealing our time, little rat." Jack informed her coldly.

To Draco's surprise Susie didn't seem to take objection to being called a rat and beamed up at the gang leader proud to have been noticed by him at all.

"I snuck up on the Sharks in their basement lair." she announced.

Draco could tell that she really had the gang's full attention now. He wondered how difficult it had to be to sneak up on the other gang. Considering the security of the garden shed and the fact that Susie'd said 'basement' he supposed it was quite a feat. He'd never even thought about where the Shark's centre of operations actually was, but it seemed only natural that it was as well guarded as the Rakers' and if it was in the basement of a building, surrounded by stone walls it was probably
entirely impossible to listen in from the outside. Susie had to have at least been right outside the door to hear them talk.

For a moment there was silence. Susie volunteered nothing more.

Draco turned his head to look over at Jack wondering what he was thinking. Jack caught his look and gave him a sight nod towards Susie in response. Go ahead? Well, if Jack wanted him to.

"See anything special there?"

"The whole gang was in there ... and they were talking." Susie sure knew how to make a big show of her knowledge now that she had found the right audience for it.

Draco paused for effect crossing his arms in front of his chest in much the same posture as Jack. He looked over at Mike, who'd taken his post right by Jack's side for a moment before he went on.

"So, what were they talking about?"

"They said, they'd meet there again right after lunch and bring their weapons. And they talked about the garden shed too and about fire. I think they're planning to burn down the shed."

Jack suddenly stepped forward and grabbed Susie hard by the collar.

"What exactly did they say?" he hissed.

"I don't know." wailed Susie. "I couldn't get close enough to understand everything. They'd have seen me."

"I think she's telling the truth there, Jack." interjected Mike casually before Jack did any actual harm to the girl. "It's almost unbelievable that she got that close at all."

Jack dropped Susie as suddenly as he'd grabbed her and she almost fell over.

"Anything else you have to tell us?" He snarled at her.

She shook her head frightened.

"Then why are you still here?"

Susie bolted. Draco wondered if she'd ever come back. He hoped the little scene hadn't convinced her to join the Sharks instead, but then again it wasn't really likely that the Sharks were any nicer to their little wannabes than the Rakers.

Jack cursed a little. Draco was by now used to that and for once the curses had nothing to do with him which was almost comforting.

"It doesn't really matter, you know." Mike said once the worst of Jack's anger had blown over. "We have a very good idea of what they're gonna do and even when they're gonna do it. That's all in all not a bad situation. We just need to decide what we're gonna do about it."

"I don't suppose there are any fire proof charms on the shed, are there?" Draco asked him hopefully.

"There might have been one placed when it was built, but I can't imagine it was ever reinforced afterwards. Definitely not in the last ten years or so." answered Cathy Cat.
Draco nodded to himself in response. That meant it had dissipated a long time ago. Protective Charms needed regular service to remain active over years.

"Hey, maybe if we just put a new one on it, that'll stop the Fishies right there and..."

"Right, Sammie. And the ministry isn't going to notice at all. I'm sure the Under-Age Magic Department is going to be so understanding." Jack sneered.

Draco decided not to demonstrate his own sneer for Jack once again. He hadn't sneered at him and the momentary peace felt rather good. No need to remind Jack of their little differences right now.

"Maybe it'll rain." suggested Charlie looking up at the bright blue sky hopefully. "If the wood were soaking wet, they wouldn't stand a chance."

"Rain?" Draco asked her. "With the weather we've been having lately? That'd be a really lucky coincidence."

"We could pour water over it to make it wet." suggested Larry.

Mike sighed. Jack rolled his eyes, even Mary shook her head at that idea.

"And where do you suggest we take that much water from? We'd have to get the whole shed really well soaked in it and we'd have to do it fast before the sun can dry it all out again." Draco reminded Larry.

"There's lots of water in the river." Larry insisted unperturbed.

"And how do you suggest we get it up here?" sneered Jack.

"In a bucket of course."

"Larry, it's almost five minutes walk from here to the river. How many bucketfuls of water do you think we'd need? It'd take us forever. The Sharks will be here long before we're done with that plan." Jack's answer reminded Draco of a Math problem. How much water would be needed to soak the shed? How much could the bucket hold? He almost felt like making up a set of numbers for it and doing the problem. But then again they had a very different kind of problem right now.

"We can't protect the shed from fire." Mike decided. "And even if we could and did, the Sharks wouldn't just leave it alone. They'd find another way to destroy it instead. We're gonna have to fight them off."

Larry grinned eagerly at hearing that and Mary got a very special gleam in her eyes as well.

"But what if they attack before we're all ready?" asked Matt. "Susie said they were planning to come right after lunch."

"They're planning to meet right after lunch. They'll need some time to organise and prepare which ought to give us time to meet up at the shed." stated Draco.

The plan could work... if they managed to beat the Sharks.

"Okay, we'll all hurry with lunch then and meet up in the shed right afterwards." decided Jack.

"It'd be better to meet outside." suggested Mike. "We won't see them coming if we're inside."
"But we shouldn't let them know we're there either." countered Draco. "We ought to surprise them by coming out of the bushes unexpectedly."

Jack stared at Draco for a moment sizing him up just like he'd done that first time they'd met in the garden shed. Suddenly Draco wondered what he was thinking. Would he accept a suggestion from a rival?

"Oh well then. Each of you try to sneak in alone. Don't let anyone see you walking towards the shed especially not in a group. That way if they do see one of you they might think you just came to get something you forgot in the morning. Let's see if we can fool them into thinking we're not even there."

Draco answered with a curt nod. That sounded like a plan and Jack had actually listened to him. Of course now he'd have to prove himself in a fight. Maybe then Jack would really accept him.

All during lunch Draco couldn't shake off the thought about the weapons Susie had mentioned. When he'd fought the Sharks in the basement they'd only used their hands and feet against him. What kind of weapons might they have to use in a fight?

They couldn't use wands any more than the Rakers could, that much Draco knew, but what else might one use for a weapon? He considered asking Sarah, but feared that she might forbid him to go out, if she knew there was going to be a fight. Instead he tried to distract himself by concentrating on feeding Billy.

His own meal he gulped down hurriedly then rushed through washing the dishes. Sarah noticed that of course and kept shooting him suspicious glances.

"What's the big hurry?" she finally asked him.

"Oh, nothing. We're just meeting a little earlier today. Jack said not to be late and you know I'm not on too friendly terms with Jack. I don't want to make him angry, that's all."

Sarah didn't quite seem to buy that, but she didn't ask any more questions and Draco luckily managed to slip out before she could remember to ask him to take 'That Dog' along.

The corridor was very quiet except for occasional sounds coming through the thin walls of the flats. There seemed to be nobody about in all the house and Draco suddenly realised that this was the first time he was going down all alone. Until now Professor Snape or Mike had always been with him when he'd left the house.

'So?' he thought. 'I'm not scared of an empty staircase. I know my way around here with or without them.' Still he walked extra carefully trying to produce as little sound as possible. When he reached the door he pushed it open just a tiny crack at first and peeked out. Nothing. Except for two old witches sitting on a park bench and chatting away happily there was nobody in sight.

Relieved he pushed the door open all the way and stepped out. There was one more person about he noticed. A wizard of about thirty to forty years was walking through the park at a brisk pace heading in the direction of the town centre. He was probably going either to the marketplace or headed for the bridge and the better part of Hogsmeade and had been hidden by the door before.

It didn't matter though. He clearly had as little interest in the Sharks or the Rakers as the two old witches. Adults didn't get involved in children's affairs.

Draco stepped away from the door and jogged over to the group of bushes and trees that hid the garden shed from view. He didn't run fast enough to seem terribly eager to get there, but he wanted
to cover the distance quickly before any of the Sharks happened to come out and see him and hoped that he seemed like he was just sprinting over for a quick stop at the shed to pick something up and move on. If anybody saw him he wanted them to assume that he'd left the shed again as quickly as he'd come and they'd just missed his return.

Of course any spies sent to watch the garden shed by the Sharks would be watching too closely to be fooled like that, but Draco assumed that even Shark wannabes did have to go home for lunch so there was a good chance that there hadn't been any spies available to keep watch the entire time. As long as the Sharks had no idea that a Raker spy had heard their plans, they had no reason to expect any Rakers out this early in the afternoon.

Draco slipped in between the bushes and found Sammie sitting on one of the lower branches of the largest tree waiting. Draco took a quick look around, but it appeared they were the first. He walked over to sit beside Sammie.

"Hi! Seen any of the others yet?"

"Nope, you're early, Dragon."

"I assumed the earlier I got here the less likely there'd be any spies about yet."

Sammie nodded at that, but didn't respond. For a while they just sat there, Draco watching Sammie and Sammie staring at nothing seemingly unwilling to look at Draco.

Draco hoped that one of the others would show up to end the awkward situation, but the seconds ticked by and nothing happened. He had to do something about the situation himself.

"Are you still angry, because you didn't score today?" he finally asked Sammie.

"I just wish I could play as well as Cathy or Jack." the smaller boy sighed. "It's okay for you if you can't score, because you're a great keeper instead and Matt and Charlie have their own strengths as well. I'm supposed to score goals for the team and I can't."

"You're fastest. That's your strength."

"It's useless, if I can't score. What use is it to be able to avoid all pursuers, if I still just lose the ball to the keeper? The others can get past Mary so why can't I?"

"The others are all older than you, Sammie. They have more experience. The skill you need will come in time."

"Sure." sighed Sammie and returned to staring unhappily into empty space.

That hadn't gone too well. Draco suppressed a sigh of his own. What to do about Sammie's problem? There had to be a way to help him. He really was an important member of their team, but how could Draco prove it to him? How could he assure him of his value without reducing their chances to win by holding back Cathy?

"Sammie?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you have a ball?"

"What?"
"A ball, Sammie. For playing Soccer. Do you have your own ball?"

"No, we always play with Jack's ball. Only need one, after all."

"That wasn't Jack's ball we used the day he didn't come though, was it?"

"I don't know. Probably not."

"So whose was it then? Who else owns a ball?"

"Mike's? Or maybe Larry's. I think Matt has one too, but I've never seen it and we arrived together that day so I'd know if he'd brought a ball."

"Mike didn't bring one either, so I guess it must have been Larry's." concluded Draco. "But that's not important right now. Do you think we could borrow Matt's ball?"

"I'm not even sure he has one. Why don't you just ask Mike for his? You two get on so well I bet he'll lend it to you anytime."

"Because he's on Jack's team and I don't want them to know what we're doing. Matt's on ours and he's your best friend. Just try to find out if he really has a ball, okay?"

"Okay, but what do you need it for anyway?"

"I don't need it. You do."

"I do?"

"Well, you say you want to learn how to score more often so you're going to have to practise more."

"Oh and you think, if I practise kicking Matt's ball about that will help me score against Mary?"

"If you can get past me, you can get past Mary and we'll just keep trying until you do."

Sammie's head shot round to stare at Draco open mouthed. That was certainly a big offer, but also an even bigger challenge. So far Jack had been the only one to get a ball past Draco except for that very first game when he'd still been learning how to play. Trying to score against Mary was one thing, but having to score against Draco seemed like a wholly different thing.

"It's just like Quidditch training really." Draco explained. "If something's not working to your satisfaction, you just keep practising it until it does."

"I'll never be able to get past you."

"Well, maybe you won't, but only because we don't have the time. I have to leave again on Sunday after all. Still you will get better, if you keep trying. Maybe Matt will train with you after I'm gone."

Sammie wanted to say something more, but the sound of footsteps from behind the bushes shut him up. Seconds later Jack stepped out into the open space in front of the garden shed and ended their chance to talk about Soccer practise.

He glared at Draco for a moment, but then sat down beside them.

"Seen anything yet?"
"No, they're probably still gathering their forces as well. If they don't know that we know they're coming they don't have a reason to hurry, do they?" answered Draco casually.

"Are you armed?"

Sammie pulled a fist sized stone out of his pocket and showed it to Jack who nodded his approval and turned back to Draco.

"What about you, Dragon. Any weapons?"

"I don't suppose my wand counts?"

"No. Or are you intending to use it?"

"No, no weapons then. Is that a problem?"

"You might want to stay away from the twins then." recommended Jack. "They've got knives. Mark belongs to me and Robin can get unpleasant as well. Don't think she has a knife, but she's known to use just about everything else. Maybe you'll get a chance to go after Pretty Ricky."

"Why? Mike tells me he isn't worth the time of the day."

"Not really, but I'd like to be rid of him early to even out the numbers. He'll most likely beat it the moment he sees you coming at him, but if he thinks nobody's after him, he'll stick around and be a nuisance. It'd be just like him to go for Sammie or Charlie from behind while they're busy with one of his friends. I'd set Mary or Larry on him, but you're faster so he won't dare try to dance around you like he sometimes does with them."

"I want Marvin." stated Sammie. "I still owe him for that detention he got me back in the last week of school."

"I'd rather you and Charlie went after Amber and Lyddie and Matt took on Marvin. He's a bit large for you."

"I can handle him." snarled Sammie. "I don't want to play with the girls."

"Very well, but don't blame me if you get hurt."

Sammie just snorted angrily.

"Okay, so you want me to give the guy with the mirror a little fright. What do I do once he's taken off?" Draco asked Jack. He didn't want to be restricted to fighting a known coward. He could and would do better than that.

"Let's see. Not the twins, because you're not armed and Mary and Larry will want to play with them anyway. Robin will most likely go for Mike of her own accord. That leaves you with Chris then."

"Chris? Who's Chris?"

"Dark hair, scar under his right eye. He's a bit taller than you, but not enough to have a serious advantage." explained Jack.

"He's been using that metal chain lately, though." interjected Sammie.

"Metal chain?" that didn't sound good.
"Yep," grinned Jack. "A nasty weapon really, but he hasn't mastered it fully yet. You can avoid it, if you're fast, which means it's really either you or Mike against him, because Mary and Larry are too slow for that and he's too big for Sammie or Matt."

"Cathy could take him." stated Sammie.

"Right, and you want Bobby on top of you in addition to Marvin?" challenged Jack.

"Dragon could take over Bobby then." suggested Sammie.

"No, he can't." snarled Mike who'd just arrived and heard the last part of their conversation. "Not unless Bobby attacks him first and I doubt he will."

"Bobby isn't that much smaller than Dragon." insisted Sammie.

"Maybe not that much smaller, but that much younger." decided Jack. "Cathy can only go for him because she's a girl and he is very big for twelve. Dragon's too old for that."

The rest of the gang arrived one by one and Jack gave each of them their instructions. Draco wondered whether he'd talked them over with Mike before he'd come. It didn't sound like the plan was entirely his idea, but then again Jack wasn't as stupid as he appeared when he lost his temper on the Soccer field and he'd clearly led the Rakers into battle against the Sharks before.

Draco climbed to his position in one of the trees feeling a little apprehensive. Maybe he should try to get himself a weapon too? It couldn't be that difficult to find a stone like Sammie's or maybe a piece of wood would do. An iron bar would be nice, he thought.

But it was too late for that now as the first Sharks came into view. Draco almost didn't dare to breathe waiting for Jack's signal. It was too soon though. They were to wait until the entire rival gang was right in the middle of them.

Draco could see his target clearly now. Pretty Ricky was right beside Mark the Shark wearing a grin that probably had half the girls in his school swooning over him. Draco however wasn't a girl and thought it just looked stupid. The more ordinary looking Chris wasn't that easy to spot at first, but upon a closer look when the Sharks assembled in front of the shed Draco recognised him by the chain in his hand.

Chris was standing over to the side, near where Jack was hiding and at the moment out of Draco's reach, but that wasn't a problem. He wasn't going after him right now anyway. He had to get to Ricky first and that proved to be a problem.

Ricky had begun to lag behind a bit as they neared the garden shed and was now standing under the tree Mike was hiding in just as much out of reach for Draco's first attack as Chris was.

Draco realised he'd have to resort to jumping the first Shark in reach and then making a fast dash for Ricky before the would be attackers recovered from their surprise. Looking down from his perch he saw that that left him the choice between one twin and the other, but Jack had warned him away from the twins, because of their knives.

It was too late to decide upon a new course of action now however. Jack's signal came before Draco could make up his mind and he had to jump. A sudden instinct told him to take the left twin and he let himself drop onto his victim as hard as he could tearing him down and giving him a quick kick as he scrambled up and dashed off towards Ricky leaving the twins to Mary who had just torn out of the bush to the right of his tree where she'd been hiding.
Mike, he saw, had ignored Ricky and just jumped off the tree and run after Robin who had been just out of reach. Out of the corner of his right eye he saw the girl turn and attack Mike with a fist blinking of metal, but he had no time to worry about his friend now. He had to get to Ricky.

Pretty Ricky saw Draco coming in his direction and tried to slip out of his way, but of course Draco wouldn't let him get away that easily. He caught hold of Ricky's t-shirt and tried to pull him back, but Ricky turned and fled leaving his torn red t-shirt dangling in Draco's hand.

Draco cast a quick look at the garment in his hand. It reminded him of the Gryffindor common room somehow which caused him to drop it and run after the fleeing Ricky instead.

Ricky however had already rounded the group of trees and bushes and was racing towards one of the neighbouring houses. Draco stopped and watched him disappear through the door.

Time to go after Chris.

He turned back towards the fight to look for his victim. Mike was handling Robin pretty well despite all her weaponry and Draco stopped worrying about his friend. Jack on the other hand seemed to be in big trouble against Mark, but Draco reminded himself strictly that he was not to interfere with the battle of the gang leaders. Jack had just begun to show first signs of accepting him. It wouldn't do to challenge his authority now. Sammie and Cathy were fighting the two smallest Shark boys and from what he saw Draco surmised that Sammie had indeed bitten off more than he could chew when he'd chosen Marvin, who was most likely the smaller of the two as his opponent. Cathy seemed more than capable of handling Bobby and giving Marvin a bad time as well however and Draco remembered well enough that those two were too young for him to take on.

Larry and Mary were obviously having fun tossing about the twins, knives or no knives, but Chris was bothering Larry with that chain and that couldn't be tolerated especially not as Jack had mentioned that Larry was too slow to defend himself properly against this weapon. He seemed to be good at ignoring the pain though, Draco discovered. Still Chris could do some serious damage to his Raker comrade and that was not to be permitted.

Draco lounged himself at Chris from behind in an attempt to pin both the boy's arms to his body and stop him from using the chain. For a moment it worked just the way Draco had planned it, but then Chris managed to kick him hard in the shin and the pain caused him to loosen his grip enough for Chris to wriggle out of his grasp and jump back far enough to have room to swing his chain. 'Damn!'

Draco limped home with a bloody nose and almost unable to move his right arm where Chris' chain had hit him. He wondered if it might actually be broken, but then he wouldn't be able to move it at all, would he? He wished he knew more about broken bones.

His nose was giving him trouble as well, but mostly because of the bloodstains it was leaving everywhere. It didn't matter much about his clothes anymore as they were already stained from the fight and needed washing anyway, but he was worried about dripping blood on the Snapes' carpet. Sarah wouldn't be happy about that. He also had trouble breathing at the moment, but knew that that would pass. If his nose were broken it would definitely hurt more.

His leg still hurt from Chris' kick, but that too was minor compared to the pain in his arm. So maybe he'd have a bruise for a few days. It'd go away.
Sarah didn't take it so easy when she saw him standing in the door like that. She was shocked. First she started scolding, then suddenly ran off to search for bandages. Draco could still hear her mutter faintly in the bedroom. Maybe she was scolding one of Billy's squishy toys?

He looked up at Professor Snape feeling a little lost. What was he supposed to do now? Wait for Sarah to arrive with the bandages? Come in and start eating dinner? Or maybe just go to the lab and lie down? That last one was what he really felt like doing, but it'd leave bloodstains on the bed. Sarah wouldn't thank him for that.

Snape looked rather amused though. Then of course he was used to seeing teenagers who'd just been in a fight. He probably had to break up more fights than any other teacher at Hogwarts. One reason for that being that somebody from his house was usually involved in the battle. The Slytherins were notorious for getting into fights. But it was also due to him usually being the first person other staff members thought of to ask for help whenever they felt they couldn't manage the situation on their own. One glare from Snape could usually cool off the most hot headed fighter within seconds.

"Well, come in." he told Draco rather good naturedly. Draco could hardly believe his ears. "No use just standing around there."

"I'm dripping." Draco said by way of explanation.

Severus pointed at the bathroom door. "Wash it off, then. ... Cold water." he added just in case Draco mightn't know.

Draco obediently limped into the bathroom and tried to wash his nose as best he could with only one hand.

"You told me to fight, if they attacked." he told Snape who'd followed him in.

"I'm not complaining." Snape answered grabbing a towel and dipping it into the water. "What's wrong with your arm?"

Draco considered the question for only a second then simply gave the easiest answer. "Hurts."

"Why? What happened to it?" Snape asked again as he started to gently wash the blood off Draco's face.

Draco had to admit that the towel was a lot more effective than splashing water into his face with just one hand and while he described the fight to Snape he felt the pain in his nose slowly ebb away and breathing got a little easier. At first he didn't even notice when the blood-flow stopped. Severus however did. He washed out the towel wetting it again and then used it to gently rub the left over dried blood off Draco's face. That looked much better now.

He turned his attention to Draco's not quite as bloody, but very red looking arm, but the boy flinched at every touch of it and he decided to leave it alone for the moment and took a look at his leg instead. That was really just a bruise, he discovered. Uncomfortable, but nothing to worry about. The only real problem was the arm.

"Okay, now that you're cleaned up a bit, lets go to the lab and see what we can do about that injury."

Draco obediently walked into the lab and sat on his bed. In passing Severus picked the bandages out of Sarah's hands.
"I'll take care of that." he told her calmly.

Snape quickly searched through his store of potion supplies and handed Draco a vial filled with a strangely blue coloured liquid.

"Drink that."

Draco sniffed the vial cautiously. He knew Snape would never give him anything harmful, but wasn't quite as convinced about bad tasting stuff.

"What is it?" he stalled.

"Just a simple pain potion so I can take a look at your arm. ... It won't bite."

With a sigh Draco gave up and took the potion. To his surprise it didn't taste bad at all. 'A bit like lemonade.' he thought. It had to be a different potion than the one Madame Pomfrey used in the hospital wing at Hogwarts. Hers always tasted of mint like most medical potions did and Draco hated mint. He didn't care for the burning sensation it left on his tongue at all. Bad enough that toothpaste had to taste like that.

"Hey, this is much better that Pomfrey's pain potion."

"Nonsense, Draco. It's the very same potion. I brewed them both myself. The effect is just the same."

"But this tastes a lot better. The other one burns."

Snape looked at Draco surprised for a moment, then smiled.

"Lemon leaves. I use them instead of mint most of the time, but Poppy hates them. It doesn't really matter though as they're really just in there to improve the taste."

"Mint doesn't improve anything." declared Draco.

"Well, for some reason a lot of potion recipes include mint for the taste and in my experience most people like it better than lemon."

"Well, I'm not most people. I like lemon better than mint."

"So do I, Draco, but for the hospital wing I have to brew the potions the way Madame Pomfrey wants them. Now, show me your arm."

Obediently Draco held out his arm for inspection.

It still hurt a little when Snape touched it, but not as much as it had before. It was more uncomfortable than painful and Snape was gentle enough so Draco could take it.

"Can mint always be replaced with lemon leaves then?"

"Most of the time. In some potions it's required for its magical properties and in those cases it can't and in potions that contain unicorn blood lemon leaves can diminish or even neutralise the magic. That last group can usually do without mint as well though. It makes them taste slightly bitter, but they're still drinkable." Snape explained still bent over Draco's arm. "That's not as bad as it probably feels right now." he finally diagnosed. "I'll brew you a healing potion and you'll have to try to hold it still for a while and it'll be much better tomorrow."
"Healing potion?"

"A rather simple one to help repair muscle damage. It'll only take a few minutes to make."

"With lemon leaves?"

"With lemon leaves." Severus promised with a slight smile. It was surprising how much Draco sometimes reminded him of himself. 'You could almost believe he was my son.' he thought. "Why don't you change out of those bloody clothes while I brew the potion. Sarah will probably want to wash them before all the blood dries in and you don't want to be stuffed into the washbasin along with them, do you?"

Draco laughed and started to carefully pull off of his clothes trying not to upset his hurt arm. The pain potion was still keeping it from hurting too much when he accidentally moved or touched it, but he was a little worried that he might do some additional damage so he tried to avoid that. It was difficult to undress using only one arm and he decided to just slip on his night t-shirt so he wouldn't have to go through the whole procedure again this evening.

Once the potion was done Severus put some of it on one of the bandages Sarah had brought and told Draco to drink the rest.

"Inside and outside works best." he explained when he saw Draco's puzzled look. "That's one of the reasons I like this potion so much. It's fast and easy to brew and does the work of two. The only downside is that it's not very strong and can't be used for more serious injuries."

"Will you teach that in class?"

"Yes, it's on the OWLs actually, but it hardly ever comes up in the exam. It's so simple nobody could mess it up. ... Except maybe for Longbottom. Maybe I should make you brew that for the exam after all. That way he'd actually have a chance to pass." Snape mused while he tied a second dry bandage over the first one.

"I don't know. People aren't used to you giving simple exams. Somebody might die from the shock and Granger will be terribly disappointed." teased Draco.

"And I won't have the satisfaction of seeing Potter squirm waiting for his results. You're right. I'll just keep this one for Longbottom's second try after the summer. That'll look like I'm giving in to Albus' and Minerva's begging to go easy on the boy. You never know what they might do for me in return."

Later when Draco finally sat at the dinner table snuggled up comfortably into Severus' much too large bathrobe and struggling to eat with only one hand as his other arm was caught in a sling that was supposed to keep him from moving it around too much he suddenly realised that he now knew exactly what he'd have to do for his Potions OWLs. He wouldn't have to study anything else at all.

Still, something told him he'd be working extra hard in Potions this year even if he didn't need it. He'd make Professor Snape proud of him.

A/N - Will Sevi find the addresses of Draco's cousins? Will they want Draco? Will the Sharks strike again?
In the next chapter: Draco finds out about some other gangs in the neighbourhood, the Rakers don't play Soccer and go swimming again.
When Draco arrived in the living room the next morning, arm still in the sling and Munin sitting on his head successfully preventing Draco from keeping his hair in its usual perfectly styled fashion he found Professor Snape sitting at the breakfast table food carelessly pushed aside to make room for several large books and some parchment, ink and quill. Peering over his teacher's shoulder curiously he recognised The Malfoys lying open on the table showing the part of the Malfoy family tree he'd found Uncle Thomas in.

"Your cousin's name is Eugene." Snape informed him. "He does not appear to be married or have any children, but that information might be outdated."

"Eugene?" Draco repeated with a frown. "Could they have come up with anything more disgusting? Cousin Eugene, really!"

"It doesn't matter what name his parents stuck him with, Draco. We're looking for someone who'll give you a good home and from what I've found in this book he might be just the right person for that."

"Really?" Draco still sounded doubtful. "Where does he live then?"

"I don't know yet. There's nothing about that in this book. It'll be in one of the others though so don't worry. We'll find him."

"So what are you still doing with this book? Why don't you just find the address and be done with it?"

"I'm looking for other suitable relatives in case we decide we don't like Eugene after all later. Right now I'm making a list of all Malfoys whose death date isn't given in here so we'll know exactly how many living relatives you've got."

"Just how old is that book?" Draco sounded even more doubtful by now.

"A little over ten years."

"Ten years? Er... has it occurred to you that some people might have died or been born in ten years?"

Snape glared at him. "Of course it has. The ones who've been born in the last ten years are of no consequence to us anyway though. We're looking for adults. As for the ones that have died. We can always sort out those later. We're looking for the younger ones anyway so the ones we'll actually want to contact aren't likely to have died."

Draco sighed and sat down grabbing for a piece of toast and a knife. Sarah immediately pushed the butter and marmalade over to him. He found it a bit hard to butter toast with just one hand, but after a few failed attempts he managed to get the slice of toast to lie still long enough.

"Are you going to eat any breakfast?" he asked Snape through a mouthful of toast.
Severus hardly glanced up from the Malfoy family tree page 45. "Later."

Sarah sighed at that and went to check 'That Dog's' and the cat's breakfast. Both animals were long finished.

"There now, that's two good little pets." Sarah praised them for which 'That Dog' shot her a very surprised look probably wondering what he'd done that was so unusual to deserve praise.

Draco leaned over to see what had his teacher so fascinated still munching on his toast. A few crumbs that fell onto the page finally caused Severus to look up and notice the boy.

"Please try not to leave any food stains on the library books." he grumbled.

Draco quickly retreated back into his seat.

"What's so interesting in there?" he asked from that safe distance.

"I've found another cousin of yours. His name's Jeremiah, he has a wife called Lillian and no kids. At least he didn't have any ten years ago. That sounds like another good candidate."

Draco continued to munch his toast unimpressed.

"Do you want to memorise my entire family tree before breakfast?" he asked.

In the background Sarah rolled her eyes and finished feeding Billy who'd been particularly fussy about his food today and had spit most of it all over Sarah and the carpet. Maybe he didn't like broccoli?

"I'm not planning to memorise anything at all. I'm just looking up some possible guardians for you. Eugene and Jeremiah are the most promising so far."

"You might still continue that after breakfast." put in Sarah. "It'll take hours anyway and I'd really like to clean off the table before lunch."

Severus grumbled something Draco didn't hear clearly enough to understand, but put the book and parchment aside for a moment to grab some food. Suddenly remembering the time Severus had confiscated his Math book Draco had to fight down a laughing attack. A few giggles escaped him anyway.

"What?" Snape growled at him.

"N... n... nothing." giggled Draco.

"Oh, really?" Snape mock glared.

Draco didn't mind however. Unlike the Gryffindors he could tell the difference between a mock Snape glare and a real Snape glare easily. It had to be due to frequent exposure.

"Will you two just get on with breakfast." sighed Sarah and deciding that it was probably best to humour her bad mood they did.

Seeing that Sarah pulled out her wand and turned her attention to removing the mess Billy had made. Green broccoli stains just didn't go well with her favourite beige carpet, but knowing Severus he'd just tell her she shouldn't put a carpet in a kitchen and especially not if she intended to feed a baby there, if she complained. Thus she just muttered a few cleaning spells over the carpet and herself as she didn't feel like changing into fresh robes and taking the ones she was wearing
down to wash. The spells weren't good for the fabric of course, but using them just once or twice shouldn't do too much damage, she decided.

Draco had to wait until Severus had finished breakfast to wash the dishes and therefore had only just started when Mike came to get him. Wearing his arm in a sling didn't exactly help either and Mike claimed he couldn't help this time because he'd cut his hand badly in the fight and couldn't risk getting it wet.

"It might start to bleed again and you don't want blood all over your dishes, do you? Besides I'd need a new bandage." he explained holding up his wrapped up hand for all of them to see.

"I think you can take off the sling for a few minutes, Draco." Professor Snape finally permitted. "But try to use the other hand as much as possible."

Draco nodded and took the arm out of the sling. A few careful movements proved that he could use it almost normally though it did still hurt a little.

Now able to use both hands, Draco finished the dishes quickly and after a few protests about having to put the arm back into the sling the two boys took off late, but happy.

The girls obviously had grown tired of waiting for them and had gone down without them. 'That Dog' decided that was a chance to fill the empty staircase with some barking and thus they hurried down and out the door with their hands over their ears.

"That dog of yours doesn't really need a lead as much as a muting charm." Mike informed Draco once they were out and safe from the worst of the noise.

"What?" said Draco cautiously lifting one hand from his ear. The level of noise seemed bearable again.

"I said your dog needs a muting charm." repeated Mike.

"That's not my dog!" protested Draco glaring at the over-excited and happy offender who laughed back up at him wagging his tail.

"Oh yeah? Then who's the one who's always dragging him along?"

Draco had no comeback to that so he just started off towards the Soccer lawn, but stopped short when he saw it was deserted.

"Hey, where is everybody?"

"Probably at the shed." Mike shrugged. "Come on, we don't want to miss a meeting."

Indeed they found the whole gang inside the shed with the exception of Sammie, whom Jack had assigned guard duty this time.

"We could hear you two coming a mile away." Jack greeted them with a frown at 'That Dog'.

"That's the dog's fault." explained Draco unnecessarily. "He just won't shut up."

'That Dog' smiled happily at all the attention he was given by the Rakers and wagged his tail at Jack hopping up and down in a desperate attempt to greet him by licking his face or, since that seemed hopelessly high up, at least his hand.

Jack glared some more, but decided not to comment any further. He could see how hopeless it was
to attempt to get through to 'That Dog'.

"Maybe we could leave him here." suggested Matt. "You know, to guard the shed."

"Does that look like a guard dog to you?" Jack snapped at him exasperatedly. "He'd probably greet the Sharks by wagging his tail and licking them as well."

"Well, maybe they'd be so disgusted by the dog spit they'd run away?" insisted Matt.

A simple look from Jack shut him up easily enough. Draco just wished the same would work on 'That Dog' who was still announcing their presence to the world happily.

"Are we gonna play today at all?" Mike asked Jack impatiently.

"No." declared Jack. "I hurt my leg yesterday. Don't feel like running around too much and anyway I'm not the only one injured."

Draco cast a quick look over the assembled gang members. Jack was correct. There was no overlooking all the bandages. He wondered what the Sharks might look like today.

"So what are we gonna do then?"

"Patrol our territory." Jack decided. "Especially the Sharks' border. Gotta show the Fishies they can't mess with us."

As Jack led them out of the shed Draco noticed he was limping slightly. No wonder he hadn't wanted to play. Considering his own injured arm that would probably not have been a good idea anyway and knowing the borders of their territory might be useful, if he ever wanted to go out alone.

Once out of the shed the gang fell into a loose formation behind Jack. With a simple nod Mary indicated for Draco to walk behind Mike and Larry who were flanking Jack to either side, but careful to stay about one pace behind him at all times. Draco kept to the middle behind Jack with Mary and Cathy on either side of him while Matt, Sammie and Charlie trudged along behind them Sammie a little behind the other two.

As they walked Cathy pointed out the landmarks that indicated the borders between the gangs' territories to him.

"Up to where that tree grows this path marks the border between us and the Sharks. From there on to the south end of the park our neighbours are the Black Ring and then out there the Avengers."

"You've never mentioned those before." Draco whispered surprised.

"They're not important. The Black Ring all live on the other side of the park and aren't really interested in our side. They hardly ever show up over here and aren't likely to start a war. Their leader's Angel Anna a very tall black girl. You'll recognise her at once if you ever see her. Best looking girl in school."

"Better looking than you? I won't believe that unless I see it."

Cathy grinned at that and winked at Draco seductively. "Ah Dragon, you sure know how to make a girl smile. Anna's really something else though. You know, the dark skin, long slender legs ... All the boys drool after her, but she's out of their reach. Has a boyfriend who goes to Hogwarts, they say." Cathy shrugged. "Anyway, she's not likely to threaten us."
"And the Avengers? What about them?"

"Small gang. And they're not from the park either. They live in the richer part of West Hogsmeade. You know, those small houses like they have at the market place. They're scared of us mean, filthy Merlin Park kids. Then again, if you say Hogwarts kids are just as dangerous..."

"Well, we do fight just as much, but I've never seen weapons used in a fight at Hogwarts." admitted Draco. "But then we do use our wands there."

"You're allowed that?"

"Not really, but how are they going to control that? They have to let us use our wands in class and for practice. It's forbidden to use them in the halls, but that just means you have to watch that you don't get caught. Fighting's forbidden anyway."

"Oh right. What did Uncle Severus say when you got home all torn up after the fight? Was he very angry?"

"Not really. He just made me drink some potion and bound up my arm."

"He didn't punish you?"

"No, why would he? Did your Mum punish you?"

"No, but she did scold a lot and she isn't a teacher."

"Oh, scolding's Mrs Snape's job. Professor Snape just glares or punishes. I've never heard him actually scold anyone even at Hogwarts."

"He never says anything when pupils misbehave?" Cathy asked astonished.

"Oh, of course he does. He usually makes a sarcastic remark, takes away points or gives a detention. He just doesn't scold or make empty threats."

"Points?"

"House points. You need them to win the House Cup."

"House Cup?"

"That's the price the most successful house gets at the end of the year. Teachers can give or take away house points and, if you misbehave, they take them away."

"From the entire house? Even if only one pupil is actually guilty?"

"That's what makes it so effective. If you lose a lot of points, your house mates will hate you for it. You'll lose friends and sometimes some of the other kids will even gang up and beat you up. It's called peer pressure."

"That's kind of mean, isn't it?"

"Yes, but effective. Instead of idolising rebels their classmates turn against them."

"Still, doesn't Uncle Severus get problems with some kids, if he never scolds them? Teachers shouldn't always be nice."
"Nice? You think Professor Snape might get in trouble for being too nice?" Draco couldn't believe his ears. "He's the most feared teacher in school. You ought to see how some students tremble whenever he just looks their way." Draco laughed thinking of Neville Longbottom. "He even scares Potter."

"But you say he's your friend?"

"I'm a Slytherin. He likes us."

Cathy seemed to have to think that answer over for a while.

"I still don't see how anyone could be that scared of Uncle Severus." she said finally.

"Well, remember when I got into that first fight with the Sharks down in the basement? Don't tell me he didn't scare you there."

"Okay, so he does have a certain air of authority, but is that really enough to make people tremble when he just looks at them?"

"Believe me, he can have that effect when he wants to. And some people are just easily intimidated."

"What about you? Who are you most scared of?"

"McGonagall." Draco said without hesitation. He might not be comfortable around Dumbledore or Hagrid, but McGonagall certainly was the worst.

"McGonagall? Who's that?"

"The Transfigurations teacher. She's also head of Gryffindor and hates all Slytherins. She thinks we're all future death eaters or something like that. Put just one foot out of line in her class if you're a Slytherin and you've got detention. She's strict with the other houses too, but not as much as with us. Most teachers give Slytherins more detentions than all other students."

"Why? Aren't they supposed to treat everyone the same?"

"They're supposed to, but they still don't like us. Slytherin has a bad name thanks to You-Know-Who. I think most of the time they don't even treat us differently on purpose. They just don't notice it anymore."

The gang hardly met anyone on their way and those few people who were about just glanced at them wearily and walked on. A few little wannabes wearing black shirts dashed away when they saw them, but Jack ignored the little kids. They weren't actually on Raker territory anyway as they'd been sitting under a tree on the Black Ring side of the border and Draco supposed that black was most likely the Black Ring's colour so the kids were on their own grounds.

The Avengers all wearing yellow shirts with the red inscription 'Avengers' on both front and back were busy covering a house wall with graffiti when the Rakers walked by, but they too were clearly within their own territory and withdrew even further away from the border when they saw the Rakers' angry looks.

Draco attempted his best imitation of a Snape glare and the smallest Avenger a little red haired boy whimpered and dove to hide behind a bigger equally red-headed girl who was probably his sister.

That did it for Jack. With a derisive snort he turned and led his gang away as if the Avengers didn't
even exist.

Returning to the park they once again reached the Sharks' border, but still found no Sharks.

"Guess they must be in hiding nursing their wounds." Jack concluded just loud enough for the little Shark wannabe, who tiptoed past them with a foul smelling plastic bag in his hand, to hear.

"Shouldn't we stop that little spy?" Draco whispered to Cathy, but Jack heard him anyway.

"Can't. The trash bins are neutral ground." he explained. "They're in our territory, but the Sharks have to take down their trash as well. They get free passage for that and I don't mind if he goes back unharmed to tell the Fishies we were out looking for another piece of them. Spares us doing the whole show again."

"So what are we gonna do after lunch?" asked Cathy.

Jack glanced at the Soccer lawn, but he was still limping and it was terribly hot by now. If they'd wanted to play they should have done it in the morning when it was still cool enough to run around in the sun. A look at the sky revealed not a single cloud in sight. It wasn't likely to cool down anytime soon.

"We'll go swimming." he announced after checking that the little spy was clearly out of earshot. "The Sharks obviously aren't coming out today and it's getting too hot for anything else."

"Can I borrow your swimming trunks again?" Draco asked Mike.

"Sure. I'll bring them over right after lunch."

"What about your hand? It'll start to bleed again, if it gets wet." Draco suddenly remembered.

"No problem. I'll just ask my Mum for a water proof charm on the bandage. Then I'll be fine. What are you gonna do about that sling though?"

"Nothing. I'll just tell the Snapes I refuse to wear it any longer. My arm doesn't even hurt at all anymore."

"Really? That was fast. Did you get a healing charm for it or something?"

"Healing potion, of course. What else would you expect from the Snapes? And it even tasted a lot better than the ones you get from a doctor." Draco grinned and lifted up 'That Dog' who once again claimed to be too tired to walk. Considering they'd done nothing more than walk and how much 'That Dog' could jump around and bark without tiring Draco strongly suspected that he was faking it though.

Professor Snape was still bent over the Malfoy family tree when Draco arrived and Draco would have loved to take another look over his shoulder now that he didn't have any crumbly toast in his hand, but Sarah insisted that he had to help her with the cooking. Remembering what Professor Snape had told Mike about the importance of knowing how to cook and the fact that he'd only gotten away from the worst of that lesson because of the money he no longer had, Draco decided not to protest too much. Better to hand Sarah some ingredients than to get an entire cooking lesson from Professor Snape.

Severus however hardly seemed to notice that Draco had come home so intent was he on his book. Billy, who'd been sitting in his lap soon got bored and tried to wriggle out of his grasp.
"Dako!" the baby insisted and Severus simply set him down on the floor and returned to his task.

Billy immediately raced over to Draco holding out his little arms to him. When had he learned to run like that? Only a week ago he hadn't even been able to walk without his mother's hand to keep him upright, now he was racing about as if it were nothing.

Draco gently picked the Baby up and Billy snuggled comfortably against his chest.

"Dako." he stated contentedly and closed his eyes. He seemed almost asleep, but Draco knew better. Billy hadn't eaten yet. He'd be wide awake the moment Sarah was done with the cooking and ready to serve lunch and indeed they didn't get to sit down and eat before the baby was fed, had his diaper changed and was comfortably tucked into his little bed.

This time Severus voluntarily put aside his book and parchment to eat.

"I'm almost done with the family tree." he reported. "It seems you have 14 living relatives counting Thomas Malfoy, who we already know isn't going to take you in. Of the others most are rather old as well and would probably not be any better suited to be your guardians. Therefore we can narrow our search down to three of your cousins. I think I already mentioned Eugene and Jeremiah Malfoy to you this morning. The third is Eusebia Coleman. She is apparently married to one James Coleman with at least one child, a boy named Daniel. Daniel ought to be twelve now and therefore should already be going to Hogwarts. As there was no first year by that name at the school this year, we have to assume that Daniel is either a squib or has been sent to a different school, which might indicate that the Colemans no longer live in England."

"I don't like that idea." Draco decided after a moment's thought. "They might want me to change schools so I'll be going to the same place as Daniel. Isn't there some forty year old aunt who's single and lives somewhere in London?"

"I'm afraid not, but if you don't like the Colemans we can concentrate on finding Eugene and Jeremiah for now. If they left the country, they might take weeks to find anyway. I might have to check all the foreign 'Where do I Send my Owls' to do it."

"In that case I'd prefer Jeremiah. He might have a baby." decided Draco.

"Okay, then we'll visit Jeremiah first if at all possible, but I want to look up both their addresses and even try to find the Colemans' as well. I know which branch of the family each of them belongs to so I think I ought to be able to find the right books rather quickly."

"You want to find them by the family branches? How?"

"By tracking down which branch lives or used to live on which property as a first step. Then we'll concentrate on the more recent books about that property. We already know where Eugene's ancestors lived, now we need to find a more recent book on the old wizarding families of that area. That would most likely mention him as the heir to Thomas Malfoy's mansion and most likely where he moved out to."

"Then Eugene would be the easiest to find? What if we don't find Jeremiah?"

"Then we'd have to resort to asking Eugene first. He might still be a lot nicer than Jeremiah for all we know and we can always ask him for Jeremiah's address before we make the final decision where you're going to stay."

"I'd still rather go to Jeremiah first."
"And we will, if we can find both their addresses by Sunday, which we most likely will anyway. As long as they are still in England they shouldn't be too hard to track down. I already brought two books that might have Eugene's address home along with 'The Malfoys' and will try to find something on Jeremiah's family tomorrow."

"You're going to Hogwarts again tomorrow?"

"Yes, I'd better take 'The Malfoys' back. Since it doesn't give any addresses it won't help us any further and I don't want Filch to notice that too many books are missing. They're not supposed to leave the castle. Now, are you going to wash the dishes today?"

"Oh, sure!" Draco exclaimed jumping up and grabbing for the first plate in sight.

"Better hurry up, before your friends take off without you." teased Sarah.

"They won't." laughed Draco. "We're going swimming again and Mike promised to come over and lend me his swimming trunks."

"Swimming?" asked Snape. "You'd better show me that arm again first."

Obediently, but feeling slightly nervous Draco trudged back over to Severus and took off his sling. What if his arm wasn't well enough to go swimming yet? Would he have to stay at home while all the others were having fun?

Severus carefully unwrapped the bandages. The arm looked perfectly fine underneath. As if it had never been hurt at all. He felt it for a while, told Draco to bend it a few times and then nodded to the boy.

"Do you still feel the injury?"

"No, it feels just fine."

"Well, I guess then it's alright to take the bandages off now, but you have to tell me at once if it starts hurting again." Snape decided.

"Okay, I will. Thanks." and Draco dashed back to the kitchen sink hoping to get the dishes done before Mike arrived.

That proved to be a vain attempt though as the doorbell rang with the now familiar BRRRING! only a moment later and Sarah opened the door to let Mike in.

"Don't tell me you're still doing chores!" he exclaimed when he saw Draco still at work.

"Professor Snape wanted to take a look at my arm fist." Draco defended himself. "And I'm almost done anyway."

The last wasn't quite true, but silenced Mike's protest about wasting time on something as stupid as dishes.

About ten minutes later they were off even managing to talk themselves out of taking 'That Dog' along who stared after them with big longing doggy eyes. Draco actually felt a tiny bit sorry for him, but he could well imagine the trouble 'That Dog' would cause at the pond. Chasing children, tangling his lead around people's feet and tripping them, disturbing half asleep sunbathers with his barking, ... The pond was no place for 'That Dog'.

The weather was still extremely hot and Draco was glad he wasn't wearing anything besides the swimming trunks. The rest of the gang were waiting for them sitting in the shadow of a tree looking exhausted from the heat already.

Cathy Cat managed to look stunning even tough she was lying flat on her back on her towel a hand dropped over her eyes against the gleaming sunlight. She sat up when they approached though and sent Draco a wonderful smile and a seductive wink. Oh, she was just so irresistible! Draco found himself smiling back.

Jack glared at him for that, but didn't comment. He probably feared that Cathy would get even closer to Draco just to spite him, if he admitted that it bothered him.

The pavement under their bare feet was uncomfortably hot and it only got worse once they were out of the park where the trees and bushes provided at least a little protection from the blazing sun. Stepping on stones stung even worse when your feet were already burned from walking on overheated asphalt. Or was that just Draco's imagination that made it seem so bad?

The way seemed longer than usual to all of them as they longed to reach the cool water, but still were unwilling to run in this heat.

"We're all going to have sunburn tomorrow." complained Sammie. "We should have stayed home."

"And gotten sick from the heat in the stuffy rooms?" asked Mike. "No thanks. I'd rather take my chances with sunburn. There's potions for that."

"We could have opened the windows to let some air in." insisted Sammie.

"Some very hot air." Matt reminded him. "My Mum barricaded all the windows with curtains to keep the heat out. Of course now it's so dark inside you can't find a thing. It took me ten minutes just to find a towel."

"Well, why didn't you just turn on the lights then?" asked Draco trying not to think about sunburn too much. His pale skin burned much too easily for his comfort.

"You don't turn on the lights in the middle of the day and besides lamps give off heat as well as light. It would only make the room even hotter."

"Did you have cold lunch today then?" asked Cathy teasingly. "Stoves give off heat as well. A lot more heat than lamps in fact."

"Do all electric things give off heat then?" Draco asked intrigued. Despite the fact that he had been concentrating on his Math exercises of late he was still fascinated by everything electric.

"I think so." answered Mike slightly confused. Why would anyone care about that? Electric things just were. They were useful of course, but as long as they weren't broken one didn't waste time thinking about them.

"Well, except for refrigerators, I guess." added Sammie. "Refrigerators are supposed to produce cold so they wouldn't give off heat."

"Yes, they do." said Charlie suddenly. "They're cold inside, but on the outside the back is warm."

"Nonsense Charlie." scoffed Larry. "Refrigerators are cold."

"Oh really? You obviously haven't ever touched the back of one before. Try it and you'll see that
"It's warm."

"The back of our fridge is all pushed up against the wall. I can't just go and pull it away just to touch it. Mum would have a fit."

"In that case you're just gonna have to believe me. I helped to set up our new fridge last year and when we removed the old one the back was warm."

"That was probably because it was broken, Charlie." decided Matt. "That's why you got the new one in the first place. A fridge isn't supposed to get warm."

"We had to get a new one because the door wasn't closing right anymore." corrected Charlie. "The rest of it was working just fine. And don't tell me you believe that a door can influence whether something gets hot or not."

"Of course it can." grinned Mike. "I bet the open door caused the inside of the fridge to get warmer than it was supposed to be."

"Oh you!" Charlie lounged for Mike who evaded her with one faster step. "We're talking about the outside. The door can't influence the outside temperature."

"Really? Bet it let as much cold out as it let warmth in." teased Mike.

Luckily they reached the pond before Charlie got seriously angry with Mike and started a fight. Their usual place under the tree was taken by a group of adults and Jack steered them clear of them and towards an inviting patch of grass without hesitation. The place wasn't as good as their favourite spot under the tree, but Draco didn't mind and supposed that the others wouldn't either.

Indeed nobody protested. They just flung their towels to the ground and walked off into the water too tired from the heat to even race those last few meters.

Once inside they felt better immediately and by the time they'd reached the swimming tree all exhaustion was long forgotten and they splashed about and dunked each other just as wildly as they'd done the last week. Draco plunged happily into the fight hesitating only once when he almost collided with Jack.

Should he dare attack the gang leader? How would Jack react if Draco dunked him? It wouldn't help their relationship to avoid him, but then if he angered Jack now, they'd probably never get along.

Draco finally settled for just splashing him and diving off after Mike which seemed to have been the right decision as Jack just blinked the water out of his eyes laughing and went after Larry who was making another attempt at climbing the tree.

Later when they were resting on the tree Sammie climbed over to sit beside him and whisper into his ear: "Matt says it's okay."

He didn't say any more about it, but that wasn't necessary and would probably have attracted Jack's interest in their conversation. Keeping that in mind Draco just smiled at Sammie in response and sent a small nod over at Matt the next time he caught his eye. That had to be enough of an answer for now.

Then he leaned back brushing very gently and seemingly unintentionally against Cathy's leg and relaxed. Cathy was once again sitting right behind him, but was keeping a little more distance than last time now that Jack was around to see. Draco didn't mind all that much. It was better to keep
peace with the gang leader and he didn't have a chance at a lasting relationship with Cathy anyway. How he sometimes wished he didn't have to leave!

But then again taking care of him was certainly expensive for the Snapes and they had little enough money as it was. They didn't need somebody else's kid around, if he wasn't going to pay them back the money they spent on him.

Mary and Larry were once again together at the broad end of the tree trunk and ... what was this? Were they actually holding hands? Draco grinned slightly to himself. 'Way to go, Larry.' he thought. Larry might not be particularly bright, but he obviously knew how to impress the girl of his choice.

Then again, maybe he just knew how to impress Mary the half ogre, but since she obviously was the girl of his choice, it didn't make a big difference.

Matt and Charlie clearly hadn't reached the state Mary and Larry had yet. Charlie was sitting near the happy couple with her back turned towards them watching Matt fool around with Sammie with a slightly discontented and longing look on her face. Matt obviously wasn't noticing at all.

Sammie's manoeuvre to get close to Draco past Jack and Mike had caused Matt to follow him and come perilously close to Draco and Cathy as well and Draco really hoped that the two would manage to keep their balance on the trunk or at least not pull him along when they finally fell in.

He also hoped the sudden change of position hadn't aroused Jack's suspicion as they had both had to squeeze past him and Mike rather awkwardly, but then Sammie and Matt never did seem to sit still on the tree for even a moment and that was probably exactly the kind of thing Jack would expect them to do. Maybe the gang leader was considering himself lucky to be out of the immediate danger zone around them and hadn't even thought about why they'd decided to endanger Draco instead of him for a change.

Draco did wonder what Jack and Mike were talking about for a while, but he supposed that he wouldn't exactly be welcome to join their conversation and it was just too nice and comfortable to lie here in the sun and feel the soft skin of Cathy's leg against his arm. Whenever the squealing and laughter from Sammie and Matt subsided for a moment he thought he could even hear her soft breathing, but that might have been just his imagination. It was a nice and relaxing though.

Jack finally roused him from his half asleep state when he stood up, stretched and announced: "Okay, lets go back before somebody decides to steal our towels."

A moment later Jack disappeared into the water with a big splash getting everyone near him thoroughly wet once again. Larry followed his example only an instant later, but a lot less elegantly and the tree began to shake and roll throwing the rest of them off as well. Draco spit out water and dove off after Larry. This sudden bath deserved a good dunk at least!

Later they lay on their towels in the blazing sun exhausted, but happy. Draco could already feel his skin begin to burn, but he was feeling much too lazy to go look for some place in the shade and most likely there wasn't any left anyway. There were more people about then ever before. It seemed all of West Hogsmeade had fled from the heat into the cool water of the pond.

"We're not playing tomorrow." announced Jack to everyone's surprise. "My Mum's decided we need to repaint her flat and consequently I'll be dragging furniture out of the way all day."

"I can't come out either." sighed Mike. "We're visiting Grandma again. It's her birthday and she wants all the family stuffed into Uncle Davy's little flat for the occasion."
"You're lucky to have a Grandma, Mike," retorted Cathy. "And an uncle, for that matter. I'll be babysitting all morning, but I'm free in the afternoon."

"Well, guess I'll just spend he morning practising ballet then." decided Charlie. "We can go out and do some girl stuff in the afternoon."

Mary and Cathy nodded avidly to that suggestion and Daco began to see his chance. Now if only Larry ...

"Mum's got a few things she wants repaired around our flat and Dad's just too drunk to do it most of the time. Do you guys mind if I ..." Larry began as if on clue.

"Hey no, that's okay." Draco said at once. "We wouldn't be enough to play anyway. Maybe Sammie and Matt could show me that game they're playing over there? It looks interesting."

Sammie looked up from the strange little box he'd been concentrating on for a while now and stared at Draco incredulously. "What? My gameboy?"

Draco winked at him hoping desperately Sammie would get it. "Yes, it must be a muggle thing, right? I've never heard of it before."

"Oh, it's really just one of those funny little electric toys. Nothing special, you know."

"Electric?" Now Draco was really interested. "I'd love to know how it works. Electricity is so fascinating!"

Sammie still stared at Draco confused, but Matt understood.

"Hey, that's actually a great idea. It'll be a lot more fun than just to sit around at home, if we'd meet at the shed though. I could even bring my ball and you can try kicking it again, Dragon. Maybe we'll make a real Soccer player out of you yet." he suggested nudging Sammie.

"Oh, right!" Sammie finally understood, but almost betrayed their secret. "That way we can all take turns. The gameboy's only for one player actually, you know, but if the other two'd play ball in the meantime, it's gonna work."

"What are you gonna play, if there's only two of you? You can't even have a match." said Larry.

"Well, I still need to learn how to shoot straight." Draco reminded him. "And maybe we can come up with something once we're there. Just kicking the ball about is better than doing nothing at all."

"And what about your Math studies?" Mike teased him. Draco's interest in a purely muggle subject had caused a lot of laughter when the Rakers had discovered it and they still loved to tease him about it.

"There's enough time for those after dinner." grinned Draco. "If we'd play, like we always do, I wouldn't get to do any exercises before then either."

On the way home he hung back to talk to Sammie a little.

"Don't you see, tomorrow morning is the perfect chance to start your training. All the others will be busy and after Matt's suggestion they won't even be surprised, if they do happen to come by and see us with the ball."

"Then you don't really want me to bring the gameboy at all?" Sammie asked. "I almost thought ..."
"Oh no, bring it. I want to know how it works." grinned Draco.

"But it's really just a simple toy. And I haven't the slightest idea how it really works. I just know how to play."

"It's electric." explained Draco. "Everything electric is interesting and I'll find out how exactly it works someday. Right now I'm satisfied with getting to look at it and trying it out." Seeing Sammie's doubtful look he added. "I promise I won't try to take it apart. Mrs Snape won't let me open up any of her electric things either. I'm used to it."

Sammie still didn't look entirely happy with the whole thing, but he agreed to bring the gameboy. Draco just hoped that he wouldn't conveniently forget about it in the morning. Then again there'd be other chances to study a 'gameboy' whatever it really was once he'd finished school and went to the muggle world to learn Physics.

A/N - Will Draco and Cathy ever kiss? (I don't even know the answer to that one) Will Sammie bring his gameboy next chapter or will he try to keep it safely out of Draco's reach?

In the next chapter: We find out what Sevi does about Draco's sunburn, Matt and Sammie explain TV and what it has to do with Muggle Studies and the Rakers take revenge on the Sharks.
Chapter Notes

A/N - Narcissa's maiden name and her brother Gringolf are borrowed from my friend Pega Pony.

Chapter 13: Soccer Training and Spray Paint

Draco woke the next morning hurting all over. He should have remembered to ask Professor Snape for something for sunburn before he'd gone to bed he thought. Every little movement hurt.

He closed his eyes again and tried to lie as still as possible. 'Don't move. Don't move.' he thought to himself as he waited for the burning to subside. Ahh yes, that was better. Much better.

He continued to lie still. Was the pain still there? He felt just fine now. How far could he move until it would hurt again? Slowly he started to roll to his back. Would that ...? Ouch! Yes, the pain was still there. He shouldn't have moved. 'Lie still. Don't move.'

Again he lay still. Again the pain subsided after a bit. Was it still there? Would it hurt again, if he moved? Of course it would, but it didn't feel like it now. Maybe if he moved just a little bit ... Ouch!

Munin fluttered in a few minutes later. "Good morning!"

"Morning bird." Draco lifted one arm to stroke the raven's gleaming black feathers. Ouch!

"Fly?" Munin asked slightly confused by Draco's pained expression. He obviously wasn't familiar with sunburn.

Draco watched with envy as the bird shook his feathers absolutely pain free.

"I'm not getting up today. You can sit there and protest as long as you want."

"Caw?"

"It hurts to move, so I'll just stay in bed and not move until it goes away." Draco explained.

"Fly!" ordered Munin, but Draco didn't react.

The raven tried to pull on Draco's blanket for a while then tried to talk him into getting up again, but when nothing seemed to help he decided to go get Severus again. Severus always knew what to do.

When Snape saw Draco curled up in bed with Munin sitting beside him complaining loudly, he laughed.

"What's wrong?" he asked the boy.
"Sunburn." Draco answered grumpily.

"I see that. What else is wrong?"

"It hurts!" hissed Draco sitting up angrily and immediately regretting the movement. It felt like his whole body was on fire.

"Well, in that case I suggest you do something about it."

"I am doing something about it. I'm staying in bed until it goes away."

"That might not be the wisest course of action." commented Severus grinning slightly.

Draco could have throttled him for standing there in the door so smugly while he was suffering.

"And why is that?"

"Well, for one thing you're going to miss breakfast and get very hungry. Then there are your friends who will most likely wait for you to come out and play. Do you really want to disappoint them? And then you're not going to get to play and embarrass Jack again."

"I'm only supposed to meet Sammie and Matt today anyway. Everybody else has somewhere else to be this morning and it still hurts." complained Draco.

"That is your own fault you know. You could have stayed out of the sun."

"There wasn't any room left in the shade. I think the whole of Hogsmeade was at the lake yesterday."

"You exaggerate. Anyway, this won't get much better soon unless you do something about it."

"Like what? Do you have any sunburn potions lying around?"

"No. ... But I do have all the necessary ingredients and the books that say how to make them."

Draco groaned. Snape expected him to climb out of bed and search for potion recipes while his whole body was on fire?

"You are going to have to help me brew this one, you know." Severus informed him calmly.

In response Draco only groaned again.

"Oh, come on. I'll give you the recipe. It doesn't take that long to make."

With a heavy sigh and a pained wince Draco finally climbed out of bed. He just knew this was going to be one of the worst days of his life.

Actually it turned out not to be a bad day at all. The potion Severus chose was indeed fast to brew if a little difficult for a fifteen year old student. Severus himself could probably have brewed it blindfolded in less than five minutes, but he wanted Draco to learn how to help himself and was quite convinced that Draco could do it even without any help. But that would have taken some time and he knew that Draco was in pain. With Severus' help it took the boy a little over ten minutes and was actually fun.

"Can we at least add lemon leaves?" Draco asked once all the ingredients were in.
"We could, of course, but there's no actual reason to do it. This potion isn't meant for drinking."

"Oh. What's next then?"

"Boil for about half a minute, then take off the fire and let cool. Once potion is cool enough, rub onto sunburn. Sunburn should disappear completely within the next half hour. No known side effects."

"Huh?"

"Never seen a muggle medicine or microwave meal before?"

"No."

"That's the kind of instructions you find on the packages of those."

Munin cocked his head and gave Severus one of his queer bird looks and Draco found he had to agree with the raven. 'No known side effects.' indeed. Since when did one mention side effects, if a potion didn't have any?

"So how long do you think this will take until it's cool enough?" he asked carefully pulling the cauldron off the burner.

"Oh, no time at all." grinned Severus flicking his wand at the cauldron once.

Immediately the smoke disappeared and when Draco cautiously touched it with one finger the cauldron was cold. He looked over at his teacher surprised. That wasn't a normal cooling charm. At least it wasn't the one he'd learned in Flitwick's class. That one required a word and a much more complicated wand movement. Draco knew that some spells could be done without words to go with them. His father had mentioned it and yes, now that he thought about it, he'd seen Snape do it before. According to Lucius those spells required only a sufficient amount of concentration and power. ... Lucius had also admitted that he'd never successfully performed one of them.

"How did you do that?"

"With a simple cooling charm."

"I didn't hear you say anything."

"I didn't. It's a silent spell. Fast and efficient. And usually they don't attract much attention either. I find that quite useful in class, because it doesn't disturb pupils' concentration as much as casting one of the more commonly used spells does."

"Can you teach me?" Draco asked excitedly.

But Snape shook his head. "You're too young. You don't have the necessary power yet. I could show you exactly how it's done, but you wouldn't get any results. Maybe in a few years, but not now."

"Oh, are you sure I couldn't learn? Father always said I had very strong magic for my age."

"I know, but you still don't have as much power as an adult and even some adults never learn."

Draco watched his teacher closely through most of breakfast. Just how powerful was Snape? 'Some adults never learn' he'd said and clearly Lucius was one of those, but Lucius wasn't a weak wizard. Draco had always admired his father's power. He wondered just how many wizards really could
master silent spells. He'd have to watch his teachers more closely from now on. Maybe he'd find out that way.

"Will we learn silent spells at Hogwarts?" he finally asked between two bites.

"No, as I said, it takes an adult wizard or witch to do them. Even most seventh years aren't up to that."

"Then where did you learn?"

Snape stared down at his plate. "Dumbledore."

That made sense. Dumbledore was one of the two most powerful wizards alive. Of course he'd be able to perform silent spells. But that didn't really tell Draco anything about how many other wizards could do this kind of magic, or how powerful one had to be. The question remained. How powerful was Severus Snape?

And why didn't he seem to want to talk about it? Or did that have something to do with the mysterious relationship between him and Dumbledore? Draco by now knew enough to understand that Snape was closer to the headmaster than he let on most of the time, but on the other hand he'd also made it clear that he felt that he was in Dumbledore's debt and therefore didn't want to ask him for favours while Draco had also gotten the impression that Dumbledore felt just as indebted to Snape. Who really owed whom there? It was beginning to get very confusing.

Maybe there was no way of solving that puzzle without hearing Dumbledore's side of the story and he couldn't just go to the headmaster's office once school started again and ask. Maybe Harry Potter the great Gryffindor hero could do that, but not Draco Malfoy the Slytherin a death eater's son. Then again Professor Snape was a Slytherin as well. How did that fit in with anything he knew about the headmaster?

Draco kept watching his teacher, but didn't see anything unusual anymore.

After breakfast Draco went down into the park to find that Sammie had been true to his word and brought the little grey box despite his worries about what Draco might do to it. First they had to get some work done though, he decided.

Matt's ball looked a lot newer than Jack's and Matt soon explained that he hadn't had it for long and of course it hadn't seen as much use as Jack's. Still it was just the same weight and size and Draco was confident that it wouldn't make much of a difference which ball they played with. Actually this one looked a lot nicer.

For now they just played one on one. Draco defended the goal and Sammie tried to get the ball in, while Matt was watching and taking care of the gameboy and 'That Dog'. The later was of course the more difficult charge, but Draco had reminded Matt that he could always tie the little nuisance to the bench he was sitting on or even to one of the bushes or trees. Matt didn't do it though. He seemed to actually enjoy playing with 'That Dog' and considering the fact that there was nothing else for him to do at the moment, Draco could even understand that.

One on one training was exhausting, Draco discovered. During a normal game he'd always have time to rest in between the attacks on his goal while Cathy and Sammie were doing their stuff over on Mary's side of the field. Now that it was only Sammie attacking all the time there was no chance to rest.

It was just as hard for Sammie though, who wasn't used to having the ball all the time either and so
they stopped after a while panting and thirsty. Sammie led Draco to a waterline which was probably used to water the park and they both drank directly from the tab. Draco only hoped that the water really came from the normal waterline and was okay to drink. He didn't really feel like falling ill and burdening the Snapes with that on top of everything else. Not that he would have liked the idea of falling ill if he'd have been back at home at Malfoy Manor. Being sick in the middle of the holidays? No thanks!

The gameboy turned out to be a rather frustrating toy. No matter how easy Sammie and Matt made the game look, Draco just kept losing hopelessly practically the moment he started the game. All of his friends' tips couldn't prevent that he kept reacting too late and pushing the wrong buttons.

The little screen and the moving objects on it however were fascinating and Draco loved to watch them move about while one of the others played. And then Sammie activated the sound.

Draco stared. He'd known that electric objects could produce sounds of course. The doorbell did that as well as Sarah's mixer and he also knew radios that could produce music, but this was still totally unexpected for him.

Of course the odd beeping sounds were far from what Draco would normally consider music, but still they seemed to be quite an accomplishment for a little grey box with buttons that already had a screen with moving objects.

And that was just an ordinary toy? How could it be able to do so many different things?

Sammie just grinned when Draco asked him that. He ended his current game and pulled out another game cartridge. Draco watched fascinated as he exchanged the little squares and started the new game.

Different moving objects! Different music!

"It's just the 'little square' that tells it all it has to do. The gameboy itself is much like a common tape player: Insert different tape, play different music. All the information what it has to do is in here." Sammie explained holding the other little square right under Draco's nose.

"Tape player?" Draco repeated confused. Whatever was that?

"Yep. Why don't you try this game for a change?" Sammie suggested. "Maybe you'll find it easier."

Draco tried, but did no better than with the other game. That gameboy thing was just too fast for him and ... What button did what again? Again he preferred to watch the others play. Watching the moving objects still was a lot more fun than actually trying to make them move.

"Don't you have a TV at home?" Matt asked him shaking his head at his fascination with the little screen.

"TV? What's that? I've never even heard of it."

Matt looked to Sammie a little helplessly. How to explain TV? Sammie however was busy with his game and didn't even look up.

"Well, it's like that little screen, but it's a lot bigger and it shows films and such stuff. You know, a bit like a small cinema you can keep at home."

"Cinema? What's a cinema? And what's a film?"
"Well ... er ..."

"Do you know what a theatre is?" Sammie asked putting his gameboy aside for the moment.

"Of course I do. It's where you go to watch plays."

"Well, the cinema is a theatre too, but instead of the actors being actually there and acting on a stage their play is shown on a big screen. The actors can live in a whole different country, even speak a different language or be dead. They just have to act the play once and it gets filmed with a special camera. You know, like a photo camera only that it photographs the whole play instead of just one moment. And then you can make as many copies of the film as you like and sell them to cinemas all over the world and they just have to hire a few different actors to record the text that goes with the pictures in a different language and people all over the world can see the same play with the same actors at the same time."

"And with that TV thing you can buy such a film and just watch it at home?"

"Oh no," said Matt. "You need a video recorder for that and even then you have to buy a different copy. They use a different kind of electric thing to show the films at the cinema."

"And the TV works just like a radio, only with pictures." added Sammie. "There's a central sender and they send out a signal that the TV picks up and then shows the film."

"Radio with pictures instead of sound? That's strange."

"Oh no, Dragon! It has sound as well as pictures of course."

"Really? Do you have one?"

"No, it's too expensive. We see films in school sometimes. Mostly in Charms and Herbology. Oh and in Muggle Studies of course."

"They show you plays in school?"

"Only those of the theatre group. The films we see are educational of course. They demonstrate how to do a Charm in Charms and we watch nature documentaries in Herbology."

"And in Muggle Studies? What do you learn there?" Draco asked eagerly.

"Oh, all sorts of things. TV is a Muggle object after all. There's a film about everything to do with Muggles."

"I've got to get permission to take that subject. Maybe the Muggle Studies class at Hogwarts has a TV too."

"Why would you need a special permission to take Muggle Studies?" Sammie asked sounding confused.

"Because I didn't choose it in my third year. My father wouldn't have approved."

"And you're sure you want to take it? It's boring, I tell you." declared Matt.

"Then why don't you drop it?"

"I can't. It's mandatory for Squibs. There are a lot of classes you can't take, if you can't perform magic so we don't get much choice and Muggle Studies are considered especially useful for us."
"Oh. Well, I'd still love to learn more about Muggles. I want to go to Muggle school to learn Physics after I graduate and I need to know as much about Muggles as I possibly can to be able to pass for one there."

"Muggle school? Why would you want to go to Muggle school? As a Hogwarts graduate you'll be able to get just about any job you want."

"But I want to be either a Physics teacher or an Electrician and you need to go to Muggle school for both."

"Are you sure the Snapes aren't your parents?" grinned Matt.

"Of course they're not. Would be nice though. What's that got to do with anything?"

"Just because you said you want to go to Muggle school and be a teacher, just like Professor Snape."

"But that doesn't make him my father, Matt! And anyway he didn't go to Muggle school to become a teacher. He wanted to become an Alchemist."

"Technicalities, Dragon. I still think you're trying to be him."

"I'm not. I could never be. There are so many things he has done or can do that I never could."

Draco said remembering the silent spells and Snape's admission of having infiltrated the death eaters. Snape was so much more powerful and courageous. Draco could never be like that.

"Come on, I'm well rested now." Sammie urged him after a few minutes of silence. "You've got to be too. Let's get back to training."

Draco smiled. Sammie was obviously beginning to see the sense of practising. He was indeed showing first improvements even though he hadn't yet managed to get the ball past Draco. He was using his speed to his advantage though and had also begun to shoot from various and unexpected positions. That was promising. It was just the kind of thing that would give Mary trouble. Draco was able to adapt and change position fast enough, but Mary had to rely on anticipating what side of the goal the ball would come flying at most of the time and Sammie was making that more and more difficult. Now all he needed was better aim.

They practised for a few more minutes until Draco came up with a plan for that. At first he just made Sammie try to shoot the ball through between him and Matt from various distances narrowing the gap every time Sammie succeeded. Then they started moving the 'goal' to force Sammie to aim more quickly.

That exercise proved to be very difficult for Sammie, while not quite as exhausting for any of them as trying to get the ball past Draco had been. It required more concentration than physical exercise from Sammie and due to the difficulty the exercise posed for Sammie Draco and Matt didn't have to move all that quickly. They walked more than they ran.

They kept practising until lunchtime and came back for another two hours of training afterwards, but after that they were all tired of the game and Draco decided to go home and get some Math exercises done to give his aching feet a rest.

He found that Professor Snape had returned to studying the Hogwarts library books when he returned and for a while they just sat side by side each working on his own project.

"I've found Eugene." Snape announced finally seeing that Draco had just finished another problem.
"He lives in an apartment in Diagon Alley. I'm not quite sure of the exact address yet, but finding that won't be difficult. My guess is that it'll be one of the more expensive apartments over the bigger shops. There aren't too many of those and I can ask one of my friends who hang around the Leaky Cauldron about them."

"Friends who hang around the Leaky Cauldron?" Draco repeated. Something about the way Snape had said that had sounded odd.

"My information contacts. Just the typical type of unemployed alcoholics who have nothing to do but sit at the bar, drink and gossip all day. They know everything and everyone, but nobody really pays them any attention anymore, because they've been there so long they've become part of the scenery. They can and will probably tell me the whole story of Eugene's life for the price of a few drinks and the best thing about them is that they won't even remember what we talked about or when they last saw me in the morning."

"You're going to erase their memories?!"

"No, the alcohol will. Once you've reached a certain level of intoxication such things just don't take hold in your brain for very long anymore. Alcoholics are really the easiest informants, if you have the patience to repeat yourself often enough and get them to make sense. They are rather slow on the uptake and sometimes they're so confused they just don't make sense."

"Confused?"

"Alcohol numbs the senses. Even a very small amount influences the brain. You don't notice when you're drinking yourself, but if you stay sober and watch others drink it's almost scary how their brains slow down even after only one drink."

"What about my other relatives? Have you found out anything about them?" Draco asked deciding he'd heard enough about drunkards and alcohol. It reminded him too much of his father. One thing he was sure of, though. He'd always avoid drinking as much as he could. Who knew, it might be hereditary and he never wanted to be anything like Lucius. Not anymore.

"Nothing so far on Jeremiah but the Colemans might be somewhere in America. At least it says in that book over there that they left for Mr. Coleman's home in America right after the wedding. They might have moved since then, but I don't think it's likely."

"Okay, so we know where two of them live. All we need is to find Jeremiah now."

"Not quite. America might narrow down the search area from the whole world considerably, but it's still a whole continent. The book probably meant the USA, but theoretically America might just as well mean Canada or one of the south American countries."

"South America? You think they might be in South America?"

"No, not really. You don't usually say America when you mean South America. I'm pretty sure they meant the USA, but that's still a very big country to search. We'll need to narrow it down and it won't be easy. Maybe we can contact some of your other relatives about their address though."

"Lets just try to find Jeremiah instead, okay. He sounds nicest."

"Draco we don't know any of these people. You can't tell what they're like from their birth dates or where they live."

"But he's married and might have a baby."
Severus rolled his eyes at Draco. "I ought to put an annonce into the Daily Prophet: 'Wanted: Family with baby. Purpose: Adoption of teenager.' That'd spare me all the trouble with your relatives."

"Could they even adopt me, if they aren't related to me in any way?" Draco asked grinning.

"They'd just need the written declaration of all your living relatives, that they don't intend to take you in themselves and wouldn't mind you being adopted by them."

"They'd have to ask all 14 of them? That'd take a lot of travelling."

"Actually it'd just take a lot of writing. Your Uncle Thomas for example would most likely be quite willing to send his confirmation by owl. Others would want to meet them though, but if they'd really want you, they'd be willing to do that."

"Fourteen are still a lot of relatives even if you only have to visit half of them. I don't think anybody would want to do that."

"And you're only counting your relatives on your father's side. They'd have to ask your mother's family as well."

"The Glizzards?"

"Yes, do you know any of them?"

"No, but I've heard of Gringolf Glizzard, of course. He's my Mum's brother I think. Have you ever heard him sing? It's so embarrassing to be related to someone like that."

"He does make a lot of money with his songs though. He might be another candidate to adopt you. You'd probably inherit even more money than you would have from Lucius."

"Gringolf Glizzard? Are you serious? That idiot who sings stuff like 'Loving my Sweet Lover'. I couldn't live with him. No way!"

"Think about it, Draco. He can offer you anything you might want, he's famous, all the girls would be after you..."

"He's embarrassing. I'm lucky nobody at school knows I'm related to a one man boy group. You're not really considering to make me move in with him, are you?"

"Not at the moment, no. You still have all of your father's family after all. I'd only fall back on him, if none of them could take you. He's the only relative of your mother I can think off."

"Well, I guess at least one of those three will want me." Draco decided relieved. "Is he really the only family Mother had?"

"I'm not entirely sure. I didn't know Narcissa all that well, but I know that her parents are both dead and she had only that one brother. She may have had some cousins though. I never had a reason to ask, if her parents had any siblings."

"We ought to be able to find that out though, shouldn't we? There have to be books on the Glizzards at the library as well as on the Malfoys."

"Of course there are, though not quite as many as the family was never as politically active as the Malfoys. The public interest was never very big and I believe the family itself was always small
too. We can take a look at the books once we're done with our Malfoy research."

Draco soon returned to his Math book hoping fervently that Professor Snape would find Jeremiah's address soon and that he could move in there. And if not there then into Eugene's apartment in Diagon Alley. It sure would be nice to live right on the biggest shopping street in London. He could go out shopping any time he wanted to, or just stroll through the alley watching all the people bustle about whenever he got bored. Quality Quiddich Supplies would be just around the corner and he could sneak out through the Leaky Cauldron to take a look at Muggle London with all its electric things.

Even moving to America with Aunt Eusebia suddenly didn't sound entirely bad anymore. At least he'd be far away from Gringolf Glizzard. With a little luck the Colemans lived in some little town where there wasn't even a concert hall anywhere near and if they didn't he'd just have to make sure to stay far away from any Gringolf Glizzard concerts.

Friday's Soccer match proved that Sammie had really improved his shooting skills though not obviously enough to rouse any suspicions. The others probably just thought that he had a particularly good day when he almost scored twice.

The game ended as a draw however since Sammie didn't quite succeed and Mike was careful not to let Cathy repeat her surprise goal.

"Well, we almost did it." Draco told his team afterwards.

"We didn't even sore a single goal." Sammie complained once again sounding depressed.

"You got a lot closer to it than last time." Draco reminded him. "If Mary had been only an inch more to the right during your last attempt, it'd have gone it. And that wasn't your only almost goal in this game."

"It's still not good enough. Cathy would have gotten the ball in."

"Maybe, but she didn't get the chance and you gave it a good try. It didn't work today, but there's always tomorrow."

Sammie sighed not quite satisfied with that promise, but stopped complaining and trudged over to join the rest of the gang who'd gathered around Jack. Draco followed him expecting the usual banter and 'See you later.', but when he got there Jack was wearing a grin he hadn't seen before. Something was going on.

"We'll meet at the shed after lunch and don't forget to bring the spray paint." he told the assembled gang.

"Spray paint?" asked Draco confused. Whatever would they need spray paint for.

"Yes, preferably blue paint of course, but bring anything you've got. We're hitting back on the Sharks."

"With spray paint?" Draco asked again.

How would that work against the Sharks? Was Jack intending to spray them all blue? That didn't seem like a good idea to Draco. Not that he didn't think the Sharks running home all covered in blue paint would be a great show, but he doubted they'd hold still for the procedure and
considering their weapons it didn't seem possible that it should work.

"Yes, with spray paint." Jack confirmed grinning widely and obviously unwilling to disclose any more information.

Draco managed to sneak into the Snapes' bedroom on the pretence of just taking Billy to bed during lunch and once he'd quickly tucked in the baby dug through Sarah's sewing basket for something he could use as a weapon. He didn't want to go into another fight unarmed.

A broken door handle turned out to be the best weapon the sewing basket could provide and it had the additional advantage that Sarah was very unlikely to miss it. Actually Draco wondered why she kept a door handle in her sewing basket at all. There was no way one could sew that into any piece of clothing. Maybe she just used it as a weight to hold paper or fabric in place when she cut it? She'd probably just use something else, if she didn't find it at the first glance in that case.

He pocketed the handle and quickly returned to the living room. For a moment he considered asking Professor Snape for spray paint, but then decided not to risk it. Snape would ask what he needed the paint for and even if he would permit him to participate in an attack on the Sharks, Sarah would forbid it for sure. She'd make him stay at home and he couldn't afford not to show up for such an important event. He'd just borrow some paint from Mike.

He raced to the garden shed immediately after lunch curious to hear Jack's plan, but Jack wasn't there yet. He arrived late grinning again (or maybe even still) a box with several cans of paint under his arm and looking very smug indeed.

"The Sharks have gone to the lake." he announced triumphantly. "I watched them leave from our kitchen window. They didn't leave anybody behind to guard their lair."

"You want to destroy it?" Draco asked surprised. "Didn't Susie say it was in some basement? We can't just take walls apart."

"Not just any basement. Your house's basement. And we might not be able to take them apart, but we can repaint them and take everything in it apart."

"Are you sure, they're all gone?"

"I told you I watched them leave. I counted them, okay?" Jack hissed at Matt. "Now if Cathy or Mike could show us exactly where the Sharks have their meeting place ..."

Cathy and Mike didn't need to be told twice. They led the way back into the house and down to the basement. Despite his intention to see the washing machines again Draco hadn't been here for a while. One look around showed lots of graffiti all over, a detail he hadn't thought of at first.

"Do you think we'll even find room on any of the walls? They'll probably not even mind the additional scrawls."

"Oh, it just depends on what you write." Mike winked at him. "They don't mind their own work, of course, but they will mind ours."

Indeed most of the graffiti around here could well have been Shark work, Draco realised. Most of it was written in red and the word Sharks appeared more than once.

Cathy led on past the room where the boiler meeting had been held. Draco remembered his first encounter with the Sharks. They were going in the same direction the Sharks had fled that day, but that wasn't really surprising, if Draco thought about it. The Sharks had run back to their lair of
course. It was only logical.

The basement was a lot bigger than Draco had expected. Well, maybe it wasn't really bigger, but it appeared to be. Most likely it was the same size as the house, just like the attic. But the attic was one big open space, while the basement was full of twisting corridors and lots of very small rooms. It was quite a maze and Draco suspected that only the Sharks knew all of it.

Their meeting place turned out to be in what Draco suspected was the very last corner of the basement. Then again he'd been lost for a while by the time they reached it. He doubted he would be able to find his way back here again without a guide.

The Sharks' lair was even smaller than Professor Snape's lab, but Draco supposed that it hadn't been chosen for its size. The surrounding area was almost entirely empty except for what might have been waterlines and covered in thick layers of dust. He suspected that no adults ever ventured this deep into the basement which made the room a perfect hideout.

The inside was furnished mostly with cardboard boxes, but there was an old wooden chest as well, which turned out to be open and empty when they examined it more closely. The Sharks hadn't left anything important lying around, but since the Rakers hardly ever left anything in the garden shed either, that didn't surprise Draco.

What was surprising however was that Susie had been able to sneak up and eavesdrop on the Sharks. Draco couldn't see any place that seemed covered enough for her to hide in. The only advantage she'd probably had, was the fact that the Sharks' door was stuck wide open and hanging in its hinges in such a strange position, that Draco doubted it would have shut at all even if they'd managed to drag it closed.

A drawing of a large red shark adorned one wall and Larry at once set to changing that. Soon there was a large harpoon sticking out of the shark's back and a long tongue hanging out of his mouth. Mike picked out the biggest empty spot of wall and decorated it with little spiteful rhymes that kept them all laughing for quite a while and Sammie and Jack were soon working on an artful multicoloured inscription saying 'Rakers rule!' all across the third wall. The girls meanwhile had begun tearing up the cardboard boxes and throwing the pieces around and Matt, obviously lacking artistic inspiration, was just spraying random parts of the room with blue paint.

Draco helped the girls tear up the more resisting boxes for a while. That's he helped Charlie and sometimes Cathy. Mary didn't need any help at all. She was way stronger than Draco anyway and working with her eyes gleaming with glee so much Draco wouldn't have approached her unless his life depended on it. 'Maybe not even then.' he thought watching her shred another box.

"Ha, take that little Fishies!" she roared and grabbed for another one.

Fishies? That gave Draco an idea. Mike had written all kinds of witty insults, but none of them had used the fish theme yet. It would be easy though. The wall beside the door wasn't decorated at all, probably because one couldn't see it coming in, but that would make it just that much sweeter if they found it only after they'd calmed down after their first rush of rage. All he needed were three different colours of paint. ... Or maybe he could use even more and get a little more personal?

Draco just grabbed one of the many cans lying around and sprayed the form of a little fish onto the wall. Now add long hair, a red bandanna and a few blue bubbles rising away from Mark the Fishy ... Yep, that looked pretty good.

With a satisfied smirk Draco raised the spray paint can again to draw a little blond fish with a mirror under one fin, a little dark fish with a chain around his neck and black hair ... he
remembered just in time to add a little scar ... little twin fish, a little female fish with a spiky necklace ...

As the final touch he added a goldfish glass all around the group of fish then stepped back to admire his work.

"Oh look, little fishies!" Sammie giggled behind him. "You ought to add a pointer pointing at Mark and saying 'Fishy'."

"And one saying 'Pretty fishy' for Ricky." added Cathy.

Draco simply held the can out to her. "Feel free to add anything you like."

"Okay everybody," Jack suddenly called from behind them. "I need your signatures over here and then we're off."

Draco watched the others 'sign' Jack and Sammie's artwork. Jack himself had written Jack in blue paint and underlined that with a picture of a knife dripping blood while Sammie had done his best to draw a weasel, but didn't seem to be too good an artist. Well, Draco could tell what it was meant to be, so the Sharks would most likely figure it out as well.

What was he supposed to do now, though? Should he just write his name on the wall? All the others had drawn something special at least though it was hard to decipher the meaning of the twirling multicoloured lines that were all Charlie had produced. They did at least look cool.

Watching Cathy draw a cat with one paw raised to strike claws unsheathed and gleaming he finally got an idea. He took the green paint and carefully sprayed a green dragon right next to Mary's blood dripping signature. Deciding that it looked a little too plain like that he added a few silver spikes on the dragon's back and a little curling black smoke rising from his nostrils. Yep, that was it.

He even found the time to train a little with Sammie and Matt, before he had to go back home for dinner.

"Dako!" Billy came running at him the moment he walked through the door.

"Hey Billy, what's up?" he laughed picking up the baby and twirling him around. Billy just loved being swung around in the air. 'Odd,' Draco thought. 'You'd expect him to be scared, but I guess it just never occurred to him that anybody might drop him.'

"Very colourful." he heard Professor Snape's voice behind him.

"What?"

"Your hands." Severus explained. "They've got paint stains. Just what did you do this afternoon?"

"Oh nothing really. Just a little artistic work." Draco grinned.

He didn't think Snape would punish him, if he told him the truth. After all tomorrow would be his last day at West Hogsmeade and he hadn't even minded when Draco had gotten into a fight. It was just more fun to remain mysterious.

Snape didn't seem to mind. "I've found Jeremiah's address. He lives in a cottage in Wales."

"A cottage? Not a mansion?" Draco asked surprised. He had relatives who lived in cottages and
apartments? How strange!

"Yes, a cottage. It appears to have once been a hunting lodge for the Malfoys that lived in the Welsh mansion, but was turned into a cottage a few generations back to provide a home for some younger son and his wife who didn't get along with the rest of the family. Jeremiah is going to inherit all the family property in Wales, but it seems he didn't want to live in the mansion as long as it still belongs to his uncle and thus remained in the cottage where he grew up."

"He's a descendant of that younger son then?"

Snape nodded. "His uncle's only son died about twenty years ago and thus Jeremiah was made his heir."

"He died? What happened to him?"

"I don't know. None of the books I found give any more information on his death than the date, but it doesn't really matter. He died without leaving any children so there's no one you could go to live with."

"I'd still like to know how he died. It sounds pretty mysterious."

"Twenty years ago was right in the middle of the Voldemort war. A lot of people died back then."

"You think he was a death eater?" Draco asked. Then remembered that Snape had been a spy. "Or do you know?"

"I know nothing about him except what I read today and a lot of people were killed back then, not just death eaters."

"But he was a pureblood, wasn't he?"

"Yes, he was."

"And death eaters only kill Muggles and mudbloods."

"And Squibs and Muggle lovers and aurors and witnesses and generally everybody who happens to stand in their way. Your dead uncle might well have been a young ambitious auror who got too close to their secrets. Or he might have just walked down a street one day and seen a death eater without his mask. That was all it took to get killed back then."

Draco was very quiet for the rest of the evening. His mind kept repeating the same thought again and again and again. 'But he was a pureblood. The death eaters favour purebloods. They don't kill them.' But hadn't James Potter been a pureblood as well? And Professor Snape had warned him that once all Muggles and mudbloods were dead Voldemort would start killing others, probably the near Squibs like Neville Longbottom and then others again. Maybe the stupid ones like Gregory Goyle. Both Neville and Gregory were purebloods as well. It was surprising that he fell asleep at all that night with all the things going through his mind.

A/N: Will Draco move in with Jeremiah? Is this really the end of Draco's stay with the Snapes? Will he ever see the Rakers again?
In the next chapter: Severus and Draco go to visit Jeremiah Malfoy and his wife, ride a wizard and a Muggle train and use the floo network.
Chapter 14: A Trip to Wales

This time Jack did come to Draco's last Soccer game with the Rakers. Maybe they were really starting to get along.

Sammie was in great form and actually scored a goal for his team. After the game he was beaming with pride and didn't even mind that Cathy Cat had scored twice. It was their clearest victory yet and Jack's team looked almost depressed.

The sight of a group of Sharks carrying buckets of white paint cheered them all up though.

"Hey, looks like the Fishies are gonna whitewash their aquarium!" Mary cheered just loud enough for them to hear.

"Well, there's nothing healthier than honest work." confirmed Cathy. "And then there's always the satisfaction of a job well done at the end of a day of hard work."

The Sharks, Pretty Ricky, the two smallest boys and one of the girls Draco hadn't noticed much before, glared at them, but continued on their way. They were careful to stay off Raker territory which meant that they had to make an odd detour from the Black Ring's side of the border path onto their own grounds and then along the side of the house to the door all the time under sharp observation.

"Maybe we ought to warn Angel Anna that there are fish swimming on her turf." Jack suggested with an evil grin.

"Maybe we ought to help her, get rid of them since she isn't around." Larry countered as always spoiling for a fight.

Pretty Ricky paled and fell back behind his companions.

"Hiding behind little children, Ricky, my friend?" Draco asked him sweetly. "You still owe me a fight, you know. You were in such a hurry last time you didn't even have time to tell me where you had to get to so urgently all of a sudden. Maybe this is our chance to fight it out."

Ricky looked about ready to either drop his paint and bolt or faint on the spot.

"Nah, not our ground." Jack finally relented. "We wouldn't want to cross the Black Ring's border without asking. Such nice neighbours as Anna's gang deserve a little consideration. We're not that impolite."

The hidden reference to the Sharks' manners was of course totally lost on Ricky who breathed a sigh of relief and pulled out his mirror for a quick meant to be hidden glance to check his hair. Mike rolled his eyes at that behaviour.

"Well, I guess that was my last chance at a fight against the Sharks." stated Draco more softly once the little group of paint carriers was safely inside and out of sight.

"Maybe not." suggested Sammie. "Maybe that Cousin Jeremiah of yours doesn't want you either
and you get to stay with us for another week."

"Maybe." conceded Draco. "But it's not really likely and then there's still Cousin Eugene in Diagon Alley."

"I still hope Jeremiah doesn't want you." Sammie insisted.

Despite his sadness at leaving the Rakers Draco had decided to spend his last afternoon in West Hogsmeade with Billy. If Cousin Jeremiah let him go back to Hogwarts, he'd get to see his friends on Hogsmeade weekends. Billy he might never see again.

The Baby who had no idea that that was 'Dako's' way of saying goodbye to him was delighted to have his attention and made him play with every last squishy toy he owned, twirl him through the air and cuddle until he dropped into bed totally exhausted.

That had the special advantage that this time Draco didn't wake up in the middle of the night unable to get back to sleep.

It was Munin who woke him as usual in the morning and Draco once again responded with an attempt at hugging the bird. As a creature of the open sky Munin did not appreciate the gesture. He needed freedom to move his wings to be comfortable. Any type of trying to flatten his wings against his body constituted an attack.

With an alarmed "Caw!" the raven fled from the room to the safety of Severus' shoulder where he remained until after breakfast.

Billy responded much better to Draco's hug goodbye and immediately cuddled up against his chest in response. He spent breakfast in Draco's lap thereby successfully stalling their departure since it turned out to be very difficult to eat with one arm around a curious baby.

The cat graciously accepted a hug as well. Apparently he was in the mood to be cuddly.

Sarah hugged him on her own and straightened his Rakers cap before they left. They had to wear muggle clothes under their robes, because they'd have to take a muggle train from London.

'That Dog' barked and jumped excitedly when he realised that he was going out with his master and the boy again. Last time had been such an exciting walk in the forest and then there had been that interesting smelling inn. Only the odd place where the floor had moved and he'd fallen in his attempt to greet that old witch had been scary. He hoped that this time they'd not go there again.

'That Dog's' hopes were disappointed though. They went right to the train station and boarded the southbound morning train.

They could have used the public floo station to floo to the Leaky Cauldron, which would have gotten them to London much faster, but they'd have had to walk through the busy morning traffic to get to Kings Cross Station from where they'd take the muggle train since the station didn't have its own floo connection and Severus who had totally forgotten that most muggles didn't go to work on Sundays didn't want to brave the horrors of the London rush hour.

Instead they took the magical express train which goes between Hogsmeade and London twice a day, once there, once back and takes the same route as the Hogwarts Express, but at more than twice the speed.
Draco watched the world streak past the window with the incredible speed of the train for a while. That was one really fast train!

"How come it goes so much faster than the Hogwarts Express?" he finally asked Severus.

"It has a special spell on it, that the Hogwarts Express doesn't."

"Well, why doesn't it?"

"Tradition, I guess and the fact that it's a very complicated spell. As far as I know this is the only train in Britain that has it."

"But Dumbledore has to be able to do it. Why doesn't he?"

"As I said, because of tradition and because it would be a lot less fun if the journey were so short."

Draco had to think about that. The headmaster's interest in his students having fun was a new concept to him. Why would Dumbledore care? But it seemed that he did. If even Snape actually considered it a good reason not to enspell the train ...

The train despite being so special was almost empty and they had the compartment to themselves for the whole trip. Munin remained cautious and stayed out of Draco's reach most of the time. Draco had hugged him once. He might do it again. Better stay safe and away.

'That Dog' had crawled under Severus' seat again as soon as the train had begun to move and all Draco could see of him was one quivering ear peeking out from behind Snape's shoe. Maybe they should have left the dog at home. He did seem terribly afraid of trains.

Consequently he was ecstatic when they got off at Kings Cross, robes stored away in their backpacks. Draco felt very adventurous going among muggles dressed up like one of them for the first time. His father, or more often one of the servants, had simply cast an illusion charm on them to make it appear like they were wearing muggle clothes when they'd taken him to and from the train.

Snape led him through the barrier and into a big hall filled with people hastening in every direction. Draco felt slightly lost, but Snape just grabbed a hold of his arm when he started drifting off and pulled him through the masses of travellers to the big board that announced the departure times of the trains.

Draco stared at the board in fascination as one train suddenly disappeared from the top and all the others slid upwards to fill the gap. How? What? But wasn't this supposed to be the muggle part of the station? Was that ...?

"Yes, it's electric." Snape confirmed with a slight smile.

"Electric? Can ...?"

"No, we don't have time for a closer look. We arrived just on time. Come on, that's our train over there." and Snape steered him away from the fascinating departure board again.

Draco followed him obediently, but with a slight sigh. He wondered if the board was a bigger version of Sammie's gameboy. Or was that voice that announced the arrivals and departures of the trains independent of the big board?

"Can't we just wait and take the next train?" he asked as Snape dragged him onto the platform. "I'm
hungry."

"We'll eat on the train." Snape decided. "There isn't enough time to wait for the next one."

"But don't we need muggle money for that?"

"What? Did you think I came unprepared?" Snape grinned back at him. "We don't have much though, so we'll have to eat cheaply."

The train restaurant turned out to be expensive though and they had to settle for sandwiches. Draco pouted for a bit, but soon got distracted by all the many muggles on the train. Some had little black boxes they talked into during the whole trip and it appeared that the little boxes were talking back. Draco longed to ask Professor Snape about the things, but didn't dare, because the muggles didn't seem to wonder about them at all and he feared to attract their attention. Would they be able to tell that he was a wizard if they noticed he didn't know the little black boxes?

Halfway through the trip one girl's bag suddenly started emitting sounds similar to Sammie's gameboy's and she opened it and produced just such a little black box. That thing was making the sound!

The girl looked at it for a moment, then frowned, pushed a button on it's front and then held it against her ear.

"Yes, Mum." she said to the little box.

Draco tried not to stare. (Luckily the muggles probably thought he just found the girl attractive and not her mobile phone.) How could that little box be her Mum? For a moment he wondered if her mother was dead and her ghost was in the little box, but that couldn't be it. No ghost he knew fit into such a small object. Helplessly he turned to Snape a very pleading look in his eyes.

"I'll explain later." he promised to Draco's relief. "Did you see all the sheep outside?"

Draco shook his head. No he hadn't seen any sheep. He'd been too busy watching muggles to notice. He turned his attention to the window. It looked like they were indeed in Wales already. There were green pastures filled with sheep everywhere.

"Lets play a game to pass the time." Severus suggested. "Whoever sees more black sheep wins."

Okay, look for black sheep. Draco didn't even ask why Snape would suggest such a ridiculous game. Anything to distract him from staring at that muggle girl.

"Of, course I'm on the right train, Mum!" she was telling the little black box. "I checked the departure board and I asked at the ticket stand. I'll be home in half an hour." ... "No, I didn't get sunburn. I bought some suntan lotion at the little shop next to our hotel. They have it all over the world, Mum. It's not a catastrophe to forget it." ... "Of course not! What do you take my friends for! He wouldn't dream of molesting me! Honest, Mum! You have such a dirty mind!" ... "No we didn't." ... "I'm telling you we didn't!" ... "I'm sixteen, Mum! I don't need a babysitter." ... "Look, I'll be there in half an hour! We can talk then." ... "Will you just leave me alone for a bit!"

She pushed another button, sighed loudly and threw the little black box back into her bag with force.

Draco turned his attention back to the window to look for black sheep again.

He could still see her reflection in the glass though. She looked exasperated for a bit, then turned to
her bag once again, dug the black box back out again and started pushing a whole series of buttons then held it to her ear again. She waited for a bit and then:

"Patty!" she squealed at the top of her lungs. "I'm baaaack!"

Draco considered covering his ears against the sound, but it was probably impolite to do so. He decided to suffer through it. She'd get too hoarse to scream on soon enough.

"OOOOHHH! Isn't that exciting!" the girl squealed on. "Did he ask you out!" ... "Really? Oh, I just can't believe it! I'm gone for only three weeks and ... wow!" ... "OOOOHHH! He did? He really did?" ... "Frank and I had so much fun in Malta," ... "Yes, it was great." ... "Of course we did!" ... "Yes, yes, but listen! You mustn't tell my Mum, okay. She thinks I'm still a little girl." ... "Yes, she's impossible!" ... "Sorry Patty, but I have to hang up now. I've got to get off the train and Mum will be waiting at the station. I don't want her to overhear. I'll call you back once it's safe." Still talking to her little box she squeezed towards the door and disappeared.

Draco sent another pleading look Snape's way, but he only mouthed 'later' and pointed towards the window again. With a sigh he continued his search for black sheep.

As soon as they got off the train Draco turned to his teacher to ask about the black boxes, but again Snape just said: "Later. First we need to get some directions."

They saw nobody at the small station however and thus had to start down the main road of the village until they finally met an old man and his Collie.

"Excuse me Sir." Snape asked the muggle while Draco dragged 'That Dog' away from the Collie before he started a fight. "Could you tell us the way to the Malfoys' house."

"Ah!" said the old muggle slowly. "The mansion in town. You need t'go back to t'train."

"Oh, but we weren't looking for the mansion. We were told that there's a Malfoy family living in a cottage around here."

"Ah!" the old muggle said again. "T'young Lord live that way." he indicated a general direction with a sweeping motion of his arm.

"Thank you." Severus said fighting down the urge to lecture the muggle on how to give directions. Draco would have to live with these people practically next doors, if he was going to stay with Jeremiah and it wouldn't do the boy any good to make enemies from the start.

"We'll get lost that way." Draco prophesied once they were a few metres away and probably out of earshot.

"Maybe not. We know about what direction to go and we'll ask the next person we meet for further directions."

As it turned out that wasn't necessary however. There appeared to be only one path leading out of town that led that way and it looked well travelled enough though Draco complained that it appeared to lead right into the wilderness with no building bigger than a shed or just a roof to protect the sheep from the weather.

"It used to be a hunting lodge, Draco. It would be a little lonely." Severus explained.

"A little? It's in the middle of nowhere!"
"Well, if you still don't like it after you've met them, we can still go and try Eugene."

That seemed to console Draco a little. For a while he walked beside Severus quietly.

"What about those little black boxes then?" he asked finally. "You promised to explain."

"They're called mobile phones." Severus obliged. "Miniature versions of the telephone that don't require cables and can be carried around."

"Oh," Draco commented sounding very puzzled. "And what is a telephone?"

"They're muggle devices used to talk to other muggles not present at the time. The way we use our fireplaces to talk to people. The only downside of the telephone is that you can't travel through it."

"But you can't carry a fireplace around in your pocket."

"Indeed, mobile phones can be useful, but then they can also be a lot of trouble. Especially if you're looking for some privacy. I'm quite sure that muggle girl in our compartment wasn't too happy about that call from her mother and I doubt anybody was happy to hear her squealing to her friend. It seems to me that with all those inventions the muggles no longer get a moment of peace and quiet. If it isn't their own mobile phone ringing, it's somebody else having some annoying conversation on theirs."

"They could be useful in an emergency, though." Draco suggested.

"But their use would have to be restricted to emergencies only and it appears most muggles just use them for their amusement. I can do without that, thank you. Not everything muggles invent is always a good idea, Draco. Not even, if it's electrical."

"Well, maybe not." Draco conceded. "All that squealing really was beginning to hurt my ears. That girl was worse than a whole bunch of Hufflepuffs in front of Lockhart's office."

Severus just rolled his eyes at the mention of his former colleague. Dumbledore really had hired a bunch of impossible people to teach DADA over the last few years, but compared to Gilderoy Lockhart even stuttering Quirrel had been a model teacher. Severus still didn't understand the headmaster's decision to hire him. Albus had explained it to him several times, but as far as Severus was concerned, it still didn't make sense. He just hoped he'd never have to see the walking fashion add again.

They finally came to the cottage, which looked rather nice, but small especially for the Malfoys. Considering how well Draco was coping with life in a small flat however Severus began to think the boy might really grow to like this place. Yes, maybe Jeremiah had really been a good choice.

There was no doorbell anywhere, which didn't really surprise Snape since it was a wizard's house, nor did any eager house elves pop up as they reached the garden gate. After waiting for some kind of reaction for a few moments, he decided to let himself in and try the front door. Draco followed him looking around curiously. They walked through the well kept garden up to the door and still nothing happened.

Still not finding a doorbell, Severus decided to knock. Nothing.

He waited for a few moments then knocked again. Still nothing.

Finally after the third try the ghost of a little boy poked his head through the closed door.
"They not home." he declared putting his ghostly thumb in his mouth and looking up at them through big round ghost eyes.

"Ah, well, do you know when they'll be back then?" Severus asked trying hard to remain patient. Such young ghosts could react with very sudden flight if startled.

"No, Jerry didn't say. Jerry never says. I'm just his big brother. Nobody ever cares about me." complained the little ghost.

"I see. Might they have mentioned where they were going to, then."

"I think Spain. Or maybe it was France? Well, somewhere around there anyway."

Severus exchanged a look with Draco. It appeared that Jeremiah had taken his wife and possible kids on a longer holiday then. Draco shrugged back at him.

"Maybe if we come back next week or so?" he suggested.

Snape sighed. "Well, maybe Eugene knows when they'll be back." He turned back to the little ghost. "Thank you for your help then, young Mister Malfoy. We shall return to talk to your brother when he's returned from France or Spain."

The little ghost beamed proudly at the formal address and withdrew his head back into the house.

"Well, so much for leaving me with Cousin Jeremiah today. I guess you're stuck with me for another week." Draco commented with a sly little grin that made Severus wonder for a moment. The boy couldn't have manipulated the situation to cause Jeremiah to go on holiday, could he?

"But we can try to see if Eugene is home. We'll be going through London on our way back anyway," he decided.

"It'll be evening by then. We still have to take the train back to Hogsmeade." argued Draco.

Didn't he want to find out where his future home would be?

"No we don't. We'll just take the public floo network from the Leaky Cauldron."

"Do you think he'll like that?" asked Draco looking down at 'That Dog' who smiled up at him widely as if to confirm that he liked to do anything in the world if he could only be with his master and his boy.

"He certainly looks happy enough with the idea." Severus promptly said.

"He can't even understand what you're saying." Drco protested. "He probably thinks you suggested a long walk through the woods and scaring up a few rabbits on the way."

"Maybe so, but you can't deny that he does like travelling by floo powder better than by train. Just look at the way he's always hiding under the seat."

"That at least keeps him quiet." Draco grumbled, but couldn't argue the fact.

They walked back to the village slowly trying to fill up the time until the next train back to London. The village was so small that only very few trains stopped there and for some reason Draco couldn't discern Severus knew exactly when they were scheduled to arrive.

Draco tried to concentrate really hard hoping that the information would just magically, or maybe
since it was a muggle train station electrically, appear in his brain. He hadn't seen any big electric
departure boards anywhere near the station when they'd arrived so maybe the information was
passed around telepathically or something like that. All his concentration didn't help any though.
He still didn't know when the train would arrive. Or at east he wouldn't have known, if Snape
hadn't already told him.

"Sir?" he finally asked.

"Yes, Draco."

"How do you know?"

"Know? Know what?"

"When to expect the train."

"Why I checked when we arrived of course."

"I don't remember you checking anything."

"That's because you were so preoccupied with wondering about mobile phones," Severus
explained. "You weren't paying attention to where we were going."

"But I'm sure I didn't see a departure board. I wouldn't have overlooked something that big."

Suddenly Snape laughed. Draco looked up at him in wonder. What was so funny now?

"Oh Draco, small stations like this one don't have those huge departure boards like Kings Cross.
They've just got a message board where they hang a piece of paper and call that their departure
board. It works, because there aren't very many trains stopping here at all. It's no problem to list
them all on just one piece of paper."

"Paper? What's paper? Something electric?"

"No, sorry. Paper is muggle parchment. It's hardly any different from our parchment. Not very
interesting at all."

"Oh," said Draco disappointed. "Can I at least take a closer look at the departure board at Kings
Cross once we arrive in London?"

"Sorry Draco, but there won't be enough time. We don't want to disturb Eugene in the middle of the
night," Snape decided.

By the time they reached London however Draco had managed to convince Severus to grant him
ten minutes to observe the departure board. Except for the discovery of the arrival board that didn't
help him much though. The board remained a mystery. It didn't even seem to be controlled by any
muggles, but Professor Snape insisted that it had to be and probably was remote controlled from
some office they couldn't see.

"Maybe even somewhere in the ticket boxes, but I doubt that. The station must have some main
information centre somewhere and the most logical thing would be to control it directly from
there," he explained.

Still Draco found it hard to believe that someone sitting in a different room might be controlling the
constant changes on both the huge boards. Maybe they had a little square cartridge like Sammie’s
gameboy? But how would that cartridge know if a train was late? And how would the information centre know it even before the arrival of the train? He decided to ask Snape that question, just to prove that the information centre was unlikely.

"By telephone, maybe even by mobile phone. Somebody on the train's staff or maybe at one of the earlier stations would call ahead to inform them that the train was behind schedule."

Draco frowned. He hadn't thought of that possibility. Did Snape have an answer to everything? He glowered at his teacher.

"What?" Severus asked calmly.

"You can't be all knowing." complained Draco.

"I never claimed to be. I'm a complete failure at Transfigurations for example and there are some decisions I've made in my life that ... Well, lets just say that I'm leaving being all knowing to the expert."

"And who would that be?"

"Dumbledore of course." Snape said with a smile and a wink that caused Draco to laugh despite his frustration at not being able to figure out the mysteries of the departure board.

Riding the Tube, as Snape told him the London subway train system was called, was a totally new adventure. It was Draco's first encounter with automatically closing doors.

"How do those work?" he whispered to Snape excitedly.

"They're probably remote controlled by the driver. I mean, who else would know when to close them?"

"But how do they pull them back together so tightly?"

"I don't know. There must be some mechanism hidden inside the train's roof I suppose."

"But what does than mechanism look like? How does it work?"

"I don't know Draco and I can't just pull out my wand and make the wall disappear so you can have a look. I bet most muggles don't know either."

"But you could make it disappear and they can't. Please!"

"No Draco, I can't. What would all the muggles think, if I did? The ministry of magic definitely wouldn't be happy with us for it."

"So who cares about the ministry?"

"I depend on their goodwill, Draco. They've got reason enough to give me trouble."

"Trouble? What can they do?"

"Cut my wages. Send me to Azkaban. They already had me as good as sentenced to the Dementor's kiss once."

"What!?"
"Albus had to pull a lot of strings to get me out of that back then. It's almost a miracle he even managed to fend off a life sentence in Azkaban."

"And that's why he can't pay you fully? He convinced them of cutting your wages instead of the Dementors kiss or Azkaban?"

"Cutting my wages and five years in Azkaban and I really got away easy. They weren't fond of Albus' meddling with the Voldemort war at all at the ministry back then and they couldn't get their hands on many of Albus' agents."

"You went to Azkaban for spying for Dumbledore?"

"Not quite. I got out of Azkaban for spying for Dumbledore. I got in for having been a death eater. Albus thought he could convince them to let me go free though. That's why he's so angry about it all. He thinks I would have deserved to go free."

"But if you only joined the death eaters to spy, they can't just punish you for helping to fight them."

"They couldn't, but they would have liked to and I was an easy target, because I didn't originally join to be a spy. Nobody likes a traitor, Draco. You'll do better to decide what side you're really on before you join up with anybody. That's probably the most important lesson I've learned in my life."

Draco stared at the floor for a while. That was a lot to accept there. And was Snape trying to warn him of something there? He'd never really asked him not to join the death eaters, but Draco had thought that his admission of having been a spy had been meant like that. Now he just said to be sure about his choice?

Lucius had always told him that Voldemort was the only possible choice there was. Why wouldn't Snape say the same of Dumbledore and the ministry? Was it because of what the ministry had done and was still doing to him? And if the ministry had tried to punish Dumbledore's spies, were Dumbledore and the ministry even the same side? Could there be three sides in a war? If a battle was between good and evil then who was the third side? What exactly was good and evil? Was his father really evil? He'd done a few very bad things, yes, but he could also remember him doing kind things every once in a while. Lucius had fully believed in the rightness of Voldemort's cause. Voldemort believed that what he was doing was for the good of all the wizarding world. How could the ministry be good after what they'd done to Snape? And how could Dumbledore be good, if he worked against the ministry?

"What is wrong and right then? How do I tell who's good or evil?"

"In the end you can only define those things for yourself. It's all up to your judgement, so I advise you not to judge easily. Everything has many sides. Some people will tell you that something is entirely good or entirely bad, entirely black or entirely white, but they are wrong. It's a child's simple view of the world as a fairy tale. Others will tell you that everything has two sides and all is grey and thus can be more good than evil, or more evil than good. That's an easy way out too. I've never seen anything that was that simple in my life. Everything has many sides and what you see of it depends to a large part not on what it really is, but on who you are and where you're standing. Of course that makes it impossible for any one person to ever see all of any thing or to judge objectively. And it also makes it impossible to rely entirely on the words of others about anything. We can not judge anything objectively, no matter how hard we try, because we are subjective beings."

"What about colour then? We can see and say if an object is black or white."
"And still it might be purple to a bee's ultraviolet vision. Even among humans you cannot be sure that the way another's brain shows him purple is the same that yours shows it to you."

"We still both call it purple."

"Unless it's such a dark purple one of you decides to call it blue."

Draco sighed. "That's confusing. You're telling me that nothing is what it is."

"No, I'm telling you that you can't see it for what it truly is nor can anybody else."

"It's still confusing."

"Yes, life is."

Draco sighed again. Was Snape right? Or was all of this just the result of five years in Azkaban? He'd heard that less than one year there could brake a person and nobody ever came back unchanged. Who had Snape been before Azkaban then? Would he be shocked if he could see the difference. How deep were those scars that the unknowing couldn't even see?

Confused thoughts kept Draco busy until they stood in front of his Cousin Eugene's door. He suddenly got very nervous when Snape knocked though and shifted slightly closer to his teacher. What if Eugene was just like his father?

They heard a loud bang from behind the door as if something large had been pushed over, some rattling and banging as somebody was probably righting the object again, then footsteps and finally the door opened and a silver-blond man with very tousled hair and bloodshot eyes blinked at them sleepily.

Had he been asleep? No, couldn't be. He hadn't had enough time to get dressed, but then his clothes were wrinkled enough to lead you to suspect that he might have slept in them.

"Sorry, my butler just walked out on me last week. It's hard to get good servants these days."

Eugene offered instead of a greeting.

"Good evening, Mr. Malfoy. Please forgive our intrusion. I am Severus Snape and this is your cousin Draco."

"Ah yes, Lucius' son, isn't it? My father mentioned that you're looking for a new home for him. But do come in. It's no use talking about these things through the door."

Curiously Draco followed Eugene into his luxuriously furnished, but untidy apartment. There was something about the place that he didn't like. Somehow it reminded him of Lucius. Snape too was watching Eugene closely. What was it he didn't like about him? Draco had no idea, but his teacher's behaviour made him feel even more uneasy. Something was wrong here.

Eugene led them into his expensive looking living room and went straight towards a huge house bar. Snape glared angrily at several empty glass bottles that were standing around the room.

"Why don't you sit down for a moment so we can talk more comfortably." Eugene offered. "Please forgive the appearance of the room. My momentary lack of a butler I'm afraid. Something to drink Mr. Snape?"

"No thanks." Snape nearly growled. He obviously didn't like Eugene much.
Eugene however seemed entirely unimpressed by Snape's gruffness. He just continued to smile stupidly and turned to Draco.

"How about you, cousin? Some Sherry? Or do you prefer Vodka? I think I must still have some beer left in the kitchen as well."

Draco shot Snape an alarmed glance. Eugene was inviting him to drink?

"Draco is only fifteen, Mr. Malfoy. I don't think any of these beverages would be appropriate." Snape said in his most dangerous soft voice.

"Oh nonsense. One is never too young for a good beer, right Draco?"

"I ... um ... I really don't think, I should, Sir." Draco stuttered. This was getting more and more scary.

"I think we'd better go now." stated Snape getting up.

Draco practically jumped up and towards the door.

"You wouldn't happen to know when Mr. Jeremiah Malfoy will be back from his holiday?" Snape asked over his shoulder once Draco was safely out of the room.

"Oh, on Wednesday I believe. Are you sure you don't want to stay for a nice little drink? It isn't that late, you know."

Snape just slammed the door shut behind him.

"That Draco," he explained to the confused boy. "Is a man who's absolutely unfit to care for a child. He probably needs a babysitter himself."

"He seems to get by without one though." commented Draco.

"I guess that's why the butler left him." suspected Snape. "He was probably tired of doing both jobs."

"So what do we do now?"

"Take another trip to Wales next week and hope that Eugene's right about Jeremiah. ... I should have remembered to ask him about the Colemans as well. Now we'll have to wait and ask Jeremiah for their address."

"I'd rather move into the cottage than to America anyway. Even if it is a little lonely there."

"It's a nice place for children, but lets not make any decisions until we've met them. They might still be as disappointing as Eugene. And America isn't a bad place either. I hear most Americans really like children."

"It's so far away. They will make me go to some American school and I'll never see you, or Hogwarts or the Rakers again."

"You'll also make a lot of new friends and you can still visit and nobody said you can't move back here once you're old enough. If you still want to by then, that is. America is a very interesting place. You might come to love it so much, you'll forget all about us."

"Never!" How could he ever forget the Snapes or the Rakers? He'd never find such great friends
again in his life.

Snape led him back to the Leaky Cauldron and handed him a handful of floo powder.

"Do you want Munin, or the dog?" he asked offhandedly.

"What?"

"I can't carry both of them through the floo, so you'll have to take one. Which will it be?"

Draco looked from 'That Dog' who was busy sniffing around under an empty chair and threatening to tangle his lead around its legs as usual, to the raven who was sitting on Snape's shoulder like a statue only blinking every once in a while to remind them that he was still alive.

"Munin." he decided. That was clearly less trouble.

Snape snipped his fingers and called to the bird and Munin hopped onto his hand from where Snape transferred him to Draco's shoulder with a simple "Stay!".

The raven cawed softly into Draco's ear, but stayed in place obediently while his master picked up 'That Dog' and untangled his lead.

"Hogsmeade!" Draco told the floo as he threw in the floo powder and stepped inside after it. A few moments later he stepped out of one of the official floos of the Hogsmeade floo station brushing the soot off his jeans. Munin was still sitting calmly on his shoulder and only reacted with one little "Caw!" when Snape arrived a few seconds after them 'That Dog' whining and struggling in his arms.

"I knew the bird was the better choice." commented Draco. "What's his problem, this time?"

"He's afraid of fire. Just every animal's normal survival instinct keeping him safe from burns."

"Munin doesn't see anything wrong with floo travel."

"Ravens are clever. That Dog isn't."

"Do you mean dogs in general or That Dog in particular?" grinned Draco.

"That depends. Generally dogs aren't as clever as ravens, but this one does seem particularly stupid to me. But then I've never had a dog before. Maybe I overestimated the species' intelligence."

Draco regarded 'That Dog' closely for a while and decided that Snape's estimation of dog intelligence was probably more correct than his own. That one was a particularly useless specimen. But he was damn cute.

It was already dark outside and Draco was reminded of his very first arrival at West Hogsmeade on their way back. How different everything looked now, even though nothing had really changed. He remembered how frightened and disgusted he'd been at the sight of the apartment houses. Now they looked warm and welcoming and he couldn't wait to get inside. The park that had once scared him now felt like coming home and he knew every single dark shape in it and could have told exactly what it looked like at daytime. Had he really been afraid of the group of trees and bushes that hid the garden shed from view once?

He smiled happily as they walked past the Soccer lawn. Tuesday morning he'd be back here to play again.
Sarah just smiled when Severus arrived bringing Draco back home once again.

"No luck with Jeremiah then?" she asked.

"He's on holiday, but is expected back next week. Eugene is out of the question though. He offered Draco alcohol."

"He what!" Sarah shrieked. "You didn't let him drink any, did you? Oh, my poor child. I'm seriously beginning to doubt it was a good idea to take him to the relatives of his horrible father. Of course there can be a black sheep in every family, but those Malfoys seem bad down to the very last."

"Draco isn't bad and I'm sure he has other relatives that aren't either and no, he didn't drink anything. Eugene just offered the drinks." Snape attempted to calm her down.

"But what if you hadn't been there to stop him? Oh no, we can't just hand the poor boy over to some stranger, Severus. We can't!"

"I'm not planning to just hand him over. I'll have a good look at them first, I assure you, but Draco does belong with his family."

"But offering a poor innocent little boy alcohol!"

"I'm not little anymore and I know well enough not to drink. You could at least trust that my father's example has taught me that. How stupid do you think I am?"

Sarah sighed. "Well, I guess you probably do know not to drink, but what if it'd been cigarettes, or illegal potions. Severus, that boy would just take any potion you give him without the slightest distrust."

"Exactly. Any potion I give him. That doesn't mean he would take them from strangers."

Sarah however kept complaining about Eugene's irresponsibility and the dangers of trusting a child to members of the Malfoy family for the rest of the evening. Draco learned to tune her out after a while and just enjoyed sitting there with Billy half asleep in his lap. It was good to be back.

A/N: Well, we're still wondering if Draco will move in with Jeremiah? Is Sevi trying to stop Draco from becoming a death eater or doesn't he care? And what are the Sharks going to do as revenge against the Rakers?

In the next chapter: Mike joins the Snapes on a shopping trip, the aurors visit and Draco thinks about the ministry some more. (At least that's what I think will happen. I haven't written any of it yet.)
Monday morning right after breakfast Draco dashed over to tell Mike that he was still here. He hadn't been able to do that the evening before when they'd gotten home, because Professor Snape had decided that it was too late to bother the neighbours.

Mike was so happy when he saw Draco that he asked his parents for permission to go to the market with the Snapes. Consequently his mother handed him part of her shopping list and a little pouch of money. Mike grinned at that and Draco wondered if he'd ever give any of the return money back to her.

Severus and Sarah didn't mind the unexpected company and when they saw the shopping list Severus quickly grabbed a piece of parchment scribbled something down and handed it to Draco.

"If you two are going shopping on your own anyway, you can help out and get the fruits for us." he explained handing him some coins as well.

Draco stared at the list and the money for a moment. What?

"But I've never bargained before. I have no idea how it's done. I'll cost you a lot more money than you'd normally spend on this."

"Well, you'll never learn, if you don't try. You can't spend any more money than I gave you anyway. Try to get everything on that list with it."

Draco stared at the list again then at the money in his hand. "That's impossible! That'll never be enough for all of this."

"In that case, you'll have to set some priorities. Try to find out what we really need and what we can do without."

Draco sighed again and stuffed the list into his pocket. How was he going to do that? What fruits were more important than others?

Mike grinned at him. "Oh come on. It's not that hard. Even the little kids can do it."

"It mightn't be hard, if you've been doing it all your life, but I hadn't even ever been to a market until three weeks ago."

"Not? Where'd your parents buy their food then?" Mike asked confused while they walked down
"They didn't."

"What? What did you eat then? Everybody needs to buy food."

"Our house elves went to the market for us, I suppose. I never really asked."

"House elves?" Mike looked at Draco wide eyed.

"Yes, those little creatures with the long ears, you know. Kinda cute and always eager to work."

"I know what they are. That's I've heard about them, but I've never really seen one. I thought only the guys with the big old castles had house elves."

"Nope, the guys with the big old manors that look almost like castles do, too."

"Did you have one of those then?"

"Yes, one of the biggest and oldest in England ... draughtiest too. And it was pretty dark and scary in some places there as well."

"That must have been great. I wish I had such a big old manor. Or at least a small new manor."

"You know, if it hadn't been confiscated by the ministry, I'd probably have sold it as soon as possible and bought something smaller and more comfortable from the money. Maybe a flat somewhere around here, or maybe in London."

"You'd exchange a big castle like manor for a small boring flat?" Mike sounded horrified.

"Well, maybe not." Draco decided. "Maybe I'd have bought one of the small houses nearer the market place so we wouldn't have to walk this far to get there. The manor should have brought enough money to afford one. But that's a moot point anyway since I no longer have the manor. I can't afford to buy anything now."

"But the rest of your family's still rich, aren't they?"

"Well, Uncle Thomas certainly seemed to be, but he didn't want me and Cousin Eugene didn't look poor either, but maybe he's just living on Uncle Thomas' money." Draco shrugged. "Jeremiah's place didn't look all that expensive, but he's supposed to inherit a big manor house as well. Maybe he'll let me live in his cottage after he does. At least until I earn enough money to buy something of my own."

"A cottage must be a great place to live, too. I'd like to have one."

"You'd like to have anything. Though I admit that you could always sell it and get some money for it if nothing else," mused Draco. "I wouldn't like to live in Jeremiah's cottage all that much though. It's in the middle of nowhere. Nothing but sheep around."

"That's nice. Imagine to be able to go home and there's no neighbours to disturb you. Nothing but nice fluffy sheep and green countryside to look at. No grey houses, no nosy aurors, no noise ..."

"But it's so far away from everywhere I want to go."

"No problem once you learn to apparate."
Draco stopped for a moment. He hadn't thought about that. Once he had his apparition license he wouldn't have the slightest problem getting anywhere he liked from the cottage. Maybe it wasn't such a bad place to live after all!

"Well, we still neither have a cottage to live in or sell."

"Well, that's life." Mike didn't seen to mind much. "Come on, we're almost there!"

"Wait! Stop for a moment! I've got to pack away the dog!"

Mike stopped and turned around to stare at Draco and 'That Dog'.

"Pack away?" How did one pack away a dog?

To Mike's amazement Draco simply took off his backpack and handed it to him.

"Here hold this open for me for a moment."

Mike took the backpack still looking doubtful, but also a little curious. What was Draco up to?

Draco quickly grabbed 'That Dog' before he could get suspicious and try to run off and stuffed him into the pack just like he remembered Professor Snape doing it last week.


"Why don't you just make him walk?" Mike finally asked. "Wouldn't that be a lot less of a bother?"

"No, he'd tangle his lead, try to run off, steal sausages. This way he's a little heavy, but absolutely unable to get into any sort of trouble."

Mike regarded 'That Dog's' head, which was the only part of his body still sticking out of Draco's backpack, thoughtfully.

"You couldn't do that with a cat, you know. He'd just wriggle out and jump."

"I don't need to do it with the cat. He has no problem staying at home alone and never gets into trouble." Draco shrugged the argument off. "I guess cats are brighter than dogs as well."

"Well, they definitely are a lot more independent. They'd never expect a human to always be there to get them out of any stupid situations they might get themselves into. I guess that would make them more careful than dogs. They certainly know how to help themselves when the need arises."

"You seem to know a lot about cats." commented Draco.

"I've got one for a familiar. Just your ordinary grey tabby, but she sure knows her own mind. Maybe I'll show her to you when we get home. If she's at home and in the mood that is. As I said she has a mind of her own and if she's not feeling like meeting you, she's not gonna talk to you at all."

"Really? Isn't that a little annoying? I mean, the Snapes have a cat too and so do some of my classmates at school, but I can't imagine having a familiar who's never there when I want him."

"It's certainly better than that dog of yours." Mike grinned. "He's always there even if you don't want him to, always gets in the way and he has no magical qualities whatsoever."

"And he isn't mine either!" protested Draco. "I'd never want such a little nuisance in the first place. 
I used to have an owl. He was really useful and came on call."

"So you're gonna get another owl once you've got a new home?"

"If my family lets me, I guess I will." mused Draco. He hadn't really thought about getting a new familiar yet. "Someday I'd really like to have a raven like Professor Snape though. Munin's much cooler than any owl I've ever seen and he can do all sorts of tricks."

"So why don't you just get a raven right now?"

"I guess I couldn't afford it. I bet they're really expensive and then Professor Snape says they're very hard to train."

"I bet Uncle Severus would help you with that though."

"Probably, but I still don't have any money and an owl will certainly do for now."

"I guess you're right. I'd like to have an owl too. Then I could write you as often as I want and wouldn't have to pay the post office all the time."

"I'll tell my owl to stay and wait for a response every time I send him to you." Draco promised.

They were now in the thick of the market and could no longer see the Snapes anywhere. Draco remembered seeing them disappear in the direction of the bread stands which made sense considering that they'd told Draco to get the fruits and it was the best strategy to get the things that were sold in the centre of the market as early as possible before the arrival of the big crowds around lunchtime.

Draco wasn't worried about losing the Snapes though. Professor Snape had asked them to meet them outside the apothecary around lunchtime after they were done with their shopping so they could have lunch together.

"Okay, where do we go to now?" he asked Mike who pulled out his shopping list.

"Let's see. I need vegetables, cheese and fruits. You only need the fruits. Cheese is almost at the other end of the market. Vegetables are right over there and the fruits right next to the vegetables. We'll be fastest if we start with the vegetables, then buy the fruit and leave the cheese for last and you can watch how I talk to the vendors at the vegetable stands before you have to try and buy something yourself."

"Can't we do the fruits last then?" Draco asked suddenly getting a little nervous again.

"That would mean we'd have to push our way through to the cheese stands and then right back here again. It'd cost us a lot more time and nerves that way." Mike reasoned. "Come on, I'll help you with the bargaining anyway. It's not that hard. Everybody does it."

Draco sighed and relented. He'd have to do it sooner or later anyway. At least once he'd gotten it over with he wouldn't feel so nervous about it anymore. I'll only be nervous about what Mrs Snape will say when she sees how much money I spent.' he thought morosely. But Professor Snape would defend him against her wrath, wouldn't he?

He watched Mike's negotiations with the vegetable vendors closely and tried to play several possible little conversations through in his mind before Mike announced that he had everything he needed and they went over to the fruit stands.
"So, what do you need to buy first?" Mike asked Draco.

"Can't we just do your shopping first? I'd like to hear some more examples."

"That doesn't make any sense, Draco. We'll probably both need the same stands so we'd better do it together. Look I'll go first, but we need to know what stands."

"Um ... I don't know where to go first." Draco said staring at his shopping list.

"Well, you always start either with the most expensive or the most important. Since you probably don't have enough money to buy everything, I suggest you start with the most important."

"So what would be the most important then?"

Mike peeked over Draco's shoulder to take a quick look at the list. "Apples." he decided without the slightest hesitation. "Apples are always the most important fruit and we'll get the cherries right after that, because they're cheapest at his time of the year and therefore will be easiest to get. Pears will be easy too, but we might have a problem with the bananas. Maybe we shouldn't buy those at all. We definitely need to get the lemons so I suggest to make those third, then the pears and we'll keep the oranges for last in case we still have the necessary money left."

"You make it sound so easy." sighed Draco.

"I'm just thinking about what my Mum would do." grinned Mike. "I've gone shopping with her often enough to know."

"I wish I'd had a mother like that." Draco sighed. "Don't get me wrong. I'm really grateful to her for saving me from Father and it's a really big thing to know that she loved me so much she died for me, but I wish she'd have spent some time with me sometimes instead of always having to be at some party."

"How can one have to be at a party?" Mike asked scowling. "Parties are just for fun."

"They're also social obligations. You know, keeping up important connections and such stuff. Some parties are about charity and such things. Those are important for the family image. Some parties are just tradition."

"You rich guys are strange." Mike declared still scowling.

"I'm not rich!" protested Draco. "At least not anymore."

"Well, okay then. Lets buy some apples all right? We always buy them over there. The green ones are the best though some people think they're too sour."

"Not Professor Snape." said Draco with a laugh. "He likes his potions tasting of lemon so he'll like sour apples as well."

"What about Aunt Sarah?"

"I don't know. I never asked her, but I don't think she'll mind. Lets just go and buy them."

With Mike going first and lowering the price Draco found that it wasn't all that hard to bargain as he'd thought. He knew Professor Snape would have gotten a much better price though. In the end he had to settle for no bananas and only half as many oranges as he'd been told to buy. He hoped the Snapes wouldn't be too angry with him.
"Okay, there goes the last of my money. Where to now?"

"Now I need to buy cheese. That way." Mike answered.

They had to push their way through the already very dense crowd at the bread stands and through several of the chatting groups Draco had first noticed last week. The vicar was once again surrounded by a large group of women right in the middle of the market, but this time Draco wasn't pushing around a large baby buggy and managed to squeeze through the group almost easily.

The cheese stands were overrun by customers and they had to wait a lot at the different stands until Mike finally declared that he had everything he needed and they should try to fight their way through to the apothecary.

Draco suggested to try to get to the side of the marketplace and walk around it instead of trying to go through the centre once again and after a short glance at the sky to judge the position of the sun Mike agreed. That way they might take a little longer, but the going would be easier.

Somewhere behind the meat stands they ran into Jack who was busy flirting with a tall blonde girl Draco had never seen before. She was wearing green shorts and t-shirt and for a moment Draco considered asking what gang's uniform that was, but decided to postpone that question. He didn't want her to know that he didn't know. Mike or Cathy would certainly tell him, if he asked them later.

Jack greeted them rather coldly indicating that he wanted them to get lost and leave him to his attempts at wooing the girl who as far as Draco could tell wasn't really interested in any of them. He strongly suspected that a girl this pretty already had a boyfriend and probably even the leader of her own gang, but didn't think it a good idea to point that out to Jack.

Mike just shrugged and suggested they move on so they wouldn't keep the Snapes waiting and despite the fact that they had more than enough time for a little chat Draco agreed readily. If Jack didn't want them around, he wasn't going to stay just to make him angry.

He did look around for the rest of the gang on the way though, but didn't see any of them. Either they were all hidden from view by the crowd or Jack had sent them away as well. Both options seemed equally likely to Draco.

A Muggle Shop attracted Draco's attention a little while later and Mike had to wait patiently while he stared at some kitchen utensils in fascination.

"I wonder what that mixer thing does. Look Mike, it has a plug. It must be electric!"

"You use it to mix all sorts of ingredients for food." Mike explained patiently. "For baking mostly."

Draco stared at it some more in wonder.

"Really? Do you have one at home? How does it work?"

"Well, it simply mixes." Mike declared feeling rather stupid. How does one explain a mixer? "It isn't particularly exciting, you know."

Draco just shrugged. "Maybe not to you. I think it's fascinating. I'll try to learn everything about it one day."

In the end Mike simply grabbed Draco's arm and dragged him away from the shop window and towards the apothecary. Draco, he decided, was a great friend to have, but sometimes he could get
really annoying and strange. Especially when electrical things were involved.

The Snapes were nowhere in sight when they reached the apothecary and a quick glance at the sun showed that they were still early. So what were they going to do now?

"Lets go back to the Muggle Shop." Draco suggested at once.

Mike had a sudden vision of spending the rest of the day looking at light bulbs and microwaves. Oh no, no way was he going back there! He cast a quick look around and indeed the solution came to him.

"Nah, lets go over there. That's where they sell toys. They've got all sorts of neat stuff and we can still see the apothecary from there. That way we'll know when the Snapes arrive and won't have to run back and forth to catch them."

"Toys? Do they sell gameboys too?" Draco asked curiously.

"Of course they do. They sell all kinds of toys you can imagine. ... Gameboys are terribly expensive though."

"That's okay I don't have any money to buy anything anyway. I just want to look."

They pushed their way over through crowds of children and some adults and finally reached a group of stands that sold mostly used toys, though there were some new ones among them as well. The first place they got to to their disappointment sold only dolls and doll clothes, but the second stand had a lot of stuffed and rubber animals that were rather cute to look at.

Mike eyed a rubber snake for a while wondering if the Sharks would fall for it, if he dropped it on their heads from a tree. Mark or Robin were probably too old for that kind of trick though and scaring Pretty Ricky just didn't seem worth while. Anyway he wouldn't need to spend money on a rubber snake for that effect. Balling your fists and charging at him usually sufficed to send him running.

Draco meanwhile was looking at stuffed crocodiles, frogs, hedgehogs, eagles ... It seemed anything could be bought as a stuffed toy. There even was a stuffed muggle car among all the animals. Why would anyone want to cuddle a car? It could be interesting to drive one though, Draco suddenly thought. He wondered if Snape knew how to drive a car. Probably not. The things were rare among wizards and probably even expensive in the muggle world. Still he might have learned during his time in muggle school. Did muggles learn how to drive cars in school? Or could one just buy a car, get in and drive off?

Another stand had nothing but baby toys. Billy would have loved those, but Mike just frowned at them and dragged Draco on to the next stand where they had all sorts of boxed games. Mostly board games and puzzles, Draco found out after a while. Aside from the usual wizard games he knew there were also muggle games and some games appeared to have both wizard and muggle versions.

There were chess games with non moving pawns right next to wizard games where little toy horses poked their heads out of the box to sneer at their motionless neighbours. One adventurous chess knight even climbed out of his box dragging his mount behind by the reigns to take a closer look at his muggle counterpart and after finding no reaction from him stalked back to his own box to find that the lid had closed behind him and he couldn't get back in. His horse snorted at him angrily while he turned to the customers with a desperate plea to let him back in. The vendor finally came and with an angry glare and the stern admonition to stay inside held the lid open for him and the
Draco would have loved to watch some more of the wizard toys' antics, but by that time the Snapes had arrived and Billy looked definitely hungry and thus they went straight to the side alley and camped on the empty boxes again. Sarah once again fed Billy while Severus bought pumpkin juice and fed Munin and 'That Dog'.

Mike laughed when he saw how the raven tricked the dog over his food again.

"He really isn't very bright." Draco commented to Severus.

"Indeed, he isn't." Severus confirmed. "How did your shopping go then?"

Draco grimaced at the question and handed the two knuts he had left from the money he'd been given in the morning back to Severus. Severus pocketed them calmly and asked to see Draco's purchases.

"I didn't get the bananas and only half of the oranges." he admitted hesitantly. He wondered how Snape would punish him. Or would he just let Sarah scold him instead? That would be getting away easy, Draco thought. After all he had already learned to tune her out.

Snape smiled. "You got everything else?"

"Yes, Professor."

"Very good."

"Good?" Draco exclaimed startled.

"That's a lot better than I expected on a first try."

"Well, Mike helped me a bit, you know."

Severus nodded. "Yes, I know. That was the idea."

Draco smiled a little. "You really think I did well."

"Of course you did."

Now Draco was positively beaming. Professor Snape thought he'd done well.

"Can we go take another look at the toy stands, Uncle Severus?" Mike begged once they were done with their meal.

"We have much still to buy, Mike, and then we still need to carry it all home and put it away."

"Please, Professor."

"Yes, please Uncle Severus."

Severus looked from one boy to the other. Somehow this didn't sound right.

"Does it bother you Draco?" he asked suddenly.

Draco blinked startled. What was Snape talking about? "Bother me? Does what bother me?"

"That Mike calls me Uncle Severus, because if you want to you can too, you know."
"Really? Do you really mean that?" Draco beamed even more. Wasn't that almost like being part of the family?

"Of course I mean it."

Mike rolled his eyes at the scene. Draco looked almost like 'That Dog' did when somebody had said a friendly word to him.

"Well, what about the toy stands then?" he tried again.

"Please, Uncle Severus." said two voices this time.

Severus smiled. Yes, that sounded a lot better. "Well, all right, but you'll have to take the cheese and meat supplies with you and you have to promise not to go anywhere else. We'll come to get you from there once we're done with all the shopping and I expect you to be there then."

That promise was given readily enough and the two boys soon dashed off back towards the market. Of course they didn't get much further once they had gotten out of the alley. At a much slower pace they had to squeeze through the large midday crowd of the market.

Mike once again found it difficult to drag Draco past the Muggle Shop, but Draco soon forgave him when they found a stand that had real Soccer balls and even some Quiddich stuff. The only toys that seemed to be totally missing from the West Hogsmeade market were broomsticks. The stands had Quiddich clothing and Quiddich balls and all sorts of posters and even strategy manuals, but not a single broom.

Draco felt a little disappointed at that. He really did miss his good old Nimbus 2001 and had almost entirely forgotten that he'd wanted to talk to his father about getting a better broom only a few weeks ago. Now it felt almost like it had been a whole lifetime since that horrible day when his father had killed his mother and everything had changed. Yes, it seemed almost as if he'd been living in West Hogsmeade for a whole lifetime instead of just three short weeks.

The next morning when he came down into the park to meet the Rakers for another Soccer game he'd already forgotten all thoughts about brooms, flying or Quiddich however. Life was great and it was even better to be able to look forward to yet another week of fun with his friends. Too bad it would all be over at the end of this week. There wasn't much chance that Jeremiah would turn him away after all. He almost wished Jeremiah would, but then he'd have to move to America and wouldn't be able to go to Hogwarts anymore and meet the Rakers on Hogsmeade weekends.

Sammie ran up to him the moment he left the house.

"Dragon! You're back! I hoped so much that you'd come back." he shouted and stopped just short of actually hugging Draco.

Several other Rakers raced up to him as well, but luckily none of them were as enthusiastic as Sammie.

"Jeremiah's on holiday." he explained to them. Let Jack wonder what was going on, if he didn't want to come and ask for the story. "And Eugene drinks."

"So the Snapes won't leave you with him then?"

"No, they were both quite appalled that he offered me alcohol."
"Why? You're not really that young anymore." said Larry and Draco wondered how his drinking father handled such things. Poor Larry and his brothers probably didn't have much of a chance to avoid becoming alcoholics themselves someday.

"Well, considering the way Draco lost his parents it's at the very least inconsiderate of him." stated Charlie. "The Snapes are quite right not to let him take him, if he doesn't even realise that."

Jack was in a rather bad mood after that and the game went accordingly. Draco's team worked together like clockwork by now while Jack started shouting and cursing at Mary the moment Cathy Cat scored the first goal.

Mary of course didn't take that too well and yelled back at him which resulted in Jack's cursing Mike and Larry. Larry couldn't see what he might have done wrong and blamed it all on Mary which resulted in a fight between the lovers and Mary finally stalking off annoyed leaving the rest of her team behind to guard their goal as they saw fit.

Draco took pity on Mike and Larry and offered to lend Matt to Jack to even the odds.

"Matt!" Jack yelled in fury. "That good for nothing ..."

"Matt's a great defence player!" Draco cut him off before he could insult the boy even more. "And that's what you need. You and Mike are both good attackers and Larry is the only one qualified to replace Mary in your goal. I don't have a second keeper to give you and you don't need an attacker so I'm offering you the best defence payer I've got and that's your response?"

"You need attackers, not defenders to win a game!" yelled Jack.

"You need defenders not to lose one though." Mike attempted to diffuse the situation. "Dragon's team isn't as strong on the attack as ours. He's offering you the best player he can afford to do without. And with Mary off our defence is seriously weakened."

"I don't want Matt!"

Matt suddenly tore his Rakers cap off his head and slammed it down at Jack's feet. Draco managed to grab his arm and stop him just in time to stop him from walking out as well.

"Well, that's your loss then," he told Jack. "Then I get to keep him. I'll be generous and make you another offer though. How about Charlie?"

"That loser? She's worse than Matt."

Charlie stared down at her feet looking very, very ashamed.

"Charlie won me the very first game I captained," Draco stated calmly. "And I remember several other games she turned for us."

"Well, I don't want her. Maybe you like her. She isn't that ugly, I'll admit, but I want a Soccer player not a mascot. Give me Cathy!"

"I can't play with only one offensive player."

"Then let Charlie or Matt play offence. You claim they're so good. I think Cathy's the only good player your team's got. I want her."

"Jack ..." Mike started cautiously as he picked up Matt's cap and started brushing the dirt off of it.
"You can't have me!" Cathy Cat cut him off sharply. "Dragon can't lend me to you, because I refuse to play for you. I left your team because of your constant yelling and as we've just seen that hasn't improved any. I see no reason to come back."

"Just one game, Cathy Cat." begged Larry. "Please. Mary will be back tomorrow."

"I wouldn't be so sure of that, Larry." commented Mike. "She might be expecting an apology." he hinted.

Matt reluctantly accepted his cap back, but didn't put it back on. He remained standing right beside Draco as far as possible away from Jack glaring ominously while Jack and Cathy traded insults for a while seemingly unaware of the presence of the rest of the gang. Draco didn't mind that. Anything was better than Jack shouting at him and Cathy proved quite capable to hold her own against the gang leader.

Maybe they should all go home though? It was clear there wouldn't be a game today after all.

While Draco was still wondering what he might do with the rest of the morning there suddenly was a loud 'POP' somewhere behind them and when they turned to see what it was they saw a man in an auror's uniform was suddenly standing beside the door to the house.

POP, POP, POP POPPOPPPPPOP ... more and more aurors apparated into the park until there were two standing in front of every house guarding the doors and groups of six aurors each disappeared into each building. Yes, one group even dashed into the garden shed, but they did come out again rather quickly, the leader looking a little sheepish, and started a search of the bushes instead.

Jack and Cathy Cat had finally shut up at the sight of the aurors.

"Ugh," commented Cathy. "That doesn't look good."

"What's going on?" Draco asked confused.

"Raid. I wonder what happened this time." murmured Jack more to himself than in answer to Draco's question.

"Probably just another attack on some muggles somewhere in England." shrugged Larry.

"I think you'd better eat lunch with us today, Draco." suggested Mike. "There might be trouble if you try to go back to the Snapes now."

"Yes, they search them every time some moron dark wizard as much as walks through Diagon Alley." explained Charlie.

"Actually they perform those raids for show whenever they need to prove to the press that they're working on some case they don't have a suspect for. They dash in here, search a few flats, make a lot of noise and drag some people off to question them back at their offices in London. Then the Daily Prophet will write a short article about the big auror campaign against dark magic and the next morning they let everybody go." Mike elaborated. "Unfortunately Uncle Severus is a particular favourite of theirs. He gets to go to London almost every time. Guess they just like it if they don't have to explain the procedures all the time. He must know their questions by heart by now."

"So what do we do now?"
"Sit down under some tree and wait. They'll not let us in until we can swear we're expected home for lunch," ordered Jack. "We can watch them look important and turn people away though."

Draco soon discovered that watching aurors guard doors was rather boring. Maybe even for the aurors themselves. Nobody seemed to need to get into any of the houses urgently enough to want to approach them, everybody just shot them nervous glances and walked on trying to look as innocent as possible. Maybe the aurors started arresting people right off the streets if they got too bored?

He wondered what they were doing to the Snapes right now. Search the flat? How did one do that? Malfoy Manor had been searched by aurors too, he remembered, but he hadn't been there to watch. That was when they'd found all his father's dark arts objects. Would they really arrest Uncle Severus? What would they do to him then?

"It's okay Draco," Mike whispered into his ear. "They really do let them go again the very next morning."

Draco nodded quietly. He didn't feel like talking at the moment. What did they do with the people until they let them go? Did they put them in Azkaban? What would it do to Severus to have to go back there even if it was for just one night?

Finally Mike decided that it was time to go home for lunch.

"Let me do the talking," he told Draco as they walked up to the door and the two motionless aurors beside it.

Draco just nodded. He was beginning to feel a little scared.

"Hold it!" came a sudden command and the two boys froze in their tracks. "This house is closed. Go back home."

"This is our home. We live in there."

"Then come back later. No access right now."

"We have to go in. Mum's expecting us for lunch. I promised to be there. She'll get worried."

The auror eyed them suspiciously looked them over from head to toe, then finally came one single step closer.

"Names!" he bellowed.

"I'm Clever Mike and he's Dragon. Can we go in now?"

"So you two have to go home for lunch, yes?"

"Yes Sir, Mum's expecting us."

"What flat?"

"412."

The auror regarded them closely once again, then decided to take the risk.

"Dave, escort those two little rats to flat number 412. Make sure they don't touch anything though."

The other auror nodded to his colleague and then indicated for the boys to go ahead. He didn't
They walked up the stairs slowly the auror following closely behind never letting them out of his sight.

Another auror was positioned on the fourth floor and he glared no less than the other two had downstairs.

"What's that?" he demanded of Dave pointing right at Mike and Draco.

"The kids from 412. They want to go home for lunch so their Mummy won't get worried. Frank said to bring them in."

"Well, take them home then and be quick about it. Can't leave the door unguarded."

Dave roughly pushed them forward and they stumbled into the corridor. Draco glared back at the auror angrily. Just who did that guy think he was? But he remembered just in time that they could probably do horrible things to Uncle Severus and decided to let it go. Only a little longer and then he'd see Mike's flat from the inside. Lunch at Mike's would be fun.

The door to the Snapes' flat was standing open and Draco could see two aurors tearing up his home. Severus was standing right beside them eyes blazing with anger, but still just watching. Draco almost stopped and ran inside, but Mike grabbed his arm and dragged him along past the door and Severus looked up for a moment and quickly nodded at them to move on. Draco suddenly wondered if they'd take him along as well, if he admitted to living with he Snapes. Maybe that wouldn't be all bad though. maybe they'd let him and Uncle Severus stay together so he could keep him company.

"Come on, move it!" Dave growled behind them. "There's nothing to see here."

"Several of these ingredients can be used in dark arts potions!" he heard a woman's voice from somewhere inside the flat. "What do you need all those stores for anyway? They aren't just normal household stores."

"Research. I teach Potions and need to keep up to date with new developments. My wife has a degree in medical potions and often requires non standard ingredients as well. We are both licensed to handle them." Snape declared calmly. He sounded as if he'd said it about a hundred times before. Weren't aurors supposed to know things like that?

They reached the door of Mike's flat and Mike pulled out his key, but Dave pushed him aside and rang the doorbell instead.

A small round woman with a face that probably looked friendly and happy normally, but immediately assumed a defiant look upon seeing Dave's auror uniform opened the door.

"Are these yours?" Dave indicated Draco and Mike with a sneer.

Back at the Snapes' something clattered to the floor loudly and Billy started wailing in fear. Draco clenched his fists angrily. He wished he could turn and run back to take the baby in his arms and calm him. Where was Sarah?

"Yes, and they're late for lunch too. Come on in boys." Mike's mother said without hesitation.

Draco wondered once again at the helpfulness of the people of Merlin Park. They had to know why the aurors were after Severus, but still they were willing to lie to keep Draco safe from them.
Maybe they were cold and dangerous to outsiders, but they helped each other out as best they could and Draco was one of them for the simple reason that he was temporarily living with the Snapes. The Snapes belonged here and therefore so did Draco. The aurors however did not.

Mike's mother glared at Dave until both boys had slipped past her into the flat, then she slammed the door shut without another word. Draco breathed a sigh of relief. No more auror in his back and he couldn't hear the sounds from the Snapes' flat all that clearly anymore. Was that 'That Dog' growling out there? Draco had heard him bark, whimper or whine before, but never growl. He'd never thought 'That Dog' could be aggressive towards anyone. Maybe he was a guard dog after all?

Mike's mother was very nice and she turned out to be almost as good a cook as Sarah, but still Draco hardly ate anything. He could hear the noises of the aurors despite the closed doors. What were they shouting about now? What had made that clattering sound? Would they take away his teddy again? He hoped not. He'd come to like holding Cuddly in his arm when going to sleep. He was so nice and ... well cuddly. That was where the teddy had gotten his name from. Not that Draco would ever admit to anyone that he had named him.

They were told to stay inside for the rest of the day.

"You'd only run into those aurors again. No telling what they might do." Mike's mother explained. "Why don't you show Draco your room instead, Mike? You could play a board game."

So they trudged off to play with Mike's toys. Mike's cat jumped off of the bed when they entered the room and mewed a complaint. It was too noisy in the corridor to go out, the cat thought. Why was there so much noise when she wanted to go out?

Mike immediately picked her up and handed her to Draco.

"Ah, there she is. I promised you to show you my cat, didn't I?"

The cat gave another little protest, but when Draco put one careful arm under her and the other around she decided that maybe this wasn't so bad after all and allowed herself to be held for a while.

The warm cat body had a nice calming effect on Draco and he managed to relax a little distracted by all the strange muggle style toys Mike showed him. That didn't last long however. The cat grew tired of being cuddled and wriggled out demanding to be let out of the room and, fascinating as they were, none of their games could make Draco forget the aurors and what they were doing to the Snapes entirely.

They started dinner without Mike's father as he would most likely find somewhere else to stay the night when he saw the aurors upon returning from work as Mike explained. Nobody liked to meet an auror and when they showed up in a flock one better got out of the way fast.

"Not too fast though." his mother added. "As fast as you can without attracting their attention. If you run away, they'll arrest you for sure."

Some time later the noises from the corridor suddenly increased and Draco stared at the door worriedly. What was that? He could make out 'That Dog' again doing his best to sound dangerous barking and growling almost at the same time. Billy was crying and Munin now raised a loud cawing protest as well some words Draco couldn't quite understand through two closed doors strewed in. Finally he heard a door slam and then everything went silent.

Mike jumped up and raced to the next window Draco right behind him. All they could make out in
the dark park outside however were a few dark shapes moving away from the houses. They met in the centre of the park and then suddenly disappeared. The aurors had finally left. The whole house lay silent.

About five minutes later the doorbell rang and Sarah arrived with Billy in her arms looking for Draco. Draco dashed over and hugged her. At least she was still there! He wasn't all alone in the world.

Sarah held him tightly for a moment then gently pulled away saying, "It's all right, Draco. They do that every few months or so. Nothing unusual. Don't worry about it."

"What happened?"

"It appears that some muggle family was attacked in some village near London. Dark magic was used and now they're trying to find somebody other than Voldemort to blame it on. At least they'll pretend to be looking for a culprit until the media interest dies down. Don't worry, it's all just a big show."

Draco didn't feel much better when he saw the flat though. The aurors had upturned every last drawer, opened every cupboard and even pushed some of the furniture over. Draco had to climb over all sorts of items from food to clothing thrown carelessly to the floor to get through to the lab which didn't look any better. For a moment he just stood staring at the chaos wondering for some strange reason how many of the potion ingredients were ruined and how much could be salvaged.

Munin sat in the middle of the chaos staring at an upturned jar morosely.

"Ministry!" the raven cursed. "Aurors! Caw!"

"Come here, Munin." Draco gently picked up the raven and put him on his shoulder, then returned to the living room to look for Sarah.

He found her in the bedroom working on clearing Billy's bed so she could put the baby to sleep. It was rather difficult holding Billy in one arm while picking robes and cloaks out of his bed, but there was no place to put the baby.

Draco went over and took him from her so she had both hands free to work.

"Aurors!" Munin complained again.

"Fudge." Draco told the raven.

"Caw?"

"Fudge. That's the minister. It's his fault." the boy explained.

"Fudge?"

"Fudge." Draco nodded.

"Fudge! Ministry! Aurors!"

"Exactly. Good bird."

Together they managed to clear the beds and climb into them. For a moment Draco wondered where 'That Dog' and the cat were going to sleep tonight, but obviously they had found some place to stay as he hadn't seen either of them anywhere. He dug Cuddly out from under a pile of books,
brushed off some powdered unicorn horn and went to sleep with the irrational hope that the world would have returned back to normal when he woke up.

A/N: What are the aurors going to do to Sevi? Are the Rakers going to make up? And where are 'That Dog' and the cat?

In the next chapter: The Sharks hit back, we meet even more aurors (those guys are trouble and trouble never comes alone) and Sevi has to get Draco out of trouble. (Again that's what I think will happen. Haven't actually written anything yet.)
Chapter 16: Even More Auror Trouble

When Draco woke up the next morning he found himself surrounded by the same chaos he'd gone to sleep in. That was of course not surprising, but still he felt slightly disappointed. Looking around for Munin he found that the bird had obviously left the room. Somebody had to have closed the door again after the raven. At least Draco had never seen Munin close a door again. He could open them just fine, but how should he close them?

He climbed out of bed trying not to step on any spilled potion ingredients or scattered books. Stepping over and around the piles he made his way to the door to investigate.

The living room still looked like a disaster area, but Sarah had obviously managed to clear the table so they could have some breakfast and Severus was back cuddling Billy. 'That Dog' was jumping around his master smiling and wagging his tail so hard his entire body was shaking. Obviously he had found a place to stay overnight on his own. The cat wasn't anywhere to be seen, but then such emotional scenes weren't his style anyway. He'd probably retreated in disgust. Munin had reclaimed his usual place on Severus' shoulder looking perfectly happy once again.

Draco dashed into the room and threw his arms around Severus tightly. He was back! The aurors hadn't kept him! So what if the whole flat was a mess. Everything would be fine now.

Severus gently put one arm around Draco, the other was holding Billy, and hugged him back.

Sarah smiled at them gently for a few moments. "So are you going to eat any breakfast today?" she finally asked and Severus let go of Draco to turn to his meal instead.

"They spilled all your ingredients." Draco reported a little later around a mouthful of toast.

"I know." growled Snape through clenched teeth. "I had to watch."

"Sorry." mumbled Draco even though he wasn't entirely sure what he was sorry for.

"Don't worry." Severus said more lightly. "They do that every time. I'll have it all cleaned up in a little over a day."

"But aren't they all ruined? How much money will it take to replace all of it?"
'That's why I keep most of the really expensive stuff at Hogwarts. They wouldn't dare to treat the school's stores like that. If they don't respect the school itself, they at least know what Albus could do to them, if he wanted to. And the ministry would most likely call for their heads as well. I've got some ways to save most of the stuff they spilled and for the rest Albus will come up. Don't worry about it, Draco.'

Draco sighed. Well, at least Uncle Severus didn't let it all get to him. Come to think of it, he was surprisingly calm about it all. Draco would have expected him to at least curse the aurors a bit in revenge. Then again that might not be a good idea. They might do even worse next time.

Washing the dishes looked almost impossible at first, but once Draco started to work, he realised that as long as he was careful not to step on anything it wasn't a problem at all. Sarah had already cleared the area around the kitchen sink and once he'd found his favourite towel it was easy enough to put the dishes into the empty shelves.

Mary didn't show up for the game that day and Jack reluctantly agreed to let Sammie join his team instead of Cathy Cat who still glared at him every time he as much as looked in her direction during the player discussion.

Draco soon regretted having trained Sammie so much. The boy was getting really good at shooting from unusual angles and he and Matt had their hands full defending against three excellent attackers. On the other hand Larry was making it almost too easy for Cathy. Jack had insisted that Mike had to be his attack partner since he didn't trust Sammie's abilities at all and thus Larry was left to defend his goal all alone.

Soon Draco's team was in the lead. Cathy and Charlie were free to do whatever they wanted. Larry was getting frantic and Jack was quickly losing his temper.

"Calm down, Jack!" Mike tried to soothe him. "It's early in the game. We can still turn this around if we strengthen our defence and keep our heads."

But even while he said it the ball once again dashed past Larry and rolled off into the bushes.

Cathy and Charlie cheered and Draco yelled a quick "Well done, girls!" over to them. His attention was mostly on Matt however who was already panting from all the action around their goal. Could he last the whole game or should he try having him change positions with Charlie?

Suddenly the ball came rocketing back out of the bushes straight toward a group of trees near the path. What was going on? Draco hadn't seen anybody go to get the ball yet and why would they shoot it away from the field?

The ball didn't quite reach its intended destination and a small figure in a red t-shirt jumped out from behind the trees to scoop up the ball and run.

"What the?"

"After him!" Jack yelled after the first moments of puzzlement.

They took off after the little Shark wannabe Larry soon falling behind while Sammie was quickly taking the lead.

"Go get him, Sammie!" Draco yelled after him. "You can do it!"

Indeed Sammie was gaining on the little boy who was obviously beginning to tire. Not used to kicking a ball he carried it clutched tightly in his arms which was hindering his movements.
"Toby." panted Matt somewhere behind Draco. "That's little Toby, Robin's brother. ... Other one must have been Mely then."

Other one? Oh right Toby must have had an accomplice in the bushes behind the goal who'd shot him the ball. Mely? Mely? Where had Draco heard that name before? ... Ah yes, Mely short for Melinda. That was the little Shark wannabe he'd seen playing on the soccer field the first time he'd gone to the market with Sarah.

They should probably have investigated the bushes and given Mely a good thrashing for stealing their ball. But then Toby would have gotten away with it. No, catching Toby and getting the ball back was more important. They'd get Mely later.

They were out of the park now, racing into the streets. Sammie almost had Toby. Just a few more metres...

Suddenly Chris appeared around a street corner. Toby threw the ball at him with all his remaining strength just before Sammie finally managed to grab him. Sammie and Toby went down rolling on the side-walk, Toby desperately screaming.

"No, Sammie! Let him go! Get after Chris!" Mike yelled.

"We have to get the ball!" shouted Jack now right beside Draco.

Chris had caught the ball easily and was now running down the block headed towards a main street. Was he going to try to cross it with the ball? If so they had him. He'd have to stop and wait for the traffic to let him through. Draco gave another spurt. If he was right about Chris' intentions it would be the last one. He put all his strength into it.

Indeed Chris was headed for the street, but just before he reached the curb he dropped the ball in front of his feet and gave it a big kick, turned and disappeared down the next alley.

The ball soared over the street and landed right in Mark the Shark's open arms. Mark ginned over at the Rakers holding the ball up in triumph for a moment then turned and ran off down the side street he'd been waiting in.

Sammie and Mike who'd been in the lead stopped at the curb shouting insults over the passing carts and carriages. Heavy traffic today and it wasn't even market day. Draco wondered for a moment what it might all be about. They were all headed towards the river he saw. Some big event in the town centre probably.

Cathy, Jack and Charlie arrived right behind him all stopped by the traffic. Draco glanced back the way they'd come, but there was no sign of either Matt or Larry. They must have lost them somewhere along the way. Matt had already been very exhausted from the game and Larry was the slowest in the gang except for Mary. Was Mary even still in the gang?

No time to think about that though. The traffic let up for a moment and they dashed out and over the street, down the way Mark had gone.

They could still see him in the distance. He had reached the smaller houses in the region of the marketplace and ran straight for one of them.

"No, not Old Connelly's house." he heard Cathy behind him. "Please not Connelly's house!"

Mark reached the house and raised the ball in his hand in one fluid motion. Klirrrr! And the ball went right through the window.
Mark jogged away lightly not even stopping to glance back at the horrified Rakers.

The whole group of exhausted panting and puffing kids assembled in front of the small house and stared at the broken window for a while. What now?

"Hey, I think we're in luck." Clever Mike finally broke the horrified silence. "If Old Connelly were home, she'd already be out here yelling and cursing at us."

"Are you sure?" Charlie asked timidly. "The last thing I want is Old Connelly to catch me breaking into her house."

"Why? You don't even have to take her classes. I'm the one who's absolutely dead if she catches us." declared Sammie.

"Hey, the rest of us have her as well and I'll be taking my NEWTS this year!" growled Jack. "But we have to get my ball back."

"Just who is that Old Connelly person?" Draco asked mystified.

"Huh? What?" Cathy stared at him for a moment. "Oh right, you don't know Old Connelly. She's our Charms teacher. The meanest old hag you've ever seen. They say she eats live cats for breakfast."

"Yeah sure." grinned Draco remembering all the tales mischievous Gryffindors told about Professor Snape.

Those tales were only good to scare little Hufflepuffs in Draco's opinion. Uncle Severus? Cut up little kids for potion ingredients? Yeah sure. Like anyone who'd seen him cuddle little Billy could ever believe that one.

"Maybe we'd better try ringing the doorbell to see if she's really not home before we break in though." suggested Mike.

"Oh? And what do you want us to tell her if she does open up?" Jack asked sarcastically.

"How about that we're really sorry and it was an accident and could we please have our ball back, we'll help clean up any damages?" suggested Charlie.

"Volunteer for work?" Jack sneered. "Are you crazy?"

"Look, do you have a better idea?" Cathy asked him. "You don't have to help with the clean-up, if you're too good for it though. We'll just leave you standing out here sulking."

She stalked over to the garden gate and pressed the small button that activated the bell. Draco was surprised to find that it was a different tone from the one he was used to from the Snapes' flat. This one sounded more like BI-BING! instead of BRRING!

They stood there in front of Old Connelly the Charms teacher's garden gate for several minutes, but nothing happened. Finally Cathy tried again.

Another few minutes passed and still nothing happened.

"Well, looks like we're really in luck today." Jack finally decided. "Come on, let's break in. Maybe we'll even find some money to take with us."

That remark gave Draco a little jolt. Steal money? From a teacher no less? But none of the others
reacted in any way. He hoped they wouldn't find where Old Connelly was hiding her money.

After a quick glance around to check that nobody was watching they quickly climbed over the gate and tried to open the front door. It was locked and looked quite solid however. Jack wasn't one to give up easily though. He led them around the house checking every window on the way and to the back door.

This was locked as well, but Sammie gave them a quick smirk. "Wait here." he said and disappeared around the corner.

They heard the sound of glass breaking, then some rustling, a muffled bang and a few seconds later the back door swung open and Sammie stood in front of them several bloody cuts on his hands and blood on his cheek, though Draco couldn't tell if he'd actually hurt his cheek or just touched it with his bloody hands, but grinning from ear to ear.

"This really was too easy." he announced. "Come on in and lets look for the ball."

"You didn't see it?" Draco asked surprised. "I thought you'd climbed in through the smashed window?"

"I did, but no, I don't remember seeing the ball. It might have rolled under some piece of furniture though. I wasn't actually looking for it so much as for the way to the back-door to let you in. Or would you have preferred to wait outside while I went ball searching?"

Actually yes, Draco would have preferred to stay outside. He wasn't altogether sure if breaking in was such a bright idea. What if they got caught?

He tried to calm himself by concentrating on breathing regularly as they went in. Most likely Old Connelly had gone to the Hogsmeade town centre just like all the carts and coaches. Whatever was going on there was likely to take some time. She wouldn't be back that soon. They wouldn't be caught.

Still he fingered the broken door handle in his pocket for reassurance. At least he had a weapon to defend himself with.

The house was rather small compared to what Draco had been used to from the manor, but after living in the Snapes' small flat for so long he hardly noticed it anymore. All he noticed was that everything looked very orderly inside. Either Old Connelly had just cleaned up the entire place or she was overly neat.

Or maybe it was just the state the aurors had left the flat in that made it all appear so unusually neat to Draco?

"Okay Weasel, where did the ball land then?" Charlie demanded rather impatiently.

Draco fully agreed with her though. The sooner they found the ball, the sooner they'd be out of here and could return to their game as if nothing had ever happened. Stupid Sharks! He'd have to come up with a very special trick to get back at them.

"In here." Sammie disappeared through a door. "But I can't see it anywhere now."

Draco followed him curiously and found what appeared to be the living room as neat as everything else in the house except for that broken window.

Sammie had broken the rest of the glass out and big and small shards were strewn all over the
floor. The ball however was nowhere in sight.

Draco exchanged a quick glance with Charlie who'd come in behind him. Hey, where had the others gotten to?

"Well, start looking under the furniture. It probably just rolled away." he suggested crouching down to peer under the couch.

Charlie nodded quickly and crawled under the table while Sammie ...

"Sammie, how do you think the ball would have managed to jump into a closed drawer?"

"Er ... um ... right. I was just ..."

"Start looking for the ball, Sammie. Where could you hide if you were a ball?"

"Er ... Dragon?"

"Yes, Charlie?"

"A ball is a dead object, you know. It doesn't choose hiding places."

"Here it is!" yelled Sammie happily pulling it out from under the cupboard.

"Great work." Cathy Cat whispered excitedly from the door. "Now lets get out of here!"

"Where are Jack and Mike anyway?" Draco whispered back.

"Next door over. Looking for money."

"What? I thought we came for the ball."

"That doesn't mean we have to waste a good opportunity, does it?" commented Charlie.

"I think we've got what we came for, so we'd better go." Draco insisted.

"Jack's call to make, not yours." reminded Sammie.

"Maybe so, but if he's clever he'll agree with me on this one."

"Lets just go and tell him we've got the ball, see what he does." suggested Cathy.

She turned to leave and nearly collided with Mike.

"Aurors! Get out!" was all Mike said as he dashed past them and towards the back door Jack right behind him.

They were outside before Draco had fully realised what was going on. The Sharks must have alerted the aurors. But how could there be more than one? It wasn't a market day.

Before the startled group could react and follow their leaders they heard "Alohomora!" shouted and the front door slammed open with force. If they stepped out into the hall now they'd be seen.

Sammie immediately turned and jumped out the window with catlike grace. Charlie followed his lead, but didn't manage quite as fast.

"Stupefy!"
Charlie slumped hanging half out the window. There was no getting through past her now.

Draco whirled around noticing that somehow Cathy Cat was no longer behind him. A small part of his mind wondered how she had managed to disappear so suddenly while the rest of him just stared in horror at the auror in the doorway. Only yesterday he had wished the aurors would arrest him, but now!

"Stupefy!" and everything went black.

About two hours later Draco and Charlie sat side by side in the only cell of the West Hogsmeade auror station staring morosely at a dirty and cracked wall. Neither felt much like talking. Charlie because Old Connelly had been there only minutes ago and created quite a fuss about the whole incident which obviously scared the girl more than all the aurors in the world and Draco, because he had been forced to admit to the aurors that he was currently living with the Snapes.

The auror who had questioned him had looked almost gleeful at that revelation and immediately sent off an official owl to alert Uncle Severus. After all the Snapes had done for him now he had brought the aurors upon them once again! And they'd only just released Uncle Severus too!

Draco tried to make himself as small as possible and hide behind Charlie as best he could. Maybe if they couldn't see him they'd forget he was there?

At least they had found the ball which Sammie had dropped in his hurry to get away and Old Connelly had confirmed that nothing had been stolen though she didn't seem all that sure that they wouldn't have stolen anything if they'd had more time.

As far as Draco had managed to reconstruct events from what he'd heard during his questioning the Sharks had timed their report to the auror station exactly so they'd catch both the West Hogsmeade aurors at the station during the usual shift change. Sammie, Jack and Mike had managed to get out just in time and obviously hadn't been seen though the aurors clearly doubted their claim to have been the only ones to break into the house.

Charlie had immediately declared that the ball was hers and that they'd been on their way to meet the rest of their gang when the Sharks had waylaid them and made off with the ball. They'd followed them and when they'd thrown the ball through the window and nobody had answered the door Charlie and Draco had climbed over the fence and tried the doors. The back door had been open. Old Connelly must have forgotten to close it last time she'd been in the back garden. The kitchen had been disturbed only because they were unfamiliar with the layout of the house and had mistakenly entered it when looking for the room with the broken window. The room was so small that they'd collided in the door in their nervous hurry and Charlie had fallen upsetting a few objects that had been lying around. They'd tried to clean up the mess they'd made, but hadn't been sure exactly where everything had been. Then they'd found the right room and picked up the ball when the aurors arrived and Charlie in her panic had dropped the ball and tried to climb through the window.

Draco had of course confirmed everything Charlie had said adding a big dose of his Malfoy charm. The one thing that remained unclear however was what had become of Cathy Cat. Draco was sure that she hadn't gotten out in time, but still the aurors didn't seem to have found her hiding somewhere in the house. He'd have to ask her as soon as he got back.

"Charlie?" he finally whispered.
She turned her head towards him already regaining her composure. Draco wished he could be that calm.

"Why did you say it was your ball?"

"Never mention your pals to the aurors. They might go after them and if we say it's Jack's ball they'll think he was in there with us."

"We could have named the Sharks though." suggested Draco.

"No. The Sharks are our kind. They might be our rivals, but they are our kind. The aurors are the enemy... Outsiders." she clarified when she saw Draco's puzzled look. "You never betray your kind to outsiders if you can help it at all. It's a matter of honour."

Draco was surprised at that answer. He understood not betraying your own gang, but a rival gang? Who exactly was 'our kind'? He considered asking Charlie, but thought better of it. Uncle Severus could explain these things better, particularly in what way they applied to Hogwarts. Were Gryffindors his kind at school or were they the enemy? He felt a sudden need to find out and Charlie surely wouldn't know.

They returned to sitting quietly and listening for sounds from the office next door. There had been a lot of noise and voices talking right after they'd been taken back to the cell after Old Connelly's visit, but then they'd heard a door slam and there'd been nothing since. Most likely the auror who'd been supposed to go home when the Sharks had come in had finally left and the other one was now alone with nobody to talk to.

"But didn't the Sharks betray us to the aurors? What about their honour?" he asked Charlie suddenly.

"That doesn't mean we have to be as bad as them. We'll act honourably and prove ourselves their betters." Charlie grinned at him all of a sudden. "You just wait and see. Word will get around about what the Sharks did to us and people won't be happy about it. All of Merlin Park will be avoiding them for quite some time. You don't get rid of the tag of traitor easily around here."

Draco gave her a weak grin back. That concept he could understand. Slytherins were much the same after all. He wondered for a moment what would happen to Uncle Severus if they ever found out he was a spy. It probably depended on who won the war though. There were Slytherins on both sides after all.

They fell silent once again. After a while there was the sound of the door slamming shut once again though not quite as vehemently as the last time. Next they heard voices once again. The auror who'd taken them into the cell. He must have been the one on duty then. A woman's voice that Draco didn't recognise, but caused Charlie to smile happily. Most likely her Mum then he decided though he was a little surprised at the smile. Charlie had been terrified of Old Connelly, but was not afraid of her Mum's punishment?

And then there was one more voice, softer than the others and barely audible from the cell. Draco might not even have heard it at all, if he hadn't known it so well. It was Snape and he was furious. He didn't even sound like that when Neville Longbottom blew up his cauldron usually. It was the voice he used only after really big events, like Dumbledore cheating Slytherin out of winning the house cup, like Crabbe and Goyle going too far and sending a kid to the hospital wing unconscious, like one of his students getting caught trying to stuff Mrs Norris into a sack and throw her into the lake, like McGonagall taking one hundred points off a group of Slytherin first years for fighting in her class while the Gryffindors they'd been fighting with went free, like Fudge visiting.
Draco suddenly felt very very sick. What would Snape do to him if he was in that mood? Would he just pack him up and send him off to live with Cousin Eugene? Maybe even per owl post? ... Well, maybe not per owl post, but probably per floo powder.

The voices went on like that for what seemed like hours to Draco, but probably was only a few minutes. The auror was bellowing out questions they could almost understand clearly through the wall, Charlie's Mum sounded angry and slightly hysterical. She talked a little too quickly to be understood, but was almost as loud as the auror while Snape was heard hissing a short answer only every once in a while. They probably couldn't hear everything he said though, just the slightly louder words. When Snape was really mad his voice got so soft you couldn't possibly hear him from another room.

Finally ... or ... no, no Draco didn't want anything to happen at all. Better they continue to shout in there and don't come here! ... they heard a chair scrape over the floor then footsteps. That had to be the auror. They were much too heavy for a woman or for Snape who usually moved as quietly as a cat especially when he was angry. He was much more intimidating like that and he knew it.

Then voices just around the corner. They were coming! No! Oh no! What was Snape going to do to him?

"Oh, I almost forgot! Is that your daughter's ball?" Oh no!

"Let me see." a moment's pause. "Yes, yes it looks like Charlie's. I can't be entirely sure though. They all look very much alike and I never did look at it this closely before. You'd have to ask her to be sure."

"Well, she says it's hers."

"Then I suppose it must be. It does look like it is."

Draco hardly believed his ears. Charlie didn't even own a ball! Didn't her mother know that?

They rounded the corner, the auror grinning broadly basking in his power and Snape and Charlie's Mum looking furious. Snape shot a quick glance Draco's way then to the boy's relief resumed glaring at the auror with the look usually reserved for the likes of Harry Potter. This was even worse than Draco had imagined.

Charlie flung herself against the bars smiling happily. "Mum! Oh Mum, I'm so glad you're here! I was so scared! I'm sooo sorry for being so stupid! I'll never ever do something like that again, I promise!"

Draco stared at her in surprise. That wasn't like Charlie at all. She had to be acting.

Charlie's Mum who looked a lot like an older version of her daughter wearing glasses sighed deeply, which didn't seem quite real either. "Just you wait until we get home, young Lady! I'll teach you to break into people's houses."

"I'm sorry Mum. Really!" whined Charlie.

Still didn't sound real. Draco wondered what was going on.

The auror stepped to the door, rattled his keys importantly, pushed one of them into the cell's lock and tried to turn it ... first to the right, then to the left, then tried to pull it out again, finally left it stuck and pulled out his wand. "Alohomora!"
Snape rolled his eyes.

Draco would have laughed if he hadn't been so worried what Snape might do with him once he got out.

Charlie dashed out as soon as the door opened and right towards her mother who slapped her in the face, grabbed her by the shoulder and dragged her off without another word.

Draco stepped out more hesitantly. He did not want to get slapped like that even if Charlie didn't seem to mind, but then he'd never seen Snape slap anyone. He usually didn't react the way other people did. Draco looked up at him shyly.

Snape looked back at him calmly. No hint of the furious glare he'd had just moments ago. "Well, lets go." he said nodding towards the door.

On the way out Draco cast one last quick look back at the cell and the auror who wore a strangely disappointed look. What had he expected? Had he enjoyed seeing Charlie get slapped? Had he hoped for Snape to react equally violently?

For a while they just walked side by side down the road without a word.

"A broken door handle?" Snape finally asked unexpectedly when they'd almost reached Merlin Park.

Draco's hand shot to his pocket. Empty. The aurors must have checked them for weapons while they'd still been unconscious from the 'Stupefy' spells. They hadn't mentioned that when they'd questioned him.

"I thought I'd better have some hard object handy in case I get into another fight."

Pause.

"Well, Sarah won't be happy with you for losing it. She needed it to sew socks."

"Sew socks? Oh." Draco wondered how that worked, but then he didn't know much about sewing after all.

"Yes, that's a rather difficult operation, if you don't have an object you can stuff inside instead of one of your hands."

"But a door handle?"

"It had the right shape."

"Oh. ... Sorry." Draco didn't know what else to say. He'd never thought anybody might find a broken door handle useful, but then again he'd found a use for it as well. "What happened to it?"

"I told Stephen it must be a bit of junk you picked up on the road. Explained that you're quite fond of muggle objects and probably wanted to examine if it was electrical."

"Stephen?"

"That idiotic auror."

"Oh. Wonder what he thinks of me now."
"That you're a bit odd probably. Not that that could surprise him. He's quite convinced he's the only sane person in the world. A typical auror delusion."

"Do you know every auror by name?"

"No, just those that are or were stationed in Hogsmeade sometime during the last ... about ten years or so, the ones in the anti dark arts squad, about half of the London aurors and a few others I've run into. All in all a little over a hundred names and faces I think."

Draco pondered that on the way up the stairs. A little over a hundred aurors? Was that normal for an adult wizard? His father had known a lot of people, but most of them probably weren't common aurors. Snape wasn't Lucius though. Most people didn't seem to be like Lucius at all. But then who should he compare Snape to?

"You are going to clean up the entire flat by the way. That would take almost forever!"

"Yes, Sir!"

"I suggest we start with the potions ingredients right after lunch."

"Yes, Sir!" Oh well, it was better than getting sent off to live with Eugene and he could see why the Snapes didn't want to do it themselves.

Luckily Sarah seemed to have made a lot of progress during the morning. All the upturned furniture had already been righted and the strewn about food and clothes had vanished. One could live in the flat once again.

The lab turned out to be the worst looking room in the flat for the moment, since Severus had been concentrating on saving his precious ingredients first and had just pushed everything else aside for later. Sorting all the strewed about ingredients out was a very slow process, but the longer they took to do it, the less they would be able to save.

To Draco's surprise they found Sarah there carefully sorting through a pile of small items on the table when they got home. She told them that lunch was on the stove and they should just grab themselves some plates and come back to help her once they'd eaten.

When they returned Sarah was still bent over the same pile though its size had diminished slightly.

"Okay. Draco, we finished sorting out all the bigger objects and those smaller ones that could be gathered by magical means." Snape explained. "What remains to be done now is sort out the ones that we put on the table and the powders. If you could take over the pile Sarah's started, she could help me with the powders."

Draco nodded obediently even if it looked like he'd be sorting tiny disgusting potion ingredients for the rest of the day. At least now they were all in one pile instead of all over the room.

"You have to take out every object individually and put it in the right jar." Sarah showed Draco. "The spider legs go in here, beetle eyes over there, wings in that one, ... But you can see that for yourself. If you're not entirely sure what one of them is, set it aside. I'll sort it later. Don't put them into a jar, if you're not sure they belong there! And you mustn't touch them with any sort of magic!"
These are all very fragile."

Draco nodded again and picked up the first little object. A frog tooth. Yuck! He looked through the many jars piled on the table until he finally found the frog teeth. Ping! In it went. Now for the next object.

Meanwhile Severus had picked up an empty jar. He touched it with his wand lightly and said "Convoco powdered unicorn horn!"

White dust suddenly rose all over the room forming a thick cloud that made Draco and Sarah cough for a moment then flew right into the jar in a big stream.

Snape calmly closed the lid and summoned a tag onto it, then took out the next jar.

Sarah was setting up strange glass tubes and glasses filled with differently coloured liquids beside the burner. Then she carefully measured out small amounts of two of them, poured them into a glass of water and put it on the burner. Draco blinked. What was she doing? He'd never seen someone brew a potion like that.

After one last cloud of bluish grey dust had been safely locked away Severus finally turned to Sarah with a nod. "I'm done with the summonable ones."

Sarah seemed to understand that remark and immediately conjured a brush and a shovel and set to collecting what was left of the spilled powders while Severus tagged his last jar and then knelt down to help her.

Draco decided that the magic show was obviously over and returned to his sorting duties. It seemed preferable to helping with the dusting. Absorbed in the intricacies of telling spider legs from beetles' antennas he almost missed when Severus poured water into the glass they'd collected the powders in.

He stopped, blinked, then stared. Why were they adding water? Was this going to be some kind of potion? But how could Severus be sure what powders and how much of each were in the mix?

Sarah calmly took her 'potion' off the fire and set it aside to cool while Severus carefully stirred his mixture.

"What are you doing?" Draco finally asked Severus.

"Separating the powders of course."

"By getting them wet?!"

"I summoned out all those that can be summoned without harming their magical qualities." Severus explained patiently. "The ones that are left will have to be sorted without magical means, just like that pile of ingredients you're working on."

"But they're dust! You can't pick up and sort every tiny particle of dust."

"Exactly. That's why we're going to use their chemical qualities to sort them instead. ... Look, if you regard the glass closely you can already see that there are some green particles swimming on top and a black layer is forming at the bottom of the glass."

Draco dropped his probably spider leg or antenna back onto the pile and peered into the glass intently. "The water's turning red!" he discovered.
"Dark orange in fact." Snape corrected. "Always try to be as exact as possible when naming colours in Chemistry or Potions. Often only tiny changes in the shade or intensity of colour tell you when something's ready or that you've made a mistake."

Draco regarded the dark orange doubtfully. There were indeed small green dots forming on top and black ones at the bottom.

"Those powders which are solvable in water are bonding with the water causing it to turn dark orange right now, those that aren't are being repelled by it and collect either on top or at the bottom according to their weight. That process will take some time until it's complete, but we can finish sorting the pile in the meantime and afterwards we'll have three separate groups of powders."

"But one of them will be liquid." Draco frowned.

"Oh, they all will be at some point." Severus answered lightly. "Chemistry is a lot of fun, you know. You'll love this. And we can practise naming colours on them."

"I thought we already named their colours?"

"Ah, but we're going to change them a few times before we're done."

Draco stared at the glass of water some more. It was going to change it's colours again? But all he saw at the moment was that the little dots had grown in the meantime. They were connecting to form thin layers now.

"Draco? Come over and help me sort out the beetle wings, boy." Sarah called him back to attention. "I can hardly see those thin little things in this light."

With a sigh Draco returned to his sorting duties leaving the mysteries of muggle science for later.

By the time they were finally done with the pile it was getting dark outside and Sarah went off to prepare dinner while Severus set to the task of separating the three groups of powders as he insisted on calling them despite the fact that the middle one was quite obviously a liquid now.

He spooned off the green top layer, which seemed quite willing to be separated from the water, Draco observed. Any amount of water accidentally spooned up along with the dust turned into a tight drop immediately pushing away from the powder.

Severus put the powder into another glass, then put a very odd looking lid on it. There were two little holes on top of it, one leading through a hose into another glass, that was hanging upside down in an odd holder and the other lead into a very small vial mounted on top of the lid with an odd little lever on it's underside.

Severus took one of the other strange liquids and poured a very small amount into the odd vial, checked once more if everything was connected correctly and then pushed the lever a little and the strange liquid began to slowly drip down into the powder. The powder gave a sudden hissing sound and smoke began to rise up into the upside down glass.

Draco stared open-mouthed. He'd seen steaming potions before, but hissing, steaming powders? Was it supposed to do that?

Snape however didn't seem at all surprised. He calmly picked up a filter Sarah had prepared along with the glasses and liquids and put it on top of yet another glass.

Draco watched in fascination as he slowly poured the orange water through the filter leaving the
black powder in the filter.

"There, all separated. Now for the next round." He put the black powder into a new glass, then poured another liquid on top of it. The whole immediately turned scarlet.

Draco blinked, looked at the full glass then at the drops left inside the empty one. Those were still colourless and ...

"Why didn't you just throw the powder into the liquid in the first place? That way you'd need fewer glasses."

"That liquid's acid Draco. Very dangerous! If any of it had splashed out it would have eaten a hole through the table ... and probably your skin as well. It's safer to pour dangerous liquids into less dangerous ones, because the one that spills out is the one already inside."

Before Draco could ask more questions Sarah returned.

"Dinner's on the table. Go and eat, you both need it. I'll finish up here." she announced grabbing for the orange water and another vial of strange liquid.

Severus just nodded and left. Draco hesitated. Hadn't he just said that this stuff was dangerous? And now he left Sarah to handle it without even a word of warning? But Sarah had also been the one to set out all the Chemistry stuff in the first place. Was Sarah an Alchemist too? She certainly looked like she knew what she was doing.

Draco decided that Severus had to know best whether he could leave Sarah to handle dangerous substances or not and followed him into the kitchen. There was another question that was bothering him.

"What do you think happened to Charlie? Her Mum looked really mad. Do you think she beat her?"

"No, her father might have, but her Mother's a decent woman. She was just putting on a show for Stephen's sake. The people around here don't take such things as kids getting caught breaking in very seriously. It's something all the gangs do every once in a while, the normal trouble kids get into. And the aurors aren't very well liked around here anyway. They don't think much of us and in return we don't think much of them either. They're outsiders who ought to stay out of our business."

"Then it's true that the Sharks will be in more trouble for this than we are?"

"You pulled a prank in the eyes of the locals. They committed treason. They won't be trusted from now on and people who deal with them won't either. It could well be that Mark the Shark has gotten a beating tonight. His Dad definitely isn't happy with him right now."

"But what we did was illegal. Doesn't that reflect badly on the people here as well?"

"No, we've already got a bad name anyway. To most people in the wizading world everybody from Merlin Park has to be a criminal and it isn't even entirely wrong. People around here are poor. If the opportunity to get some money or even food or clothing presents itself, they've got other priorities than wondering whether it's legal. That doesn't necessarily make them bad people though. ... At least to me it doesn't."

Draco thought about that for a bit. His father always had been very keen about family honour, but he supposed that here in West Hogsmeade people had different worries than their chances at becoming minister of magic or being invited to some big social event. And abiding laws for the
laws’ sake was for Hufflepuffs. Yes, he could see Severus’ point there.

"Then you're not really angry with me at all?"

"Of course I'm angry. This is the second time you've forced me into contact with aurors. I don't much care for that, you know. I believe I told you that I have problems enough with them as it is so I'd thank you not to get involved with them while you're staying with me."

"Oh, and now it's my fault that they came and caught us and not the Sharks’?"

"It's their fault they came, but yours for getting caught. Clumsy, Draco, very clumsy."

Well, at least Snape was still talking to him. Being punished like this wasn't all that bad after all. Just a lot of work.

"I suggest you start washing the furniture now." Snape said once they were done eating. "That way you can be sure it'll be dry when you put the books back on the shelves tomorrow. I don't like my books getting wet at all. You can still do your Math exercises today if you're fast."

"I can't find the book." Draco said miserably.

"In that case your exercises will have to wait until tomorrow evening. I'm sure you'll find it once you get the lab cleaned up." he handed Draco some cleaning tools which the boy recognised from his detentions with Filch. He wouldn't have known what to do with them otherwise. "And if you get bored you can start planning your revenge on the Sharks."

"Revenge? I thought they hurt themselves more than us?"

"Yes, but they still hurt you and that calls for revenge."

"Well, then I guess we'll just have to beat them up again. Too bad I lost my weapon."

"Oh, come on, Draco. Be a little creative! Beating them up is so old. You're a Slytherin, you're supposed to be cunning. Do something special, something they wouldn't expect."

"Something only we can do?"

"Even more. Something they can clearly trace to you, not something Jack would normally do, not the kind of trick Mike would come up with. A very special Draco revenge."

"A very creative thing only I can do? What would that be?"

Snape shrugged. "I don't know. You've got a lot of time to think about it though. You'll come up with something. Cleaning furniture all alone is very thought provoking work."

"What about your chemical separation of powders?"

"Those will have to stand and work themselves for a while. We'll just leave them alone overnight. Just don't touch anything on the table. We'll clean that last once we're done with everything else."

Draco nodded obediently and went to work. A sort of revenge only he could do. What could that be? What was there he could do that others couldn’t? He no longer had a rich father to threaten people with so what else was special about him?

'Nothing,' he thought. 'Without my rich family I'm absolutely nothing.' So what could he do?
A/N: So, how do you think Cathy got out? What was Charlie’s punishment? And what is Draco going to do to the Sharks?

In the next chapter: Draco cleans the flat, finds something interesting and makes plans for his big revenge.
The next morning the green powder had turned a greenish blue colour while the upside down glass was filled with white smoke. After breakfast Severus removed the hose that had connected it to the odd glass with the formerly green powder, put a plate under it, lowered the holder a little and ... set the smoke on fire!

Draco stared as white ash dropped onto the plate.

Severus however calmly removed the glass with the now blue powder and poured another liquid on top of that. The whole thing started smoking again, but this time it didn't hiss nor did Severus make any attempt to capture the smoke.

Draco redirected his attention towards the new glass and found that the powder was beginning to dissolve into dark blue liquid.

"What about the smoke?" he asked curiously.

"Just a by-product. Never mind. It's harmless and of no use to us." answered Snape and turned towards another glass filled with liquid that Draco didn't remember seeing before. It had to be the one Sarah had used for the orange water, but now there was no hint of orange left. The liquid looked completely clear and the odd crystals on the bottom were white.

Snape poured the whole thing through the filter once again, then threw something into the liquid that Draco couldn't see. It might have been some powder or capsule, he thought. Definitely not another liquid. The liquid slowly began to darken while Snape added water to the crystals once again and then moved on to the formerly black powder.

The scarlet liquid seemed to have settled at the bottom of the glass while the top now looked yellow. Severus smiled obviously satisfied with the result and poured it into yet another strange contraption. Then before Draco could even take a closer look he touched it lightly with his wand and the whole thing began spinning like a washing machine.

Draco gaped at it. Was that thing a mini washing machine? But it seemed to be powered magically instead of electrically! This Chemistry thing sure was strange.

"You know, in this one I'm actually using Physics, not Chemistry." Severus commented indicating the spinning washing machine like contraption.

"Really?" Draco's eyes grew very wide.

"Yes, the two subjects are closely related."

"But I don't see any cables."

"Not everything in Physics is electrical Draco. Actually electricity is only one very small part of it."

Draco nodded excitedly. "I'll find out everything about it. just as soon as I'm through with that
"Math book. I just need to find it again."

"In that case I suggest you start washing out these." Severus handed him some of the empty glasses. "I need everything we've used for the separation cleaned perfectly. Treat them as you would potion ingredient jars and be particularly careful with the ones that contained the acid. Once you are done with that you can start dusting and putting back the books and jars."

"What about the glasses you're still using? And how do I know which jar goes where?"

"Just put the jars in according to their requirements. You ought to know which ones need to be kept out of direct light. The ones that need to be kept cool I've already taken care off and those that have to be kept in the dark entirely were all ruined anyway. The other glasses will have to wait till I'm done with them, but I'll be needing some of these here again before then. And wash them in the bathroom. Sarah doesn't need you underfoot in the kitchen!"

Draco nodded obediently and carried as many glasses as he could off into the bathroom. When he returned for the rest he found Snape busy filling the white ash into a jar labelled 'fairy dust'.

"There's our first powder, see." he showed Draco the jar.

It really did look like fairy dust, but how could that be?

"But that's ash. I saw you burn it."

"Yes, and that way it turned back into fairy dust. Don't forget to clean the filters as well and be careful with this. It wouldn't be easy to replace. We'd have to go to London and pay a lot of muggle money for it and you know what the exchange rates at Gringotts are like." Severus warned him as he gingerly picked up the strange contraption they'd used to get the fairy dust smoke.

It was a muggle object then? Well, that probably explained the strange looks. Draco carefully carried it back to the bathroom with the rest of the stuff.

Those were quite a lot of glasses. Well, it wasn't much different from doing the dishes. Most likely he was much better at this now than he had been before he'd come to live with the Snapes. At least Uncle Severus had never entrusted him with his own jars back then even during detentions. He'd always cleaned them himself. And that strange contraption seemed to be a lot more valuable to him than common potion ingredient jars.

Draco smiled. He could do this and he would do it well.

Draco returned with the clean glass objects about an hour later to find Snape packing away another freshly isolated potion. For a moment Draco considered asking where that one had come from, but then decided to ignore it. He wouldn't understand this anyway. That Chemistry stuff was too complicated he thought.

Instead he asked where he should put away the glass objects.

"Oh, just set them back on the table. I'll need most of them again after lunch anyway." Snape told him setting the jar onto a very empty looking shelf.

"Okay." he put each of them down separately as carefully as he could with both arms full of them and returned to get the rest.
"So, what do you want me to do next?" he asked once everything was back on the table.

"Dust off the books and put them back on the shelves." Snape answered. Then added looking Draco up and down pointedly. "But first change into some dry clothes."

Draco looked down at himself and decided that Snape had a point there. Washing the bigger glasses had been rather difficult in the small bathroom and Draco had splashed himself thoroughly.

"That's not so bad." he declared after a moment's consideration. "It's so hot today that this is rather comfortable. I won't get sick as long as I don't even feel cold."

"I wouldn't be so sure of that. And I don't want you to get my books wet, so please get dry before you start on them." Severus insisted.

Well, if he put it like this ... Draco sighed and complied. At least he'd found his clothes again after Severs and Sarah had cleaned up all the potion ingredients.

He quickly slipped into his other pair of trousers and his favourite T-shirt with the dragon on. If he wasn't going out anyway, it didn't really matter that he wasn't wearing the gang colours and he really liked that dragon shirt. Might as well have that to cheer him up while he had to do all the cleaning.

Dusting the books didn't turn out to be all that bad either. Snape had already shelved most of the potion ingredients despite his earlier insistence that Draco had to do it all alone and now the room didn't look nearly as bad as it had right after the aurors' visit. The task seemed manageable and Draco even decided to attempt to sort the books by topic. That way he might even find what he was looking for next time.

He started by just collecting all of them in a big pile near the shelf then picked up each individually, dusting it off with Sarah's feather duster and checking their titles to determine their subjects.

He soon realised that it was better to find out first how much room each category would require and started to build a stack for each.

Playing with the feather duster turned out to be fun as well. At Hogwarts he'd only ever watched Filch do it while he himself had had to do the less pleasant work like scrubbing floors or rubbing stains out of furniture. Now he realised why. The duster was fast and didn't require any real effort at all.

Draco experimented a bit and found that it was much more fun to twirl the duster over the book instead of just brushing it off. And the dust clouds drifted off in different patterns according to the movement and speed of the duster. He tried out a few different ways of dusting and tried to predict the patterns.

By the time he finally tired of the game he'd made good progress and only about a dozen books remained still to be dusted and sorted. The only problem he'd encountered were the foreign books he couldn't read. He supposed that most of them were potion books, but since only very few were illustrated he couldn't tell for sure. After putting them aside for a while wondering what to do with them he'd finally decided to simply put them into a category of their own next to the potions books and stacked them according to the writing. He couldn't be entirely sure that everything he'd sorted together was written in the same language, after all English and Latin used the same letters as well, but since they hadn't been sorted at all before the raid, Draco didn't think Severus would really mind if the new order wasn't perfect.
With a sigh he picked up the next book and brushed the feather duster over it quickly determined to get the rest of the dusting over with as soon as possible. If he worked fast he might get the room done before lunch.

One glance at the cover to find the title and ... There was no title on the front. Draco shrugged and tilted the book to check the spine. Nothing.

He turned the book over, but found no title anywhere. That wasn't entirely unusual. He'd already found several others like that, but now that he was almost done it annoyed him. He wanted to get this over with and this book was slowing him down.

With another exasperated sigh he opened it and finally found the title on the first page: 1001 Useless Potions. Ah, another potions book.

Wait a minute! Useless potions? What the hell were useless potions? Who'd want to know useless potions? Well, a potions teacher probably might find anything to do with potions interesting.

Draco put the book on the third potions stack he'd formed when the first and second had gotten so high they'd threatened to fall over and turned to pick up and dust the next book. ... Chemistry. On the Chemistry stack then. This was how it should be, recognisable at first glance, not like that stupid Useless Potions book.

What were useless potions anyway? Draco stacked the Chemistry book and picked up 1001 Useless Potions again. Just a quick look inside to find out what useless potions were and he could go back to work without having to think about it constantly.

He flipped the book open at a random page. 'Anti Ink Potion' it said there. A potion that makes ink disappear. Why would that be considered useless? Oh, there it was: Right at the bottom of the page it said that the writing on any roll of parchment or paper disappeared for five seconds every twenty minutes. Draco tried to imagine a situation where one would want to hide writing at only those precise times, but his imagination failed miserably. This potion was truly useless.

Draco turned a few pages and looked at some of the other potions. There was one that scared off ants, but worked only in uninhabited forests. Another made sand glow underwater. One made mice invisible. And there was one that could make fish grow hair and worked only on dry land.

He was just about to close the book and put it back on its stack his curiosity satisfied when he noticed one more potion. He read through the description quickly. This one wasn't nearly as funny as the other ones. Disappointed he closed the book. That last one wasn't even really useless. It could be used for a really nasty prank. Draco grinned evilly when he remembered the last line: 'The effects fade after a little over a week. There is no known counter potion or spell.'

Too bad he couldn't try that one out on Potter or Weasley. Here he had noone to do such nasty things to. Nobody here deserved that.

"Wait a minute! The Sharks!" Of course! He still needed to get revenge on the Sharks. And this was absolutely perfect. This prank practically had 'Rakers' written all over it and a potion would almost immediately be connected with Draco. Who else would have a source for unusual potion recipes or ingredients. The Sharks would know exactly whose idea this one had been.

The only problem was to get Professor Snape's permission to brew this.

Then again it had been Severus himself who'd told Draco to come up with a very special revenge. Maybe he would even help him if he told him what he was planning to do?
Draco considered his options while shelving the books. He could tell Snape what he was planning and ask him for help, but risk that he'd say no and forbid him the use of his potions equipment, which would leave Draco without a plan for his revenge again.

Or he could just brew the potion without asking and risk getting caught and being forbidden from even touching the things ever again. That would lead to exactly the same result as the first option and no doubt anger Professor Snape on top of it. He might even send him off to live with Eugene if he came to the conclusion that letting Draco stay in his potions lab was dangerous.

What exactly were the chances that he wouldn't be caught? Draco picked up 1001 Useless Potions once again. Just what page was that potion on?

It took him a while to find the recipe again. The potion had to simmer for 12 hours then be taken off the fire and left to cool without any help from cooling charms. Well, he wasn't allowed to cast a cooling charm during the holidays anyway. But 12 hours and then even more time to cool down? He'd have to leave it overnight and there was practically no chance he could do this while Snape wasn't home. He never stayed out that long and he was sure to check on Draco and his lab sometime during 12 hours.

Could he tell Severus that he was brewing something else?

Draco almost laughed at his own idea. As if Snape the potions master could be fooled like that by a normal fifteen year old student! He'd probably recognise that wasn't the potion Draco was claiming to brew the moment he first laid eyes on it. Of course there was a chance that he wouldn't look too closely, if Draco picked a potion that was very similar to the one he was actually brewing, but the description in the book was hardly enough to tell what exactly it would look like during all stages of it's production and Draco doubted he'd have known a suitable potion even if it had been. No, Snape knew his stuff too well to be fooled like this.

What Draco really needed was an open permission to use Severus' equipment without informing his teacher what exactly he was doing. But how could he get that?

He was done with the books by the time he reached that conclusion and turned to pick up whatever other objects were still strewn about the room. There weren't many left except for the mysterious Chemistry stuff on the table which Snape had told him was still needed there for now.

Draco smiled. He was almost done with the first room. Only the living room and the bedroom to go. For once he was happy that the Snapes' flat was so small. The living room was in much better shape than the lab had been since Sarah had had to clean up the worst of the mess to do her cooking. He hadn't seen what condition the bedroom was in yet, but he supposed that Sarah and Severus must have at least picked up their clothes and most of Billy's toys already so it wouldn't be as bad as Draco remembered it from right after the raid either.

Severus came to call him to lunch before he was completely done, but he knew he'd have the last few items returned to their proper places within minutes when he returned.

Severus seemed to realise that as well. He gave Draco a pleased look. "Looks like I can introduce you to another electrical toy after we eat." he commented.

"Something electrical! What's it called? Can I see it now?" Draco asked excitedly.

"After lunch, Draco. You'll even get to use it then."

"Use it? What does it do?"
"Clean floors and certain items of furniture."

Draco stared at the table during most of lunch wondering what kind of electrical object might be used to clean it. He'd forgotten all about his revenge project for the time.

When he picked up the empty dishes after lunch Severus looked up from his game of 'Find the Squishy Toy' with Billy and calmly told him: "Just put those in the sink and leave them for later. I want you to finish the lab first. I'm almost done with the separation of the potion ingredients and it'll be nice to have at least one room back to normal."

Draco nodded excitedly. "What about that electrical thing you were talking about then?"

"First pick up whatever's left on the floor and try not to overlook any small objects or they'll be gone afterwards. I want to check on my powders first. Maybe another one is ready to be put back into its jar."

While Draco quickly checked the lab for any last forgotten objects Snape picked up the glass with the dark blue liquid, held it against the light obviously checking for something and then poured it through the freshly cleaned filter into the strange contraption that had been so hard to wash. Draco sighed. He could guess who'd have to clean all this again afterwards. Small grey crystals remained behind in the filter.

"I'll just have to pulverise those." Severus explained to Draco. "Almost done with it all."

He put the crystals aside for now though and took a glass filled with scarlet liquid instead, poured that into a small cauldron and put it on the burner. Draco stared at the glass with yellow liquid that was standing right beside where the scarlet one had been. Were those the same two liquids Severus had put into that miniature washing machine in the morning? How had he gotten those two to separate?

"That's it. Now I'll show you that electrical toy." Severus promised ignoring the yellow liquid completely.

He led Draco to a small cupboard in the living room and pulled out a strange rectangular object that was obviously a lot heavier than it looked. It had the usual cable and plug that Draco already knew from other electrical gadgets and a strange long hose on the other end that continued in a metal pipe and then ended in a strange plastic something that looked almost like a brush though the bristles were too short.

"This," Snape explained as he dragged the thing over into the lab. "Is a vacuum cleaner. It sucks up small particles of dust, but also all objects small enough to fit in so you have to be careful where you point it."

Draco regarded the vacuum cleaner curiously. As with all the electrical things he'd seen so far he found nothing that gave him a clue to how it worked, but it still looked very interesting.

Snape plugged it in which didn't surprise Draco anymore. He'd seen that before. Almost all electrical things appeared to have plugs somewhere. He'd thought for a while that the refrigerator didn't, but Sarah had proven him wrong when she'd shown him the hidden cable that led away from behind it. Only the light switches and Sammie's gameboy appeared to be plug-less, but Professor Snape had said that whatever made the switches work was hidden inside the wall so maybe that was where the plugs were hidden as well. The gameboy however wasn't connected to anything at all. Draco decided to ask Sammie about that sometime.
"Always remember to hold on to this end when switching it on and point it at the floor. If you let go of it while it's running, it'll twist around and you can't control what it sucks up."

"Isn't there a way to get those things back?" Draco asked feeling a little worried. How could a non magical thing make something disappear?

"Of course there is, but it's very messy and you'll be cleaning for hours if you do that. It's better not to risk it swallowing anything it's not supposed to in the first place."

Draco nodded obediently to that and watched carefully as Snape demonstrated the use of the vacuum cleaner. The humming of the motor quickly attracted Billy who wandered in through the open door, gave a happy yelp and cuddled up beside the vacuum cleaner one ear pressed tightly against it's rectangular body.

"And be careful when you move it. Billy likes to lie on it. He appears to like the humming." Snape added calmly.

So Draco vacuumed the lab floor and his couch bed very slowly to avoid startling Billy while Severus crushed the grey crystals to powder, put them into a jar and labelled them.

That reminded Draco of his plan.

"Uncle Severus?" he ventured cautiously. "Could I use some of your ingredients for a little brewing of my own? I'd really like to try and see, if I can manage simple potions without any help."

Snape regarded him sternly for a moment and Draco tried to look as innocently interested as possible. He had the strange feeling that Severus saw right through him.

"Didn't you find the Math book while cleaning up in here?"

"Oh, sure, but I also found all those Potions books and ingredients and I'd just like to try. I promise not to use up anything valuable. I just want to try one or two simple little potions on my own."

"Well, just remember not to use any ingredients you're not familiar with and don't experiment. Use a recipe and stick to it exactly. Potions can be very dangerous, if you don't know exactly what you're doing and you're not ready to predict the outcome of new combinations. Remember that some ingredients tend to blow up or produce poisonous smoke when combined with others."

Draco nodded. "Don't worry. I'm not going to do anything that special. I'll just look up some harmless simple potions in one of your books and see if I can get one of those to work."

"All right, but remember to call for me the moment your cauldron does anything unusual."

"I will." Draco promised grinning happily. Obstacle one to his revenge on the Sharks had been a lot less difficult than expected. He was surprised that Severus hadn't insisted that he told him what potions exactly he intended to brew or what ingredients he was going to use for it. Did Snape guess what he was planing? There was no way to know except to ask him and he couldn't do that.

"What are you doing with the liquid in the cauldron?" he asked instead.

"Just boiling it to get rid of all the water. That'll leave the powder alone in the cauldron. I could just let it stand around and wait for the water to dry, but that would take days. This way is faster."

"But won't that burn the powder?" Draco asked alarmed.
"Not if you know exactly the right moment to take it off the fire. I can't let it out of my eyes until I do though."

"And what about those?" Draco pointed at the two glasses still left untouched on the table.

"The same." Snape said with a shrug. "They'll just have to wait until I'm done with this one, since I have only one burner.

"Oh." Well, that was a really boring explanation. "What about the one in that dripping contraption?"

"That'll be done tomorrow. We'll have a powder and a gas then and turning the gas into powder is a matter of minutes. You'll be able to use the burner this evening if you want to though. I won't need it much longer."

"Well, I'd better go do the dishes now and get started on cleaning up the living room." Draco said hastily before Snape could start asking about his potions experiment again.

Severus smiled knowingly as the boy dashed out. What a cute little rascal Draco was even though he was already fifteen. Well, Severus himself hadn't looked his age at fifteen either and it had never been a problem.

Draco spent the rest of the day cleaning the living room and by the time he retreated into the lab to start brewing his revenge felt quite confident that he'd be able to finish his punishment the next day. He found the right page much faster this time and checked the list of ingredients. There were only six of them which by now seemed almost ridiculously few to Draco.

He checked the shelves to find that all of them were indeed available and set them on the table in the correct order, just like he'd learned to do with potions with long lists of ingredients. It wasn't really necessary in this case of course, but he didn't want to make any mistakes here. It really was the very first time he was going to brew something without adult supervision and he even intended to actually use the potion afterwards. He might be planing to take revenge on the Sharks, but killing them or even hurting them seriously wasn't an option. The potion had to be exactly what it was supposed to be and he wouldn't get a chance to test it first.

Draco carefully prepared the cauldron and set water to boil. Then he rechecked his recipe. No, none of the ingredients were to be added before the water was boiling. Nothing to do except wait.

But he could start planning the execution of his revenge while he waited. Luckily the potion didn't need to be drunk. It would suffice to just make the Sharks touch it so splashing them with it should work. But how to prevent the Rakers from getting in touch with it as well?

It would have to be an ambush. They had to throw the potion at the Sharks from a safe distance and that meant they'd have to use water bombs. Where could Draco get water bombs before Saturday, if he wasn't allowed out of the flat? He'd have to ask Mike to get them. But that meant he had to get a message to Mike.

By the time he had reached that conclusion the water was finally boiling and he could start adding the ingredients.

It took him almost two hours to stir in everything correctly, but finally it was done and the potion matched the description the book gave of this stage. Now all Draco had to do was to turn down the burner and let it simmer for 12 hours, then take it off the burner. That proved to be more difficult than rDaco had imagined from watching Severus do it. It took him a few minutes to figure out how
to turn down the burner without turning it off and even after that he had to constantly guard and readjust it until he finally found the exactly right size for the flame. How did Severus manage to get it right with what looked like just one casual touch of the burner?

In between the watching and readjusting the burner Draco had managed to write a quick note to Mike roughly outlining his plan and asking for some small balloons that could be turned into water bombs. After a moment of hesitation he added a quick ps asking Mike to try to get Jack's permission to execute the plan. It probably wouldn't look good to set something this big in motion without at least informing the gang leader and Draco wanted to keep the hesitant peace with Jack.

Now his only problem was to get the message to Mike. If only he had an owl! Instead he opened the lab door a crack, got out his Math book and started to do some exercises even though by now he was feeling rather tired and really just wanted to go to bed.

Indeed the open door soon attracted Munin's attention and the curious raven fluttered in to see what was going on. Oh, it was just the boy writing those odd symbols again. Nothing out of the ordinary.

"Why hello, Munin." Draco grinned. "Say, do you want to deliver a letter for me?"

Munin hopped onto the table. Deliver a letter for the boy? This was new. This was interesting. "Write!" he cawed happily. "Fly!"

Draco took that to mean: 'Oh yes, I'd love to. Write fast!'

"Oh, it's already written. All you have to do is take this over to Mike and bring back his answer."

"Caw?" That sounded a little disappointed.

"The trick is that you can't let anyone see you except for Mike. Can you do that? Can you deliver a letter without letting Uncle Severus know about it?"

"Caw! Fly!" Munin sounded happy again.

Or was that just Draco's imagination? How much could the bird really understand?

"Okay, here it is." he tied the letter to Munin's leg. "Don't show anyone except Mike! Okay?"

Munin was about to fly off, but turned back to Draco on hearing the last sentence. "Hide?"

Hide? Was that the command for one of the raven's tricks? If so, what did it mean?

"Yes, hide!" Draco decided to risk it. Whatever it meant, it didn't sound like it included showing the letter to a lot of people. "Hide and take this to Mike." If those were opposing commands Draco hoped that the raven would know to execute one after the other.

Munin flew directly out the window upon hearing the instructions and Draco hoped that was a good sign.

Less than a minute later Severus entered the room. "Is Munin with you?"

"No, he was here earlier, but flew off again." Draco answered truthfully. He wasn't sure how well he could lie to Severus. He'd been good at lying to servants, other kids and some of his other teachers, but Snape had that way of looking at you like he could see your very thoughts. "He said something about hide though. Does that mean anything?"

"Hide?" Severus asked surprised. "Hide is the command to perform a mission unseen. Did you tell
"Well, I talked to him. I don't know all of his commands. You don't think I sent him to do something stupid, do you?" Draco asked grinning inwardly. The command to perform a mission unseen. That was exactly what he'd meant to do!

Severus thought about that for a moment then shook his head. "You couldn't make him do anything he doesn't want to. Ravens obey only one master usually. He'd take your commands as suggestions, not orders. The worst you could have done is probably send him to steal something."

"Steal?" Draco said honestly shocked even though he knew that wasn't what he'd done.

"Yes, that one is usually combined with hide so it would make sense for him to suggest it. Did you tell him to seek anything?"

"Seek?"

"Yes, that would be the command to bring you something."

"I doubt it. We weren't talking about Quiddich as far as I remember."

"Seeker doesn't work. It has to be seek and the name of an object."

"So if I'd said Hide and Seek that would mean to steal something?" Draco giggled.

"Well you'd have to add what you want stolen. Hide and seek letter for example would mean to steal some parchment."

"Wouldn't he just pick a roll from your desk then? How do you tell him which parchment exactly you want?" Draco asked curiously.

Snape regarded him for a moment. "I think I'd better not answer this one. I have the strange feeling Potter's homework might pick up a habit of disappearing during the next school year if I did."

"Okay, but what if I did send him to steal something? Or what if I sent him somewhere far away or something?"

"He'll be back in time for breakfast. He wouldn't follow a suggestion, if that would cause him to miss a meal. And if he returns bringing you some object, just give him a treat, tell him well done and make him put it back."

"Put it back? How?"

"Hide and back." Snape smiled. "He'll remember exactly where he took it from even a day after he brought it to you."

"What if he doesn't feel like taking it back?"

"Wait till after breakfast to give the command again or if it can't wait, tell me. He will obey me without question."

"What if he gets caught?"

"Gets caught? That raven once stole a letter from Voldemort right out of one of your father's pockets without getting caught."
"I didn't know my father ever lost a letter from him!" Draco exclaimed shocked. If Voldemort ever found out about that incident Lucius would be in big trouble. Then he remembered that Lucius was in Azkaban. It wasn't likely at all that the dark lord would go to all the trouble to get to him out of there just to kill him for losing a piece of parchment.

"See?" grinned Severus. "That's because your father doesn't know either."

"Doesn't know? How could he not know?"

"Hide and back. And Munin once again didn't get caught."

Draco was beginning to feel a new respect for birds. Up until now he'd thought Munin was just a fancy pet with a lot of cool party tricks to show off. Now it turned out he was as much a spy as his master. And when the raven silently and elegantly glided in through the window with Mike's answer the moment Severus had left the room and closed the door behind him Draco's mind was made up. Someday he would have his own raven. He just hoped Uncle Severus would agree to teach him how to train one.

He quickly fished a large caterpillar out of one of the potion ingredient jars and offered it to Munin in the hope that it qualified as a treat. Munin took it without hesitation and rubbed his head against Daco's hand. Obviously the caterpillar was very tasty.

Draco gently stroked the raven's feathers while he read Mike's response, then put it away and offered his arm to the raven who climbed on immediately. He walked out into the living room hoping that he looked innocent enough.

"Uncle Severus, Munin's back. He didn't steal anything and looks just fine."

Severus looked up from the book he'd been reading and snapped his fingers. Munin immediately flung himself off Draco's arm and flew to his master's shoulder.

Draco just stood there in the door and watched them for a while, Severus sitting there reading his book and absent-mindedly stroking the raven's feathers now and then and Munin perched on his shoulder eyes half closed looking perfectly happy. Yes, Draco definitely wanted his own raven someday.

He finally returned to the lab to check on his potion, but it seemed he'd really finally gotten the size of the flame right. Everything looked to be perfectly in order. He glanced over at the Math book again, but felt much too tired to continue his studying. After one last glance at his cauldron to make sure everything was really okay he packed away the book and went to bed.

A/N: What is Draco brewing? Will Jack approve his plan? And does Severus know what he's up to?

In the next chapter: Draco finally finishes his punishment and his potion and maybe we'll also see him execute his revenge. (Depends on if I manage to fit in one day or two.)
The first thing Draco did that Friday morning was to check on his potion. It still looked perfectly fine and was simmering peacefully just like it was supposed to. He checked the clock. Three more hours and he could finally turn off the burner. The room was hot enough as it was.

Draco tried to open the window to let some cool morning air in, but was greeted by another wave of heat. This was a day to go swimming in the lake, not clean the Snapes' bedroom, but there wasn't much chance of that unless he got his punishment done first. Maybe he could manage, if he got started right away.

So Draco rushed to the bathroom to wash and get dressed. First order of business: Vacuum the living room. He already had the vacuum cleaner out and plugged in when Sarah intervened reminding him of breakfast.

"Oh, I'm not that hungry." Draco tried to overlook the slight grumbling of his stomach at the mention of food. "I can wait till lunch."

"No you can't!" insisted Sarah. "Breakfast is the most important meal of the day. You need to give your body some energy for all the work it's supposed to do today. Now sit down and eat!"

Draco sighed. There was nothing he could do or say to convince her when she took that tone. So he sat down and crammed some toast into his mouth hurriedly while Sarah went on another rant about skipping meals and how unhealthy it was. Draco tuned her out and recalculated his chances at going swimming this afternoon.

He'd have to eat lunch as well as breakfast and do the dishes after both meals, then he had to vacuum both the living room and the bedroom and the later needed cleaning up first. The small entrance room needed vacuuming as well and ...

He'd forgotten about the bathroom! He'd have to scrub that too and he doubted that Severus would let him use the vacuum cleaner for that. At least it was really tiny and seemed to consist only of tiles. They'd be easy to wash and the little cupboard in there couldn't be much of a problem either. Maybe there still was a chance he could manage to get it all done before lunch?

He was almost done with the dishes when Snape calmly set down some of the glasses he'd used for his chemical separations beside him.

"This is the last time you'll have to wash those." he said when he saw Draco's disappointed face. "I've separated all the powders I could. The rest I'll have to replace on Monday."

Draco sighed again and banished all thoughts of cool lake water and lying on tree trunks beside a scantily clothed Cathy Cat from his mind. Washing the dishes and glass objects would take up too much time, so he set his mind on finishing his chores today instead. Then he'd still have tomorrow to spend with his gang, before he went to live with Jeremiah.

Or not. He was beginning to wonder if any of his relatives would want to take him in. And what if they didn't? What would Snape do with him then?
For some strange reason chores unlike homework seemed to go faster when one was distracted. Soon Draco once again picked up the metal pipe of the vacuum cleaner. He bent down to hit the switch.

BRRRING! The doorbell? Who might be visiting them now?

Draco dropped the vacuum cleaner and went to answer the door. It was Mike.

"Sorry, I can't come out yet. I've still got to clean the entire bedroom and the bathroom."

Mike looked disappointed. "Oh, sorry about that. We didn't mean to leave you guys in there like that, but we just didn't see them in time."

"That's okay. It's not your fault we got caught."

"How's the potion coming along?" Mike whispered.

"Almost done. I'll take it off the fire in a bit and then it just needs to cool down. Do you have the balloons?"

"Larry's getting those. Turns out his little brother already has some water bombs that were left over after his birthday party last month. Larry's just got to convince him to trade."

"Jack gave his okay then?"

"Yup, Jack loves your plan. And we've even got the perfect place to attack from. They won't have the slightest chance to get at us there unless they can fly."

"Won't get there unless they can fly? Where's that then and how do we get there?"

"We'll just go in by the door." Mike grinned at Draco's startled look.

"You want to do it inside? And how do we get the Sharks to come there?"

Mike grinned some more and attempted to look mysterious then admitted. "We're going to drop them from Mary's bedroom window. It's on the second floor right beside the front door where the Sharks always walk past when they leave the house. A perfect ambush point and you can bet Mary's Mum won't let any Sharks into her flat. She's a Raker too, you know."

"Mary's Mum's a Raker?" Draco repeated confused. "But I thought adults don't care about the gangs?"

"That's what they want you to believe, but they all were kids once and they always stay loyal to their gang. It's quite normal for kids to join their parents' old gang and very rare that they join a rival gang."

"So what gang you belong to depends on what gang your parents were in?"

"In many cases, but not always. Older siblings are a lot more decisive there. Joining a different gang than your brother or sister is almost unheard of. It's something you just don't do."

"So families sort of belong to certain gangs." Draco repeated thoughtfully. The gangs reminded him more and more of the Hogwarts houses. His whole family had been in Slytherin and even though his father had been out of school for almost 30 years when Draco had started Hogwarts Lucius would never have forgiven him, if he hadn't gotten into Slytherin.
But then Draco wouldn't have forgiven himself either if he'd been sorted anywhere else. Slytherin was undoubtedly the best house. And where else should he have gone?

Ravenclaw was probably the best of the other houses, but also hopelessly boring. The Ravenclaw table in the great hall was almost disgustingly quiet during meals, because most of them had their noses buried in books even while they were eating.

Hufflepuff on the other hand was hopelessly noisy. The Hufflepuffs were chatting away constantly always hanging around in big giggling groups. It might be nice to have lots of friends, but Draco also needed his privacy. Some peace and quiet were absolutely necessary from time to time. No he wouldn't fit into a house so lively and happy all the time.

Which left Gryffindor. Self-righteous, boastful, prejudiced Gryffindor. They thought they were the greatest, absolutely perfect and good. Draco shook his head in disgust as he thought of them. What fools they were. Rushing blindly ahead without a thought of the possible consequences.

Considering how highly Uncle Severus spoke of him it was hard to believe that Dumbledore could have been a Gryffindor. Well, the sorting hat did make mistakes sometimes. Neville Longbottom was the living prove of that. He'd probably have made a great Hufflepuff, but among the noisy thoughtless Gryffindors he was completely drowned. He just couldn't keep up with them. Maybe Dumbledore was a similar case, a Slytherin accidentally put into Gryffindor. Or maybe it was just his age that had taught him to act with more foresight.

He managed to get most of the bedroom done before lunch. He might even have finished cleaning it up if Billy hadn't thought cleaning up was a great game and decided to help. The baby's help of course consisted mostly of throwing things about he room, dragging squishy toys over to Draco to play with and wanting to be cuddled. And Draco just couldn't resist the cute little baby face.

Draco sighed as he helped Severus lay out the dishes for lunch. There was so much work still to be done. At least he'd escaped another cooking lesson. Sarah had gone to visit her sister who'd caught a bad cold and as far as Draco had understood seemed to have some kind of intolerance for pepper-up potion and expected Sarah to brew her a very special cold potion instead.

Thus Uncle Severus had been left to do the cooking himself once again. He didn't seem to mind having to cook though and Draco hadn't really minded either once he'd been sure that he wouldn't have to help. Professor Snape was a fine cook even though he usually left the job to his wife.

There was only one thing that confused Draco and after puzzling over the matter for a while he decided to ask.

"Why's Sarah gone to brew that potion at her sister's? Couldn't you just have brewed it here and sent it over afterwards?"

"That's just the way Samantha is." Snape grinned at the boy. "She's a rather strange person, you know. She doesn't trust any potion that wasn't brewed by Sarah and she doesn't believe it was brewed by Sarah unless she watched her brew it. At least that's what she claims."

"What she claims?" Draco repeated thoughtfully. "And what's the real reason?"

"She's lonely, I suppose. She isn't married and Sarah is her only surviving relative. I think she makes up at least half of the trouble she always gets into just so Sarah will have to come visit her."

"Trouble?"

"For example she'll misplace her glasses and send us an owl, because now she can't see well
enough to go looking for them. Don't ask how she finds ink, parchment and a quill or the string to tie the letter to the owl's leg, if she can't see enough to find her glasses. She has a very complicated way of thinking and the easiest solution usually doesn't occur to her at all."

Draco shook his head in disbelief. "How can you live with her?"

"I'm not living with her, I'm living with her sister. And actually Samantha is a very nice witch once you learn to accept her oddities. Still, I wish she'd find herself a husband to help her with all her catastrophes."

"Can Sarah brew that potion without your help? It sounds complicated."

"Sarah does not need anyone's help with brewing a simple cold potion, Draco. She's been a medical brewer longer than I've been teaching. She also knows Chemistry a lot better than I do." he added after a while. "We started muggle school together, but she got the chance to continue while I got called back to the wizarding world long before I was ready." He sighed. "Sarah's taught me a lot and I try to learn as much as I can from books, but it'll never make up for everything I missed, because of the biases of my family and a misguided war."

Misguided war? "You mean the dark lord? That was the time he started his big campaign, wasn't it? But what's your family got to do with it all?"

"Too much, Draco, too much. It's a long story, but to them much like to your father Voldemort seemed the only way and I was much too young and foolish. I didn't understand a thing."

Draco waited for his teacher to say more, make sense of all that, but nothing came. Snape just stared at his empty plate obviously far away in his thoughts. Just when Draco decided to ask, he suddenly looked up.

"I think you'd better do the dishes now. I'll put Billy in your bed for his nap so you can get on with your work." he said and went to pick up the baby.

Draco watched him cuddle Billy tightly as if to reassure himself that he was still there. What was it Snape had been thinking of?

Work continued much faster without a 'helpful' baby around and Draco was done with his cleaning long before Sarah returned. To his disappointment Severus decided that it was too late to go out and look for the gang.

"You wouldn't find them." Snape told him. "They're not down in the park and you have no idea where they went."

Draco thought the lake would be a good guess, but had to admit that there was no use in going to look for them there. He still didn't own swimming trunks and Mike wouldn't have brought his second pair. Sarah had taken 'That Dog' with her and Billy seemed more interested in Munin than Draco at the moment. Draco could have done some Math, but for some reason he was feeling too restless. Maybe he'd been locked up in the flat for too long.

"We could cook dinner." Severus finally suggested.

Draco frowned. "I can't cook. I have no idea how to work the stove."

"So? I'll tell you how it's done. Knowing how to cook is a very useful skill and it isn't difficult at all."
Well, not difficult at all for a potions master it seemed. Quite difficult for a normal fifteen year old potions student. Draco burned his fingers on the stove, almost cut himself chopping onions and almost put sugar instead of salt into the water.

"You know," Snape told him afterwards. "A little concentration would have helped a lot there."

"Maybe. I had no idea that black circle gets so hot." Draco protested. He didn't mention the near cut or the sugar. Those were things he should know from first year's Potions class.

"You might have guessed though. We put our cauldrons on the fire to heat the potions and put the pots on the stove to heat the food. Fire heats stuff by being hot so what did you think he stove would do?"

"Heat things by being electrical?"

"It gets hot electrically."

"Well, you still could have warned me. It hurts."

"You want me to brew you a burn potion?"

Draco thought about that. The burn wasn't really that bad, just a little red, but he felt like pouting at the moment.

"Yes!"

Severus held out a hand. "Let me take a look at that."

Draco hesitantly showed him his hand. What was he going to do with it?

Severus just took it gently and regarded the burn for a moment. "It's not that bad. You won't even feel this in about half an hour."

"No it hurts really bad. I need a potion for it."

A mischievous glow Draco had never seen before suddenly appeared in Severus' eyes. "Well, if it's that bad, I'll have to bandage it as well."

"Yes, that would be good."

"Of course you wouldn't be able to go swimming tomorrow, if I did. Maybe I should even keep you at home for a day."

"No! No, it suddenly feels a lot better." Draco dashed off into the potions lab then poked his head out once more. "You still could have warned me about the stove and I wouldn't be inured this badly now."

Severus threw a towel after him. "Rascal!"

Draco quickly ducked back inside and closed the door even though the towel could hardly harm him. He went to check on his potion which he had taken off the burner several hours ago. Remembering the hot stove he touched the cauldron very carefully, but it felt entirely cold.

Now did that assure the potion inside was cold as well? Draco wasn't sure what might happen if he put the hot potion into the bottle. With magical potions you just never knew. They might explode, shrink or expand during the cooling process.
He couldn't touch it to make sure either or he'd suffer the potion's effects just like the Sharks would. Maybe he should leave it over another night? But that increased the risk that Snape would get curious and he might not have enough time to bottle it in the morning. And transporting it in two small bottles that he could stuff into his pockets was the only way he could hope to smuggle this past Severus.

In the end he decided on a compromise. He filled the bottles up after dinner then put them on the bookshelf where he hoped they were less likely to attract Snape's attention then if he'd left them on the table.

That's when he realised he'd need a funnel to get the potion into the water bombs without touching it. Did Mary's family have one the right size? Would they let him borrow it, if they did? And what if they didn't? The one he'd used to bottle the potion would be perfect, but it was too big to stuff into his pockets along with the bottles and he couldn't just carry out Severus' lab equipment in plain sight. Especially not if it was Sarah's stuff as well. She'd never let him borrow it for a prank like that even if he could convince Severus. Or was only the Chemistry stuff Sarah's?

That reminded him of something. During the separation of the powders Snape had used a pipette. Draco remembered cleaning it very well. It had been one very unpleasant task. Now he was grateful for it though. That thing was small enough to fit into his pocket easily despite all the room the bottles required. He quickly checked the old trunk that held the Chemistry equipment to see if he could find it again, then closed the trunk again. It was best not to take it out until the morning to avoid getting caught. It was quite safe lying there inside the trunk anyway.

He regarded the trunk for a while. It was pretty old and shabby, but must have been rather expensive a long time ago. Was this Uncle Severus' old school trunk? For a moment he wondered what had happened to his own trunk. What use would the ministry have for it? Well, maybe they stored potions equipment in there now.

He shrugged, so what. Jeremiah or whoever else he'd end up living with would surely buy him a new one before he went back to school.

But it would be interesting to know all the things this trunk had seen back in Severus' days at Hogwarts. He wondered if he'd been a good student. Probably yes. Severus was the greatest wizard Draco knew so school had probably been almost boring for him. Maybe he'd stored some books for extra reading at the bottom of his trunk. Or would he have had a secret stash of sweets hidden there the way Draco did to keep them from Greg and Vince's greediness? Or maybe it would have been full of potion ingredients for Severus' personal experiments? Or treats for his raven? Had he even had a raven back then? Maybe he'd had an owl or a cat.

Draco sat down beside the trunk trying to imagine what Severus' school days had been like. Maybe this trunk had even been at the muggle school with Severus. If only it could tell its story. Well, maybe he'd get a chance to ask Severus what muggle school was like someday. Right now he'd better learn his Math to make sure that he could go there someday.

Thinking about school, why hadn't this year's Hogwarts letter arrived yet? Well, maybe it was a little too early to wonder about that. After all it was still July.

Saturday morning Draco could finally go out again. The weather was still unbearably hot, but the Rakers didn't have the time to go swimming. Instead they all met on the stairs on the second floor where Bloody Mary lived. Mary's mother looked a little astonished when they all trooped through into Mary's room.
Draco realised to his surprise that the flats down here seemed to be bigger than the ones up on the fourth floor. Not much bigger, but they did have one room more. Mary shared her room with her little sister Beth who looked about twelve to Draco, but according to the Rakers was only nine. Well, ogres were huge and half ogres not much smaller.

Beth hopped up eagerly the moment they came in. She was the current leader of the Raker wannabes and probably entertaining strong hopes of being accepted into the gang soon. This had to look like a great opportunity to her.

Mary drowned that hope with a single glare though. "Scoot! We've got business here today."

With a very disappointed look Beth trudged out and slammed the door shut behind her. The Rakers turned expectant glances at Draco who pulled out the bottles and pipette.

"Is that all?" Jack asked with a sneer. "I thought we were going to hit all the Sharks with this."

"And we will." promised Draco. "A few drops of this added to the water in a water bomb will be enough." He shifted his attention to Larry. "Do you have the balloons?"

"Right here." Larry presented a small plastic bag filled with empty balloons. "I had to trade a whole box of chocolate frogs and a package of every flavour beans for them."

"It will be worth it." Draco promised. "Now let's get these filled up."

The Rakers soon moved their gathering to the bathroom, but it turned out to be no bigger than the Snapes' and so the rest of them had to wait outside while, Larry filled the balloons with water, then held them out to Draco, who dripped the potion in using the pipette and then passed them on to Mike who tied them shut carefully and handed them out to the gang.

That accomplished they headed back into Mary's room each carrying two water bombs.

Mary's mother watched the procession with a raised eyebrow. "Aren't you a little too old for childish pranks like that?"

"That's why the Sharks won't expect it." Mike told her calmly.

"And you always say I shouldn't always beat people up." Mary added. "I'm using different ways to resolve differences, like you always tell me to."

Mary's mother sighed. Obviously she didn't quite approve of her daughters' ogre temper. She didn't stand much of a chance to teach them diplomacy though. Beth was even more aggressive than Mary, probably because she was the younger of the two. She had to be more forceful to hold her own against her stronger sister.

The Rakers returned to Mary's room, made a point of shutting the door behind them and then squeezed themselves up to the window all trying to peer out to be the first to spot the Sharks. Once again there wasn't enough room and Draco began to fear that one of the balloons would burst from all the pushing and shoving and drench them all with the potion. If he showed up at Jeremiah's tomorrow looking like that he'd never take him in.

"Stop! This isn't working. We can't all be at the window at the same time."

"Okay, everybody gather over here and we'll make a strategy for the attack." Jack shouted from the middle of the room."
Grudgingly the Rakers trudged over to him.

"If we're squeezed together this tightly, we won't be able to aim our bombs." Mike declared calmly.

"We'll have to choose a group to throw the bombs and another to hand them the ammo." ordered Jack.

Everybody immediately started arguing.

"It's my room!" Draco heard Mary shout over the noise.

"And my balloons!" answered Larry.

"Silence!" yelled Jack at the top of his lungs.

"Mary and Larry are too big." Mike announced still sounding calm. Draco was beginning to really admire his friend's leadership skills. It was almost a miracle he hadn't taken over from Jack long ago. "If we chose either of them for the throwing team we can fit only two people in there, if we want them to have enough room to aim properly. I think it would be better to have three throwers, but that means we need smaller people."

"I'm smallest!" went Sammie.

"But you have terrible aim." countered Jack.

"Sammie has improved a lot lately." Matt backed his friend.

"It's my plan." hissed Draco in his most threatening tone. "And I'm the one who got punished for it all. I've got a right."

"Very well then, Dragon and Charlie because they're the ones who got caught and Cathy, because she just barely got away."

"I was almost caught as well!" protested Sammie, but Jack didn't want to hear about it.

Draco, Charlie and Cathy sat on the windowsill and waited while the rest of the gang sat on Mary and Beth's beds watching them expectantly. Nothing happened. The Sharks were still inside probably having a band practise session.

"So how come they didn't catch you?" Draco asked Cathy after a while. "You were right behind me and both the door and the window were blocked, but still you got away before the Aurors arrived."

Cathy grinned. "I didn't. I just slipped behind the cupboard."

"Behind the cupboard?"

"There was a space between the wall and the cupboard. I slipped in there and pulled the curtain after me so they couldn't see me from the side. They only took a quick glance at every room at first anyway. When they hauled you two off I simply walked out the back-door and was long gone before they returned to search the house more thoroughly."

"You just walked out?" Draco couldn't believe it.

"There are only two aurors in West Hogsmeade and they had two prisoners. And if you knew the kind of auror that gets stationed here, you'd know that one of them can't possibly levitate more than
one person at a time."

So that was it? No wonder those aurors never caught any thieves on market day. Draco felt truly embarrassed at having been arrested by those guys.

"We should have just crouched under the table instead of trying to climb out the window."

"They'd have searched more thoroughly then and have found all of us." Charlie shrugged.

"Don't you mind having been caught at all? After the way your Mum scolded you?"

"Oh, that was just show for the aurors. Once we got out of sight of the station we both just laughed at it."

"Your mother thinks getting arrested is a joke?"

"Yes, it is."

"Uncle Severus didn't think so."

"That's because he's only used to being responsible for rich kids whose parents do mind these things." commented Mike. "And a little house arrest is hardly a big punishment."

"No, but cleaning up after an auror raid is." grumbled Draco. "And scrubbing bathroom tiles isn't much fun either."

"So? I have to help with the cleaning all the time." Cathy Cat said with a shrug.

"Not after a raid though." Sammie reminded her.

"I've seen raids. Doesn't look worse then my Mum's spring cleaning."

"They're worse with the Snapes though. I think they enjoy harrowing a Hogwarts Professor." commented Matt.

"I doubt it has anything to do with that." said Mike. "It's something different that they enjoy."

Mary looked over at him then to Larry who was staring at Mike as well trying to make sense of that. "What do you mean?"

"Isn't that obvious? Think about it."

Draco suddenly wondered how much the Rakers knew about Severus' past. Or about the politics between the ministry and Albus Dumbledore. Or was there something else Mike might have been referring to? He almost hoped that Mike would clarify his statement for Mary, Larry and probably also Sammie who'd given him a curious look at first, but then had turned away. Either he'd realised what Mike meant and lost interest in the conversation or he was pretending not to be interested because everybody else seemed to know and he didn't want to appear stupid.

Mike said nothing however and the conversation died down again until Charlie finally spotted Mark the Shark stepping out into the park.

"There they are." she whispered excitedly and the gang was on their feet at once.

Robin and Pretty Ricky showed up right after Mark and Draco got ready to throw, but the three Sharks suddenly stopped and turned to look back. Then Mark took a few steps in the direction of
the Soccer lawn. Somebody must have pointed out to him that the Rakers weren't there. Instead Beth and her little wannabes had taken over there trying to imitate their idols as best they could.

"So?" They heard Ricky putting on a brave show now that there was no danger in sight. "The blue dummies have probably gone swimming. Who cares?"

Draco grinned and redirected his attention towards Pretty Ricky. He wanted to play tough? Okay, he could take a bath first. That was probably good strategy anyway, because he'd likely run off the moment he realised they were under attack and then they wouldn't get him with the potion.

Mark let that remark convince him or maybe didn't care for what attacking a bunch of little wannabes would do to his already badly tainted reputation. He came back onto the path and the rest of the Sharks soon came into sight as well. Just a few more steps and they'd be right under the window. There!

Draco let fly his water bomb and Splash! Pretty Ricky was suddenly pretty wet Ricky.

He jumped backwards at once knocking over one of the twins. Good, that would ensure that one would be affected as well, even if they didn't manage to hit him with their bombs.

"What!" yelled Mark the Shark in outrage. Both Charlie and Cathy had obviously chosen him for their first target, but Robin had been close enough to get doused as well.

Draco threw his other bomb at Chris. That one hadn't gotten in touch with the water yet and he still owed him for his hurt arm.

"Ricky, you coward!" Mark yelled on. "Get back here! It's only water!" But Ricky was already gone running straight for his house probably setting a new speed record.

The other Sharks however hadn't realised there was anything wrong with the water and considered it nothing more than an insult. It was hot enough to make the involuntary bath comfortable after all.

"Hi there, Fishies!" Cathy Cat called down to them. "We thought to help you out a little seeing as you're all stuck on dry land. Poor helpless things."

The Sharks reacted by picking up pebbles from the path and throwing them at the window which brought them nicely together and into better reach.

Draco accepted another bomb from Mike and dropped it on one of the twins. He didn't know which one it was, but that didn't matter anymore. The Sharks were close enough that they'd all get a taste of the potion now.

As he accepted another bomb from Mike he noticed that Mark had begun scratching his arm where the first water bomb had hit him. He grinned as he dropped his new bomb on the other twin's head. The potion was starting to work.

Soon the other Sharks were scratching as well and Draco thought he could see the first small blue spots starting to grow on Mark's face.

"Itching powder!" screeched Robin. "They put itching powder into the water!"

"Not quite." Draco smiled down at her. "This is something a little more powerful than itching powder."
"You guys really look great in our colours." Charlie informed the Sharks smugly.

The Sharks took one look at each other, noticed the blue spots that were covering their skin and screamed. Had the spots been red they would have looked like measles.

"Okay, that's enough. Step back." Jack told them and the throwing team retreated into the room.

"Have fun looking for the antidote!" Jack shouted down as he closed the window.

"Didn't you say their hair would turn blue as well?" Mike asked Draco once the laughter had died down a bit.

"Yes, but it takes a few hours for the potion to take full effect. We'll have to try to catch them again sometime in the afternoon.

"So much about going swimming today then." sighed Cathy.

"We can always go tomorrow." Larry suggested.

"Yes, Dragon hasn't seen my new diving trick yet!" shouted Sammie. "Bet I'll manage to dunk you this time."

Draco sighed. "Sorry Sammie, but I'm afraid I won't be here tomorrow."

"Oh, are you leaving us again?" Jack sneered.

"We're trying Cousin Jeremiah again." Draco shrugged. "According to Eugene he's supposed to be home by now."

"And who said he's gonna keep you?"

"Nobody, but I'm hoping that he will. I kinda like his cottage and the only other candidates left are a cousin in America and my Mum's idiot of a brother."

"Well, I hope none of them want you." stated Sammie. "That way you can stay here with us."

"Sammie, I can't stay. The Snapes aren't going to keep me around forever. If nobody wants me, they'll just send me to some orphanage in the end."

"What makes you so sure of that?" Mike asked suddenly. "They've kept you this long and I think they kinda like you."

"Yes, they like me and they've been very nice, but I cost them a lot of money and they don't have enough room."

"They have room for you now."

"In their potions lab. They're going to want to have that back sometime."

"They'll have to give it up anyway when Billy gets big enough to need his own room."

"And where would they put me then?"

"What's the problem? You're both boys." interrupted Mary calmly pointing at the two beds in the room. "And you get along much better with Billy than I do with my sister."
"Who said that's gonna stay that way?" grumbled Matt probably imagining having to share a room with his hated sister.

"Siblings with such a big difference in age usually get along perfectly. The older brother is more like another parent to the little one than a rival for their affection." Charlie announced.

"Huh?" Cathy stared at Charlie. "Where'd that come from?"

"Psychology class. I had to take it instead of Charms. It's all rather boring though and I think all psychologists are mad anyway."

"Well, let's just hope they don't drive you completely mad as well."

A/N: Will Draco finally find a new home? How will Severus react when he finds out about the prank? And was this chapter even worth posting?

In the next chapter: We finally meet Jeremiah and he tells us the story of his little house ghost. We also might meet some blue Sharks.
Jeremiah and his Brother

Chapter 19: Jeremiah and his Brother

Draco didn't get to see a blue haired Shark that day. They probably were hiding hoping that the colour would wear off. Well, they were in for a disappointment, but Draco was disappointed too. He was of course hoping that Jeremiah would let him stay, but he'd also wanted to see the results of his potion. At least the other Rakers would see it.

They went to the train station early this time and had to wait for the train. Severus was hoping that that way it would be less scary for 'That Dog' who was sniffing around the platform obviously feeling comfortable enough.

Draco kept looking back towards the familiar skyline of Merlin Park wondering what was going on there right now. Of course Jeremiah's cottage would be very nice to live in, but he would miss the small flat, the park and his friends. There wouldn't be many kids around that he could make friends with at Jeremiah's.

"You'll like it there, Draco." Snape said as if he'd read his thoughts. "It's nice and green, has lots of space and so few muggles that you'll be able to fly your broom anytime you like."

"I don't even have a broom anymore." Draco reminded him.

"I'm sure your Cousin Jeremiah will see to that soon enough. You won't get around much without one there."

Having his own broom again would be nice. Draco tried to imagine flying over Wales. Green meadows he could practise his Quiddich moves on, herds of sheep he could startle by swooping down at them all of a sudden and only a few villages and cottages around that he'd have to avoid.

"There won't be anybody to practise Quiddich with though." he sighed.

"You can always do that when you return to Hogwarts after the summer and Wales in summer is a very nice place to be."

Draco sighed and nodded. Definitely better than America and no Hogwarts, no Professor Snape, no Hogsmeade weekends ... He didn't even want to think about that.

The train was nearly empty when it arrived and so even 'That Dog' got his own seat. He didn't look too happy when Severus picked him up and placed him on a human seat, but after a little coaxing and some rattling from the train accepted that he was supposed to lie down on it. Severus gently stroked his shivering back and maybe 'That Dog' felt a little better for it.

Munin stared down at 'That Dog' with obvious contempt. The raven had chosen his own seat and was perching on its back comfortably. He didn't mind trains at all.

Draco sat beside the bird once again dreaming about having his own raven someday, and watching the scenery speed by the window.

At the last station before London a stern looking old witch boarded the train and poked her head into their compartment. There were enough empty compartments left, but maybe she was looking
for some entertainment on the way. What she found however was a dog in a seat meant for witches
and wizards.

She frowned at 'That Dog' then glared at Severus which of course had no effect at all. Severus
didn't even acknowledge her presence. Slightly confused by that reaction she turned towards
Draco. A young boy like that would certainly be intimidated by her stern look, she assumed.

Draco treated her to his most winning smile. "The dog's afraid of train journeys so we take weekly
trips with him to help him learn to control his fears." he informed her.

The old witch snorted derisively and withdrew her head from the door in disgust.

Munin fluttered over to sit on the handle of the open door which was still sliding about slightly.
"Caw! Fly!" he called after her. Draco calmly stood and closed the door.

Munin cawed disappointedly at that, but did climb onto Draco's arm when the boy offered it to
him. The door must have been some kind of swing to him so Draco moved his arm about a little
which earned him another happy "Fly!".

They arrived in London soon after and once again Draco was fascinated by the departure board and
this time Severus let him stare at it for a while. They already knew the way to Jeremiah's cottage
and if everything went well, they could use Jeremiah's floo for the trip back. Severus hadn't told
Draco yet, but this time he wasn't intending to just leave the boy with his relatives right away. He
wanted to make sure Jeremiah wasn't another Lucius or Eugene, before he handed Draco over
permanently. For now they'd just take a look at the inhabitants of the cottage.

When Draco had finally seen enough of the departure board they still had almost an hour to wait
for the next train and Draco complained about being hungry.

"Lets have muggle lunch then." Severus suggested.

"You mean go to a muggle restaurant?" Draco asked a little shyly. He wasn't quite sure he knew
how to behave in one of those without attracting attention.

Severus nodded and steered them through the crowd, obviously knowing exactly where he wanted
to go.

"But will there be enough time? Father always said the service at muggle restaurants was terribly
slow."

"Your father actually had experience with muggle restaurants?" Severus asked surprised.

"Well, I guess he must have had to know that they are so slow. Or aren't they?" Had his father just
passed on some more anti-muggle propaganda from Voldemort?

"They are a little slower than magical restaurants, because they can't use magic, but that's why
we're going to a fast food restaurant." Snape smiled.

"Fast food restaurant? How can food be fast?"

"You'll see. I think you'll like it. Most kids do."

"What's that?" Draco asked when he realised they were heading straight for a building with a big M
on it.
"That's a McDonalds." Severus grinned.

"A McDonalds? I thought we're in England not Scotland anymore?"

"McDonalds is a chain of fast food restaurants that you can find all over the world. And they're not Scottish at all actually. They're American."

"So this is where we're going to eat? How do I behave in there?" Draco asked nervously. He'd never seen anything like this place before. What if some muggle realised that he was a wizard?

Snape smiled again. "Just let me do the talking. It's not difficult at all."

In fact eating at McDonalds turned out to be very difficult, but not because of Draco's lack of knowledge in muggle customs. The problem was the food itself. How did one eat a hamburger, as Snape told him his lunch was called, without it falling apart?

Luckily some of the older muggles were having problems with that as well so Draco's struggles didn't attract any interest from the other customers. Annoyingly Severus had no problems with his burger at all, though. How did he manage to keep the sauce and meat between those two round pieces of bread?

"Practice." was the only answer Severus gave him when he voiced that question.

The food was good though, very good. If he could learn how to eat it without making such a terrible mess every time, McDonalds was another reason to spend some time exploring the muggle world once he'd finished school. Yes, definitely worth a return, Draco decided after he'd tasted the strange ice-cream Severus had bought for desert.

The muggle train was once again very full, but Draco knew by now not to stare at people talking to little black boxes. Still it felt a little odd and listening to two totally mindless conversations conducted via the little phones at the same time was a bit annoying. Draco tried to close his ears to them and concentrated on looking for black sheep. Of course you never find what you're looking for. There were plenty of sheep, but no black ones anywhere.

Draco was very relieved when they finally left the train at the small station. This time they didn't need to ask for directions and it seemed to Draco that they reached the cottage much faster. Suddenly he felt nervous again. What if Jeremiah didn't like him? What if he was like his father?

Snape smiled at him reassuringly then put on his usual disapproving business look and knocked.

This time a small house elf appeared and bade them inside. "Linny tells Mister Malfoy Sir right away, Sir!" she squeaked and popped away.

The little ghost appeared the moment she was gone. "You were here yesterday." he announced around the little silver thumb in his mouth.

"Actually it was a week ago." Draco corrected him.

"It was. Yesterday's what was, now is today and what wasn't is ... next week?"

Draco turned towards Severus for help with that answer.

"It seems young Mr. Malfoy hasn't quite mastered the concept of time yet." Severus explained in a tone Draco knew meant he was biting back laughter, but would seem absolutely indifferent to anybody else. "It is a rather difficult idea for the young ones."
"You were here yesterday. I remember you." insisted the little ghost. "You were looking for my little brother. Jerry is upstairs with the mistress. That's his wife's name, says Linny."

"Ah yes, thank you for your kind help, but Linny has already gone to inform him of our arrival. I expect that she'll be back to tell us where he wants us to meet him." Snape explained to the ghost.

"Oh Jason, will you stop bothering our guests!" came a voice from the top of the stairs. "I'm sure they have better things to do than play with little baby ghosts. Why don't you go bother Linny instead? She's dusting in the library. There'll be lots of dust clouds you can glide through."

Jason seemed to like that suggestion. With a quick "Bye!" he disappeared through the wall.

Jeremiah came down the stairs greeting them with a wide smile. He looked young and friendly. Draco felt more at ease at once. He could imagine living with this man.

Severus however wasn't as easily convinced. To him Jeremiah looked like a younger blue eyed version of Lucius though Lucius admittedly hardly ever smiled like this at anyone.

After a few words of greeting Jeremiah led them into a comfortable sitting room and Linny the house elf popped by to bring some refreshments. Draco wondered for a moment how she could be serving them and dusting at the same time, but then remembered all the impossible tasks the house elves at Malfoy Manor had performed everyday. Lucius had often demanded more difficult tricks of them than doing two jobs at once.

"The little ghost is your little brother he says?" Severus asked Jeremiah as if just making polite conversation.

"Older brother actually. A rather tragic story. You see, when he was about three our roof was damaged by a storm and my father was going to fix it. There were a lot of muggles coming around that day to check if we were alright after the storm. Nice neighbours really, but it meant that we had to keep up appearances. So my father conjured a ladder to lean against the house while he was up on the roof that would give the muggles the impression that he'd gotten up there without flying. Well, he fixed the roof and just when he'd flown down again another muggle came by. My father pretended he'd been using his broom to clean up all the leaves that had been blown onto the garden path and asked the muggle inside, but of course he couldn't allow the ladder to disappear in plain sight of the muggle and had to leave it outside. While they were inside Jason got curious and climbed up the ladder. He must have been at the very top when it suddenly slipped under his weight. After all it had never been meant to actually be used and hadn't been secured at all. Jason landed very hard and was dead at once. I think he snapped his neck or something, but back then I wasn't old enough to understand these things and my parents never liked to talk about the details of the accident when I was older. They never entirely got over it. The only good thing about it is that Jason can't have felt much pain. He's a friendly little ghost actually, but unfortunately since he died so young it's hard for him to understand certain things. His mind is still that of a three year old even though he's almost thirty now."

"Ah yes, we noticed he had some trouble remembering exactly when we'd last been here."

"These young children live in the here and now, my mother always explained it. They have no clear concept of the past or the future. You can't rely on Jason to answer questions about when something has happened." Jeremiah smiled charmingly once again. "My cousin Eugene however remembers your visit surprisingly clearly. You must have caught him when he had just gotten up."

"I don't know about that. He was obviously unfit to be Draco's guardian however." Snape glared a bit to emphasise that statement.
"Yes, he is a bit ... irresponsible, if you know what I mean. A nice guy, but I wouldn't entrust him with anything important."

At that moment the door opened and a stern looking young woman came in. Draco thought she was wearing a little too much make-up which said a lot since he was used to the amount used by his Mum. It didn't help to disguise her too long nose much and her small tightly pressed together lips only increased the unpleasant look.

Jeremiah jumped up at once. "Ah darling! How nice of you to join us. Come let me introduce you to our guests."

Mrs. Malfoy regarded them icily.

"This is Professor Snape of Hogwarts. Very important people those Hogwarts professors as you know." Jeremiah was obviously trying to raise his wife's interest in his guests. "And this is my young cousin Draco. You know, the son of that very unpleasant relative we never visited? Sorry, about that, Draco, but I'm sure you understand. Lucius always had a way of making himself ... well, unpleasant."

"You promised we wouldn't have any children, Jerry."

Draco and Severus exchanged a glance. Eugene. Would all the Malfoys be forewarned of their visits from now on?

"Yes, that's true. As Jason's story shows this place isn't save for children and neither my wife nor myself ever wanted any. We just don't have the time for that. I understand that it must be a difficult situation for you, Draco, but we cannot take you in."

"I'm not a little baby anymore. I can take care of myself and all I really need is a place to spend the summers. I'll be at Hogwarts during most of the year and intend to go to muggle school after that." Draco tried to convince him.

"Muggle school?" Mrs Malfoy exclaimed.

"There are a lot of interesting things muggles know that could be of advantage to the wizarding world." Severus intervened. "At the very least the experience would be valued by the ministry, if Draco ever wants to work there. Muggle affairs is one of their major problem areas."

"Well, that's all very interesting, I'm sure, but it doesn't change the fact that we do not have the time to raise any children of our own, much less those of others. We really wish you the very best for your future, but we certainly aren't the best that could happen to you. I suggest you try some of our older relatives. Old people have lots of time on their hands and would certainly be happy to take you in." Jeremiah insisted still wearing his wide smile.

Draco frowned wondering how he might convince them to keep him, but Severus had already made up his mind. Those two obviously didn't care for Draco at all. Mrs Malfoy was almost openly hostile and Jeremiah's charming smile was nothing more than a politician's mask. 'He ought to run for minister of magic in the next election.' Severus thought. 'He has all the required qualities: He's rich, charming and doesn't give a damn about anyone except himself.' The pair were barely better than Eugene. No way was he going to leave Draco to them.

"Ah well, we were thinking about possibly sending him to your relatives in America. You wouldn't happen to know the exact address of Eusebia Coleman and her husband?"

"Eusebia? Ah yes, I believe it was somewhere in New York ... or was that New Jersey? New
Orleans? Something with new definitely."

Draco had to bite back a groan at that response. Some place in America with a New? That could be almost anywhere.

"I don't know it right now, but I have the address somewhere in my office. I'll send you an owl sometime next week. Are you staying at Hogwarts over the holidays?"

"Hogsmeade, but I have to check on the castle every once in a while anyway and it's much easier to find for your owl. Do you think you could manage to send him right on Monday? The trip to America will take some preparation and I'd like to find Draco a new home as soon as possible."

"Well, I'll see about that. If my owl is back from her current delivery by then, it won't be a problem, but if I have to use one of the business owls, I'll have to consider the momentary demand. Mondays are generally very busy days for us and I can't guarantee we'll be able to spare the bird."

"I could send you my raven if that's your problem."

Jeremiah cast a distrusted glance at Munin. He obviously wasn't familiar with post ravens and didn't quite trust the bird. "Oh no, that won't be necessary. My owl ought to be back sometime tomorrow morning. Only if she should be late your letter might have to wait until Tuesday morning. No later than that, I promise."

Meanwhile Mrs Malfoy had ordered Linny to serve them tea and during that they returned to polite meaningless conversation. Mrs Malfoy was a little more approachable now that it was assured Draco wouldn't stay with them and started talking about her roses which it seemed had won a prize in some muggle event last year.

Draco was reminded of having tea with his mother. The same mindless boring conversations had always been the centre of Narcissa's social life. He'd learned to handle those situations long ago, so he effortlessly made the appropriate comments while keeping most of his attention focused on his piece of cake and 'That Dog's' begging looks.

"That's one very unusual looking dog." Jeremiah commented when 'That Dog' turned his efforts towards him. "What breed is that?"

"None that I can decipher." Snape responded lightly. "I found him injured in the street a while ago and have been unable to find his owner. Maybe he was abandoned because of his looks."

"Well, I certainly would abandon such an ugly little creature." Mrs Malfoy sneered.

'That Dog' gave her a cute look, sniffed her leg cautiously and then retreated towards Severus. 'Amazing!' thought Draco. 'He's actually found a person he doesn't love.'

"Don't you think that's a rather extreme action?" Severus asked her. "I'm sure there is someone somewhere who'd love to have a dog like that. All it takes is a little patience to find that person."

Mrs Malfoy regarded 'That Dog' doubtfully, but didn't comment. Maybe she thought it was Severus' business whatever he wanted to do with such an ugly little dog.

Jason floated in again to watch them have their tea. Draco felt sorry for the little ghost. He would probably have loved to have a piece of cake, but he couldn't taste it anymore.

Mrs Malfoy gave Jason the same look she'd given 'That Dog' and Jeremiah tried to send him back to Linny, but Jason wouldn't go.
"Linny's cooking in the kitchen." he reported. "It's boring. No more dust clouds. I wanna watch tea."

"Very well, but don't be a bother. Just watch quietly."

Jason nodded happily and didn't say another word all through tea which didn't last much longer anyway. Once they'd finished Severus asked the Malfoys about using their fireplace, but it turned out that it was cold and they didn't want to bother with lighting a fire.

"It's too hot this time of the year and we don't get many calls. If someone wants to contact us, they can always send an owl." Jeremiah explained.

"Ah well, but in that case we'll have to leave you now. We'll need to catch the next train to London or we won't make it there before dark."

That seemed to suit the Malfoys just fine and they said a few good byes and were on their way. Only Jason looked sad to see them leave. He even followed them out into the garden.

"Will you come back?" he asked when they'd reached the gate.

"I don't think so, young Mr. Malfoy." Snape responded formally. "We're done with our business here so it's not likely we'll have a reason to return anytime soon."

Seeing the ghost's unhappy look Draco added. "I might come back to visit someday, though. You are my relatives after all and I probably ought to stay in touch."

Jason brightened a little at that. "Next week?"

"Someday."

"What isn't today or yesterday is next week." Jason reminded him.

"Next week then." Draco confirmed with a smile.

The little ghost remained standing at the garden gate waving after them as long as they still were in sight. Draco wondered if he'd ever get a chance to keep his promise to him. Jeremiah would move out once he inherited the manor house and who would take over the little cottage then?

Well, Jeremiah would need an heir and since he didn't want to have children of his own, he'd probably leave the cottage to whomever he'd choose. Maybe they'd be nicer people and Draco really would come back to visit them then. Maybe Jason would like them better as well.

"I wish they'd have kept me. Why did you let them convince you so easily? Maybe we could have talked them into accepting me." Draco complained, but Severus just shook his head.

"They'd just have neglected you even more than your mother did. That's no good, believe me."

"How do you know? I got along fine with my mother."

"Yes, I got along fine with my parents as well, but I didn't turn out that well in the end. You're better off with a family that really wants you, someone who takes an interest in your future."

Draco started. Severus thought that he hadn't turned out well? Why? He was the absolutely most perfect person Draco knew. "My father was very interested in my future and look where that got me."
"Your father was interested in your future as a death eater. As was mine. That's more of an interest in the future of Voldemort than in yours. Don't let people like that deceive you. If they want to lead you right into a long bloody war, they don't care for you at all."

"But now I'll have to move to America."

"Which is about as far from the war as you can get. And Americans love children. You'll have lots of fun and muggle objects there."

"Muggle objects? How do you know that?"

"Because American wizards haven't withdrawn as far from muggle society as we have here in Europe. They live too far apart to form a closed society of their own."

"But I'll have to go to a different school. I won't see my friends anymore."

"You'll make new friends and you can always owl. And about the school you'd have to ask the headmaster first, but I don't see any reason you couldn't finish your education at Hogwarts, if it's okay with the Colemans. You could come by floo powder instead of the Hogwarts Express. There's no rule that says all students have to come by train. Most of the Scottish students use floo powder as well and the ones from Hogsmeade usually come by coach."

"But will they agree to that, if their own son is going to some American school?"

"We'll have to wait and see. It would be easier for them, if you both needed the same equipment for school, but better for you to stay in the school you've started. The American educational system is different from ours and your classmates there would be on a different level in most classes. We'll see which argument is more important for the Colemans."

They had to run a bit to catch the train and stopped talking to catch their breath and find a compartment. The train was almost empty and they didn't draw many odd looks from the muggle passengers for travelling with a free-flying raven this time.

"So this journey was all in vain then." Draco finally stated.

"Not quite." grinned Severus. "We did get free tea and cake and hopefully will get Eusebia Coleman's address."

"And if we don't we just check out every place in America that has a New in it's name? You do realise that could take years, don't you?"

"If we don't we'll check the Where do I Send my Owls of New York and New Jersey and if we don't find her there we wait until Dumbledore gets back and ask him to find out through the ministry."

"Why can't you just ask the ministry?"

"I could, but I don't want to. I don't get along too well with them, but a lot of them owe Albus and will be glad to help him."

"I thought they don't like you, because you are Dumbledore's spy? Why would they like him then?"

"Politics, Draco. Politics are a very strange thing. The ministry as a whole doesn't approve of the existence of an independent spy ring, because that usurps one of their main power structures. On
the other hand Hogwarts itself is a major power factor and having the headmaster to back him is a big political advantage for the minister. Dumbledore's spy ring was also approved of by the general public, because it allowed him to save many lives back in the days of the first war. He was always better informed of Voldemort's plans than the ministry and to most voters that makes Albus a hero. That doesn't please the aurors though and they are Hogwarts' main enemies within the ministry."

"Wait a minute! Voters? What do voters have to do with anything?"

"What do voters have to do with politics? Everything Draco, Everything. They are supposed to be the ones who choose our politicians so politics is mainly the art of manipulating them. You do understand that, don't you?"

Draco nodded. Manipulating people was something every Slytherin, with perhaps the exception of Gregory Goyle, understood.

"Now, since the voters favour Dumbledore and as headmaster of Hogwarts he is in an ideal position to influence future voters no politician can afford to officially take position against him."

"But you're a head of house. You've got an influential position in the school as well."

"As an ex-death eater and West Hogsmeade resident I also have a very bad position in the opinion of the general public. The aurors are in the perfect position to use that against me and through me they could get to Dumbledore, if they wanted to risk it. It would most likely weaken both their positions and as long as the minister wants both to remain strong they won't go to such extremes. With the recent falling out between the minister and the headmaster however and the minister's refusal to accept that Voldemort has returned my current position is very tenuous. On a different level however all the political factions consist of individual people who each have their own goals beyond those of their fraction and will work against their own in order to further those. Remember that no group of people ever truly works together in perfect harmony. The larger the group the more discrepancies between individual members. The ministry is a very large group consisting of different subgroups, like the aurors or muggle affairs, as well as different political parties, and that includes the extreme right, who more or less openly support Voldemort, as well as the extreme left, who don't really see a reason to have a ministry or keep ourselves hidden from muggles at all. Each of these groups once again consists of individual people some of whom really back the ideals of the group, but the large majority are only there to further their own careers. For each of those it is a personal power factor to have a connection to one of the bigger players even if said bigger player is of a rival group. And Albus Dumbledore is big enough a player that connections with him are valued by the minister himself. He can play on that, ask a favour of one of the smaller players who sympathise with him, one who's hoping to keep up good connections or even one who doesn't have any really big connections at all yet and will see this as his big chance. He'd owe that person a favour afterwards of course and that is the main political currency, but for such a simple thing as an address in America he could pick almost anyone and thus chose who he'll owe it."

Draco thought that over during the rest of the journey. His father had sometimes spoken about owing favours to other death eaters and even ministry people from time to time and the power structures within Slytherin house functioned in a very similar way, but for some reason he'd never seen the ministry as a Slytherin house on a larger scale before.

"Does anybody ever act without any hidden motives of their own?" he asked Severus dejectedly when they changed trains at Kings Cross station.

"The Huffepuffs almost always do and other people do it sometimes. Those who do it in politics however never get anywhere. Politics are a difficult and treacherous game, but that is the Slytherin way."
"And being a Hogwarts professor is a political job?"

"Not necessarily, but being head of house certainly has a political component. There's no getting around that, but then I was a political pawn long before I ever became a teacher."

Draco sighed looking out the window as the train rolled out of the station. It would be dark by the time they got home and he was no closer to having a new home than he'd been the day Severus had taken him in.

"Maybe we should have tried some Slytherin manipulation on Jeremiah." he suggested.

"I did. I got him to promise to send me Eusebia's address tomorrow."

"If he'll do that. He seems like the kind of person who'll tell you everything's perfect with a lot of charm and smiles and then conveniently forget he promised anything."

"Yes, he's a perfect politician, but he'll do it for fear of having to deal with a visit from Munin, if he doesn't. Didn't you notice the raven disgusted him as much as the dog did his wife?"

Draco could have kicked himself for not realising that sooner. He'd noticed that Jeremiah had disliked Munin, but would never have thought of using that reaction to his advantage, nor had he realised when Severus did. He liked to see himself as a master manipulator, but just watching Severus deal with people showed him how much he still had to learn.

He suddenly wondered how much and to what ends Severus was manipulating him. He'd been very open about things most of the time so far, but could that be a sort of manipulation as well? Whatever Severus wanted of him, he'd gladly do almost anything for him if asked. Surely Severus was aware of that? And was it a good thing at all? Maybe he should try to be more independent. There had always been things he'd have outright refused to do for his father and others he would have demanded compensation for. When had he started to depend on Severus like that?

'That Dog' whimpered softly from his comfortable seat beside Severus. He seemed slightly disappointed that they hadn't gone on to Diagon Alley today. Despite all the nice stroking he still liked floo travel much better than trains. Munin looked over at him, but decided that such ridiculous cowardice wasn't worth commenting on. Instead he hopped onto Draco's shoulder. If Severus insisted on stroking the dog all day, he'd just go get his comfort from the boy instead.

Draco smiled and scratched the raven's head. Munin ducked into better reach and closed his eyes. Yes! That was more like it.

It was indeed dark by the time they arrived at the Hogsmeade train station, but Draco didn't mind. Merlin Park could no longer scare him even in the dark and getting lost on the way there was nearly impossible. Both the river and the apartment houses were hard to overlook and 'That Dog' could find the way blind anyway. The moment Severus had carried the shivering little bundle out of the train and set him down on the platform 'That Dog' suddenly returned to his usual cheerful self. With a loud bark and a little jump he started off towards home attempting to pull Severus along.

Severus however was much too big for a small dog to drag off and 'That Dog' got no further than the end of his lead.

"He'll exhaust himself again before we reach the house if he keeps that up." Draco remarked nodding at the fruitlessly struggling dog.

"Doesn't matter." shrugged Severus. "The exercise will do him good and he'd make us carry him up
the stairs anyway."
Draco couldn't argue with that observation.

Walking through dark West Hogsmeade was nice, Draco decided. In the darkness you couldn't see how run down many of the buildings looked and the lights in the windows gave him a warm comfortable feeling of coming home. Some were flickering candlelight, others the bright and steady glow of electric lamps and in some windows only the soft glimmer of a fireplace burning was visible.

Draco wondered why those fireplaces were burning despite the heat. Were all those people expecting visitors tonight? No, not likely. Maybe they were just going to call some friends or relatives before going to sleep.

Their own block had only electric lights burning of course. One of them in Mary and Beth's room. He wondered what they might be doing in there at the moment. Would Mary play board games or cards with her little sister? Or was that beneath her? He couldn't imagine her reading a book or doing homework. Maybe she was just dreaming of Larry.

Then again, those two hadn't talked much the day before. Mary seemed to avoid Larry. Was she still cross with him after their quarrel? He'd have to find out this week.

Munin suddenly took off as they neared the door heading upwards towards the living room window. He'd be home before them again.

Severus carried 'That Dog' upstairs, but set him down again when they reached the fourth floor. Free of his lead 'That Dog' set off running and barking and was the first to reach the door.

"Wasn't he supposed to be tired?" Draco shouted over the noise.

Severus just shrugged and pulled out his key to let 'That Dog' in before he brought all the neighbours out complaining, when the door opened on its own. 'That Dog' dashed in ducking through the space between Sarah's legs straight into the kitchen where he continued to bark demanding to be fed.

"That dog of yours is absolutely impossible." Sarah informed Severus and went to get the dog-food

About ten minutes later they'd finally settled down to have dinner, 'That Dog' done eating and curled up under the table just in case somebody dropped something for him. He always found room for a little dessert.

"Alice was here while you were gone." Sarah told Severus between two mouthfuls of food.

"Alice?" Draco asked. "Who's Alice?"


"She's the mother of the Sharks' twins." Severus chose to describe her in a way that would have more meaning to Draco. "What did she want? I doubt she'd come up just for a social call busy as she is."

"Well, it seems that the very twins you mentioned have developed a very strange blue rash and blue hair all of a sudden." Sarah glanced over at Draco for a moment. "They don't appear to be sick or be suffering any other ill effects, but both Alice and I have been unable to get the colour to come off."
"And now you expect me to help?"

"Alice offered good money for our help. And you know how hard it is to get her to part with her money."

"Ah, and what makes both of you think that I could help at all. You are the medical potions expert. If you can't heal this mysterious illness, I doubt I'll have much success."

"Well, the twins swear that this mysterious 'illness' was caused by a potion the Rakers gave them." Another glance at Draco who was giggling into his plate. "And since you are the potions expert ..."

"I see. I'll take a look and see what I can do. You told them to come back tomorrow evening, I suppose?"

Sarah nodded. "I did."

"Good, I'll have a chance to refill my supplies at the market first then."

To Draco's surprise neither of the two asked him what he'd done to the twins. He was sure that at least Severus had to know exactly who was behind that prank and Sarah's suspicious glances spoke volumes, but still they let him go to bed that night without even mentioning the twins again.

A/N: Did Severus recognise the potion from the description of the effects? Will he be able to counter it? And will Draco move to America?

In the next chapter: Draco goes shopping on his own, Severus examines the twins and we finally get to see blue haired Sharks.
This time Mike had to go to the market with his own family and so Draco was left to do some shopping on his own. Sarah gave him a list of fruits and vegetables and though he wasn't quite sure which ones to buy first, he wasn't as nervous as the last time. At least he knew how to bargain now.

He stuffed "That Dog' into his backpack ignoring his protests and set off through the dense crowds. To his surprise he found that those were much easier to navigate when he was on his own. He didn't have to try to keep up with anybody or wait for someone all the time and could adapt his speed to the movements of the crowds and use whatever opportunities presented themselves to slip through.

Slipping out of a particularly dense crowd with a newly purchased bag of apples he noticed Mary standing in line at a vegetable stand with an old little witch who was leaning heavily on her walking stick, obviously her employer for the day. Mary waved when she caught sight of him and he smiled back at her since he had no hand free to wave.

A while later he got to the less crowded part of the market near the meat stands. The smell was exciting 'That Dog' even though it wasn't all that bad yet and Draco was already turning away when he saw a familiar face in a group of kids nearby.

"Hey Charlie!" he called out to his friend and Charlie smiled at him for a moment and waved back. She didn't come over though and Draco soon realised why. Those kids had to be from her ballet class and they were practising their dance moves. A small group of spectators had assembled around them and one of the smaller girls, probably somebody's little sister was making the rounds with an upturned cap, collecting money.

Draco slipped closer and caught a quick peek into the cap. The money they'd been given was all knuts, but probably had the value of several galleons. The little side-show was obviously worth the effort. He stopped to watch a little wishing he'd something to give them as well, but the only money he had were two knuts left over from his purchases and those belonged to the Snapes. He couldn't just give them away.

When it became obvious that Charlie wasn't going to stop dancing and come over to talk anytime soon, Draco decided to go have another look at the muggle shop instead before he went to meet the Snapes for lunch break in the side alley.

Slipping through the crowds he made his way around the marketplace and had almost reached the shop when he heard a voice calling him from behind.

"Hey Dragon! Wait up!"

Draco stopped and turned around to see Larry trying to push through a group of chatting witches to get to him. "Hi, Larry! Why don't you try to go around the group!" he suggested.

Larry pushed one particularly fast talking witch aside roughly and finally managed to break through as the rest of the group scattered complaining loudly about his rudeness.

"Phew, you're fast!" Larry exclaimed as he finally reached Draco's side. "I can't squeeze through as
"fast as you do. What was that you were trying to tell me? I couldn't quite understand over that witch's babbling."

"Oh, never mind. I was just suggesting you take a different route that might have been faster. Doesn't matter anymore now."

"Faster route is easy for you to say. You're smaller. I wouldn't fit through the gaps you use."

"Probably not." Draco agreed looking Little Larry up and down. "You want to come along have a look at the muggle shop?"

Larry shrugged. "Why not. I haven't got anything better to do anyway. The witch I was going to work for fell ill and her nephew is going shopping for her instead of me." he sighed. "That's five sickles lost, because of the stupid flu."

"Why didn't she come over for some of Uncle Severus' pepper-up potion? That would have cured her instantly."

"No idea." Larry shrugged.

They walked side by side for a while chatting about this and that. No, Larry hadn't seen any of the Sharks either, but Joe, the little wannabe who lived next doors to him had seen Pretty Ricky take out the trash early in the morning and he'd still been having fits of laughter when he'd told Larry. Draco told the story of Alice's visit to the Snapes and summed up his meeting with Jeremiah in a few sentences.

It was a while before Larry finally came out with what he really wanted.

"Dragon?" he asked suddenly.

"Yes?"

"Do you have a girlfriend?"

"A girlfriend?"

"Well, you're not going after Cathy Cat all that much even though everyone can see that you like her, so I thought you must already have a girl from that fancy school of yours."

"There's a girl I dated last year, yes, but I'm not sure she's really my girlfriend. My father expected me to marry her someday, but now I haven't decided what I want yet and I don't know if she still likes me at all."

"Ah, but you do have some experience with having a girlfriend then?"

"I guess so."

Larry seemed to think that over for a moment. He looked unsure of himself as if he wanted to ask something, but didn't quite dare to.

"What's her name?" he finally asked.

"Pansy. Pansy Parkinson. She's a nice girl from an old pureblood family. Guess I could have done worse."
"Ah, but you aren't in love with her?"

"I'm not sure. She's a really nice girl."

"You're not in love, but then a lot of people have girlfriends they're not in love with. You shouldn't marry her though."

Draco shrugged. He really wasn't thinking about marrying all that much at the moment.

"Do you and Pansy ever fight?" Larry asked all of a sudden.

"Of course we do. Everybody fights sometimes. Why?"

Larry sighed deeply. "Mary's still not talking to me just because of the things I said during that one stupid game."

"Well, you do tend to get carried away during a game. You really should try to remember it's just a stupid game while you play it."

"I know. What I don't know is what to do about Mary. I thought maybe ... What do you do if Pansy won't talk to you after a fight?"

Draco thought for a moment. "Well, I used to buy her jewellery or something like that, but back then I still had a father who'd pay for that."

"I can't afford jewellery." Larry sighed.

"And I doubt Mary would expect or even want it. Pansy's the kind of rich girl that expects expensive gifts and likes to dress up. I've never seen Mary wear anything fancy."

"Okay, so no jewellery. Anything else you can think of?"

"She definitely expects you to tell her you're sorry."

"She knows I am!"

"But did you tell her so?"

"No, but there's no need. She already knows."

"Maybe so, but girls always expect you to say it. It's kind of a ritual. You tell them that you're sorry and that you love them and then you give them something romantic."

"Okay, I can tell her that, but I don't have anything romantic. I don't even know what is considered romantic."

"That depends on the girl. With Pansy it always had to be something expensive."

"I can't afford anything expensive. I didn't even earn anything today."

Draco thought that over. "Do you have any money at all?"

"Two galleons and three sickles. I'm saving for a new book-bag for school. My old one's falling apart and I really wanted to buy something new for once."

"Well, what's more important a new book-bag or Mary?"
"Mary of course!" Larry said at once.

"In that case I suggest you invest some of that money in a romantic present."

"But what is romantic and no more than two galleons and three sickles?"

"Something Mary will like. You know her better than I do. A box of sweets in a nice heart shape works with most girls. You have to be sure she likes the sweets though. Some like stuffed animals, but I doubt Mary is one of those. Almost all girls like it if you give them flowers. Again it helps to know which flowers she likes. If you know her favourite sweets or favourite flowers, I suggest you buy those, wrap them up nicely and present them as a token of your love."

Larry thought that over. "Cornflowers, cornflowers and everyflavour beans. That's what she likes best."

"Cornflowers?" Draco repeated incredulously.

"Yes, she once had an argument with Cathy Cat about that. Cathy likes dandelions best and Mary cornflowers. I even know where I can pick them and I can still buy her the everyflavour beans."

"How come all the girls I ever dated insisted on roses and diamond necklaces or gold earrings?"

"Because they liked feeling expensive?"

When had Larry gotten this insightful? "Probably. So all we need now is to find the right box to present the beans in. Come on!"

It took them a while of squeezing through the marketplace until they found a stand that sold cheap cardboard boxes. A heart shaped one was easily found and they soon set off again for the sweets shop to fill the box with everyflavour beans. Larry had to buy two boxes of beans to fill the heart shaped box to the brim, but he wasn't satisfied until he had added a chocolate frog on the top.

"There." he finally told Draco. "Now all I need to do is get the flowers and wrap it all up."

"I'd wait with the flowers till the very last. They won't stay fresh if you pick them too soon."

Larry considered that. "Then I'll wait to get them until tomorrow morning. You want to come help me find a nice wrapping paper for the box?"

"I can't." Draco glanced around nervously. "I should have met the Snapes for lunch break a while ago. I just hope they won't be too angry that I'm late."

"Oh, okay. See you tomorrow then. And thanks for your tip. I just hope it works."

Draco laughed. "Don't worry, it will. Bye Larry!"

Only moments after Draco stepped out onto the marketplace again something suddenly dropped onto his shoulder. Draco nearly jumped, but then the something suddenly said. "Caw! Find. Boy. That Dog. Caw!"

Draco breathed a sigh of relief. "Hi, Munin! Sorry, we're late. We got held up, but we're on our way now."

"Fly!"

"Yes, yes I know that. I'm already going as fast as I can in this crowd."
"Fly!" "Believe me, I would if I could, but I don't have wings or a broom so I'll just have to stay on the ground and walk." "Fly!"

"Oh shut up, we're almost there anyway."

"Caw!" Munin said then grabbed a lock of Draco's hair and pulled, not very hard luckily, just hard enough to be felt.

"Ouch! Will you stop that! It hurts."

"Fly!"

"I already told you I can't. You're such a clever bird, you should have noticed by now that humans don't fly without brooms."

Still arguing they finally reached the alley and Sarah immediately engulfed Draco in a tight hug. "There you are! We were so worried about you!"

"I just had to help Larry make some purchases that took longer than we'd thought. I'm fine." Draco mumbled feeling a little embarrassed. What if any Sharks or Rakers were around to see this? Then again it felt really nice to get hugged.

"You should have come back and told us." Severus declared sternly. "You had promised to meet us here at noon, not half an hour later. You'll have to learn to keep your promises."

"It's not that late! ... Is it?"

"It is." Severus glared. It wasn't the full force Snape glare, but bad enough.

Draco stared at the ground. "Sorry."

"Just see that it doesn't happen again. Now, lets see what you've bought."

Luckily the Snapes were happy with the fruits and vegetables he'd brought back with him and seemed willing to forgive him for being late. Draco decided to be careful not to remind them of the incident though, just in case they remembered they'd forgotten to punish him.

As soon as Draco had hastily slung down his sandwich they were on their way again to get the needed potion supplies. The potions shop's owner smiled widely at the sight of them. Draco thought he must have heard about the raid. Experience probably told him that this meant he'd get to sell large quantities of his more unusual wares.

The customers' eyes went very wide as Severus listed the ingredients he required. One little girl turned to a tired looking witch and pulled on her bright summer dress. "Mummy, Mummy! What are toad toes and what are they good for?"

The mother blushed slightly and bent down to whisper into the girl's ear. "I haven't the slightest idea, honey. But I suppose the shopkeeper must know, because he's measuring something right now."

The little girl frowned and scrunched up her face in thought. The shopkeeper was behind the counter and from where she was standing she couldn't even see him. She regarded Severus. That man had ordered the toad toes, so he had to know what they were as well.

"And add some thistle thorns as well. I'm almost out of them and might need some today."
"Certainly, Professor. Anything else you need? We've just received a fresh delivery of frogs' livers."

"No thank you, that will be all."

"Excuse me, Mister." a tiny voice said beside Severus' right leg.
He looked down at the little girl in surprise.

"What are toad toes? My brother has a toad and it doesn't have anything that looks like toes."

"They're just called that. In truth they are the roots of the magical fireflower. They just look like little toes covered in toad skin. Look." Severus pulled one toad toe out of its pack and presented it for inspection on his palm.

"Ugly." the little girl decided. "And what do you do with them?"

"I brew potions."

"My Mummy brews potions too, but she doesn't know toad toes."

"That's because you don't use them in every potion. They are very dangerous if used incorrectly and therefore you need a special license to be allowed to brew the potions that need them."

"Dangerous?" the little girl's eyes went very wide. "Do they explode?"

"No, but they can make you hallucinate."

"Halu- what?"

"Hallucinate. That's when you see things that aren't really there."

"Ah, dreams."

"Yes, dreams that you have when you're awake."

"But dreams can't hurt you. They aren't real."

"When you have them when you're awake they can. Imagine ... imagine that you'd dream that there was a bridge over the river and you'd want to walk over that bridge, but it isn't really there."

"Then I'd fall into the river."

"Right. You could drown. That's why hallucinations are dangerous."

The little girl nodded earnestly. "I see. Thank you."

"You know, you really are a good teacher." Sarah commented to Severus on the way out.

"No, I'm not. The children hate me."

"The Slytherins don't." protested Draco at once.

"You were great with that little girl." insisted Sarah.

"But I didn't teach her anything. I just answered her questions."
"Maybe you ought to try doing that with your pupils. Maybe then they wouldn't hate you anymore." Sarah suggested.

"They have to hate me. How else should I prepare them to face Voldemort?"

"Why do you have to prepare them to face him at all? You're a Potions teacher, not a general." Sarah said sounding a little tired as if she'd said those words too often to still believe they'd have any effect.

"Somebody has to do it. Albus is relying on me to be that somebody."

Sarah sighed.

"What about the Slytherins then? We don't hate you." argued Draco.

"You're different. You don't have to learn how to face danger. Slytherins know that. What they need is someone they can trust, someone who really likes them and will fight for them. And if that person isn't me it will be Voldemort. Slytherins can be so many things, but as long as everybody expects them to be evil, that's the only thing they will be. They need to be given the chance to be something else to be it."

"And I'll be a Physics teacher." insisted Draco.

"Even if you'll have to teach in a muggle school then?"

Draco considered that. He hadn't thought about it yet. What if the wizarding society didn't want his muggle skills once he finally had them? Could he stay in the muggle world forever? Would that mean he had to live without magic?

"I'll cross that road when I get there." he finally decided.

Alice and the twins were waiting in front of their flat when they got home. The twins were trying to hide their blue hair under their bandannas which made them look even more ridiculous.

Severus regarded them closely. "Ah, I see."

"Can you help them?" Alice asked almost beggingly.

"We'll see. I'll have to conduct some tests first. But before we start that I'd like to put these away." he lifted the shopping bags in his hands slightly. "There are some supplies in here that could prove helpful. Do come in and sit down."

The twins glared at Draco as he slipped past them to tend to his purchases. Draco smiled back at them sweetly. 'My flat.' said a tiny voice in his head gloatingly. 'You'd better stay polite.'

Alice too regarded his blue cap with distaste.

"So Sarah, are you going Rakers on us?" she asked with a slight sneer.

"Well, it is either that or the Sharks in this part of town at the moment, isn't it." Sarah answered sweetly. "And considering the way Mark treats my son that doesn't leave much choice now, does it?"

"What do you mean your son?" Alice measured Draco.

Sarah calmly gestured towards the bedroom door where she'd put Billy to bed already. "That little
"What's Mark want with a baby now?"

"That's what I'd like to know. He's a bit too old to play with baby toys, don't you think? I don't like kids who attack babies. It's just like with dogs. A dog who'll attack a puppy has something wrong with him. You have to get rid of those before they start attacking people as well."

"Mark didn't do anything. He was just playing with the baby a bit. Just a little teasing." protested one of the twins. Draco couldn't say which one he was. They both looked exactly the same.

"He scared him and tried to push him off the table. If that is not doing anything, I don't want to see him attack anyone." he told them.

"I'm just glad the Rakers happened to come by when they did. I doubt Draco could have kept four Sharks at bay all alone for very long and there's no telling what they'd have done to Billy once they'd gotten past him."

"We wouldn't have touched him." said the other twin this time. "What do you take us for?"

"It didn't look like you weren't going to harm him." shot Draco angrily.

Severus who knew a fight brewing when he heard one poked his head out of the lab. "Draco? Can you get a cauldron filled up and on the fire? We'll be needing it once I've gotten a quick look at the twins."

"Sure!" Draco quickly got a cauldron from the lab and went to fill it with water from the tab in the kitchen. He grinned when he realised it was the very same one he'd used to brew his potion in.

It didn't make a difference of course. The rest of the potion had dried out long ago and lost its potency and after Draco had washed it out all traces of the potion had vanished. It was just an ordinary cauldron once again, but 1001 Useless Potions said that there wasn't an antidote. Could Severus come up with one anyway? Draco hoped not. The twins looked much too funny like this.

"Please come on in." Severus told the twins from the door of the lab. "Which one of you wants to go first?"

Draco followed them inside and placed the cauldron on the burner then started the fire while Severus regarded the twins' skin through a magnifying glass and pulled at their hair a bit. Watching him out of the corner of his eyes Draco wondered how much of this was really necessary. Was Severus playing with the two Sharks? It did look like he was having fun.

"I'll need the lizard teeth, Draco."

Draco obediently went to get the jar of lizard teeth and set it on the table.

"Thistle thorns, maybe some of the fairy dust and of course the lemon leaves and some pepper root."

Draco set all of those out on the table then looked at Severus quizzically. Lemon leaves and pepper root? Sour and spicy? Didn't sound like a good combination to him at all.

"And then I'll need to borrow some of your hairs." Severus told the twins pulling a few out despite their yelps.
"I've put lizard teeth into the cauldron with the hairs, and then started to stir."

Draco dropped it in and Severus continued to stir. "You have to be careful not to use too many at once though, because they tend to explode at sudden contact with other ingredients. Especially the fairy dust tends to set them off. Second now. Good. The lizard teeth are for the skin, though they have their downsides. They tend to make you itch even worse at first, but ought to take the discolouration away. Third thorn now."

Draco flipped another thorn in and watched how the potion changed colour.

"You'll remember the effects of pepper root from your second year, I expect?"

Draco nodded though he felt a little confused about those. Pepper root was used as the main ingredient in wakefulness potions only though it could have a fever reducing effect as well, if one didn't have all the ingredients needed for a proper pepper-up potion on hand. It was also one of the most unpleasant tasting ingredients Draco knew. A real tongue burner much worse than anything containing mint.

"Fourth thorn. Always remember to stir anything that includes lizard teeth counter clockwise as long as you're still adding ingredients. The only exception to that rule is when you've added unicorn horn or dragon scales. In those cases you have to stir clockwise. Stir it the wrong way and the potion will boil over within seconds and douse out your fire. If that happens you have to wait at least an hour until it will burn again and most potions are ruined, if they stop boiling before they are done. The last thorn now. That rule does not concern potions containing dragon breath of course as those will boil on their own. Now add the pepper root and cut up ten lemon leaves."

"Add the pepper root uncut?" Draco asked in surprise. He knew that one hardly ever used a whole pepper root, because that made the potion almost undrinkable.

"Yes, it is stronger like this. Since Sarah's attempts all failed I think it's advisable to use unusually strong means."

"And ten lemon leaves?"

Severus nodded and winked at Draco. Draco grinned. This potion was going to be sour, very sour.

After adding the lemon leaves Severus left the potion to boil for five more minutes during which he continued to lecture Draco on the use of lizard teeth and thistle thorns, and the twins and their mother stared dumbly at the bubbling cauldron shifting uncomfortably whenever Severus mentioned explosions or poisonous effects. Severus soon went into a diatribe on explosive poisons for their benefit and Draco could barely hold back the laughter anymore by the time he finally decided that the potion was done, turned off the burner and cast a cooling charm over the cauldron with a wave of his wand.

"So which one of you wants to try first?" Severus asked the twins.

They looked at each other doubtfully, but after a moment one volunteered. Severus calmly filled some of the potion into a glass and handed it to the twin. The boy sniffed the liquid cautiously then tasted it and immediately started coughing.

"Urgh! That's not drinkable." he complained.
"Well, if you'd rather stay like this." Severus hinted.

The boy stared morosely at his brother for almost a minute then with a deep sigh downed the potion. He grimaced then looked expectantly at Severus. His hair flimmered for a moment and then turned a striking pink.

"Interesting." commented Severus.

Draco grinned. The spots hadn't changed at all and pink hair was almost as good as blue.

"You wouldn't happen to have some unchanged hairs we could use for the potion?" Severus asked Alice.

"Unchanged hairs? Well, there might be a few in their hairbrush."

"We'd have to know exactly which hair belongs to which twin though."

"No chance. Their hair looks exactly the same. I couldn't tell single hairs apart."

"Ah well, in that case there's only one more potion I can come up with at the moment. Draco, get me a fresh cauldron and fill it up."

Draco smirked at the pink haired twin on his way out. This was getting better and better.

A few minutes later they had a new potion bubbling, this time without lizard teeth but with a lot of unicorn horn and some fairy dust.

"Another ten lemon leaves and the pepper root." Severus announced calmly.

Draco wondered how he was managing not to laugh. This potion might have a better chance at success, but it would taste no better than the first.

It also needed to boil for half an hour and this time Draco decided to use that time for some Math exercises. The twins stared wide eyed while Severus commented on how to calculate how much water a cauldron could hold. That sounded slightly more complicated than what Draco was doing right now, but then again it was a challenge. He put aside his book and started measuring the cauldron they'd used to brew the first potion.

"Why are you torturing the poor boy with things like that?" the twins' mother asked Severus mystified.

"I don't. It was his idea to learn Math. I'm just supporting his natural curiosity." Severus stated matter-of-factly.

The potion was done long before Draco had figured out how to solve this problem and soon Severus held out another glass to the still blue haired twin.

"It's only fair that you should try it first this time." he explained when the boy looked to his brother for help.

After some more grimacing and coughing they all stared expectantly at the twin. For a while nothing happened. Then a thin tendril of smoke began curling out of his nose soon joined by another coming from the other side.

"Well, I guess I'll have to remember this one, if I ever want to dress up as a dragon." grinned Draco.
"That was not a common dye potion." Severus diagnosed when it became clear that that would be the potion's only effect on the boy. "Not even the Ancient Greek ones are that resistant and I'm quite sure Draco can't read Greek. Just what did you make them drink?"

"Make them drink? I didn't make them drink anything. You're the one who did that. They'd never drink anything I gave them."

"Then what did you do?"

"He dumped water bombs on us!" complained the pink haired twin.

"A tactile potion then." Severus concluded. "I'd guess Merlin's dye potion, but that's supposed to turn the hair red, doesn't leave marks on the skin and doesn't itch either. And I always thought that runic text would be too difficult for a fifth year student anyway."

"What good would that be?" Draco asked surprised. "Just changing the hair colour can't be of much use, can it?"

"Disguise. Back in Merlin's days muggles didn't have hair dye so changing your hair colour was a good way to escape witch hunts. Of course that's where the muggles' belief that all witches have red hair originated."

"So it wasn't even very successful back then?"

"Not entirely, but it did a lot of good. Now stop trying to distract me. Is this a variant of Merlin's potion or what is it?"

"It's a useless potion."

"Draco, we can discuss your opinion on Merlin's dye at some other time."

"No, that's not what I meant. The one I used is a useless potion."

"What?"

"I found it in 1001 Useless Potions." Draco grinned handing Severus the book. "See, there it is."

Severus looked at the page and ... laughed.

The twins and Alice stared at him in complete confusion.

"Looks like you found it very useful though." he managed through his laughter. "We ought to write a letter to the editor. Wrong book."

"So what about my sons' hair then?"

With an effort Severus managed to get himself under control. "I'm sorry, there is no antidote for this one. It's completely harmless and will wear off after about a week though."

"A week!" shrieked the smoke breathing twin.

"But what about the pink?" shrieked his pink haired brother.

"The attempted antidotes have reacted with the original potion." Severus explained. "That means the side effects will last as long as the blue spots do."
"But isn't there a way to neutralise at least those effects?" Alice asked exasperated.

"I could try, but it would require inventing a new potion and that usually requires at least a year of work and experiments. The effects would disappear on their own before I'd discover the right combination of ingredients."

"Well, don't expect me to pay you for this." Alice snorted and started for the door head held high while the twins trailed after her dejectedly.

"I did try to help, Alice. If you're unwilling to recognise that of course, I might think twice about trying next time."

Another snort and Alice opened the door to rush out. She had to stop short the moment she'd stepped outside however and the twins ran into her pushing her over and into Pretty Ricky and Robin who'd obviously been just about to ring the doorbell.

"Forget it." The pink haired twin told them while his brother helped their mother dust herself off after her fall. "There is no antidote. He just tried some fowl tasting stuff on us that left some nasty side effects and then said there was nothing he could do."

"I'm not dusty, you know." Pretty Ricky informed Alice with a very insulted look. "I just took a bath to try and get the colour to come off."

"Maybe if we try asking Professor Funnel?" Robin suggested.

"If Snape can't do it, that old charlatan hasn't the slightest chance." Alice snapped ignoring Ricky. She righted her clothes and then continued her rush down the corridor as if nothing had happened.

"I would not call Frank Funnel a charlatan, Alice." Snape calmly informed her quickly retreating back. "He may not be one of the top potions masters in the world, but he certainly is among Europe's best and most experienced teachers. West Hogsmeade is very lucky to have him." But by the time he got to that last sentence he was already speaking to an empty corridor as the kids had followed Alice in her rush down the stairs.

Severus shrugged and turned to Draco. "Well, I guess that got rid of the Sharks. All that remains to do is clean up the lab. If you'd agree to help me with that, I'd agree to help you with that Math problem. Okay?"

"Perfect." laughed Draco.

A/N: Will any more Sharks show up on the Snapes' doorstep? Is Professor Funnel really a charlatan? And will Mary and Larry make up?

In the next chapter: The Rakers go Shark spotting and play Soccer, Larry gives Mary his gift and a bunch of flowers and Draco considers picking some dandelions.
Tuesday was once again unbearably hot and when Draco arrived down on the Soccer lawn he heard several voices arguing in favour of going swimming instead of playing Soccer. Jack wasn't feeling like swimming though. Maybe he was still trying to get back at Draco for the last defeat and hoping that the heat would work in his favour.

Draco smiled and dropped into the grass beside Cathy. So Larry thought she liked him? Should he try to go for it? Cathy Cat sure was one very pretty girl and who knew if Pansy still cared for him at all. He could imagine living in a nice little West Hogsmeade house near the marketplace with Cathy. Pansy would probably kill him for suggesting to move into an ordinary house instead of a mansion. If he mentioned West Hogsmeade to her he was as good as dead.

So what spoke against Cathy? Pansy might not like being displaced. Then again she might find somebody richer and more influential more to her taste anyway. She'd probably go out with Blaise or that sixth year Ian. Both were on the Quiddich team and from very rich pureblood families. Not as rich as the Malfoys had been, but rich enough to keep Pansy Parkinson in style.

Cathy was Jack's ex though. And everybody knew that Jack wasn't over her yet. Did he really want to risk challenging the gang leader now that they were finally getting along? Who was the girl in green he'd seen him with at the market last week? Was he serious about her? Could she make him forget Cathy? Draco thought he'd seen the two of them together again when he'd been looking for cardboard boxes with Larry, but it had been only a short glimpse and he wasn't entirely sure. Maybe he ought to ask Severus what he thought about it?

Then there was that one last big argument against asking Cathy on a date. He was going to move to America on Sunday. He had no idea if he'd ever get a chance to return to England at all.

"What about you Dragon?" Jack asked all of a sudden. "You're awfully quiet today. Do you want to play or not?"

"Huh? Of course I want to play. I was just thinking, that's all."

"Thinking? Thinking about what?" asked Mike stretching comfortably on the grass beside him. "It's much too hot to think."

"About the fact the next pair of relatives I'm supposed to go live with live somewhere in America."

"America!" exclaimed Charlie excitedly. "Oh wow! I've always wanted to go to America! That's great Dragon!"

"No, it's not. They're probably going to send me to some American school and owls can't fly from America to here. I'd need an albatross to owl you and I bet I won't get one."

"Well, stay here then." said Sammie. "We all want you. We've got a school here and you don't need a bird at all, because you can always come over and talk to us in person."

"Sammie, I don't have any relatives here. I already told you I can't just stay with the Snapes forever."
"So let's just hope the Americans don't want you either. None of the ones you wanted did, so why are you so sure they will?" said Matt from a small shady patch under a bush a few paces away. He'd arrived too late to get a spot under the tree where the rest of them were lying and had had to either sit in the sun or put up with the distance.

"If they don't want me, I'll be stuck with my mother's impossible brother. I couldn't bare living with him."

"Why? What's wrong with him?" yawned Mary almost asleep leaning against the tree trunk.

"He's a sort of ... well like a boy band singer. Only he has no actual boy band. He just sings."

"Really? Do we know him?" asked Charlie.

"Gringolf Glizzard." Draco ground out between clenched teeth.

"Gringolf Glizzard! Really! You're related to Gringolf Glizzard? Oh, wow! That's so cool!" several voices shouted.

Draco covered his ears with his hands to block them out. "If you tell anyone I'll kill you. The guy is a total idiot, honest. Just listen to the stuff he sings. He might be rich and famous and all, but I couldn't possibly live with him."

"Well, I'd love to live with Gringolf Glizzard." said Charlie dreamily.

"Oh really?" asked Cathy all of a sudden. "You do realise there'd always be those pretty movie star type girls hanging around him, don't you? They'd probably make you fetch and carry for them like a dog," she indicated 'That Dog' who was sitting at attention by Draco's legs hoping he'd get to chase the ball again.

"I bet they've got house elves to do that for them." protested Mary.

"And they'd love to show you that you're no better than a house elf in their eyes. You don't really think Gringolf Glizzard would give you any sort of attention at all, do you?" asked Mike. "He's all stuck up in his world of the rich and famous. I bet he's going to marry some model or actress someday."

"Just wait until I'm a famous dancer." Charlie said dreamily. "He'll have to notice me then. They all will."

"Yeah, sure Charlie. He'll probably be yesterday's news by then anyway." sneered Jack.

"I still think he's great." sighed Mary.

"I thought you were in love with Larry." Cathy reminded her. "And he really likes you, you know. Gringolf Glizzard would give you an autograph at best. Larry loves you."

"Oh, and what has he ever given me? Where is he anyway? He could have at least said he wasn't coming so we'd know not to wait for him. I want to play."

Indeed Larry was nowhere in sight and Draco was the only one who had any idea where he might be. He knew better than to mention that though. So Mary was disappointed that Larry had never given her any presents? Just perfect. He just hoped Larry was right about her loving everyflavour beans and cornflowers.
"Why don't we just start the game without him. If he comes a little later he can still join in." he suggested.

"And what if he doesn't come at all?" asked Jack. "Maybe he's got house arrest and I'll be playing with two people less."

"Take Matt until Larry comes then." Draco offered.

"No, I want Cathy." Jack snapped almost automatically.

"I'm not playing on your team. Get that through you thick skull, will you." Cathy glared at him.

"I thought you'd found a new girlfriend anyway?" ventured Draco. "Or is she just a friend?"

"Who?" Jack looked surprised.

"That blonde you were with at the market. Who is she anyway?"

"Oh, Babs. Yes, I think she does like me, but I'm not sure I should really go with her."

"Babs?" Cathy asked surprised. "You mean Big Babs? I thought she was going with Steve."

"Not anymore." grinned Charlie. "They broke up sometime last week I think. She caught him kissing Robin they say."

"Just a moment." interjected Draco. "Who is Big Babs? She didn't wear Black Ring or Avenger insignia. And I know she's not a Shark."

"She wouldn't. She's the Lions' second and their colour's green." explained Mike. "What's the matter?"

Draco was rolling on the ground laughing so hard he could barely breathe. "Green lions?" he finally managed to gasp.

"Yes, what's so funny about that?" Mary asked confused.

"Slytherin's green. And the Gryffindors are the lions."

"The guys with the red rooms?" Charlie asked remembering their trip to Hogwarts.

"Exactly." Draco managed through another laughing attack. "If Potter only knew that."

"Who'd be blue?" Sammie wanted to know.

"Ravenclaw. You know, the bookish types. The next best thing to Slytherin, really."

"Oh, and who'd the Sharks be?"

"Nobody. We don't have any fish at Hogwarts. Just lions, ravens, badgers and snakes."

"So what were you doing with Big Babs, boss?" Mike turned to Jack.

"Nothing much." Jack shrugged, but he had blushed a little, Draco thought. "I was just trying to arrange a game against the Lions. I'll have to catch Steve for that though. You know how much you can rely on Babs' promises."

"Really! A game?" Sammie squealed excitedly. "A real game against another gang?"
"Don't rely on big Babs' promises, Sammie." Jack reminded him at once.

"Why not?" Draco asked. And here he'd thought he finally knew all the kids around here.

"That's where she got her name. Originally it was Big Moutthed Babs, but she shortened it to Big Babs." Cathy grinned. "It's a little more flattering."

"Okay, enough about Babsy!" Jack commanded. "Larry's obviously not coming so let's play. Sammie, you're with me."

The moment they all got up was the moment Larry finally showed up coming down the path that led towards the river a big bunch of cornflowers in one hand and something that looked like a blue heart in the other. At first Draco regretted he hadn't gone to buy the wrapping paper with Larry, but then he realised how well the colour went with the flowers and after all it was the Rakers' colour. Red wrapping paper would probably have been very bad style in this gang.

"Mary?" Larry asked almost timidly once he had reached the gaping group. "Mary, I'm sorry for the way I behaved last week. I shouldn't have yelled at you over a stupid game. And I wanted to ... Well, I wanted to tell you I'm sorry and I love you and I've brought you a little gift and some flowers to show you how sorry I am." he ended in a rush.

Mary had jumped up the moment she'd realised the flowers were for her. "Oh, Larry!" was all she said before engulfing him in a big hug that almost threatened to crush the flowers, but Larry managed to get them out of the way in time.

"Oh, how romantic!" sighed Charlie.

"Yes, isn't it?" smiled Cathy. "I'd never have thought Larry could come up with something like this. And those are her favourite flowers as well. How thoughtful. I wish I had a boyfriend who did things like that. Of course, I always end up with the bossy kind who'll shout at me and then expect me to forget and forgive everything the next morning." she glared at Jack who was still gaping at Larry.

"Well," Larry admitted. "Actually it was Draco's idea about the gift and the flowers. I really just chose which ones to pick. I'd never have had such a great idea on my own."

"Oh, but you remembered my favourite flowers and my favourite colour!" Mary exclaimed and rewarded that with a big kiss while everybody else was staring at Draco in surprise.

Draco looked back at them and shrugged. "I just made a few suggestions about how one could make up with one's girlfriend. It wasn't even anything special. Larry just put a few ideas together and adapted them to Mary's tastes."

"Oh, who'd have thought Larry of all people could be so romantic!" sighed Charlie. "Why doesn't anyone ever give me flowers?"

"I thought you were waiting for Gringolf Glizzard?" Mike laughed.

"No, I'm waiting for a romantic boyfriend, who'll love me and bring me flowers." decided Charlie.

"Maybe you just have to be a little more patient." Draco suggested. "Maybe you just haven't met him yet. Or," he continued seeing Sammie elbow Matt behind Charlie's back. "Maybe he just needs some more time to get up his courage to tell you."

"You think there will be someone someday?" Charlie asked hopefully.
"Of course there will." Cathy encouraged her. "You're a dancer after all. Boys love dancers."

"Yeah, they love dancing girls in shabby bars. I don't want to end up like that."

"Not the kind of boy who'll give you flowers." insisted Cathy. "Those prefer the real dancers and appreciate ballet."

"Are you sure? I've never met a boy who really liked ballet dancing."

"Ah, but I bet you've seen a lot of young men come to your dance shows." cut in Mike. "Bet the older girls all have great boyfriends, right?"

"Well, yes, but nobody was ever interested in me." Charlie sighed. "I'm just not pretty enough."

"You're just too young." Mike insisted. "Boys only start to like ballet when they're a little older so they'll also be more interested in the older girls then."

"They're more romantic when they're a little more mature anyway." decided Cathy. "The immature ones are nothing but trouble, believe me."

Cathy was still glaring daggers at Jack who was twirling his ball in his hands nervously.

"Can we finally start our game?" he asked as everybody turned to stare at him.

"I have to put the flowers in a vase first!" protested Mary finally letting go of Larry. "And open my gift!"

Jack rolled his eyes and sighed demonstratively. "Really Larry, did you have to start all this nonsense? I've had little spouts with my girlfriend too and I've never made a big show of it, did I?"

"And you no longer have a girlfriend." Larry told him with a shrug. "Unlike you, I don't want to go off and chat up another. I love Mary and no other."

"Maybe you ought to give Babs some flowers boss?" Sammie suggested in a whisper Draco could just barely understand.

Jack glared. "I'm not even serious about Big Babs."

"Have you ever been serious about any girl at all?" Cathy asked.

"Well, you might consider it whenever you are serious." Draco said lightly. "At least it worked great for Larry and I've seen a few boys pull off similar scenes in school too."

"Pah, rich kid nonsense!" Jack snorted and took off without an explanation.

"Everyflavour beans!" Mary shrieked excitedly. "Oh, I love everyflavour beans!"

"I know." mumbled Larry. "That's why I chose them."

"Oh, Larry! I don't know why I ever doubted your love."

Mary followed that declaration with another long kiss and Draco turned to look for Jack again, but the gang leader had disappeared and he'd taken his ball with him.

'Well, I guess we're not playing Soccer today after all.' Draco thought, but then had a better idea. "Hey Matt, why don't you run get your ball while Mary's taking care of her flowers?" he suggested.
"I don't think we've ever used it in a real game before."

"Oh yes! Sure! Be right back!" Matt dashed off beaming with joy.

Jack was back with them when they went swimming in the afternoon. He didn't say where he'd gone in the morning and Draco decided not to ask. He had other things on his mind anyway. Larry and Mary still were impossible to separate and looked perfectly happy together.

Should he go pick a few dandelions and present them to Cathy? There were more than enough growing down by the river and they were close enough that it would take him less than five minutes to pick a nice bunch.

But did he really want to break up with Pansy? If he brought Cathy flowers that was a commitment. He couldn't go back to dating Pansy then. But what if Pansy didn't want him anymore? He'd rather break up with Pansy than have Pansy break up with him.

Then again if Pansy wanted to keep him? He'd been expecting to marry her someday all his life. Well, he'd also expected to serve Voldemort someday and to inherit Malfoy Manor.

But if he decided to go out with Cathy and then his family in America wouldn't let him go back to Hogwarts after the summer, was that fair to Cathy?

He was still weighing his options by the time they reached the lake, but the fight over the tree trunk banished all those thoughts from his mind.

"I saw Mark the Fishy in the market yesterday." Jack announced once he was settled comfortably on the trunk.

"Oh? I thought the Sharks had all stayed at home. At least I didn't see any blue hair anywhere." Charlie commented.

"He was wearing a hat." Jack grinned. "An ugly old green hat. Susie and Beth swear they saw him with it again this morning."

"Oh, I wish I'd seen that!" said Sammie. "I haven't seen a single Shark since we dumped the water bombs on them."

"I saw four yesterday." Draco smirked.

"Four? In the market?" Charlie asked incredulously.

"No, at home. The twins' Mum wanted an antidote and Uncle Severus and I had a little fun with them. We'll be able to tell them apart for about a week now."

"Tell them apart?" Mike repeated. "How?"

"Well, for this week Andy is the one with the pink hair." Draco waited for a moment to enjoy the laughter and shocked looks. "And Alex is the one who's breathing smoke."

"Breathing smoke?" Matt asked incredulously. "How did that happen?"

"Side effects of the antidotes Uncle Severus tried on them. You should have seen their faces when they had to drink them. We mixed in a whole pepper root and ten lemon leaves for each potion."
Sammie hadn't been able to hold on to the tree anymore because he was laughing so hard. Larry tried to fish him out, but was laughing too much as well and Sammie didn't want to wait. He tried to climb back up on his own turning the tree trunk over and throwing all of them into the water.

"Ahh! Sammie!" squeaked Charlie who didn't like unexpected baths at all.

Sammie recognised the tone of that and took off before she came back up to the surface. Charlie followed him the moment she'd regained her bearings.

Draco started to climb back on, but Mike shook his head at him. "No, we'd better get after them and stop Charlie before she kills Sammie."

"Charlie?" Draco asked surprised. "Kill Sammie?"

"She might not get angry very often, but when she does she gets really angry. Believe me, Sammie's no match for her in this state." Cathy confirmed.

"She probably won't actually kill him, but she might really hurt him." Matt amended.

By the time Draco reached dry land however Mary had already separated the two and Sammie looked no worse for wear. Charlie was glowering a little, but that was all.

So Draco just flopped down on his towel to let the sun dry him and told the rest of his story to the amusement of not only the Rakers, but also a bunch of smaller kids who'd been playing in the shallow water when they'd arrived and had crept closer when nobody had shooed them off.

"I think this calls for a patrol tomorrow morning." Jack decided stretching comfortably on his own towel. "Let's go Sharkspotting."

"Do you think they'll even be about?" Draco asked surprised.

"They can't stay at home for an entire week." decided Mike. "The very least they have to do is come out to take down the trash and as hot as it is, I doubt they'll be staying away from the lake for long. We just have to be patient and keep watching."

Draco got home late again that day, but not as late as he had the first time he'd gone swimming with the Rakers. Billy greeted him with a very hungry sounding "Dako!", but the Snapes' dinner wasn't ready yet.

While he fed the baby he noticed that Severus was once again buried in some book and this one looked like it contained maps.

"Did Jeremiah really send the Colemans' address?" he asked when he finally sat down by the table a very sleepy Billy in his arms.

He ought to put the baby to bed now, but he was too curious to hear what Severus had found out.

"Yes, it appears they live in a town in New Jersey. It doesn't look like they'd have a big mansion there, but I think we can expect a big house and a garden. ... And lots of other kids in the neighbourhood you can make friends with. I just have to work out how to get there."

"You went to Hogwarts today then? Is the headmaster back? Did you ask him if I can still go to Hogwarts?"
"Slow down Draco! One question at a time. Yes, I spent the whole afternoon in the castle. No, Albus hasn't returned yet, but Minerva is back and as annoyingly Gryffindor as always."

"McGonagall? What's McGonagall doing at Hogwarts in the middle of the holidays?"

"Right now she's writing the acceptance letters to this year's first years and that's put her into a bad mood." Severus frowned.

"Oh, is that such a bad job?"

"It's a lot of work. After all there will be about forty new kids coming to Hogwarts this year which means she has to write forty almost identical letters."

"Aren't there spells to do that?" Draco asked surprised. McGonagall couldn't possibly have to write all those letters by hand could she?

"There's an enspelled quill to copy the letters once she has written the first one of course, but it needs to be properly supervised and the names of the students and the signature have to be added by hand and they get a little more complicated for the higher years where pupils have different classes and therefore require her to write individual book lists. Then there are the letters to the new prefects and the head boy and girl. Minerva always gets a little irritable when she has a lot of work ahead of her. She'll calm down by the time she gets to the seventh years and most of the letters have been owled off."

"Will the letter even reach me, if I'm in America? Owls can't cross the ocean, can they?"

"No, they can't, but don't worry about that. We can always hire an albatross from the post office or send someone via the floo network."

Send someone? Well, that sounded nice. Draco smiled. "Do you think she'll get around to owling the fifth years before I have to leave for America?"

"No Draco. She might manage to get started with the third years this week, but no more than that."

"But will she know where I am when she owls my letter? What if the owl comes back?"

"If an owl sent to one of the older students comes back unopened the first step taken is usually to inform the headmaster and the student's head of house. And I will know where to find you. You'll get your letter."

Draco smiled. It was good to know Severus would be around to help him even if he was no longer there himself.

The Rakers' patrol the next morning was very successful indeed. The Sharks were actually meeting under the same tree Draco had first seen them under and glaring daggers at the Rakers when they arrived. Mark the Shark himself was still wearing that ugly old hat while Pretty Ricky had tied a scarf over his hair which made him look more ridiculous than the blue hair had.

The twins had given up trying to cover their hair with their bandannas. Maybe seeing Ricky's scarf had convinced them that anything was better than looking like that. They just wore them normally now which clashed horribly with Andy's hair. Chris and the two smaller girls were missing, but Draco couldn't tell if they were still hiding or had been sent on some mission. It didn't matter to the Rakers much anyway. They'd wanted to see some Sharks and they'd found some Sharks.
"Hey Alex, don't you know smoking's bad for your health?" Jack called out to the still blue haired twin and was rewarded with the sight of a big angry puff of smoke blowing out of the Shark's nose.  

"Why it's the blue hair club!" Draco feigned surprise. "Are you sure you belong here Pinky? You seem to have the wrong colouring."

Andy jumped forward at that and had to be held back by his brother and Robin.  

"Say Ricky, don't you know only girls wear scarves like that? Or is your new name Ricketta?" Charlie asked.  

"Maybe it's Rickina or Ricka." suggested Cathy Cat.  

"Where'd you find that hat Fishy? The trash bins?" Mike grinned for only a moment before Mark lounged at him and immediately pinned him down under his weight.

Draco had just enough time to notice that Jack threw himself onto Mark before the twins had reached him brandishing their knives. Damn! He suddenly remembered his lost door handle.

Just when he thought he was in real trouble now, Mary and Larry appeared from either side each grabbing a twin.

Draco looked around for an opponent, but found everybody busy. Ricky had already disappeared. Charlie, Matt and Sammie were playing with Bobby and Marvin had had the bright idea to attack Mike the moment Mark had let go of him to take care of Jack. Draco grinned evilly. Marvin might be more than Sammie could handle, but that didn't mean he could take on Mike.

Seeing no truly worthy opponent Draco grabbed a hold of Robin's hair and pulled her off Cathy. He hesitated for a moment wondering if it was bad style to hit a gang girl and Robin took the chance to turn around and run. Bobby and Marvin immediately followed her lead and soon the rest of the Sharks fled as well. Only Mark dared to slow down long enough to yell "We'll get you back! Just you wait!" at them, but that didn't bother the Rakers much. They'd already known that the Sharks were going to take revenge on them. After all, what else should they do?

A few little Shark wannabes who'd come to watch the fight quickly disappeared around corners or under bushes. That was a normal enough occurrence after a fight and Draco wouldn't have paid them any mind at all, if they hadn't reminded him of something else.

"Did you guys ever do anything about those two little rats who stole our ball for Mark?" he asked into the victory cheers.

That silenced Jack immediately. They'd completely forgotten to teach the two little wannabes a lesson. "Do you have any of that potion left?"

Draco shook his head sadly. No, he'd let all the rest dry out already.

"They'd be expecting that anyway and it's a little harsh for the children." Mike decided. "A little blue spray paint should suffice for them."

Jack thought that over for a moment, then nodded. "All right. Do we have any blue paint left?"

It turned out that there wasn't much, but they decided that two cans ought to suffice to paint two little wannabes and green paint would work almost as well just in case they didn't.

Now all they had to do was find Toby and Mely. A first search during the afternoon proved
unsuccessful since all Shark wannabes had wisely disappeared from anywhere near Raker territory.

Jack finally called the search off and postponed the revenge on the two children to the next day. They'd let a whole week pass after their transgression so another day didn't really matter anymore.

A/N: Will Draco really move to America? Will Dumbledore allow him to continue to go to Hogwarts if he does? And will he give Cathy Cat some dandelions to say goodbye?

In the next chapter: Draco gives Munin an accidental command, the Rakers invade Shark territory and Draco gets a quick glance at a real Soccer field.
A Storm and Revenge

Chapter 22: A Storm and Revenge

Draco was awoken in the middle of the night by thunder and lightning. At first the loud rumbling scared him and he lay awake listening clutching Cuddly waiting nervously for the next bolt, but then he remembered the ministry law that said every house in Hogsmeade had to be protected by a lightning proof charm.

The owner of this house might not care about the lamps on the stairs or the boilers, but he wouldn't dare go against a ministry law. And remembering how he even forbade having a firepace for fear of fire Draco doubted he'd want to.

Feeling a lot better after he'd gotten to those conclusions Draco sat up in bed and watched the storm through the window. The lightning against the black night sky was quite a show when you were sure that it wouldn't strike you. Draco almost forgot how tired he was.

The rain got harder and harder until it ran down the windowpane almost as a constant stream blurring the view and creating new visual effects for Draco.

That didn't last long though. Soon the distances between lightning and thunder began to lengthen and the rain returned to single drops dripping against the window.

The house was unusually silent Draco noticed then. No doors opening or closing out in the corridor, no voices, even 'That Dog' wasn't barking. He smiled for a moment at the thought of how used he'd gotten to the constant noise in an apartment house with too thin walls.

It had to be really late or very early for the house to be this quiet. Was everybody else really asleep? Had he been the only one who'd woken up from the storm? Then again he wasn't making any noise either sitting almost motionless in the dark listening.

Should he get up and see if the Snapes were awake? Maybe they were sitting in the living room?

But then he would have heard them open the door when they'd come in. He couldn't just intrude into their bedroom to see if they were awake. Who knew what they might be doing in there. They were a married couple after all and Draco took Billy as living prove that their relationship wasn't as distant as that of his parents had been. No, he definitely shouldn't walk into their bedroom in the middle of the night.

Instead he lay back down and pulled the covers up over him. For some reason he was feeling cold all of a sudden. The storm must have broken the heat wave. Well, all in all that was a welcome change, but he suddenly wished he had more to wear in bed than that old muggle t-shirt.

Under the covers it wasn't quite that cold though and he soon fell back asleep Cuddly the teddy bear held tightly in his arm.

The morning brought another surprise. Instead of stopping the rain had picked up again and was steadily dripping against the windows. Big muddy puddles were all Draco could see down in the park when he glanced out the window when he got up, but when he looked again a little later he saw a few lonely people in raincoats or with umbrellas hurrying along the wet paths towards the bridge or the market place.
The Snapes refused to let him go out in the rain though saying that they couldn't possibly play Soccer in this weather and the other Rakers wouldn't come anyway.

"You'd only ruin the lawn if you ran through the soaked earth." Severus told him. "You don't want to have to play on a mud field from now on do you?"

So Draco picked up Billy who was very sleepy and cuddly that day and sat by the window hoping to see his friends down there to prove to the Snapes that he had to go out. But all he saw were the occasional umbrellas and raincoats.

"There are people down there though." he finally decided to tell Severus and Sarah.

Severus pushed away his book and came over to stand beside him and stare out the window for a moment. "Those are just some neighbours headed for work, Draco. They wouldn't be out there if they didn't have to go to work to feed their families."

"But can't I go down and just take a look around?" Draco begged.

"No, you'd only get all wet and then you'd use up all my stores of pepper-up potion tomorrow."

"I could take an umbrella."

"Which isn't much help in weather this bad. You'd need a raincoat and you don't have one." Severus decided. "And don't start about borrowing Sarah's either. It's much too big for you."

Draco scowled and looked down at Billy realising that the baby hadn't moved much in a while. Indeed Billy had fallen asleep in his arms.

"I'm bored." he protested. "There's nobody to play with and I don't feel like studying all day. Look even Billy is sleeping and where is the dog? I don't think I've even seen him today."

Severus calmly pointed at a small ball of fur curled up under the table. 'That Dog' obviously was just as sleepy as Billy. The cat looked down at them from his place on top of the highest cupboard for a moment then decided to continue licking his paws. He definitely was in no mood to play with Draco either.

So Draco spent most of the morning doing his Math exercises and staring out the window. Sometime around lunch time Severus asked him to help brew a potion to help one of the neighbours who had a hearing problem. It was one of Sarah's recipes Severus explained, but she was busy with her sewing which was one of the few things she never let Severus touch. She seemed to have no problem trusting him with her potions or the cooking and cleaning, but her sewing basket was off limits.

Draco remembered the first time he'd offered to help her with her sewing and she'd told him he couldn't because he wasn't allowed to use magic during the holidays. Could it be that she'd just said that because she hadn't wanted him to touch her sewing? Or was it just Severus she didn't want to do it? Maybe he was just very bad at it? He'd never seen Snape do any sewing so he couldn't tell.

The brewing turned out to be the most interesting thing that happened that morning. The recipe was more complicated than anything Draco had been allowed to touch until now and Severus once again seemed eager to explain what he was doing.

Draco smirked when he thought of how much better than Potter he'd be at Potions by the end of the summer. Maybe he'd even get a chance to show up Granger this year.
After lunch however Severus and Sarah decided to do some Chemistry stuff Draco didn't understand and they obviously didn't want him poking his nose into their vials and jars.

"Don't touch that! There's acid in there." Sarah told him as soon as he started exploring.

"Stay away from there! That might explode." Severus warned him when he tried to get a better look at what they had put on the burner.

"Move over, I need some room here." Sarah told him the moment he stepped away from the flame. "Don't you have anything else to do?"

Draco shook his head. "I've been doing Math all day. I'm tired of it. Billy and the animals are all asleep. I'm bored."

"So why don't you ask Mike to come over and play with you?" Severus suggested. "I could give you another cooking lesson when we're done here."

Cooking! Oh no, not another disaster! But asking Mike over sounded like a great idea. Maybe they could find a way to talk themselves out of the cooking lesson later.

Mike was indeed home and almost as bored as Draco. Remembering they'd had to play with Billy's baby toys the last time he'd visited he brought a board game along that Draco didn't know and lost horribly at most of the time. Still it was fun to play and even Sarah joined them for one round.

One of the reasons Draco kept losing was probably Munin who woke up the moment Mike arrived and was fascinated by the game. The raven soon fluttered over to sit beside the board hoping to be invited to play. Unfortunately the rules were a little too complicated for him to understand and he had to content himself with grabbing pawns every once in a while and pushing them around on the board.

For some reason Mike seemed to be more adept at protecting his pawns than Draco. Or could it be that Munin liked Draco's pawns better?

Even 'That Dog' woke up from the commotion above his head, stretched a bit and trotted out from under the table sleepily. Seeing that whatever was going on was still out of his field of vision he managed to find enough energy somewhere to jump onto an empty chair, sit up and put his front paws on the table. What he saw was clearly too much for his dog brain. It wasn't edible, didn't look like it would run if he chased it and had no particularly interesting smell.

'That Dog' withdrew his paws from the table, yawned and curled up on the chair. The next time Draco thought to check on him he was already fast asleep once again. He didn't give any signs of life again until Severus came out of the lab to take him out for a quick walk.

Draco tried to convince Severus to take him along as well, but was once again sternly reminded of his lack of a raincoat.

"The dog doesn't have one either." he protested.

"But he has to go out."

"I have to go out too."

"You know how to use the toilet and I think you also know where it is." Severus pointed out, grabbed 'That Dog's' lead and took off before Draco could come up with another argument.
With a sigh Draco returned to the game to find that Munin had cleared all his pawns off the board. Mike grinned at him innocently and Draco saw that his pawns had remained untouched. He glared at the raven.

"Fly!" cawed Munin.

"You really enjoy sabotaging me, don't you?" Draco asked the bird exasperatedly.

"Sabotage?" Munin repeated. "Sabotage! Potion?"

Sarah paled. "No Munin, no! Abort sabotage! Just keep playing."

Draco stared. "He has a command for sabotage?"

"Sabotage! Caw!"

"No Munin, don't! Abort sabotage!" Sarah repeated glaring at Draco. "Don't say that word around him. He seems to like taking orders from you."

Munin looked from Sarah to Draco then back at Sarah. They didn't seem to agree on what he was supposed to do. He'd have loved to go along with the boy's suggestion, but he hadn't quite understood what Draco wanted him to sabotage. Munin really wished the boy had given him a clear command. He hadn't had a chance to sabotage anything in a very long time. Well, if they weren't going to tell him he could still sabotage the game.

With one quick movement he grabbed the board with his strong beak and pulled. Mike's pawns clattered down off the board and onto the table along with the dice.

"Caw! Sabotage!" Munin announced happily and climbed onto the upturned board.

He let the boys try to shoo him off for a while then grew bored of that game, grabbed one of the pawns and flew up onto the cupboard.

"Munin! Give that back!" Mike called helplessly.

"Drop it!" Draco tried remembering the commands Severus usually used in such situations.

Munin looked down at him with what almost looked like a smug grin to the boys.

"Back!" Draco tried and when that didn't work. "Hide and back!"

Munin just kept grinning and swinging the pawn about in his beak teasingly.

Mike pulled over a chair and tried to climb the cupboard when he couldn't reach the raven from on top of it. Stepping on the shelves he had almost reached him when Munin dropped the pawn with another happy "Caw!"

With a triumphant shout Mike jumped off the cupboard and helped Draco scoop up the pawns. Munin bird grinned again and glid off his perch elegantly, picked up the dice and flew back up.

Sarah laughed at the boys' desperate looks. "That's what you get for giving him ideas."

"Can't you make him stop that?" Draco begged her.

"He won't obey me any more than he does you." Sarah shrugged. "You'll have to wait until he tires of the game or Severus comes back. He'll obey him just fine."
So the boys sat down and waited. After a while Munin grew bored watching them watch him and dropped the dice on the cupboard.

"Oh Munin! Couldn't you have thrown it on the floor?" Mike groaned.

Munin landed on the table once again. "Fly!"

So Mike started to climb the cupboard again.

Munin happily grabbed one of the pawns and carried it onto the other cupboard. Then swooped down to choose another one which he dragged under the couch.

Draco quickly swiped the remaining pawns back into their box which was a little too big for Munin to carry off and closed the lid.

"Quick, get the dice and put it back in the box!" he told Mike. "I'll crawl under the couch."

That turned out to be a very tight space, but after a while of lying in the dark barely able to breathe and grooping about blindly Draco managed to grab the pawn. He wriggled out slowly careful not to hit his head on the couch's wooden leg. At least it wasn't very dusty down there. For once he was glad about all the cleaning he'd had to do last week.

When he came back up he found Munin perching smugly on the back of a chair watching him. He glared at the bird.

Munin looked back innocently.

Draco sighed and put the pawn safely into its box. A few moments later Mike rescued the last pawn as well and the two boys flopped into their chairs with relief.

Munin cocked his head to one side considering, then hopped onto the table and pulled the lid open again.

The boys jumped up at once. "No Munin! Please don't!"

They were saved by Severus' return though. Munin took one look at his master, dropped everything and flew over to land on his shoulder. Mike quickly packed his game away so the raven could no longer reach it.

'That Dog' trotted in a moment after Severus looking mildly insulted because his master had subjected him to a drying charm before allowing him to enter the flat. Not that he had liked being wet, but this was his home and he was of the opinion that he was supposed to be allowed inside no matter what condition he was in. He certainly hated rain.

Draco and Mike didn't get out of their cooking lesson either, but at least Draco didn't burn himself this time. Maybe that was more due to the fact that Mike handled the stove while Draco cut up ingredients, but Draco considered it an improvement anyway.

The next morning the rain had finally stopped and everybody seemed to be out in the park. According to Jack it was the perfect time to look for two little wannabes.

A search of their own territory brought no results however. Mely and Toby were clever enough to stay away from the Rakers most of the time. They had to be somewhere in the Sharks' part of the
Unfortunately the Skarks were somewhere around there as well. They'd seen blue hair several times that morning and it wasn't likely that the Sharks would go down into their basement lair anytime soon. Not after they'd spent a whole day stuck inside.

For a while the Rakers just paced up and down the border to Shark territory hoping to find Mely or Toby anywhere close enough to their own ground to simply dash in, grab them and drag them over. That only attracted the Black Ring's attention. At first there were only a few wannabes in black t-shirts watching them over the border, but soon some of the younger gang members showed up as well and by the time they'd run up and down the border the fifth time Angel Anna herself was sitting on a park bench near their end of the border enjoying the show.

She really was beautiful, Draco decided, tall and thin with well shaped long legs covered in shiny black skin shown off proudly as she was wearing shorts instead of the jeans Draco was so used to seeing by now. She flashed him a smile of perfect white teeth when she noticed his appreciative look.

Mike had to shove him hard to get his attention away from her. "We'll have to go in now." he hissed angrily.

"What? Why? We could always wait and try to get them after lunch." Draco shrugged eyes wandering back to Anna.

"Not with all the witnesses here." Mike explained. "If we back down now, we'll look bad. Angel Anna might be a nice sight to look at, but her presence also forces us to act."

Jack hesitated for another few minutes, but nothing happened and finally he gave in to the inevitable and waved the group over to a spot out of the Black Ring's hearing range.

"Okay," he told them. "We're going to start searching the Shark's territory along the Black Ring's border, then continue from the Lions' side and move further in from there. They won't expect us to come from that side. Are you all armed?" They all nodded. Draco had picked up a large stone similar to Sammie's when they'd gone swimming. It wasn't as good as his door handle had been and definitely not the iron bar he really wanted, but it was better than nothing.

"Good." Jack continued. "Stay close together and keep your eyes open at all times. If we find them or one of them Mary grabs Mely and Larry Toby. Be quick about it, make sure you cover their mouths before they can yell for help and hold them still. Matt, you spray Toby while Charlie takes Mely. Do it fast. No special artwork, just hit and run and we go back the same way we came. Along the Black Ring border. Don't try to run straight into Shark territory unless the whole gang attacks us."

"What did you give the rest of us the paint cans for, if you want only Matt and Charlie to use them?" Draco asked just before Jack could break up the meeting.

"Just in case something doesn't go according to plan." Jack tried to shrug it off, but he definitely looked nervous at the thought. "You stay behind me, Dragon. Understood? And if they catch us you try to get Chris."

"What about Ricky, boss?" asked Charlie.

"Whoever encounters him first, spray him. That ought to send him running." Mike advised.

"Whatever." shrugged Jack. "We can't worry about a coward like him in an attack like this. We
have to concentrate on the big players."

And with that they took off into enemy territory walking so close they almost touched. Draco felt a little boxed in, but on the other hand, if they really were attacked the Sharks would have to get past the others before they could get to him. He'd have advance warning at least.

The Black Ring trailed them from their side of the border. Well, actually the wannabes did. The gang members themselves just followed their scouts calmly.

The park looked as peaceful as ever. Birds were singing, flowers were standing in orderly beds. And still Draco felt as if they were moving through an unexplored jungle. The natives might attack at any time.

It seemed to him that they'd been walking at least an hour when Angel Anna and her gang started falling behind. The little Black Ring wannabes still followed them, but they were beginning to look nervous as well. It took Draco a moment to figure out what had happened. They had reached the end of the Back Ring's territory. The region to their right now had to be the Lions' territory though there was nobody in sight.

The Lions obviously had no idea what was going on yet. Draco hoped that meant that the Sharks didn't either.

They kept walking on along the Lions' border but still met noone. Glancing to the right once again to check if any Lions had shown up to watch them Draco almost stopped in surprise. There was a big lawn with two huge white netted goals on it's short sides. Was that a real Soccer field?

"The Lions might have the smallest territory of all, but it's also the coolest." Cathy explained with a grin. "Of course we have no chance to get to the field, because we'd have to either take over the whole Shark territory or the Black Ring before we could even attack the Lions."

Soon after that they reached the end of the park and had to turn back deeper into Shark territory. Two very small little wannabes spotted them as they rounded a group of bushes and immediately turned and ran.

"Damn!" cursed Jack. "They'll tell them we're coming. We'd better act fast now."

They increased speed and luckily it turned out they didn't have much further to go. Mely and Toby were sitting under a bush playing family with a rag doll. They looked so cute like this Draco almost regretted having to punish them for their parts in the Sharks' scheme.

By the time the two kids looked up from their game and saw them it was too late to run. They tried anyway, but ran straight into Mike and Jack who held them long enough for Larry and Mary to reach them and take over. Matt and Charlie approached with their spray paint cans threateningly.

Toby kicked futilely at thin air as Larry simply lifted him off the ground and held him out to Matt. Mely saw what was happening to her best friend and let herself drop in an attempt to avoid the same fate. She did manage to get her mouth free and scream at the top of her lungs as Charlie sprayed her.

"Good, let's get out of here." Jack ordered with a quick satisfied glance at the two blue painted children.

Mary and Larry dropped the little Sharks who took off towards the houses screaming and the gang ran off in the opposite direction. They'd done it. Draco felt triumph and relief wash over him.
They'd be back in their own territory soon.

That's how far his thoughts got before red bandannas and blue hair appeared in his line of vision. The Sharks had found them! Of course the Rakers had already won, because the Sharks were too late to prevent their revenge on Mely and Toby, but that didn't mean they wouldn't get beat up badly.

Draco quickly dropped his green spray can when he saw Chris advancing towards him and pulled out his stone. Unfortunately the Sharks had come well armed as well. Chris was already swinging his chain and Draco once again wished for an iron bar. A long one that he could thrust in the chain's way without risking his arms. He just hoped Severus had some healing potions ready.

He somehow managed to dive out of the chain's path and threw himself at Chris pinning him under him. Now if only he could wrest the chain away from him and keep him down.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Pretty Ricky sneak up on Sammie who was facing Lyddie. That wooden stick Ricky was carrying didn't look all that dangerous compared to the twins' knives or Chris' chain, but it still might do some damage.

"Sammie! Behind you!" he yelled out and saw Sammie turn and activate his paint can.

Ricky screamed and tumbled backwards rubbing at his eyes. Obviously the spray paint was a more effective weapon than they'd thought. Ricky seemed to be too blinded to even find his way back and run away. He stumbled over a protruding root and remained on the ground still rubbing his eyes.

Draco shouldn't have watched him this long though. Chris made a sudden attempt to throw him off and almost succeeded. When Draco managed to stay on top of him however he tried to bring his chain into the game again. It was a lot less effective at close range though and lacking the room to swing it he had to wind it around his hand instead which made it only slightly different from Draco's stone.

For a while they just punched each other, but once it started really hurting Draco decided a change of tactics was in order. He knelt up on Chris' stomach and tried to pin down his hands with his own. The stone turned out to be a hindrance in this manoeuvre, but he didn't dare let go of it. He'd be unarmed without it and if he just dropped it within reach Chris had as good a chance to grab it as he did.

Chris wriggled under him and kicked out, but couldn't really harm Draco at the moment. His arms were beginning to tire though. He hoped that the fight would be over soon. With a little help from one of the older gang members Draco thought he could take Chris prisoner. He didn't really know what to do with a prisoner, but felt confident that Jack and Mike would have a use for him.

Meanwhile Jack seemed to have managed to hurt Mark the Shark. At least the Shark leader remained on the ground groaning in pain when Jack jumped to his feet.

"Back to the garden shed!" he shouted over the noise of the battle.

Draco hesitated for a moment, but he wouldn't be able to keep a hold of Chris for long, if the rest of the Rakers took off and left him. Instead he hit Chris with the stone once more as hard as he could and jumped up as well using the Shark as a springboard hoping that the jolt to his stomach would keep him down long enough that he could get away.

Without another glance back he followed Jack back towards their own territory.
They didn't stay in the garden shed for long despite their grand victory. Most of them were hurt and in no mood to celebrate. Draco had probably gotten away the most healthy of them, but he was still black and blue from Chris' punches. He just hoped the Shark was feeling equally bad.

Larry and Mary were the only ones who regretted the early end of the victory party. Those two seemed to be totally unable to feel pain even though they were both bleeding.

Still Mary joined Draco, Mike and Cathy on the way home after a quick good bye kiss or two for Larry. They trudged up the stairs very slowly because both Mike and Cathy were limping and even Draco found the movement painful. He really hoped Severus would fix him up when he got back.

Or maybe he could ask Sarah for help? After all she was the medical brewer. Then again she'd probably scold him during the whole treatment.

As he found out when he got home he was lucky today. Sarah wasn't even at home. She'd gone to visit some friends Severus explained while they brewed the healing potion for Draco's bruises. That meant another cooking lesson, but at least Sarah wouldn't find out about the fight.

"Why didn't you go with her?" Draco asked as he handed Severus the powdered unicorn horn.

"Because they're her friends from work and I hardly know them. And somebody had to stay home to watch Billy and let you back in. Or would you have preferred to wait outside until we got back?"

"I could have stayed with Mike."

"Well, Billy couldn't and I really don't want to know what you two might get up to if left alone together for a whole day."

"Aren't Mike's parents home?"

"No, they're both at work today."

Draco had to think that over. Right, normal people went to work everyday. The women as well as the men. And Severus had said that Sarah was a medical brewer.

"Why doesn't Sarah ever go to work?"

"Because of Billy. He's too small to entrust to a baby-sitter everyday, so Sarah is staying home until he turns three."

"And then? What are you going to do with him when she goes back to work? Cathy can't baby-sit everyday and she has to go to school too."

"An unemployed neighbour." Severus shrugged. "Or maybe one of the retired ones. Maybe Joe would like to take him for a small fee. He's raised enough kids and grand-kids to know what he's doing and there's always at least one grand-kid hanging around Billy could play with."

The cooking lesson once again passed without Draco burning himself, but again that might have been because he managed to avoid the stove. After all, Billy needed to be fed and taken to bed afterwards.

"How come he always eats after the cooking is done when Sarah's cooking?" Severus asked him with an amused smile.

"I don't know. He's definitely hungry now." Draco tried acting innocent.
"Sure." Severus threw another towel after Draco, but this time the boy ignored it.

It fluttered against his shoulder harmlessly and fell to the floor where Munin immediately attacked it with his beak. What was that thing doing flying through the living room? That was his job!

Draco watched the raven's game for a moment.

"Hey, where's the dog?" 'That Dog' should have been there to chase off Munin and claim the towel for himself. Or at least he would have tried.

"Sarah took him since you forgot him this morning and he needs to get out everyday." Severus looked at him accusingly.

"He'd only have gotten into trouble if he'd joined the fight."

When he got down into the park after lunch Draco found only Sammie, Matt and Charlie there. Mike had refused to come out, because of his injuries, Cathy was baby-sitting again and Larry and Mary were going out on a date. Nobody knew where Jack had disappeared to, but Sammie had tried both his parents' flats in vain.

"Did you try Big Babs' place as well?" Draco asked him with a grin.

"No, why?"

"Maybe our leader's on a date as well." Charlie grinned.

"But he doesn't really like Babs." protested Sammie.

"Right." said Draco imitating Jack's usual stance. "I don't like Babsy." The last word he said dreamily putting on a silly grin. "Don't believe everything people tell you Sammie. Most of the time they lie or try to manipulate you."

He sent Matt off to get his ball and they spent the afternoon training. Sammie was getting really good and Charlie was improving a lot as well. Her aim still wasn't very good, but she'd increased her speed running with the ball and was learning to throw off chasers with sudden unexpected turns. Matt was beginning to have real trouble stopping her.

Draco smiled as he watched Sammie and Charlie try to get past Matt. He was proud of his team even if Jack had the more talented players and he wasn't even that sure about that anymore. They were a good team and he wished he could be there when they played the real game against the Lions. But then again the only position he could play well enough was keeper and that was also Mary's only one. They had use for only one keeper in a real game.

Maybe he could play defence with Matt though? That didn't require a lot of aimed shooting which he still hadn't mastered. Or just run around and distract the Lions? They didn't know how bad he was after all.

But he would be in America by then anyway.

Saturday was spent training for the whole gang. Jack arrived with a wide grin that morning and told them he'd finally caught Steve at home and gotten an actual promise to have the game in two weeks time.
"They want to play with full teams though, so we'll have to get some additional players." he announced.

"Full teams?" Draco asked surprised.

"Yes, eleven players on each side. I'd really like to know if you'll be here for the game, Dragon."

"I don't think so. Either the Americans or my horrible uncle will have to want me."

"That means we need three players then." decided Jack. "We can always bring one reserve player, if you change your mind."

"We shouldn't have sprayed Mely." grumbled Sammie. "She's the most accurate at shooting outside of the gang."

"That's not what you'll need." Draco told them. "You've already got Jack, Mike, Cathy and Larry to play attackers."

"I'm attacker too!" Sammie protested at once.

"Yes, but five are most likely too many. You can join the attack if it really gets stuck, but you're also fast and that's what we need to get the ball to the attackers. I think you'd better play Charlie's style in the big game."

"I'd rather play attack."

"But we need your speed Sammie." Mike confirmed Draco's analysis. "Charlie can't manage all alone and we need Matt for the defence."

"Which means you'd better chose additional players who are good at defence and maybe another fast one." Draco concluded.

"Beth can play defence. She's big enough to scare off an attacker." Mary suggested trying not to sound too proud of her little sister. "And I'm sure she'd want to."

"Susie's pretty fast, but she's too small to play defence." Matt stated.

"Which is an advantage for sneaking through enemy lines. They'll underestimate her which will render her practically invisible." said Charlie.

"Okay," decided Jack. "Beth and Susie. That means we need one more for defence. Which other wannabes are big enough to impress a guy like Steve?"

"Luke might be." suggested Cathy. "Or maybe Bobby? Sandy can be scary too the way she dresses."

"Maybe we ought to ask Beth which one of hers is the best defender." Mike suggested. "She ought to know best."

"All right. Mary, tell Beth to meet us here tomorrow morning and bring Susie and her best defenders. We'll choose one of them after we've seen them play."

"You could invite all the wannabes to audition." Draco suggested. "Then you'll be sure you have the best three."

"But keep in mind that we don't want any attackers no matter how good they might be." Mike
grinned. "We'll be the ones who'll do the attacking in the try-outs They have to stop us."

"That way we won't see how fast they are." Cathy reminded him.

"Okay then we give them one round where they have to try and get past us with the ball as well." Mike amended.

Draco sighed. It was hard to have to leave them right now.

A/N: Will the Rakers beat the Lions? Will they even find the additional players they need? Will Draco be there for the game?

In the next chapter: We visit America, Sarah is worried and we get to know the Colemans.
Going to America

Chapter Notes

A/N - Okay, here's Draco's trip to America. ... I just hope nobody kills me for this one.

Chapter 23: Going to America

Despite Draco's wish that time would simply stop Sunday arrived much too soon. The animals had all learned to avoid his hugs by now so he only hugged Sarah and Billy good bye a few times and tried to buy time by eating as slowly as possible and for some strange reason Severus didn't push him this time. Didn't they have a train to catch?

"Americans love children, Draco. I'm sure they'll want you there. They'll probably spoil you completely, especially if they're really that rich." Sarah encouraged him, but Draco wasn't so sure.

"They're still Malfoys." he reminded her.

"No, they're Colemans." Severus countered. "We don't know what they're like, yet. Your Aunt Eusebia might have been a Malfoy, but she still married an American. She probably never did fit in with the rest of her family."

"Well, lets hope so." mumbled Draco feeling unconvinced.

"I've made you some sandwiches for lunch." Sarah told them when they were ready to go. "They're in your backpack, Severus."

"Thank you, but I'm sure we could have found somewhere to eat in America. You didn't have to do that." Severus told her.

"America is a very big country and you still don't know when your bus leaves." Sarah smiled. "And I've heard that American food is terribly fat and tastes horrible. Anyway, it's cheaper to bring your own food."

Severus looked up at that. "Have we been spending more money than we should?"

"No more than should be expected with another person in the household, but we still have to bring that money back in somehow." Sarah answered.

"Draco is leaving us today anyway." Severus reminded her.

"That's not sure yet and there's still the money we already spent because of him and that Auror raid. There might be another raid anytime so we need to hold enough money back to pay for the damages." Sarah insisted.

"Albus will cover most of that when he returns and maybe there'll be fewer raids this year."

"Sure, with Voldemort on the loose again, there will be fewer raids and the Aurors will start giving
away money in the marketplace." Sarah said sarcastically.

"Maybe Voldemort will keep them busy elsewhere." Severus suggested, but Draco knew he didn't really think so.

West Hogsmeade was going to go through some very difficult times once the death eaters really got down to business. The thought that the Snapes might be in financial troubles because of him troubled Draco a lot more though.

"I'll pay back the money I cost you." he promised Severus as they walked down the stairs.

"No, you'll need your money someday. Your family won't support you forever and finding a job is very hard when you're fresh out of school."

"But I ..."

"Keep your money!" snapped Snape in full teacher mode.

Draco shut up at once. He knew when not to cross his head of house and waited silently for Severus to calm down.

After a while of trudging after his teacher he realised that they were headed for the river instead of the train station. That was odd. He looked up at Severus trying to judge his mood. Should he risk it?

"Where are we going, Uncle Severus?" he asked softly.

"The floo station." Severus answered as if it were obvious.

"Are we going to floo to Digon Alley again?"

"No, to the New York public floo station. You didn't expect us to take a train over the ocean, did you?"

Draco thought about that. No he didn't really think trains could swim.

"But the floo?" he asked. "I thought the floo network only worked within Britain?"

"Private floos normally aren't connected to the international net, but the public floo stations are. We are definitely not taking a muggle plane."

"Why not? I bet it would be interesting."

"Because it's very expensive and we'd need passports."

"Passports? What are passports? Something electric?"

Severus laughed. "No, they're not. A passport is an official document that declares your identity and nationality. Muggle borns can obtain them quite easily, because they already have birth certificates, but for us it would be very complicated."

"Why? We'd just have to sit down and write them."

"Official documents have to be written by the authorities, Draco. You can't just make them yourself. That's the same as conjuring your own money."
Draco thought that over for a moment. "Then why can't we just go tell the authorities to do it?"

"Because they need to see our birth certificates first and we don't have any, which doesn't normally happen in the muggle world."

"So where would we get passports if we needed them then?"

"Via the ministry of magic and you already know why I'd rather not contact them. They'd most likely deny my request anyway telling me that I'm not trustworthy enough to be allowed out of their sight."

"And I bet they'd let all the real death eaters go wherever they please."

"Of course. After all they either have no proof against them or they can't allow them to get suspicious that the Aurors might be after them."

For a moment Draco hoped that Severus would tell him more about the death eaters and his spy work, but they'd reached the floo station and Severus was already pulling out the floo powder.

"Here." he handed Draco some powder. "It's New York public floo station. Be careful not to get lost on the international floo. I don't want to have to search the whole world for you." With that he picked up 'That Dog' and stepped into the fire.

Munin who'd been flying after them landed on Draco's shoulder with an impatient "Fly!". Draco sighed disappointedly and threw his floo powder.

"New York public floo station!" he announced as he stepped into the flames.

The journey seemed longer and faster than he was used to. Or was that just because he was so nervous? He didn't whirl past as many floos as usual either. Of course not. Most private homes were not connected to the international floo network after all. All he could see were public floos probably on all sorts of islands since most of the way had to be over the ocean.

Finally he landed with a slight plop in a rather dark and dusty little wand shop. At least it looked like a wand shop on first glance. As he stepped out of the fireplace he noticed some cages with owls and cats on one side of the room while on the other there was a counter and some price lists for standard potion ingredients. All of them stuff he'd learned to handle back in his first year.

The wizard behind the counter regarded the new arrivals curiously probably wondering if they were customers. Severus ignored him completely and just cast a quick cleaning charm to get the soot off Draco. It really didn't go well with the boy's silver-blond hair.

"Did we take a wrong turn somewhere?" Draco asked staring at their surroundings. "This looks like some small village wizarding supplies shop."

"No, we're exactly where we intended to go. The New York public floo station also doubles as the city's wizarding supplies shop." Severus explained calmly.

"But, but... New York has to be at least as big as London! I mean, shouldn't they have some sort of Diagon Alley or something?" Draco stuttered completely confused.

"No, there are only about as many wizards and witches in America as there are in all of Great Britain. They live all over the country and don't have any real community centre Most of them get their supplies per mail order. Some even from Diagon Alley itself. The wizarding schools and the floo stations in the biggest cities are the only places that see a lot of wizards regularly and that's
why traders set up their shops there. As you can see the customers don't have much choice though. These are more like emergency shops than anything else. If you lose your wand for example, you can buy a cheap one to use until your new one arrives per mail order."

"But how can you order a wand per mail order? How do you know it's the right one, if you don't try it first?"

"Well, those who can afford it travel to a real wand shop to buy their wands and the first wands are bought at school. Wand-makers travel to the American wizarding schools from all over the world on the first days of school and the first years get to chose their wands on their first day of school. The different schools even start on different days so the wand-makers can travel from one school to the other with their wares. It's one of the biggest events of the year for wand-makers. They get to sell a lot of wands in only a few days and to actually meet their international colleagues. It's almost like a convention."

"And the older wizards who need new wands? Those that can't afford to just travel over to London to buy a new one?"

"Some come to the schools as well, if their old wand will still work until then. Some buy in Canadian or South American shops and there is one very exclusive wand shop somewhere in Texas. Those that can't or don't want to buy there order the same type of wand they had per mail order."

Draco shook his head at that. "Americans sure are strange."

They stepped out of the dark store and found themselves on a wide road. Draco looked around and up and up and up. So those were the famous skyscrapers. Not that he'd never seen any before, but around here there seemed to be no other buildings at all.

"That way." Severus pointed. "We have to get to the subway."

"The tube again?" Draco asked. "Great. Maybe this time we'll see how the doors work."

"No, the subway. It's only called tube in London."

They walked down the street for two blocks on a nice wide side-walk and Draco finally tore his eyes away from the sky and looked around some more. Everything seemed to be arranged absolutely regularly here. All the streets seemed to be perfectly straight and the blocks were arranged almost like the fields on a chess board. Somehow this seemed unreal.

"Why's everything so straight around here?" he asked Severus when they finally reached the subway station.

"That's because Americans always plan their cities in perfect squares. You'll find this phenomenon wherever you go in America."

"But aren't our cities planed ahead too?"

"Not entirely. They grew out of smaller settlements that were around for centuries. The Romans certainly didn't plan for Londinium to ever reach the size of today's London. European cities just grew naturally while American cities are much more artificial."

"Oh ... Hey, what's that? The station's closed off!"

"No, that's just the barrier. You're supposed to buy little tokens that you feed to this machine and
then it let's you walk through there."

"Is it electrical?" Draco asked immediately staring at the barrier in fascination.

"Maybe, but it might just be some mechanical mechanism. I don't know."

"So where do we buy the little tokens?"

"We don't." Severus grinned mischievously. "Sarah said we have to save money so we'll just walk through."

With a slight wave of his wand he sent the strange metal wheel that obstructed their way turning and they could indeed walk through unhindered.

"Isn't that cheating?" Draco asked as Severus stopped the wheel with another slight wand movement.

"So? Isn't that the Slytherin way?" Severus asked him. "We didn't bring much muggle money and we will have to pay for the bus."

Draco sighed and followed Severus onto the platform. Was this the way a teacher should behave? Or maybe it was the kind of thing uncles did? He might have expected Jack or Mike to come up with an idea like that, not a respectable Hogwarts professor.

Severus seemed to have forgotten all about the barrier by the time the train arrived. As if it weren't anything important at all. Draco was glad to get on the train. The station was very dark and scary after the wide street above. The train however was no better. It was dirty and covered in graffiti like the basement of the house in West Hogsmeade. He could imagine adding some artwork of his own together with the rest of the Rakers and feeling right at home, but all alone he felt scared as if he were intruding into another gang's territory. Maybe he was.

He stuck close to Severus and tried not to attract any attention from their fellow passengers. Some of them looked strange even for muggles.

Luckily they got off soon and returned to the surface which was once again a wide light street.

"Look, there's a McDonalds over there. Can we eat there again?" he smiled relieved to have found something familiar.

"We can eat Sarah's sandwiches at the bus stop, Draco. We're supposed to save money, remember?" Severus reminded him.

Draco sighed again. "I don't think I like America. It's all strange and grey and full of odd looking muggles." he mumbled. "I want to go home."

"You weren't so sure about West Hogsmeade at first either." Severus tried to convince him to give America a chance. "And New York is probably not the best place to judge the whole country on. It isn't exactly one of the world's most beautiful cities. America has much better looking places to offer."

"When people talk about America, they always talk about New York though." Draco insisted. "Well, most of the time."

"It is a very important city, a centre of culture and trade. There are lots of interesting places for tourists as well, but we don't have the time to go sightseeing and just to travel through it's not
exactly a nice place, no. You'll like New Jersey a lot better.” he promised.

Severus led Draco to a filthy looking bus station that did nothing to improve the boy's opinion of America and dug out the sandwiches. Those helped to improve Draco's mood a lot more. How had Sarah discovered his favourite kind of sandwich in such a short time?

Draco took a big bite and tried to figure out how long he'd lived with the Snapes. Severus had taken him in on the first day of the holidays and then there’d been one week while Lucius had been on trial, then they'd gone to Uncle Thomas', the next week they'd wanted to visit Jeremiah, but only met Eugene, Jeremiah had been home a week later and now it was another week later and he was going to live with Aunt Eusebia from now on. That were four weeks altogether, he realised with a start. He'd spent a whole month in West Hogsmeade.

'Just another month until I can go back to Hogwarts. Only one month that I have to spend in America and then I'll go home again.' Draco thought. 'If they'll let me.'

They just had to let him go back to Hogwarts. This strange country with it's backward wizards and witches wasn't for him. One month he could stand, but living here forever?

It was a while until the bus arrived and they spent the time with an impromptu Potions quiz. Draco was proud to see the surprise on Severus' face when he managed to list all the ingredients for the invisibility potion in the correct order they went into the potion. Listing their effects was a lot more difficult though and it got even harder when Severus started on the effects they could have in different combinations and what other potions they were used in. Munin turned out to be a big help when Severus started asking for the ingredients of various other potions some of which Draco didn't even know existed at all. That raven sure knew his potions ingredients.

Seeing Draco's amazement Severus was quite willing to show off his raven and Draco soon realised that he had badly underestimated the bird's vocabulary. He seemed to be able to name every potion ingredient there was.

Munin was proud of his knowledge as well. He stood tall and proud on Severus forearm answering his questions as promptly as Severus always wished his students would. With his black feathers Munin looked a lot like a miniature Hogwarts student, Draco thought.

Severus had to silence the raven with an order when the bus finally arrived and they climbed in with all the muggles. The bus driver stared at the raven for a moment, but then shrugged and accepted Severus' money without question. Obviously he'd seen so many crazy New Yorkers that he no longer really cared.

The rest of the muggles reacted similarly. That, Draco decided, was one thing he liked about Americans. Back at home Munin had been stared at a lot more whenever they'd gone out among muggles. Even the wizards and witches sometimes had stared at the unusual bird.

The bus soon took them out of the city and Draco had to admit that America did look a little better now. They stopped in several towns that seemed all the same to Draco before they finally reached their stop.

The Coleman's home-town was just as regular and chess board like as New York had been, but this time the fields consisted of smaller houses surrounded by gardens with no fences. Maybe they weren't quite done building yet? But then why did all the houses lack only the fence?

"Why don't they have fences here? Do they order those by mail order as well?” he asked Severus.
"Oh no, Americans just don't like fences, I think. They usually don't have any."

Draco stared. "No fences? But what about privacy? How do they keep the little children and pets from running out onto the road? Isn't that dangerous?"

"I don't know, Draco. Maybe they just drive more carefully? They do have different cars."

"Different cars?" Draco took a closer look at a car that was parked on a driveway nearby. "They look just the same to me. What's different about them?"

"They have something called an automatic that switches gears for them automatically, I heard. I think it might be electric, but I've never really seen one and ... Draco! Get back here! You can't just go exploring some stranger's car like that. Leave it alone!"

"But I want to see that automatic thing!" Draco protested still peering through the car window.

Severus simply grabbed him by the shoulder and dragged him off. "Maybe the Colemans have a car they can show you. Or you can ask one of the neighbours once you know them a little better. They might even teach you how to drive."

"But don't I have to be eighteen for that?"

"Americans can get a driving licence at sixteen already so you'll just have to wait one more year."

Draco grinned. Maybe he could get used to living in America after all.

The Coleman's house looked just like all the others around here. A nice big house with a nice green lawn in the front and no fence anywhere in sight. Draco felt a little nervous walking up to the door. They were already inside the Colemans' garden and they hadn't announced their visit yet. Wasn't that trespassing? He almost hoped that a house elf would pop up in front of them, but nothing happened.

At least the door had a proper doorbell just like he flat back at home. They were half the world away from home, but at least the doorbells looked familiar. Draco pressed the button and listened to the buzzing sound that produced. It didn't sound like a proper ringing, but at least they'd announced themselves now.

After only a moment the door opened and a little Malfoy blond boy stood before them. "Hi!" he said in that odd American accent.

"Good afternoon." Severus responded in proper British. "You're Daniel I assume?"

The boy gaped at him for a moment probably trying to translate that into American. "Nope, I'm Tyler." he declared then. "Dan's in summer camp. He insisted on a different camp. Wanted to go alone. We're leaving tomorrow."

Draco looked towards Severus for help. Summer camp? Leaving tomorrow? What was that all about?

Severus simply ignored everything except the fact that the boy was obviously David's younger brother which meant he couldn't be any older than ten. Well, he had seen ten year olds this big before. He was just used to Malfoys having rather small children.

"I see. Is your mother home? We'd like to talk to her if we can." he asked Tyler.
"Who's there, Ty?" came a child's voice from somewhere inside the house and a blond girl about a head shorter than Tyler bounced into view. She must have jumped off some stairs or something, thought Draco.

"Some odd soundin' guy and his kid or somethin'." Tyler shouted back over his shoulder. "Is Mum home?"

"In the baby's room. We just got a new little brother." she informed Severus now standing in the door beside her brother.

"Go get her, Lib!" Tyler ordered her and she turned and dashed off again.

"That's my sis Liberty." Tyler introduced belatedly pointing over his shoulder.

Liberty? Was that supposed to be a name? Liberty was a noun not a name as far as Draco knew. How could anyone name a child Liberty? Next they'd introduce him to someone named green or red or something like that.

"Mum says to let em in, Ty!" Liberty yelled from somewhere upstairs.

"Kay!" Tyler yelled back. "C'mon in then."

Draco and Severus exchanged another puzzled glance and followed the boy inside into a large kitchen where two little blond girls of about four were fighting over a bowl of ice-cream.

"Better put that back in the fridge." Tyler informed the squealing twins calmly. "Mum's comin' down."

The girls immediately jumped up at that, collided and fell splashing the ice-cream onto the floor. Liberty bouncing in at that very unfortunate moment stepped into it and slipped smearing it all over the kitchen. Draco caught her just in time before she fell onto the twins who were just getting up again.

"Ups." was Liberty's only comment. "Mum's on her way."

"Great, now she'll see the ice-cream." Tyler rolled his eyes.

Severus calmly pulled out his wand and made the ice-cream disappear with a quick swish.

"Thanks." said Liberty this time.

Draco glared at her for a moment. She could have thanked him as well. After all he'd stopped her from falling onto her pile of sisters.

Tyler too nodded his thanks at Severus and went to help the twins back onto their feet.

"That's Sapphire." he introduced the one he grabbed first. "And that's Azure," he nodded towards the other one.

Draco suppressed a groan. Azure and Sapphire! Wasn't that almost the same as blue and green?

"How'd you get to the ice-cream?" Liberty demanded of Sapphire. "And where's Buster anyway?"

"Watchin' TV." Sapphire said.

"That show Mum doesn't want us to see?" Tyler asked sternly. "The one with the cops and all the
shootin’?"

Azure nodded. "Ya, that one."

"He said not t’ tell!" Sapphire hissed at her sister angrily.

"He said not t’ tell, if we wanted ice-cream. We didn't get any ice-cream." Azure stared morosely at the empty bowl on the floor.

At that moment Eusebia Coleman entered the kitchen. Her eyes fell on the upturned bowl on the clean floor. "Clean that up, Lib!" she ordered without missing a beat.

"But I didn't do it! It was the twins!" protested Liberty.

"The twins can't reach high enough to get the bowl so who gave it to them?" Eusebia glared sternly at her daughter though she might have glanced Tyler's way for just an instant.

"Buster." Liberty and Tyler said at once.

"You left Buster to watch the girls?"

"I had to open the door and Lib was upstairs." Tyler defended himself. "It was just for a moment."

Aunt Eusebia sighed. "Buster!" she yelled.

Nothing happened.

"BUSTER!!! Get in here and clean this up this instant or I'll ..." she didn't finish her threat and when there still wasn't any answer she turned to Severus with an apologetic smile that proved that she was actually more tired than angry. "I'll be back in a moment. I just have to find my son and make him put back that bowl. Why don't you sit down in the meantime."

So Draco and Severus sat on the chairs just vacated by the twins and listened to the sounds of doors opening and Eusebia yelling "Buster!" a few more times. The twins no longer afraid of punishment finally got around to taking a closer look at the guests and discovered something very interesting.

"Doggy!" squealed Azure in delight and dropped to the floor to pet 'That Dog' immediately followed by her sister.

Tyler and Liberty just glanced at them and Tyler wrinkled his nose at 'That Dog', but the dog didn't care. He'd found somebody who liked him back and was terribly busy proving to the twins how much he liked them by wagging his tail and licking whatever patch of skin was in reach.

"Ups, Buster's in for it now." Liberty commented when they heard a loud "BUSTER! What is that you're watching there?"

Indeed Aunt Eusebia sounded really furious now. "And with little Star in here as well! How can you let your little sister see such a violent, disgusting ..." she yelled on for about five minutes before she calmed down probably because she was getting hoarse.

When she finally returned to the kitchen she was accompanied by a crying boy of about six and had a little girl only slightly older than Billy on her hip.

"I'm sorry. My children are impossible today. I guess it must be the excitement of going off to summer camp tomorrow." she explained. "I'm Eusebia Coleman."
"Severus Snape." Severus introduced himself and Eusebia gave him a surprised look when she heard his accent. "I'm the Potions Master and head of house Slytherin at Hogwarts school of witchcraft and wizardry."

That earned him another surprised look. Draco could almost see what Aunt Eusebia was thinking. What might a Hogwarts professor want from an American wizarding family? Hogwarts school was famous all over the world and Eusebia had probably gone there herself, but they didn't usually accept pupils from outside Europe. Even pupils from outside the United Kingdom were rare at the school.

Eusebia glanced at Tyler once more. Could it be that there was something unusual about her son that had attracted Albus Dumbledore's attention?

"My young companion is Draco Malfoy, the son of your cousin Lucius." Severus went on.

Draco saw a hint of relief in Eusebia's eyes as she realised that this visit probably had nothing to do with Tyler after all.

"Have you ever met Lucius?" Severus asked her.

The little girl in her lap was starting to wriggle about wanting to be let down and Eusebia gently set her on the floor. "Not since I was a child. He must have inherited the original Malfoy Manor by now, right?"

Severus nodded.

"I remember him only as a very tall young man who didn't seem to approve of me, but I must have been very young then, not yet in school. My father took me to some party or something Lucius' father was giving. I was only introduced quickly and left in the care of a house elf. Then my father and Lucius' father had a terrible row and we never went to the manor again. I remember we got an invitation to Lucius' wedding and I asked father why we didn't go. He said something about it being a convention of dark wizards and that no decent witch or wizard had any business being there."

"Well, I'm afraid he was probably correct about that. I do not know about his father, but Lucius Malfoy was indeed recently found to have a large collection of dark arts objects in his possession." Severus informed her.

"He went to Azkaban then?" Eusebia asked.

"Cool!" exclaimed Buster who was just climbing the kitchen shelf to get at some glasses. "We've got a criminal in the family!"

"That's not cool, Buster. It's very dangerous. The dark arts are nothing to meddle with. And get down from there, you're going to break something!"

"But I'm thirsty!" protested Buster.

"Tyler darling, please get your brother a glass of milk!" Eusebia ordered.

"But Mum! We're in the middle of a game and Star keeps grabbing my cards!" complained Tyler.

"Libby can watch your cards for a moment I've got visitors here and you're the only one besides me who's tall enough to reach the glasses."
Grumbling Tyler got up from the floor where he'd been playing some card game with Liberty.

"The milk's in the fridge, Buster. You can get it yourself. Tyler will pour it out for you." Aunt Eusebia added probably trying to give Buster some more incentive to get off the kitchen shelf.

"But I want Coke!" whined Buster.

"Mum! Lib's peekin' at Tyler's cards!" squealed Azure.

"No, I'm not! I'm just tryin' t' pull em away from Star!"

"Cheater! Cheater!" yelled Sapphire.

"No, I don't want milk!"

"Yes, you are! You are, you are, you are!"

"Mum said to give you milk. Milk's what you get."

"No Star! Don't eat the Queen!"

"I want Coke!"

"Cheater!"

"Mum!"

"Mum!"

"Mummy!"

SLAPP!

"WAAAAHHHH...!"

"Mum, Libby slapped Star!"

"Coke!"

"Mum!"

"SILENCE!!" Eusebia yelled.

"But Mum!" five voices protested.

Star continued to wail and Draco finally decided to pick her up and cuddle her like he did with Billy. She immediately shut up and stared at him wide-eyed. Who was that? What was he doing with her?

"Buster, take your milk and go to your room! I don't want to see you or hear a sound from you until dinner!" Eusebia ordered.

"But Mum!"

"No buts. I've had enough of you for one day. First you watch that horrible show even though you know you're not supposed to and in front of poor little Star. That violent stuff! She'll probably have nightmares for weeks. Then you give the twins who knows what in that bowl and leave them all
"Ice-cream." supplied Sapphire.

"Ice-cream! Get out of my sight, Buster!"

Buster ran leaving his glass of milk behind.

"Sapphire! Azure! You know you're not supposed to have more than one ice-cream a day and you already had it after lunch!"

"Buster said we could!" complained Sapphire.

"And we didn't eat it anyway!" added Azure.

"So? And why was the bowl empty then?" Eusebia asked sarcastically.

"It fell." answered Sapphire.

"I cleaned it up to prevent any further accidents." Severus clarified.

"Libby slipped." added Azure.

"She almost fell on us!" complained Sapphire.

"So how come the bowl fell in the first place?" Eusebia demanded.

"Az pushed me!"

"Sapph didn't let me have it!"

"They were quarrelling over it." Tyler translated.

"Quarrelling over the ice-cream you knew you shouldn't have had in the first place? Get to your room and don't come out until I say so!"

"But what should we do there?" Azure whined. "It's borin'."

"How about tidy up the chaos you left there this morning. And when you're done with that you can play with your dolls. Quietly." Eusebia suggested.

The twins trudged out looking a lot less upset than Buster, but still unhappy.

"No fair. Buster said we could have it." Sapphire mumbled on the way out.

Eusebia Coleman breathed deeply and surveyed the kitchen. Tyler was still standing there with the carton of milk in his hand. Next to him on the table stood Buster's abandoned glass of milk and Liberty sat on the floor surrounded by strewed out playing cards.

Draco was still cuddling Star talking to her softly. "Don't you have any squishy toys to play with? Or maybe a rattle?"

Eusebia dug a very soft stuffed rabbit out of a pocket that it shouldn't normally have fit into and held it out to Draco. "Here, that's her favourite."

"Thanks." Draco took the rabbit and moved it about in front of Star. "Hi Star. Do you want to play with your rabbit?"
Star looked at the rabbit, then Draco and smiled. If Draco liked the rabbit it had to be fine. No friend of her rabbit had ever harmed her.

"Tyler, put the milk back. Libby, pick up those cards." Eusebia ordered more gently now that she had calmed down a bit.

Tyler put the milk back into the refrigerator and bent down to help Liberty with the cards unasked.

"Good. Once you're sure you have all of them take them to the living room and play ON the table. Understood?"

"Yes, Mum. Play on the table." Tyler confirmed dutifully.

"Wait! Libby let Tyler finish picking up the cards and bring Buster his milk in case he's still thirsty. Don't try to talk to him now. Just put the glass on the table or on his night stand and go. I don't want another fight."

"Yes, Mum." but in the door she stopped once more and whispered "Mum, why do the guests talk so odd?"

"They're British. That's how people talk in Britain. Now go, bring Buster his milk."

"But Mum," said Tyler. "Aren't you British too? Why don't you talk like that?"

"Oh, I do. I've just lived here so long I've adopted a bit of American language as well. You're so used to the way I talk that you don't notice it, but if you ask your friends I'm sure they'll tell you that your Mum talks oddly too."

Once the kids were finally out of the kitchen Eusebia let herself drop back into her chair.

"Whatever possessed me to have eight children?" she asked the world at large.

The world of course didn't offer an answer and so she returned to their earlier conversation. "So Cousin Lucius went to Azkaban for possession of illegal objects?"

"No, he went to Azkaban for murdering my mother." corrected Draco cuddling Star tighter.

"He got drunk and attacked her." Snape clarified. "She fell and hit her head at an unfortunate angle. When they searched the house afterwards they found all sorts of illegal objects hidden away. I knew Lucius personally and I'd say he was capable of actually using them. The jury shared that opinion."

"So that's why my father never wanted anything to do with them. He must have known." Eusebia realised. "But why didn't he report them to the authorities then?"

"Maybe he just suspected, but had no proof. Lucius was very clever and always in control of himself when he was sober. I'd have thought him capable of murder, but never would have expected him to be caught. He always acted with forethought and very deliberately. A very dangerous man. Your father was wise to avoid him, I think."

"So you came all the way from England to ..."

"Scotland!" interrupted Draco and Severus at once.

"So you came all the way from Scotland," Eusebia corrected herself. "To tell me that a relative I barely know was rightfully sent to jail?"
"Not quite. We were looking for a home for Draco and when I found out that he had relatives in America that sounded like a good chance for him to get away from all that and make a new start."

Severus explained.

Eusebia looked at Draco who was still playing with little Star for a long time several different emotions flickering over her face.

"Look," she finally said. "I ... I'm very sorry. Draco seems to be a really sweet boy, but I just can't do it. I already have eight kids and I don't even have the room for another one. Draco needs a good home where he'll get all the attention he needs. I'd love to help, really, but I've already got more children than I can handle. ... I ... I'd take him before he had to go to an orphanage or something, but I'm sure with a family as large as ours there must be someone better suited to take him in. There are several big manors in the family where they have to have room enough for another person. Or maybe you ought to try Cousin Jeremiah. As far as I know he hasn't got any kids and he lives in this nice cottage in the country. It'd be a great place for kids.

"I'm afraid he and his wife don't want any children. He's the one who gave us your address."

Severus told her.

"Why that ..."

"Never mind." Severus said hastily to calm her down. "We didn't know you had this many children until we got here. I can see why it would be difficult for you to take in another. We'll try to contact Draco's mother's family. I'm sure that we'll find someone who'll want to take him."

Eusebia nodded. "But please keep me informed of what happens to him. I meant it when I said I'd take him if he had nowhere else to go."

"We'll owl you as soon as we've made a final decision where Draco is going to stay." Severus promised.

Eusebia Coleman with her many children seemed to be the most likeable of the Malfoys they'd met and Draco even felt a little sorry when they had to leave and he had to say good bye to little Star. America might be a very strange country, but the people certainly were nice. Maybe he'd come back to visit someday. After all in about twenty years America was going to be full of Malfoys even if they called themselves Colemans and had a very strange way of talking. And some very strange names, he thought.

Eusebia led them into the living room where they got a chance to say good bye to Tyler and Liberty while she lit the fire for them to floo back. The Colemans' floo wasn't connected to the international network, but it spared them the time and money for the muggle bus to floo right back to New York and on home from there.

"And don't forget to add Great Britain when you announcement your destination." Severus reminded him before he stepped into the New York public floo. "The international floo network gets confused very easily. I think it has something to do with having to understand so many different languages."

A/N: Will Draco ever find a new home? Will he end up with the Colemans anyway in the end? Or will Uncle Gringolf take him in?
In the next chapter: The Rakers have picked their team for the big game, they start training and Draco tries to find out more about the Lions.
They got back from America early enough that Draco could still join the Rakers on the Soccer lawn. The little wannabes had already left and they were in the middle of their player discussion when Draco flopped down on the grass beside Mike.

"So how'd it go?" he asked them casually.

"How was America?" Charlie immediately asked back. "Didn't they want you there?"

"America's odd. They don't even have proper wizarding supplies shops there. Can you believe they buy wands by mail order?"

"But what's the country like?" demanded Sammie. "Are there lots of skyscrapers all over?"

"Yes, and it's all regular and their tube is all dark and dirty, but they don't call it tube at all. And they don't have fences around their gardens. The people are nice though. They've got the strangest names and a weird accent, but they're really nice."

"So why didn't they keep you then?" asked Jack glaring. He hated it when important business was interrupted.

"They've already got eight kids. Didn't have any room left for me." Draco sighed.

"So now you're going to live with Gringolf Glizzard?" Mary asked dreamily.

"Oh, that's so exciting!" exclaimed Charlie.

"No, it's not." Draco grumbled. "Hopefully he won't want me either though and then I'll be here for the big game."

"That'd be good." Jack said to everyone's surprise. "We could really use you."

Draco laughed. "For what? I can only play keeper and you've already got Mary for that job."

"You're better than Mary and we could use her as a defender as well." declared Mike.

"Mary as a defender?" Draco asked surprised. The idea had never occurred to him before. "She's never even tried that."

"It's not that hard." commented Matt.

"She's big and scary." explained Jack. "Beth is pretty good at that as well, but the others are all way too small. They might be good against kids their own size, but none of them will impress the Lions."

"So you haven't picked your team yet?" Draco asked him curiously.

"Beth is a given and Susie wasn't bad either. It's the third defender that's giving us trouble." Jack summarised their discussions.
"I'm for Luke." Mike stated. "He isn't really scary, but he's good with the ball."

"Cedric is much more talented though." interjected Sammie. "He'll be great someday."

"Yeah, someday, but not now." Mike rolled his eyes. "He's only seven, Sammie. He'd never be able to stop Steve, no matter how hard he tries."

"Maybe we won't need him anyway. If Dragon plays, that'll free Mary to play defender and we can do with only two of the little ones." Jack decided.

"I can't promise that. I really don't want to live with Uncle Gringolf, but if he wants me, I don't think I'll have much choice. We'd better train a third kid even if we don't need him anyway." Draco suggested. "We can always use him to watch the dog."

"In that case I pick Beth, Susie and Luke. I don't even want to be seen with Cedric. Beth at least looks like she's already out of primary school."

"What about Susie?" Draco grinned.

"Susie's actually already eleven. She just doesn't look the part." Cathy told him. "The Lions will know that."

"And Luke's ten." Matt added. "They'll both start West Hogsmeade Wizarding this year so they're technically no longer in primary school."

"Well, that's a decision then." said Mike. "It's time I got home, too."

"I'll tell Beth we expect her, Susie and Luke to join us for training on Tuesday." Mary promised getting up as well.

"Make sure they know only two of them will actually play." Jack told her. "That ought to give them some motivation to work harder in training."

"I thought we already knew which ones are going to play, if Dragon's here for the game?" Mary returned puzzled.

"Yes, but that's no reason to actually tell them." Jack grinned brushing the grass off his jeans.

Draco trudged up the stairs with Mike and the girls. "So did you have fun with the little kids today?"

"It was okay." shrugged Cathy. "All in all a little disappointing though. I expected them to be better."

"They're pretty good against each other." Mike amended. "It was quite obvious that we were too big for them though. The smaller ones are no good at all and the bigger ones aren't used to playing against bigger opponents. They were too scared of us to try most of the time."

"Sounds like we have some hard work ahead of us next week." Draco shrugged. "The Lions can't have that many excellent players either though, can they?"

"They've got eleven ready to play or they wouldn't have asked for full teams." Mary stated glumly.

"They usually see to it that they have a full team. That means they often take in kids very early though. Some of their members might actually be Beth's age, but they're used to playing with the team." Cathy explained.
Draco felt a little confused at that. If the Lions had such young members why was Jack worried about the three little wannabes’ performance? They'd be just fine playing against kids their own age.

During the visit to the market the next day he kept his eyes open for green t-shirts and shorts. There ought to be eleven of them? All right Draco would see how many he could find.

Big Babs was the first one he spotted. She was once again engaged in conversation with Jack and for a moment Draco considered slipping over to them and disturbing their flirt. If Jack didn't admit to liking Babs Draco had no reason to leave them alone, did he?

But then again Jack might probably not be too happy with him if he tried anything like that and he wasn't done with his shopping yet. Sarah definitely wouldn't be happy with him if he didn't bring her the tomatoes she'd wanted.

By the time he had spent all the money the Snapes had given him Jack and Babs had disappeared and there were no other Lions in sight. He did spot Robin though who was glaring daggers at him from one of the other stands. She no longer had any blue spots, he noted with a slight feeling of regret, but her hair still held a few blue stripes.

Draco grinned back at her and disappeared into the crowds. Maybe he'd have better luck if he looked for Lions in another part of the market.

The toy stands didn't yield any results either though there were lots of little wannabes of all gangs about around there. They all regarded him with caution and Mely and Toby took off the moment they caught sight of him. There wasn't even a single spot of paint left on either of them, but obviously they weren't going to take any chances.

Draco just shrugged and turned his attention towards those little wannabes who were wearing green. He had no proof that the two he saw were actually Lion wannabes. There might well be another gang that wore green as well somewhere in the better parts of West Hogsmeade. Still he watched them for a while trying to determine if they behaved like Merlin park kids or not. He certainly hadn't seen them around ever before, but then he'd never seen some of the Black Ring members either and the Lions didn't even share a border with the Rakers.

Their behaviour didn't really give him a clue and watching them gaze longingly at some plastic animals that didn't even move grew boring after a while. So Draco decided to take a little stroll past the clothing stalls before meeting up with the Snapes for lunch. Still no Lions. Was that even possible? There were supposed to be eleven of them somewhere in the marketplace and he'd only found one?

But then with these crowds they might be only a few metres away and Draco would never see them. Especially the smaller ones would be invisible in this mass of adults.

Uncle Severus wasn't too happy about Draco's wish to take off on his own again right after eating. "If I catch you with anything you shouldn't have, you'll be cleaning the flat for the entire week." he informed Draco calmly. "And you'd better be home by five."

Draco knew his teacher and head of house well enough to know that that was no idle threat despite the casual tone. He'd make sure he left the marketplace with ample time to get back to Merlin Park by five. The first comment confused him for a moment though. Something he shouldn't have? Then
he remembered the way Severus had looked at him when Sammie had given him that stolen carrot. Did he actually suspect him of being a thief? That thought hurt more than it should have. Why was it so important what Snape thought of him all of a sudden?

The moment he left the side alley Munin dropped onto his shoulder. "Watch!" the raven stated when Draco asked him what he was doing there.

"Great," he grumbled half-heartedly while he scratched the bird's head. "Now I've got a bird for a baby-sitter."

Munin just cocked his head so Draco could reach it better and didn't comment.

Draco continued his search for Lions at the bread stands they squeezed through the milk stands and searched the meat section just to get away from all the people for a bit. After the tight crowds in the centre of the marketplace he was feeling slightly crushed and had to reassure himself that he wasn't actually hurt. Only his toes hurt a little after someone had stepped on them. He wasn't even sure who it had been so tight packed were the people at the bread stands. If there were any Lions in there he'd never see them unless he got shoved right into them.

The meat stands provided more breathing room, but they still stank terribly and he soon had enough of that and decided to take a look at the place where Charlie and her ballet class had been dancing the week before. Maybe they were there again and he could watch them for a while. Or maybe Charlie would even take a short break and talk to him for a bit.

But Draco was disappointed. There were no dancers there at all. Either they hadn't performed at all this time or they'd grown tired and gone home. Probably the later. They wouldn't want to miss out on the money their performances had brought in, but dancing had to be hard and exhausting work so they'd probably only performed for a short time.

He was just about to turn away and visit the muggle shop again when he noticed the two boys in green. One looked even older than Jack and had short blond hair while the other had dark hair and looked about Sammie's age. Perhaps a little older than that. Yes, he might be closer to Matt's age than Sammie's, Draco decided. They were most definitely Lions.

Draco tried to look as casual as possible as he walked closer to where the boys were talking. Maybe he could overhear their conversation? The older boy ... Could he even still call him a boy? ... had his back to him which might give him a chance.

Carefully he edged closer.

"... just like Babs." the blond boy was saying.

"Well, I guess so." said the smaller one. "Hey! Who's that?"

Damn, they'd spotted him. Well, at least now he could see the blond one's face. Draco looked up at him pretending to be unimpressed.

"He's been watching us, Steve." the dark-haired boy said accusingly.

So this was Steve, the mysterious leader of the Lions and ex-boyfriend of Big Babs. Draco grinned.

"Actually I was just looking for my friends." he drawled in his best rich kid accent. He'd lately adopted a more Merlin Park style vocabulary, but he could still do the proud noble if he wanted to. "I thought you might have seen Jack? Last time I saw him he was with your Big Babs."
He had to suppress a fit of laughter when he saw the Lions' confused faces. Steve looked him up and down very slowly taking in the slightly grassy jeans, blue t-shirt and Rakers cap, the old backpack and quivering nose of 'That Dog' peeking out and over the boy's shoulder. Then his eyes rested on the raven for a while. Munin cocked his head, looked back at Steve and decided he was unimportant. He settled back onto Draco's shoulder and watched the proceedings through half closed eyes.

"Snape's little Dragon." Steve finally stated. "The kid we've never seen, obviously. They teach you to talk like that at Hogwarts, eh?"

Draco shrugged which resulted in some displeased muttering from Munin. "So, do you know where Jack is or not?"

"Think he's any good?" the dark-haired kid asked his leader.

"They say he beat up the Shark." Steve answered still looking at Draco.

"I'll take that as a no." Draco informed them. "And I guess you haven't seen Babs either, have you?"

"Why should we care where the Ripper goes?" the smaller Lion asked.

Steve shot him an angry glance that probably meant 'Stay out of this.', but it was too late. Draco decided not to give them a chance to regain their footing.

"I thought so. Well, thanks anyway." he turned away with the comforting knowledge that he had completely confused the Lions' leader.

By the time he reached the muggle shop Draco was smirking openly about the incident. So Snape's little Dragon they called him? Well, if he managed to avoid being left with Gringolf Glizzard he'd show them just how little he was.

He spent some time looking around the muggle shop then made another trip around the marketplace hoping to meet either some of his friends or some more Lions, but the crowds had gotten so dense by now that it got really hard to even find the stalls and so he finally decided to head home. At least he knew what the Lions' leader looked like now. He could always ask Mike about the rest of the team.

He was home early enough to do some Math before he had to help Sarah with her cooking and Munin's report had to have been positive as well as Severus asked him to help him with some brewing after dinner and Draco soon discovered that it was no ordinary recipe that they were working on.

They weren't using any books for reference. All they started with was a roll of parchment with some hastily scribbled down notes, that made absolutely no sense to Draco at all.

"What are we brewing anyway?" he asked Severus when he started pulling out various ingredients, then putting some back and getting out others.

"Nothing really." was the surprising answer. "Just an experiment that I hope might someday lead me to discover a cure for vampires ... or werewolves."

"A cure? But is that even possible? They're dark creatures."

"The existence of the wolfs-bane potion shows that their condition can at least be influenced by
"Potions so there might be a way to cure them with them as well." Severus explained. "I've been wanting to try this ever since I first heard about the wolfs-bane potion."

"But that only influences werewolves. What makes you think that you could cure vampires as well?"

"The two conditions are very similar. I'm actually hoping there might be a way for one potion to cure them both, or at least two very closely related potions."

"And you really think this is going to work?" Draco stared doubtfully at the ingredients on the table. There were a lot more of them than he usually worked with, but not nearly as many as Severus had used for the wolfs-bane potion.

"Of course not. This is only a first test to see how certain combinations turn out. It might take years before I'm ready to put the whole potion together safely and see if it works. Right now I'm just checking which combinations cancel each other out. Then the next step will be to find replacements that have the same effect without conflicting with the rest of the ingredients and then I can start on the actual potion." Severus explained as he dropped some little flowers into the cauldron. "Now give me one dragon tooth."

Draco quickly searched through the jars for dragon teeth. "I thought you know how any two ingredients affect each other?"

"Yes, but some react with each other to gain completely different properties. That's mainly what Chemistry does and Potions relies on it to a certain extent as well, but when you start adding ingredients to such combinations you sometimes get unexpected results. Knowing Chemistry helps to predict some of that, but not everything is predictable where magic is involved. For a complicated potion like this one, you need to put several such combinations together and some of them will once again react with each other. If you don't check those reactions in advance tracing the cause of a failure to the responsible ingredient becomes almost impossible." Severus dropped the dragon tooth Draco handed him into the potion and it suddenly changed its colour to fiery orange and started hissing. "Back!" Severus yelled and pulled Draco away just in time.

A huge flame burst from the cauldron singeing the ceiling and only the quick fire extinguishing spell Severus cast saved the furniture from catching fire. Draco suddenly understood why having the burner in this house was practically illegal.

"What ... What happened?" he gasped when he saw that Severus was calmly correcting his notes.

"The dragon tooth must have reacted with the seagull feather which increased the power of the fire caps. We'll try to use dragon hair instead of fire caps next time, but I'm afraid we don't have any at the moment so we'll have to try another component of the potion right now. I think the one that's supposed to block the transformation would be a good idea. It requires an entirely new development and will therefore take the longest to figure out. The rest of it is mostly variation on the wolfs-bane potion."

"Dragon hair? But isn't that extremely rare and dangerous?"

"Yes, that's why we don't have any at the moment. I will have to order it specially, but it's a lot less likely to create any problems with the dragon tooth since both come from the same type of creature. Dragons don't have any problems with seagull feathers so hopefully there won't be another such reaction. ... Still adding a cooling agent might be a good idea. Check the shelf for ice flower seeds, Draco. I want to see how those react with the dragon tooth - seagull feather combination."
Draco dutifully handed Severus the jar of seeds and watched him repeat the experiment without adding those strange flowers. They had to be the fire caps then.

With another loud hiss the potion on the fire froze.

"Oh no, now it's too cold!" Draco exclaimed in dismay.

"No, it's not. We didn't add the fire ingredient this is supposed to balance. It'll work once we add the dragon hair."

"Why didn't we just try this with the fire caps?" Draco asked peering into the cauldron.

"Because that would just have gone up in smoke." Severus suddenly grinned and walked over to the window. He opened it wide and said. "But do try it if you want to. Drop a fire cap in."

Draco looked at Severus a little uncertainly, but then took one of the strange flowers out of its jar and threw it into the cauldron. A puff of black smoke burst out, filled the entire room within less then a second and then gradually drifted out of the window leaving Draco to stare incredulously into an empty cauldron.

"Fire caps don't react too well with ice flower seeds. The smoke is harmless and will dissipate within the next three hours." Severus stated calmly.

"You could have warned me." Draco growled. "It almost gave me a heart attack when everything went black."

"I told you it'd go up in smoke." Severus grinned. "These are just the little surprises you get when experimenting with potions. Happens to Neville Longbottom all the time."

"Okay, but can we please try something with a little less spectacular results next? I think I need a little time to calm down."

Severus laughed. "Sure. We can't continue with the modification of the temperature regulation before we get the dragon hair anyway. If I order it tomorrow we ought to get it sometime next week. So do you want to experiment on the transformation blocker or test out the poisons next?"

"Poisons?!" Draco yelped.

"The wolfs-bane potion contains several powerful poisons, but they are all balanced out so they won't harm the werewolf. We need to check if our modifications will affect that balance in any way and figure out a way to restore it. The ice flower seeds are a little poisonous as well by the way. We'll need to add them to the balance."

"I think I'd rather we start with the transformation blocker. You said that would take the longest too, didn't you?"

"Indeed it will. The poisons and temperature regulation will be more important during the early experiments though. The transformation blocker is highly unlikely to actually work the first time we actually put the whole potion together. It'll require a lot of changes and fine tuning before the potion will really work. Alright, put the ingredients for the temperature regulator back on the shelf and lets get started."

Even though there were no more grand eruptions it was a very exciting evening. Draco had never known a potions master's life was filled with so much adventure. Still it was also a great feeling of accomplishment when the transformation blocker was finally balanced out and looked like it might
work. Severus even declared that he wanted to check the batch they'd made for poisons the next
day since he was considering actually using this exact combination in his first attempt at brewing
the whole potion.

"If this passes the test we can start checking it with the poisons next week. We might even brew a
first version of the complete potion sometime this year."

Did Severus mean that he was going to let Draco continue to assist him with his experiments when
school started again? Draco could hardly restrain his excitement. He was actually part of a real
scientific project now.

Tuesday was just as exciting though. Severus left early in the morning to order dragon hair in
Diagon Alley and check up with his informants there.

"The dragon hair really is the perfect excuse to hang around the Leaky Cauldron and Knockturn
Alley." he explained when Draco asked him why he didn't just go to the potions shop at the
marketplace. "It might be a little more expensive, but the headmaster will pay for it and he needs
the information from his spies more than a cure for vampirism."

Draco didn't mention his suspicion that Dumbledore would be highly interested in a cure for
lycanthropy which Severus' potion was much more likely to be anyway. Somehow he felt Severus
didn't like the thought of being accused of searching for a cure for Remus Lupin even though ...
Well, Draco had decided to humour him in this.

When he arrived at the Soccer lawn he found that not only Jack but also Mike and Larry had
brought their balls and Matt was looking slightly offended that he hadn't been asked to bring his as
well.

The three little wannabes stood there wide eyed and Susie was hopping from one foot to the other
excitedly. All three of them were much too nervous to sit down in the grass with the older kids.

'That Dog' saw Susie hop about and immediately decided that he loved her. Jack grinned at the
sight of the dog trying to jump up and lick Susie's constantly moving knees.

"That's an idea. Give Susie the lead, Dragon." he suggested "She can give your dog a little
exercise."

"He's not my dog!" Draco protested out of habit, but handed 'That Dog' over anyway. "There you
are, you little dancing mouse." he laughed when Susie grabbed for the lead eagerly. She seemed to
like 'That Dog' almost as much as he liked her.

"Dancing mouse?" Charlie asked momentarily confused.

"Dancing mouse." Cathy pointed at the still hopping girl with a little grin. "Obviously."

Draco however found Luke much more interesting at the moment. He'd met both Susie and Beth
before and the others had all agreed on them as their temporary partners while Luke had only been
one kid among many so far. He was about the same size as Susie, which was a problem for a
defender. Matt might not be particularly big and scary, but he was tall enough to be noticed and
much more agile than Mary which gave him an advantage against evasive manoeuvres.

Luke might have the same agility, but did his size give him a chance at all?
Jack too regarded his new team for a moment then decided it was time to get started. "Charlie, take Sammie and the dance mouse running." he ordered.

"Running?" Charlie repeated incredulously.

"Yes, you're supposed to be good runners and I have no use for you here today. So train running."

"You could check our borders for us while you're at it. Just run around our territory once, then take a break and we'll see if there's still enough time for another round after that." Mike suggested.

"And you could try making sudden turns or running around obstacles." Draco interrupted. "Of course it would be better if you each had a ball to practise with, but I guess for today that has to be enough."

Charlie shrugged unconvinced, but did as she was told. Draco wasn't entirely happy with the decision to send those three away either. Susie was supposed to learn how to play with the team. She already was good at running anyway. Then again maybe it would do some good to establish Charlie as their leader.

"Dragon, you take the goal." Jack continued and Draco got up and headed for his usual position. "Not that one. The other goal."

"What? I've always played in this one. I'm used to it." Draco protested.

"Exactly. You're not used to the Lions' goals though." explained Mike and Draco once again wondered whether Jack asked Mike's advice secretly before making strategic decisions. Using the other goal for training sounded suspiciously like a Mike plan.

"Okay, Mary, Matt, Beth and Luke. You try to stop us while we'll try to get through to the goal. Whenever you manage to get a ball send it to whichever attacker doesn't have one at the time since we have only three balls."

Draco grinned. "I've got a better idea. Matt, go get your ball and give it to Cathy."

Jack stared at Draco. "Matt has a ball?"

"Sure, didn't you know that?" Draco shrugged. "We've been using it for training me and Sammie for weeks. It's a good one too. Almost new."

Jack glared for a moment, then relented. "Very well. Go get your ball, Matt. And you, Dragon, get your defenders organised. They're your invention anyway."

His invention? Somehow Draco was convinced that there had been defenders in Soccer long before he'd ever heard of the game, but he had to admit that he'd been the first to use them in the Rakers' games.

Three pairs of eyes focused on him curiously. Two of them looking very eager and clueless. Well, with Jack obviously unwilling to work out how to train defenders and Matt already gone, Draco was the only one who could do the job anyway.

"Mary, you start with Mike. He's probably the most dangerous, because he'll keep his head and try to outsmart you. Watch him closely and try to keep up." Mike would most likely outrun Mary until she tired. Matt would be a better opponent for him, but Matt wasn't here at the moment and when he'd get back somebody would have to deal with Cathy who could be almost as difficult as Mike. "Beth, you take Larry. Remember that he tends to get impatient if things don't go as planned. He'll
try to overrun you rather than evade you. Don't let him scare you. Stay in his way and try to get the ball."

"What if I do get it? What do I do with it?"

"Shoot it as far out into the field as you can. He'll have to run back and get it for another attempt. In a real game you'd have to try and pass it to a runner who'd be waiting in the centre of the field. So try to shoot far and precise. Just pick some spot you imagine to be Charlie." Draco explained, but he wasn't sure this was going to work. Beth was huge for her age, but still no match for Larry in size. Maybe she was faster though. He'd have to wait and see. "That leaves Jack for you, Luke. Jack's damn good as long as he keeps his head, but if you make yourself a constant nuisance he'll lose his temper and make mistakes. That's your chance to get the ball."

Only a few moments after they'd started Draco realised that his strategy hadn't been too good. Beth was doing fairly well against Larry, but Mary simply had no chance against Mike's superior speed and endurance. She was already panting heavily. And Luke was always behind Jack instead of in front of him. Draco doubted that the gang leader had noticed him at all.

"Enough! Stop!" he yelled angrily when two balls came soaring at him at the same time. He couldn't possibly stop both at once. "This isn't working at all."

Larry and Beth the only ones who still had their ball stopped in surprise and turned towards him.

"Mary and Beth, I want you to switch opponents." Draco announced.

Beth scowled at him and he sighed. "I know Beth, you were doing fine against Larry, but Mary isn't used to running this much and Mike is too fast for her. She'll also have an easier time against Larry because she's bigger than him. You're faster, so you might have a chance to keep up with Mike. Mary, I think you ought to train running. And Luke, you're supposed to stay between Jack and the goal! Try to get in his way! Got that?"

Luke nodded eagerly, but somehow Draco didn't feel very hopeful. The boy was just too small. Maybe if he tried to set him on Cathy instead of Jack? But they had to wait for Matt to return with his ball and when he did it was simply easier to let him and Cathy join in without stopping the training again.

Mary and Larry worked pretty well and Beth wasn't too bad either even though Mike managed to trick her repeatedly. That wasn't too bad, Draco decided. That way Beth would learn to recognise the tricks and not fall for them so easily. What worried him more was that she too seemed to lack stamina. Well, the training would improve that in time.

Matt of course proved to be way ahead of the other defenders. His experience against Jack and Mike showed against Cathy as well. He knew his part and wasn't easily tricked. Larry would be too easy an opponent for him, Draco thought, but maybe he should set him against Mike next time and give Beth or Mary a chance against Cathy.

The only real problem was Luke. Despite Draco's earlier advice he was still running after Jack instead of getting in his way. Had it been a bad idea to let him go up against the oldest and tallest opponent first? But aside from Larry who was way too massive for Luke to handle, Jack was the easiest opponent. Cathy and Mike made a lot less mistakes, because they just didn't let their temper get so out of control. Still maybe Luke had a better chance against Cathy? She'd probably seem less scary to him.

When the others let themselves drop onto the grass for a break Draco went over to where Jack and
Mike were discussing the training.

"We have to get the runners involved with the rest of the team." Mike was telling Jack as he arrived. "Their job is to pass the ball from the defenders to the attackers so what they need most is to practise with them."

"I might have a few ideas for that." Draco interrupted Jack before he could protest. "And I'd like to send the defenders running instead of them a few times. "Matt probably doesn't need it, but Mary and Beth are both having the most trouble with being too slow and tiring too easily."

"What about Luke? He's fast enough as far as I've seen." Jack asked surprisingly not angry at Draco's intrusion into their conversation.

"Luke seems totally hopeless this far. Did you even notice he was there? This is doing nothing for him and all you're doing is practising your aim. I'm considering to try how he does against Mike or Cathy, but I fear they'll be too big for him as well. If he can't handle you, how do you expect him to go up against Steve. I saw him in the market yesterday and at first I thought he had to be well out of school already."

"Luke won't have to face Steve." Mike stated calmly.

Draco turned towards him in surprise. "He won't?"

"No, we will, but the defenders won't." Jack explained. "Steve's the Lions' keeper, so let me worry about him. You'll have to handle Babs, though. Think Luke can manage her?"

"From what I've seen so far, Luke can't handle anyone at all, but I'll give him a chance to prove himself against Cathy or Mike, before I give up on him officially. What are the rest of their attackers like? Anyone small enough not to tower over Luke the way ours do?"

"I don't know. There are four small kids in their gang, but we have no idea what positions they play. They might have had the same idea we had and use them as runners," Mike speculated. "Maybe Babs would give something away if Jack asked her the right way."

"We can't trust anything Babs says. She'll try to feed us lies or simply give us her usual tall talk." Jack countered. He was most likely not feeling like using his new girlfriend against her own gang.

"Then we'll have to spy out their training." Draco decided. "What are the chances one of our wannabes can get close enough to watch them on the field?"

"Slim." said Jack.

"They'd either have to get into the Lions' territory itself, which means they'd have to cross the Sharks' or the Black Rings' territory first or they'd have to watch from the Sharks' territory. Either way they're in trouble if they get caught." Mike elaborated.

"Why? Angel Anna and her gang wouldn't harm a little kid just passing through, would they?" Draco asked confused.

"Probably not, but their wannabes would react less tolerantly and the Lions will definitely not tolerate any spies on their ground." Jack explained. "They'd not want to invade the Sharks' territory, though and there's that one place there that gives you a really good view of their field."

"Maybe so, but I doubt any of our kids would dare go in there. With the situation between us and the Sharks as it is at the moment Mark might actually attack our wannabes on sight." Mike argued.
Bad idea. We should wait at least until they've hit back for the potions attack.

With a sigh Draco leaned back onto his elbows to look up at the sky. Not a single cloud in sight. How boring! Maybe he should return to his suggestion for the afternoon training? He turned his head slightly to take a look around. The rest of their team was still sitting in the middle of the Soccer lawn now rejoined by the runners and a very exhausted dog. A few people were walking on the path. An old couple and some unemployed neighbour. and over there were two mothers with their baby buggies. Mely was kicking a tin can around on the Sharks' side of the border. Somebody had just opened a window on the second floor ...

Mely! Draco abruptly sat up straight again. Was it possible to use another gang's little wannabes to spy on a third gang?

Mike and Jack started at Draco's sudden movement. Following the line of his stare they saw nothing except for a lonely little girl plying with a tin can.

"That's only Mely, the little rat. She often watches us play. I thought you knew that." Jack flopped back into his former position flat on the ground. "We have more important things to worry about."

"No, wait!" Draco insisted. "Mely loves Soccer, but she's a Shark wannabe and the sharks don't play."

"Of course, that's why she's always watching us." Jack rolled his eyes.

"And you said yourself that there's a place in the Sharks' territory where one has a great view of the Lions' field. So Mely probably watches them as often as she does us." Draco concluded.

"She's perfect, Jack." Mike backed him up. "The Lions are used to her watching them and don't connect her with us in any way and she'll know what she's looking for just as well as our wannabes."

"We only just spray painted her." Jack commented calmly.

"But we could still try." suggested Mike.

Jack nodded slowly and turned to Draco. "Call her. Let's see if she'll come."

Draco looked back at Jack, trying to analyse his reaction then leaned back into a more comfortable position and yelled "Hey, Mely!"

The little wannabe jumped at hearing her name called out by a Raker and turned to face them very slowly.

"Come over here for a moment. We want to talk to you." Draco called.

Mely hesitated for a moment staring at the group then over to where the rest of the team were sitting. They'd stopped all their conversations at Draco's shout and were staring back at her. Mely turned and ran.

"See," said Jack. "That's what I thought. She'd make a great spy, but she won't talk to us."

Mike shook his head. "We still might convince her. She was just scared, because there are so many of us here. Maybe if we didn't bring the whole gang."

"She won't show up again for a while after this." Jack reminded him.
"So we'll send her an invitation. One that's harmless enough not to scare her." Mike grinned.

"What do you have in mind?" Draco asked intrigued. He knew that look by now.

"Your little dance mouse." Mike's grin grew even wider.

Jack gave him a short, very serious nod and Mike turned towards the rest of the team. "Susie! Come over! I've got a job for you."

Susie bounced over eagerly followed by 'That Dog' who seemed to have recovered from his complete exhaustion enough to walk after her.

"You know where Mely lives?" Mike asked her calmly.

"Sure, same house as I, second floor, third door on the left." Susie beamed.

"Good. I want you to go over there after lunch and tell her that we want to meet her. Just the three of us, nobody else around. We'll be waiting for her right here tomorrow morning." Mike instructed her. "Can you do that?"

"Sure! Sure! I'll tell her! I'll tell her!"

"You don't have to repeat everything you say, you know." Jack sneered at her. "Just give her the message."

"Yes, I'll tell her. What do you want with a Shark kid?"

"That's none of your business." Jack told her getting up. "Okay, everybody! Once more, same as before and then we'll go to lunch!" He shouted out to the team. "And you two work out what you're going to do with the runners before I get back here afterwards." he told Mike and Draco more softly.

The players quickly assembled again and Draco decided to rearrange his troops. "Luke, you try playing against Cathy this time. And please try to at least let her know you're there. She isn't as tall as Jack. Maybe that'll help, but she won't make it easy for you either. Mary, you take Jack. Try not to let him exhaust you the way Mike did. Beth, you take Larry again and Matt gets Mike."

Matt sighed. "My favourite opponent."

"This is training, Matt. It's not supposed to be easy, it's supposed to teach you to handle more difficult tasks." Draco reminded him. "And besides, you're our best defender so it's only fair that you get the best attacker as your opponent."

"Hey, I heard that!" growled Jack, but there wasn't any real malice in his tone this time.

"You're the best shot." Draco informed him. "That makes you the most difficult opponent for me, but Mike's trickier for the defenders."

It wasn't entirely true, though. As long as he had a good defender trailing Jack, he feared Mike a lot more, but he wouldn't have any defenders to help him out this afternoon if Mike agreed to his plan.

Beth managed to seriously impress Draco. Except for the fact that Mike had managed to tire her pretty well she was almost as good as Matt and once she gained a little more experience would be a great addition to their team.

Her sister was clearly not up to playing against Mike, but then she'd always played keeper before
and probably found it hard to adapt to a different role. She fared a little better against Jack and
despite the several fast shots he got past her in the beginning managed to frustrate him after a
while. Draco saw room for improvement there. He'd have to concentrate on giving Mary some
experience, which meant not to let her face Larry too often in training.

Maybe he should let Luke have a go at Larry after all? It might help Larry to rebuild his confidence
after his almost completely unsuccessful attempts to get past Mary and Beth. Luke seemed
hopeless anyway. He'd made a few brave attempts at getting between Cathy and the goal, but that
had hardly slowed Cathy down. Luke against Larry didn't seem much more hopeless than Luke
against Mike.

Draco was beginning to seriously consider suggesting to test Luke's potential as a runner and using
Sammie or maybe even Charlie as a defender instead. It wasn't their thing of course, but he knew
them well enough to be sure they'd at least get no worse results than Mary.

He wasn't feeling too hopeful when they trudged back up the stairs afterwards. 'That Dog' had
refused to go another step and he was forced to carry him once again even though he was
exhausted himself and wished someone would come and pick him up and carry him home.

"Well, that went much better than I expected." Mike said to his surprise. "Beth was very hard to
shake sometimes and Matt's real trouble."

"I didn't do too well, though." sighed Mary.

"It was the first time you tried a new position and Mike is the best attacker we have." Draco tried
to console her. "You were much better against Larry and Jack, definitely worlds better than Luke."

"I didn't feel like I was doing well against Jack. He still got through a lot." Mary glared at the
corridor lamp as if it could have done anything about that.

"You did fine." Draco assured her. "You're just inexperienced and you got tired too soon. We can
work on that."

"Yes, if our runners are any good, we've got a great team." Mike confirmed.

"No, we don't. Larry's shooting isn't too good and Luke is abysmal. I really don't understand why
you chose him at all. Even Charlie would make a better defender than he does." Draco complained.

"Charlie could be pretty good at anything, if you gave her a chance to learn it. She's just too shy to
make you give her that chance." Mike told him. "You've already made her a runner though and
she's the most experienced at that job we've got."

"I know. I just think there must have been someone better than Luke we could have chosen." Draco
sighed again. "I want a look at the runners after lunch. We need to know if Susie and Sammie are
any good."

Sammie will do fine." Cathy reassured him "He's done the job before, remember?"

"Yes, right. Can't use him as a defender either and Susie was never picked for that job, so why
should she be any good at it." Draco could only hope that they wouldn't need Luke in the game.

Severus didn't come home for lunch and Draco could see that Sarah was worried even though she
told him that he'd probably been invited to eat with one of his contacts.

"But wouldn't he have owled?" Draco asked her feeling a strange fluttering sensation in his
stomach "He has Munin with him after all. It couldn't be too hard to write a short note."

"He wouldn't. Especially not in front of anyone with connections to the dark arts." Sarah shook her head wearily. "He doesn't want them to know that he has a family."

"But how can he hide that?" Draco asked confused remembering all the contacts his father had kept just to get at that kind of information.

"Oh, they could find out, if they bothered to actually seek information about him, but as long as they all think they know him anyway, they won't look for something that they never got a hint exists at all. He thinks that even if Voldemort found out he'd conclude that we don't mean anything to him, if he never mentions us at all."

Draco didn't eat much this meal. Suddenly he wasn't very hungry anymore.
Draco and Mike met very early after lunch and quickly discussed their training strategy and Draco was quite happy with the results they came up with, even though it would be very hard on him without his defenders.

Susie bounced into the discussion announcing happily that Mely had agreed to the meeting and was rather disappointed when Draco told her that Sarah had kept 'That Dog' at home for the afternoon when she'd seen how tired he was. She'd planned to take Billy for a little walk in the evening anyway and decided that that would be enough exercise for 'That Dog' as well.

Jack arrived late and left it to Mike to arrange the training. Mary and Beth sent pleading looks Draco's way when Mike announced that the defenders were to go running this time, but they got no help there.

"You don't have to be as fast as the runners, but we want you to build up some stamina so you won't grow so tired by the end of the game." he told them. "That's particularly important exercise for you, Mary. Matt, you lead them. See that you keep it slow enough that everyone can keep up and take a break before you drop, but try not to take too many breaks."

Mary glared at him for that remark, but Draco was no longer that impressed by her glares. She wouldn't harm him unless he seriously provoked her, which he had no reason to do.

"The attackers will be working in two pairs. It doesn't matter who's with whom today, but we'll try out all combinations in time," Mike continued and Cathy immediately stepped beside him. "The runners start on the other side of the field. Take two balls at a time and pass them among you as much as you can then pass one to each pair of attackers. You stay in the far half of the field, we stay in this one. We pass the ball between the partners as well, take it up to the goal and try to get it in. You two," he pointed at two surprised little wannabes who had crept closer to watch. "Will take the balls back to the other side for the runners. If you're fast enough the runners will never run out of balls."

Draco wished they had a second keeper for this exercise. Then they could have had one pair on each side and the runners simply passing the balls from one group to the other, but it would have meant to keep Mary here and she really needed the running exercise. He hoped the two little assistants Mike had just hired would do.

He soon stopped thinking about the runners at all though as the attackers usually shot at almost the same time making his job almost impossible. This time he was really getting a workout.

Mike and Cathy turned out to be a good team and it was hard for Draco to predict which one would actually shoot most of the time. Jack however almost always kept the ball to himself and went straight for the goal. Charlie soon noticed that and started to preferably pass the ball to Larry, which resulted in Larry keeping it to himself just the same as Jack did. That was less troublesome for Draco, but still against the general idea of the exercise.

When Mike finally called for a break Draco simply dropped into the grass where he was standing and closed his eyes panting.
"You okay, Dragon?" that was Sammie's voice.

Draco opened his eyes and found the others had gathered around him looking worried.

"Just exhausted." he panted. "Need defenders. Can't stop two balls at once."

"You want to change the exercise? We could try working with only one ball." Jack suggested.

"No, but I want the defenders to participate tomorrow and right now I want you two to actually stick to the exercise."

"What?" asked Larry. "What did we do wrong?"

"The idea was to practise passes not just shooting at the goal." Draco explained. "You two keep forgetting the passes."

"That's Larry's fault." accused Jack. "He never passes the ball back and when he does he usually misses me entirely."

"Well, in that case he needs to practise it more, not less." Cathy pointed out.

"Why? I'm an attacker. What do I need passes for?" Larry protested.

"For evading and confusing defenders." Mike informed him. "If you're too boxed in, you pass the ball to another attacker who's free to move."

"Your shooting is suffering from the same problem." Draco added. "There's a lot of power behind it, but you sometimes miss the goal entirely or shoot the ball directly into my arms. That might work if the keeper doesn't expect such a hard shot, but I doubt Steve will fall for it after the initial surprise. He certainly looks strong enough to hold your balls if he catches them."

"So you think Larry needs shooting training?" Mike asked.

"Aiming training." specified Draco. "Jack's shooting is fine though, so I think he could leave that to Larry for today."

"So what do you want me to do? Nothing?" Jack growled.

"Passes." Mike reminded him. "Your shooting's fine, but you tend to forget that you're not the only attacker on the field. You often lose the ball, because you shoot even though you're blocked and somebody else is in a better position."

"I know how to make passes." Jack insisted.

"But you don't use that knowledge enough." Draco told him. "Maybe practise will make you consider passing instead of shooting more often. And Larry needs someone to practise passing with him."

"New rule." Mike announced. "You're not allowed to go for the goal unless you have passed the ball at least three times first. Try to make it more."

"And you could try to put more force behind your shots." Draco told Mike. "You're relying too much on your tricks and too little on strength. Your balls are too easy to hold once I catch them."

"If you catch them." Mike reminded him.
"Indeed, but a little more force behind your shots couldn't hurt." Draco grinned.

"And what about me?" Cathy asked. "What should I improve?"

Draco considered that for a moment. "Try to shoot sooner. You hesitate too much before you shoot which makes your shots more predictable than the others."

"How'd the runners do?" Mike asked. "We've been discussing the attackers all the time, but you really wanted a look at the runners, didn't you?"

"I had no time for that." Draco answered. "I was too busy with your attacks. Charlie, how'd it go back there? Is Susie fitting in with you guys?"

Charlie regarded the small girl for a moment. Despite all the hard training of today she was still bouncing. "Well, she's definitely fast and she doesn't tire easily. Her shooting is even less precise than Larry's though."

"Okay, she only needs to pass. Actually scoring isn't necessary." Draco decided. "Keep practising passes. That ought to help. Any other problems?"

"Sammie seems to prefer Jack. He always forgets to pass to Larry and rarely passes to Mike."

Charlie reported.

"I'm more used to working with Cathy and Jack's just always there." Sammie defended himself.

"We'll have to consider that the Lions' defenders will most likely concentrate on Jack though. They know that he's our leader and maybe also that he's the best shot and will expect our attack to depend on him mostly. They might make it impossible for him to do anything at all." Mike predicted. "We have to prepare in a way that we can work without him, if that happens. Try to pass to all attackers in turn, Sammie. Even if the one you want is in a less perfect position at the moment. That way you'll be prepared to work with all of them and maybe even to confuse the Lions with passes they don't expect."

"Not choosing to make the most obvious move when another is possible sounds like a good strategy." Draco mused. "It'll confuse the Lions if they can't predict what we're going to do."

Jack nodded. "I'll think about it. Do you really think they'll cut me off?"

"They'll expect our strategy to centre around you so it'd be the logical thing to do." Draco agreed. "Our advantage is that they'll probably not consider that Mike might lead the attack. That'll throw over their game plan."

"Mike's shots aren't as good as mine." Jack protested. He didn't like being second to anyone at all.

"But they are very hard to predict and if we want our strategy to be to confuse the Lions with unexpected moves that suits us just perfectly. You'd draw their defenders away from the others and Mike would be free to play his tricks with Cathy and Larry to back him up." Draco elaborated.

"They'll figure that out after a while and send the defenders after Mike." Jack warned him.

"Which would leave you free to take over." Mike grinned. "They'll have to make up their minds which one of us is the more dangerous then."

"That means it'll all depend on the runners." Draco concluded. "We can't shout over the whole field who they're supposed to preferably pass to, if it's supposed to be a surprise. They have to judge for
"You expect the runners to make strategic decisions?" Jack yelped.

"Charlie's good at that." Mike stated calmly. "She's changed Dragon's plans to suit a momentary advantage before. It's not Sammie's forte though and we definitely can't expect our little dance mouse to have that kind of experience."

"We'll make them take their clue from Charlie then." Jack decided suddenly calm again. "Find some hand signs or something to communicate the necessary commands. Something that isn't obvious so only the runners will understand what you mean."

"You'll need signs for people and positions." Mike advised Charlie. "Like 'Pass to Jack.' or 'Stay more to the right.,' 'Get further back.,' 'Leave the ball to Sammie.'"

"'Leave the ball to Sammie.' wouldn't be necessary." Cathy objected. "One sign for Sammie would be enough. It could mean both 'Pass to Sammie' and 'Leave the ball to Sammie.' according to the situation. One sign for each person and for front, back, left and right should be enough."

"They won't need symbols for the defenders or me either." Draco added. "They'll only pass to each other and the attackers."

"You'll need your own code though." said Mike. "To assign the defenders to the attackers."

"But we don't even know who they are yet! I've only seen three Lions so far and of one of those, I don't even know the name." Draco protested. "We can't make up symbols without knowing who they'll refer to!"

"We already know that Big Babs is an attacker and we'll use Mely to find out the rest." Mike reminded him. "Maybe you could even use the same symbols the runners use with different meanings. That would confuse them even more."

"It'd also get very complicated." Draco objected. "Are you sure we really need that?"

"You'll have to switch defenders between attackers until you find the best way to combine them and it'll be easier if they don't figure out that the gestures refer to specific persons too soon. If they refer to different persons according to who's giving the sign that'll take longer to crack." Mike insisted.

Draco thought about it for a minute. What symbols could he use to name people? What would fit Babs without being too obvious? And then it hit him. Of course!

"Charlie, what symbol are you giving Jack?" he asked into the runner's discussion about the Sammie symbol looking too much like the Larry symbol.

Charlie turned to him with a proud smile, held her left hand in front of her chest, palm facing right fingertips almost touching her chin, then pulled it down.

Draco grinned back at her. "Good then that'll be our Big Babs symbol too."

"Hey!" Jack protested. "Will you stop that! I'm not in love with Big Babs!"

That only made the rest of them giggle even more and Draco calmly informed him "But that wasn't what I was thinking at all. You're our leader and Big Babs is their second. Since Steve plays keeper, she'll be the leader of the attack and that's why she gets the same symbol as our leader."
before bursting into giggles once again.

"I thought we'd decided Mike's the leader of our attack?" Jack reminded him.

"Only to confuse them, remember?" Draco grinned back.

"Ah well, alright." Jack conceded. "Lets get back to work then. If you can laugh like that, you can train as well. Charlie, I want you guys to start using your pass to commands, Larry and I will try to practise some real passes and Mike and Cathy work on their shooting. Dragon, ... What about Dragon? Anything we want him to do?"

Draco thought he'd do well not to collapse from exhaustion, but Jack had accepted all his suggestions so he probably ought to at least try to improve as well.

"Well, I think he ought to try kicking the ball back to our little assistants instead of throwing it." Cathy suggested.

"Kick it?" Draco repeated surprised. "Cathy, I can't aim a kick at all. I'd force the kids to run all over the field and that will slow down the ball supply."

"But if you could learn to aim them your kicks could get the ball a lot further behind the Lions' lines than if you throw it." Mike commented. "That'd give our runners a clear advantage since their attackers won't be able to catch up with them and they won't tire so much. At least give it a try. We won't be any worse off, if you can't learn it."

Draco nodded. Okay, he'd try. It didn't seem like anyone cared much if the two little wannabes had a hard time running after the balls anyway.

The training turned out a little less exhausting that way. Having to wait for the return of the balls forced the attackers to shoot at longer intervals and they no longer attacked at the same time either. Jack despite his obvious dislike for holding back restricted himself to passes and Larry's shots still were a lot easier to hold so Draco could concentrate on Mike and Cathy and on trying to kick the balls as far as he could. He also tried to aim for the centre of the field and thought that he was getting better. At least he managed to keep the ball inside the field most of the time.

He was almost ready to collapse once again when finally a tall, dark clad figure showed up walking down the path towards them. Draco dropped the ball he had just caught and raced out of his goal without even a glance for the surprised attackers.

"Uncle Severus!" he called out relieved to have him back and threw his arms around his teacher.

Severus hesitated a moment before hugging him back. This was the kind of greeting he expected from Billy, not Draco.

"Where were you? I thought you were going to start testing our potion for poisons this afternoon?" Draco asked once he pulled away.

"Yes, but I can always do that tomorrow, or the day after. I heard a rumour in Knockturn Alley today that I needed to check out for myself. It looks like I'll have to contact Headmaster Dumbledore about this." Severus answered gravely.

"Why? What happened? Did you see death eaters?" Sammie asked excitedly and Draco realised that his friends had followed him. He'd been so focused on Severus that he hadn't even noticed.

"That too, but that's not unusual in Knockturn Alley. It's usually full of them." Severus answered
openly to Draco's surprise. "The rumours are saying that Voldemort has found out Harry Potter's address, though and that's rather alarming news."

"But won't his family have all sorts of wards around him?" asked Luke.

"Idiot," hissed Draco. "His aunt and uncle are muggles. They can't protect him at all."

"Headmaster Dumbledore and a few others did surround their house with several very strong protection wards, but Harry himself isn't as well protected and he won't just stay inside the house for the entire holidays. All it would take is a little walk to visit a friend or to buy some milk or bread and they could get him." Severus explained. "If death eaters are watching his house we'll have to get Harry out and hide him elsewhere."

"So you've sent Munin to find Dumbledore?" Draco guessed.

"No, I'll need to send him an albatross this time. I sent Munin to inform the agent who's protecting Harry. If ... that agent confirms possible death eater presence in the area, I will have to alert Albus ... and Potter." Severus added through clenched teeth.

"Of course, protect Potter." Draco growled. "So where are you going to hide him? Here?" He didn't even know why he was so angry about the thought. All he knew was that Harry Potter had no right to come to the Snapes' flat. No way!

"Here?" Severus repeated obviously appalled at the thought. "I'm no hotel. I have no room for a kid. If Potter has to stay in Hogsmeade, Minerva can take him. I know she's in town. I only met her a week ago."

"Okay, that's better." decided Draco. "She won't send him over here to visit, though, will she?"

"She doesn't even know I live here, much less that you're here." Severus answered patiently. "But she does know, that West Hogsmeade is a dangerous place for rich celebrities, so I trust she'd keep Potter away."

"Your colleagues don't even know where you live?" Mike asked incredulously.

"Dumbledore knows and Filch might have heard from his friends in town, maybe Hagrid as well, but I doubt it. I think most of them think I spend my holidays at Hogwarts."

"But McGonagall must know. After all she's at Hogwarts during the holidays to write all those letters." Draco reminded him.

Severus shrugged. "She must know I have a home somewhere else, but she's never asked where. Maybe she thinks I spend the holidays with relatives somewhere. Are you coming up for dinner with me or do you want to sleep outside tonight?"

Draco started. He'd completely forgotten the time! "Oh no, I'm coming. See you all tomorrow!" he called out to his friends.

After dinner he helped Severus fill some of their transformation blocker into test tubes and watched him add different substances to each, then label them carefully.

"There, tomorrow we'll check the results of the alchemical tests and do the checking spells." Severus told him.

Munin didn't show up again this evening, but Severus thought that was a good sign. The agent
would most likely have sent the raven back immediately, if there'd been any obvious death eater activity anywhere around Privet Drive.

Munin did arrive during breakfast the next morning carrying a letter and feeling very hungry. Severus immediately opened the letter he carried and didn't react to Munin's loud protests of "Eat! Eat! Fly! Eat!"

When Severus didn't react the raven decided that Draco's breakfast egg would do.

"Hey! Stop that! Get yourself some toast from the breadbasket! That's my breakfast!" Draco tried to shoo him away, but to no avail.

Munin didn't leave his breakfast alone until Severus had finished the letter and fed him. That finally distracted the bird and Draco was left to stare morosely at the egg splattered all over the table.

Sarah wasn't too happy with the situation either. "Did you have to do that?" she asked, it wasn't entirely clear which one of the three. "Now I'll have to wash the tablecloth again! As if there wasn't enough laundry already! This will require another machine full!"

"Wash!" Billy cheered happily.

"I can do that as soon as I get home." Severus offered. "Leave it to me."

"No, no way! You'll get back too late and then it won't dry in time and we won't have a tablecloth tomorrow morning." Sarah scolded.

"So? What's the problem with that?" Draco asked. "We won't have one for lunch or dinner either, so why do we need one for breakfast?"

"In case something like this happens." Severus indicated the egg stains.

"Then what's wrong with it happening now? If that's what the tablecloth is for in the first place ..."

"Oh, just go and get yourself cleaned up!" Sarah interrupted his question.

Get himself cleaned up? Draco looked down at himself and realised that he too had been splattered with egg. Just great! Now he'd have to wash and change once again.

"Just don't eat all the toast before I get back." he warned Severus and Sarah before heading off to the bathroom. And all this on the day he was supposed to meet up with Mike, Jack and Mely! He hoped he wouldn't be too late to hear her report on the Lions.

He didn't remember the message Munin had brought until Severus got up from the breakfast table and got ready to leave.

"Where are you going?" he asked curiously.

"Dover." was the short reply. "And no, I can't take the dog. I'm in too much of a hurry. He'd only slow me down."

"You're going to send that albatross." Draco guessed. There weren't many post offices that kept albatrosses for hire and only Dover had enough of them to guarantee that one would be available at all times. "You sure you can't send one from Hogsmeade?"
"Hogsmeade doesn't have any, Draco. They'd be too conspicuous around here. Only the post offices on the coast are allowed to keep them."

Severus explained.

"Are allowed? You mean by the ministry?"

Severus nodded. "You need a special license to keep an albatross further inland. They're sea-birds and supposed to stay near the sea."

"Oh, I didn't know that." Draco grabbed the last empty plates and put them in the sink. If he hurried with the washing up, he might still make it on time. "Does that mean you're going to spend the day rescuing Potter?" he didn't like that thought. Stupid Potter taking his Uncle Severus!

"No, M .... Our agent reports nothing suspicious anywhere in Potter's home-town so I doubt he'll need rescuing at all." Severus told him already on the way to the door. "I'm just going to inform Albus of the rumour and wait for his decision. It wouldn't look good to lose the little nuisance this easily."

"Who cares." grumbled Draco at the plate he was just polishing since Severus closed the door behind him right after that.

The plate however had no opinion on the subject and refused to answer. Billy and 'That Dog' had no idea who Potter was and didn't care about death eaters or Voldemort either. Sarah might have had something to say, but didn't speak up either. Maybe she hadn't even heard Draco since she was busy stuffing the tablecloth into the already overflowing laundry basket. Draco had to help her carry it down the stairs to the washing machines because it was so full.

He was almost tempted to stay and watch again, but the meeting with Mely was more important then learning how to use a washing machine. He just worried a little how Sarah was going to drag the full basket back up again afterwards when all the laundry would be wet and she had to bring Billy along as well. Well, obviously she thought she could manage.

Mike and Jack were waiting impatiently under the same tree they'd used for their strategy meeting yesterday and Jack wouldn't quite believe that it was Munin's fault that Draco was late even though Mike assured him that the raven could be worse than 'That Dog' if he wanted to stir up trouble.

"Where are the others?" Draco asked as much to distract them as out of real interest.

"Waiting in the garden shed until we've spoken with Mely." explained Jack. "If she comes."

"She didn't have to tell the dance mouse that she would." Mike pointed out. "She'll come."

Indeed Mely arrived about ten minutes later and came over hesitantly. It almost looked like she expected to get jumped the moment she crossed the border, but when nothing happened she seemed to take heart and moved a little faster. Still she regarded each bush with distrust and tried to stay as far away from them as possible.

Finally she stood in front of them trembling and looking ready to bolt at any sudden movements.

Mike exchanged a quick look with Jack and when the gang leader made no attempt at talking to the
little wannabe spoke himself. "We have noticed that you seem to like Soccer, Mely."

"Yes, yes I do?" she made it sound like a question.

"And you might have heard that we're playing against the Lions next Wednesday." Mike continued.


"Yes, a real game with full teams. Eleven players on each side and you'll get a good look at it from that little spy post you have on the Sharks' border, won't you?" Jack suggested unexpectedly.

Mely jumped, but nodded. "Yes, you can see the Soccer field quite well from over there. There's a tree that's pretty easy to climb and is quite comfortable to sit on. If you stay on one of the lower branches the Lions can't even see you."

"So you watch them play quite often, don't you Mely?" Mike took over once again.

"Yes, of course. It's a lot easier to watch there then it is here. Here I can't hide."

"And I'm also sure you'd like to watch a good game." suggested Mike.

"Of course."

"Well, you see, the Lions have us at a slight disadvantage, because we don't have eleven players and had to hire on a few kids from outside the gang and we won't have enough time to train them properly." Mike went on. "So it would really help us prepare them, if we knew more about the way the Lions play. All we know at the moment is that Steve is their keeper and Big Babs one of the attackers. I bet you know a lot more about them though."

Mely thought that over for a moment. "So what do I get, if I tell you? Besides seeing the game, because I can watch that either way."

"You get permission to use our Soccer lawn when we aren't using it ourselves. We'll tell Beth and her bunch to leave you alone." Jack said evenly. "Maybe they'll even let you play, if they need to even out their numbers."

Mely considered again. There were nine Raker wannabes at the moment. An uneven number. They'd need an additional player quite often even though right now they were down to six due to the three players they'd lent to the gang. It had to be a very tempting offer for a girl who had noone to play with and didn't even own a ball. "That permission will remain after the game as well?" she asked Jack trying hard not to sound too eager.

"Yes, that permission remains unless you do anything to abuse that right to help the Sharks gain an advantage over us." Jack told her still very businesslike. "Steal our ball ever again and the deal is off."

"I won't. It was just to prove I could shoot a real ball, anyhow. I didn't know the whole plan, honest!"

Jack shrugged to indicate that it didn't matter either way. "So what do they play like? Same as us or do they have their own style?"

"Oh, nothing like you at all." answered Mely. "Or maybe more like you than like Dragon, but still very differently."
"How differently?" Draco asked her and she jumped again probably having forgotten that he was still here since he hadn't said anything so far.

"They play with a lot of attackers, like you always used to before Dragon came, but they've also got a strong defence which you never used much." Mely reported.

"What about the runners? Do they use runners a lot in their game?" Mike demanded.

"Runners? You mean like Dragon uses Charlie?" Mely asked surprised. "No, not at all. They're a specific Dragon thing as far as I know."

"A specific Dragon thing?" Jack repeated.

"That might be our advantage." Mike pointed out. "The runners keep their attackers out of the defensive game, but Dragon's strategy used our lack of a strong defence there. If they have that the runners will be less effective."

"But they won't expect them at first. It might take them a while to get used to them and figure out how to react." Draco pointed out. "What worries me is that that means they have more attackers than we expected."

"Indeed." confirmed Jack. "What are the numbers Mely? How many attackers and how many defenders have they got?"

"Six attackers and four defenders." Mely replied dutifully.

"Six!" Draco repeated in shock.

"Nick sometimes players defender as well though, so they might play five - five." Mely added as an afterthought.

"We can't possibly use Luke." Draco decided. "Even with three perfect defenders we'd still have to worry about three attackers."

"Then we'll have to draw Nick into the defence." Mike decided. "Our attack simply has to be so strong that we tie up their whole defence. Or maybe the runners can draw their defenders forward into the middle. ... I'll have to think about it. I'm sure we can make some use of Charlie there."

"What does that Nick look like?" Draco asked. "Come on, help me out. I don't know the Lions."

"Nick's the kid who sometimes helps out at the newspaper stand. Tall thirteen year old, long black hair." Mike obliged.

Draco remembered the kid. He looked a lot like the one he'd seen in the market with Steve only taller. "Does he have a little brother? Same dark hair, but a little smaller?"


"Jerry?" Jack asked. "Isn't he a little small for a defender?"

"He's fast, but not very good. They'll probably assign him to Cat or Larry." Mely decided.

"Cathy can probably handle him with a few tricks then." Draco decided. "And Larry would walk right over him. They won't assign the smallest defender to him."

"Ah, but Jerry isn't the smallest defender. That's the new kid, Greg." Mely corrected him at once. "I
think he's their week spot. He'll probably play as a team with Elena. She's the best defender, I think."

"So they'll most likely set those two on Jack and Jerry on Cathy or Larry." Draco assumed. "If I were them, I'd leave Larry alone and set the last defender on Mike."

"That'd be Pat. She's really fast, but easier to trick than Elena." Mely reported dutifully.

"Good, I can handle that." grinned Mike.

"And if Greg can't handle an opponent on his own, that means they have to use Nick as an additional defender, if they want all attackers covered." Draco continued.

"But he's their best attacker. Nick is the best player they've got." Mely protested.

"If we just keep walking over Greg and Jerry, they can't do anything else." Mike told her. "They have to strengthen their defence somehow."

"What about the other attackers then?" Draco asked. "You say Nick is the best. How does he play? Like Jack, Mike or more like Cathy?"

Mely thought hard about that question. "Most like Mike, but also like Jack a bit. Somewhere between those two."

"Dangerous." conceded Draco, but at least that hinted that he wasn't better than Mike. "What about Babs?"

"Dangerous in the first five to ten minutes. Then she gets tired. She shoots pretty well though."

Mely reported.

Draco smiled. That sounded like the perfect opponent for Mary. "Good, who else have they got?"

"Bob and Rob are probably dangerous as well. They're a perfect team. You never know which one will shoot in the end." Mely answered.

"Bob and Rob?" Draco repeated. Odd that their names would sound so alike.

"Brother and sister." Mike explained. "They stick together like twins. Maybe a perfect team, but how well do they work with the others?"

"I don't know." Mely reported dutifully. "They keep to themselves even during the games."

"You've never seen them play on different teams?" Mike asked suddenly very interested.

"No." Mely reported, "Never."

"And the last two?" Draco prompted her once again when she didn't say anything for a while and Mike appeared to be lost in his own thoughts.

"Well, there's Bianca," she hesitated. "Not much to say about her. I guess she tries, but doesn't really like soccer. Her brother Nino's much better, but I haven't seen him for a while. When he shows up he's usually the second keeper, so I don't know how his shooting is at the moment."

"I thought Nino had left the gang completely?" Jack asked alarmed. "I didn't count on him showing up at all."
"They've also got a new member, Frank the Wolf, who's probably meant to replace Nino. He's got
talent I think, but isn't really ready to play with the big guys yet." Mely shrugged. "I wouldn't use
him in a real game yet, so I thought they'd bring Nino anyway."

"Nino has a job at the barber's." Mike commented on the way to the garden shed after Mely had
left. "He might not be available for the game at all."

"Or he could have that day off and we'd be in big trouble." said Jack. "I'd much prefer Frank, but
we'd better be prepared for Nino."

"Do you think he might be better than Nick?" Draco asked worried. Nick sounded like bad news to
him and if Nino was even worse ... 

"He's bigger, but without much training he'll probably be too slow to get many shots in." Mike
decided. "He might be a target for Mary."

"Maybe, but she'd also be perfect for Big Babs." Draco told him. "I'd like to keep her out of the
picture. If she's really such a good shot she might get dangerous if we leave her alone, but if she
meets with opposition it'll tire her and take her out of the game."

"You could use Matt for that." Jack suggested. "He's a really exhausting opponent."

"But also our best defender." Draco objected. "I'll need him to cover Nick, as long as he's in the
attack and once Nick starts defending, I'm thinking of setting Matt on either Bob or Rob."

"You think they're more dangerous than Babs?" Jack asked doubtfully.

"Mely seemed to think so." Draco reminded him.

"And it seems blocking one of them would also seriously handicap the other." Mike added. "Those
two seem to depend on each other too much. That'd take care of two opponents at once. We can't
afford to ignore a week spot like that."

"That'll leave Beth to play against Nino, if he comes." Jack reminded them. "If Dragon plays we
won't have to use Luke and she'll be the smallest defender. Nino would be the biggest player on the
field."

"She did fine against both Mike and Larry yesterday." Draco stated calmly. "I doubt Nino will be
much scarier than Larry and he can't be trickier than Mike, if Mely thinks Nick is their best
attacker. There's also a chance that Nino will underestimate her and give her a chance to take the
ball off him."

"Should we count on Nick to be drawn back into the defence this much though?" Jack warned.

"They've got four defenders, we've got four attackers. If we prove to them that at least one of their
defenders isn't good enough to stop us, they'll have to get another and weaken their attack." Mike
reasoned. "The only risk with that tactic is that they might not use Nick as that additional defender
at all. If they draw back Bianca instead, that might give us some trouble, though I suspect that we
could outfox Bianca by offering her Charlie as a decoy attacker. Charlie's good enough to make a
believable attempt at their goal even if she'd probably have no chance to actually score. If she
keeps pretending Bianca would likely go after her and the Lions would be in the same situation as
before. If they draw back Rob, Bob or Babs, they'll free one of our defenders to assist Matt."

"But we're leaving two attackers unguarded even if it works." Jack reminded him.
"I think, I can handle any shot from Bianca from the way she sounds in Mely's description and we're counting on the unguarded sibling to be too confused over having to play alone to be much trouble. It seems they're counting on the keeper being unsure which of them to watch out for as their most effective method of attack. If I know which one will shoot, I can probably hold their shots as well." Draco decided.

"You can probably hold them anyway." Mike grinned. "We just want to make sure."

"I'm not that good. Steve's got a lot more experience than I do." Draco protested.

"So does Mary and you beat her easily." Jack reminded him. "You're probably the one thing they'll expect even less than our runners."

"Have you played against the Lions before now, or haven't you?" Draco finally asked. Jack seemed to know nothing about the Lions' players, but then he seemed to expect the Lions to know everything about the Rakers."

"Four years ago. I remember Steve and Nino quite clearly and I think Babs was already playing for them, probably Nick as well, but if they were, they were only just beginning and didn't have much say in the game. The team must have changed quite a bit since then."

"And who of us was playing that time?" Draco asked thinking hard. What consequences would it have, if the Lions knew some of their players?

"Mike couldn't play because he'd hurt his leg, but Mary and Larry were with us. Cathy was there and I think Charlie might have been." Jack answered.

"Yes, Charlie had to play in my place." Mike confirmed. "We lost of course. Charlie never was an attacker and she had about three days training."

"Mary was keeper and you and Larry both played in the attack?" Draco asked Jack.

"Yes, Rex and I led the attack. Larry just sort of ran along and looked dangerous back then." Jack confirmed. "His aim was even worse back then than it is now."

"Rex? Who's Rex?" Draco asked confused.

"Our old leader." explained Mike. "He, Jack and Mary were all that stopped us from being a complete walkover in that game."

"So they'd expect us to use Mary and Jack in the same functions again." Draco concluded. "Mary as a defender will come as a surprise and we want them to think Jack is leading the attack, so that's good. I wish we could put Larry into the defence to confuse them even more."

"Why can't we?" Jack asked. "Exchange him for Matt or Mary and it'll work fine."

"Matt's not good in the attack at all. I think he just doesn't believe he can score so he doesn't really try. And he's our best defender. I'd miss him terribly." Draco explained. "Mary has never played attack at all and she isn't too good at running. She'd be exhausted too soon. Then there's the problem that Larry always forgets his position in the heat of the moment when we make him a defender."

"We could use Sammie as an attacker, but then we'd be short a runner and they're our main advantage." Mike added.
"They'll probably expect Larry to have improved a lot since then." Draco suggested. "After all their own players obviously did."

They entered the shed and the first thing Draco saw was Mary and Larry kissing in one corner. How cute!

Unfortunately Jack didn't share this opinion. "Oh, cut that out!" he barked at them. "This is a strategy meeting not a romantic picnic."

The pair blushed and jumped apart. Maybe they'd been so busy they hadn't even noticed them come in? In the background the three little wannabes were looking around a little nervously, but also seemed to be very excited. Hadn't they ever been in the garden shed before?

"We now have a first idea of how the Lions will attack." Jack announced proudly. "Beth, you'll tell your kids to leave Mely alone. She has my permission to enter our territory and use the soccer field as long as she doesn't attack anyone."

"But she'll get in our way!" Beth protested. "What if we want to use the field too?"

"Let her play with you?" Draco asked innocently.

"What?" the shocked little wannabes turned to face him.

"I'm sure you have use for another player." Mike elaborated. "And she's never had a chance to play with a team before. You don't have to make it a habit, just invite her to play when she gets in the way."

Beth grumbled a little but didn't protest anymore. Maybe she was thinking about ways to prove to Mely that she couldn't keep up with the Raker wannabes anyway.

"Okay, Dragon, Charlie! We need you to work out those signs now." Jack ordered. "Mike, I need your suggestions for today's training."

"Signs? What signs?" asked Matt when Draco stepped over to him, Charlie and Sammie.

"We'll explain in a moment." Draco promised. "Mary, Beth, Susie, Luke! Over here!"

Most of the morning was spent on working out the sign code and training strategy, but at least Draco went back up for lunch with the feeling that they now knew what they were going to do, both during the training and in the game. It was a very reassuring feeling. Now if only Uncle Severus didn't force him to move to Gringolf Glizzard's place this Sunday the plan might actually work.

A/N: Will Mely continue to spy for the Rakers? Is Voldemort really about to capture Harry? And who will win the big game?

In the next chapter: Draco takes Billy to the park, Mely watches Nino and the team continues their training.
Training for the Big Game

Chapter 26: Training for the Big Game

Severus announced that he was going to Hogwarts right after lunch, but wouldn't give a clear answer when Draco asked whether he was going to meet McGonagall or Filch. Draco was beginning to wonder about the caretaker. Hadn't Uncle Severus said that all of the long time staff members had some other secret function besides their jobs at Hogwarts? Both McGonagall and Filch fell into that category, but then what might Filch's function be?

Severus had paid weekly visits to Hogwarts even before the head of Gryffindor had returned so he must have gone to see the caretaker. Could the old man who spent most of his time scrubbing floors like a muggle be that powerful a wizard? He wished he knew how to get Severus to talk about it.

"What about the poison tests?" Draco finally asked. "Didn't you want to do those today?"

"I already checked the vials and they show only one mild poison that we'll need to counteract." Severus answered calmly. "I'll do the spells when I get back."

"Can't I do something?" Draco asked eagerly.

"No, I'm not letting a boy your age conduct poison checks. You'll learn those in your seventh year and that will be early enough." Severus told him sternly.

"Why? Are they dangerous?"

"The poisons are dangerous. And I wouldn't trust many adult wizards to perform the checks correctly." Snape informed him in the soft tone he used only for the most serious matters. "I'm an expert in poisons, Draco. I probably have more experience brewing them than the poison specialists in the ministry's potions lab. That's why I can perform these checks without extensive animal testing. You'd better stay away from it entirely."

"But I want to learn! You say you're a poison expert, so why can't I learn it too?"

Severus sighed. "Look Draco, if you need a Potions expert to idolise, why don't you pick Sarah." he suggested. "She's an expert in Chemistry, works with some of the most complicated medical potions and her work really helps people. Poisons kill, medical potions heal. They are a much more constructive and rewarding discipline."

"But then why did you choose poisons?" Draco protested.

"Because someone didn't leave me a choice at all." Severus hinted. "You don't want to be like me, Draco."

"Yes, I do! You're the greatest person I ever met. Maybe I don't have your talent, but I want to be as much like you as I possibly can."

Severus sighed once again and put a hand on Draco's shoulder. "Draco, the man I am now is not the same man I was back then. Today I'd choose healing over killing anytime. If you have to try and imitate me, Draco, try to live the life I wish I'd lived, don't copy my mistakes."
Draco looked up at him a little frightened by the pleading look in his eyes. He'd never seen Severus plead with anyone before. Was this really so important? What was so bad about wanting to understand poisons? Lucius had always admired them. But then he'd sworn to himself that he never wanted to be like Lucius, so maybe Severus was right, maybe Sarah really was the better hero. After all there had to be a reason Severus had married such a simple ordinary looking woman and maybe it wasn't her cooking after all. Severus was a great cook himself, so why would he need a wife who could cook?

"But the werewolf cure is a medical potion and you need your poisons knowledge for it." he finally told Severus.

"Indeed, the two subjects are very closely related, despite being complete opposites in a way. It's hard to draw the line there, though and you are still so young. There'll be time to learn such things later. For now stick to your pranks and invisibility potions. How are you getting on with your Math book, by the way?"

"I'm almost half way through. I wish I'd taken Arithmancy instead of Care for Magical Creatures, though. I could learn it all much faster, if I had. Do you think I can still switch?"

"I thought you wanted to take Muggle Studies?" Sarah raised an eyebrow at him.

"Yes, that too." Draco confirmed. "I want to do both."

"Stick to one of them for now." Severus advised him. "I wouldn't advise you to give up Ancient Runes and adding two new subjects even if you give up Care for Magical Creatures would be extremely hard. Remember that you have to take your OWLs this year. The tests cover three years in both subjects and you'd have only one year to learn it all."

"And I also want to continue studying Math on the side." Draco agreed. "All right, I'll stick to Muggle Studies."

Severus smiled at him. "Good choice."

Draco smiled back at him. "I'll manage. I'll pass my OWLs, you'll see."

"I hope so." Severus told him.

Susie the Dance Mouse was happy to see 'That Dog' again, but unfortunately she didn't get a chance to play with him as Jack arrived only minutes after Draco eager to get back to their training. The rules were the same as the day before, only this time the defenders were there to stop the attackers and pass the balls back to the runners.

This time the attacker teams were Jack with Mike and Cathy with Larry and Draco immediately realised that even though Larry was still hesitant to pass, these combinations worked much better. Jack clearly trusted Mike not to miss the goal or lose the ball as easily as Larry and cooperated fine this time, while Cathy did her best to coax Larry into passing.

Unfortunately Larry's attempts usually resulted in the ball ending up with Luke, who'd been assigned to be his opponent this time. Luke might be entirely unable to stop Larry from attacking the goal, but anybody could have stopped his clumsy passes and Luke turned out to be very good at long passes himself. Larry's ball returned to the runners in a wide arc almost every time he tried to pass. Cathy made no attempts for the goal on her own. Instead she concentrated on outmanoeuvring Beth and passing to Larry, who'd lose it once again.
At east this gave Draco the chance to concentrate on Mike and Jack, who were a truly dangerous team. Mike could almost run circles around Mary even though she was trying hard, but Matt was giving Jack a very hard time.

"Don't let him get to you Jack!" Draco shouted out to the gang leader when he realised Jack was nearly ready to blow up. "You can get past him, just wait for the right moment."

Jack waited trying hard to keep his temper under control. He pretended to go left and when Matt followed the expected movement quickly shot to the right.

A good idea generally. Against Mary or Beth it would most likely have worked, but Matt was too fast. He turned at once and managed to reach the ball just in time.

"Good move." Draco told Jack. "And well done Matt."

"Good?" Jack asked incredulously. "I lost it again!"

"It'd have worked against the others most likely." Draco shrugged. "And we are trying to improve the defenders' performance as well. Don't worry. I'll set him on Mike mostly. Mary's clearly out of breath already with all those sudden turns. Matt's more agile and Mike's tricks will challenge him more than your straight shots."

"So who're you going to assign to me?" Jack asked.

Draco cast a quick look at the other pair as he saw another ball sail high back towards the middle. "Not Luke again, that's for sure. Maybe he ought to have been a runner."

"Dance Mouse's faster." Jack reminded him.

"Yes, but those far passes make up for that. Susie's also less nervous though and she's got a lot of energy. Luke will probably tire faster." Draco grinned at Jack. "Hey, are you going to play or not?"

He nodded towards where Mike was once again darting around Mary headed towards them.

Jack took off at once.

All in all Draco wasn't particularly busy this time and could watch all the players a bit from time to time. The runners were doing well, but then they were left without opponents on the field. Maybe they ought to set them against the defenders a few times. Susie's shooting seemed to be improving and the three were beginning to form a nice team.

The defenders were all doing their best and even Luke wasn't a complete disaster for once. Maybe he should have let him play against Larry from the beginning. He might look the most frightening, but was definitely the least dangerous attacker. Those two were obviously giving each other a chance that neither of them usually had.

Cathy wasn't practising her shooting though and Larry didn't get through to shoot either. That Jack lost the ball so often, didn't really worry Draco. He was keeping his temper under control and that was much more important than shooting practise for him. Mike was the only one who got through frequently and provided Draco with an actual challenge.

He told Mike of his idea for the next day's training on the way home.

"That'd require another keeper." Mike reminded him after thinking it through for a moment.

"It also requires only three defenders. They could take turns as keepers."
"Matt's not particularly good at that position and can you see Luke as a keeper at all?"

"That won't matter." Draco told him. "It's not really a scoring exercise anyway. I just want them to practise evading attacks from defenders. The Lions might decide to try and get the ball back as early as possible once they realise what our strategy is and we said we might use Charlie or Sammie to strengthen our attack if necessary."

"Have you considered using Susie as a defender in that scenario?" Mike asked to his surprise.

"Susie the Dance Mouse? No, she wouldn't fare any better than Luke and I want to keep at least one runner on hand." Draco grinned. "I'm not sure I know how to play without them."

Mike thought it over again. "Well, I'm sure Jack won't mind. He'll enjoy getting some target practise again, even if he knows he doesn't need it as much as the rest of us."

"Larry's the one who really needs that exercise." Draco told him. "I've always left him without a defender to cover him, because his shots are the easiest to catch and now he doesn't know how to handle them and that's keeping him from practising his shooting. I can't believe he didn't even manage to handle Luke."

"He didn't get past him at all?"

"Only two or three times and those shots were so badly aimed I didn't even have to bother to attempt to catch them. Since Luke isn't going to play if everything works out as planned Larry will be our weakest player."

"Weaker than Susie?" Mike asked surprised. He'd been too busy outmanoeuvring Mary to watch the other players.

"Susie's clearly improving and she really is fast. She mightn't be any good at the other positions yet, but she makes a fine runner."

Mike gave him a sideways glance. "I think now I know why the Lions' captain is almost always their keeper. ... And why you keep winning so much."

Draco started at the sudden change of topic. "What?"

"The keeper's always at the end of the field facing in. He's got the best overview of the game. Jack as an attacker is always at the head of his team and can't see what's going on behind him. That's why it's so hard for him to see the need for defenders. You see it all and are in the perfect position to organise your team."

Draco just shrugged at that. Yes, he did see everything that was happening on the field, but was that really so important?

After some bugging Severus finally agreed to show Draco the results of his poison check. "Most of the tests checked out negative, but this one here shows a slight poison." he explained as he showed him a vial with a slightly greenish liquid.

"How do you tell that that's poison?" Draco asked eyeing the vial distrustfully

"From it's colour, of course."
"But there are at least two others that show the same colour!"

"Those are different tests. They're supposed to be this colour, this one isn't."

Draco stared at the vial for a while before turning to his Math exercises. Poison checks sure were complicated. Each of the vials had turned a different colour and Severus claimed that all of them meant 'no poison' for that particular test and considering the colour of the tested potion. Maybe he really didn't want to be a poisons expert after all?

"We're going to see my sister this afternoon." Sarah announced at breakfast the next morning. "She isn't feeling well and needs our help. Can you watch Billy for us while we're gone?"

"Sure." Draco agreed readily, but then he remembered. "But I have to train for the big game. Jack will kill me, if I'm not there."

"I doubt that." Severus calmly informed him. "He's got to be used to his gang members' parents getting in the way like this."

"But this is special. It'll be the first real game the Rakers play against the Lions in four years." Draco tried to explain.

"It's just one afternoon of the training, Draco, not the game." Severus reminded him.

"I know." Draco sighed and picked up Billy for a quick cuddle. "And I'm sure we'll have a great time, won't we Billy?"

"Dako!" Billy agreed happily.

"Why don't you just take Billy down with you?" Sarah suggested. "The fresh air will do him good and you can still play with your gang."

"Isn't that dangerous?" Draco asked surprised. "Mark already attacked him once before."

"As long as you make sure he stays by the Soccer lawn, I don't see any problem." Severus told him. "Usually the older kids don't bother with babies and if the gang's right there to protect him, the Sharks won't even come near."

"Just make sure he doesn't get anywhere near the border and he'll be safe." Sarah agreed. "I'd better make sure that he wears a blue shirt though."

"But he isn't even old enough to choose which gang he wants to belong to!" Draco protested.

"He's expected to become a Raker now." Severus informed him calmly. "Remember what I told you about the younger siblings always joining the oldest's gang? You've been around long enough for the neighbours to consider you part of our family. Thus you count as an older brother and Billy counts as a future Raker."

"Oh, I'm sorry! I didn't mean to do that." Draco told Billy. Sarah just shrugged it off. "He'd only have had the choice between the Rakers and the Sharks anyway and after the way Mark treated him, do you really think I'd want to see him join the Sharks?"
"You want to change the training again?" Jack asked the moment Mike and Draco told him of Draco's idea.

"The runners might get attacked in the game. They need to have at least a little experience avoiding defenders." Draco explained his thoughts.

"And it gives us a chance to get some simple shooting exercise. There are only three runners, so we have one ball left for shooting training." Mike added in the tone Draco had learned to recognise as manipulating Jack. "You might not particularly need that, but Cathy and I are supposed to work on our shooting and Larry doesn't get much of a chance to practise it at all with the defenders around."

Jack hesitated for a moment thinking about it. He was clearly tempted to use this chance to show off his favourite skills. "Shooting practise isn't much use without a keeper. Anyone can kick a ball into an empty goal."

"The runners don't really need a keeper so they can use whatever defender isn't busy at the moment for their keeper. I want them to rotate partners a little so each gets to try playing against different people. I'll be with you." Draco informed him. "I need some serious training as well and that means I have to face some real attacks."

"You want to use Luke as a keeper?" Jack stared at Draco, then Luke who looked back at him unhappily. "I thought we just agreed that the only thing he's good at are passes and now you want him in the most defensive position of all?"

"He doesn't have to be good at it." Mike reminded him once again. "He's just supposed to watch the others play and throw back the ball whenever they shoot. We want the keepers to report on the others' strengths and weaknesses afterwards, that's all."

"And who's going to organise the defenders, if Dragon isn't with them?" Jack challenged. "Have you even thought of that?"

No, at least Draco hadn't. The runners would have Charlie to organise them and might be at an advantage there.

"Maybe we ought to leave that job to the keepers as well." Mike suggested calmly. Was he thinking on his feet here, or did he already have it planned out? "They're used to looking to the keeper for guidance and getting an idea of strategy might do them good. It'll also help us to figure out who'd be best to lead them in case Draco leaves us before the game."

"I don't even want to live with Gringolf Glizzard. I'm staying." Draco protested at once.

"Maybe you won't get a chance to say no." Charlie warned him. "If he wants you, they might make you stay."

Draco swallowed hard at that. Of course he couldn't force the Snapes to keep him for another week if Gringolf Glizzard wanted him. There just had to be a way to make Uncle Gringolf not take him. None of the others had, so why should Gringolf? But then he was one of his mother's relatives while the others had all been Malfoys. What if the Glizzards really wanted him?

"All right, lets give it a try." Jack finally agreed and they were about to take their positions on the field when Mely raced into their midst not even stopping when she nearly collided with Bloody Mary.

"Nino's there today!" she yelled at them when she reached Mike who she seemed to consider her contact with the Rakers. "And he's playing attack this time, not keeper!"
Jack froze in his tracks and Draco and Mike exchanged a worried glance. The rest of the gang just stared at the little Shark wannabe that had barged into their meeting like this.

"How good is he?" Draco asked Mely into the stunned silence. "Does he seem to be in top condition or does he tire rapidly? Is his aim as good as it was?"

"I don't know. I didn't stay to watch that long." Mely reported.

"Try to sneak back unseen then and keep a very close eye on him." Draco instructed her. "We need to know as much about him as we possibly can."

"If you can tell us more about Nick and how exactly the Lions are preparing for the game, that'd be great as well." Mike added. "But for now Nino is the most important. If you notice anything about Steve that would help as well, but for today just try to find out how much his lack of regular training is affecting Nino."

Mely nodded and took off again.

"Well, looks like this one has almost as much energy as our Dance Mouse." Cathy commented. "Pity, her brother's a Shark. She'd make a great runner and maybe a good attacker as well, if she got enough practise."

The training turned out to be hard for Draco. He wasn't used to having to concentrate this hard during an entire game. Normally he'd get to relax a little while his team was attacking, but now with the attackers taking turns shooting at his goal he didn't have that luxury. Jack and Mike both got a few shots in and Cathy scored twice. Only Larry wasn't very successful.

He did shoot better than when there was a defender in his way, but still Draco could hold all his shots.

"Come on, Larry! Try to aim for a corner, not straight at Dragon!" Cathy tried to help him with some advice, but Larry's attempt ended with him hitting a tree beside the actual goal.

"I hope you're aware that the Lions' goals have goal posts." Jack stated when another shot went right over the stone that marked the side of the goal.

"I know that!" Larry growled angrily. "What I want to know is how Dragon always knows where I'll shoot."

"Well, you've been aiming at the same corner for almost half an hour." Mike observed. "I guess he must have noticed."

"Do you think there's any chance that we could convince the Lions to concentrate their defenders on Larry instead of Jack?" Draco asked Mike and Cathy on the way back up.

"Not unless he scores a few impressive goals first and I doubt he can." Mike shrugged. "I don't know how good Steve is, but he looks fast to me."

"And Larry's still used to facing Mary in the goal." Cathy added. "He just doesn't understand that what works against her, doesn't against another keeper."

"He's been trying to get past me for a month now." Draco reminded her. "Don't you think he should have noticed?"

"I think he has." Mike answered. "He just doesn't know how to play differently. He's just not agile
enough to play tricky and not fast enough to outrun you. His only strength is smashing through with brute force and it seems his shots aren't hard enough to push you over."

"Think they'll work on Steve?" Cathy asked with little hope.

"Maybe, but I wouldn't count on it. We haven't even seen him play yet, but he's bigger and stronger than Draco, so if Draco can hold Larry's shots it's unlikely that Steve shouldn't." Mike decided. "Larry's only chance would be if Steve was a lot slower than Dragon, which is possible, but I doubt the difference would be that significant."

"I'll be bringing Billy down after lunch." Draco suddenly remembered. "Got to baby-sit while the Snapes are out. Do you think Jack will mind?"

"Maybe a little, but I wouldn't worry about it. If he gets unpleasant about it, just tell him you can always go back inside and baby-sit there." suggested Mike. "He needs you for the training. Can't do anything without a keeper."

"He's still got Mary." Draco reminded him.

"Who's working hard on becoming a defender. He knows it wouldn't be a good idea to use her as keeper right now."

Billy was quite excited to be taken down into the park and so was 'That Dog'. Both of them together with Billy's buggy turned out to be almost more than Draco could handle and Draco was very relieved when Mike offered to take the dog. He refused to hand Billy over to Cathy however and reminded her that the Snapes weren't going to pay her for baby-sitting when they'd asked him to do it for free.

"I just wanted to help you." Cathy tried to explain.

"Then take the buggy. Billy's mine!"

"Hey, what's wrong with you?" Mary who'd only heard the last part asked surprised.

"Overprotective big brother." Cathy shrugged at her. "All right, give me the buggy then."

Once outside Draco soon found a nice shady spot under a tree where he could put Billy, the buggy and two little squeaky toys he'd brought along. He tied 'That Dog' to the tree hoping that Billy would know to stay near the dog. The spot was close enough to the goal that Draco could keep the baby in his sight and far enough from the border to let him hope that Billy wouldn't wander into enemy territory, if he decided to take off on his own.

The rest of the team soon ran over to see what was going on and Billy suddenly found himself surrounded by curious faces. He dug his little fists into Draco's shirt and cuddled up to him tightly taking only occasional peaks at the gang.

"Awww! He's so cute!"

"Hey Billy, look here!"

"Hi, little one!"

Nothing could convince Billy to let go of Draco's shirt and play with the others.
"See," Draco told Cathy. "I knew he wouldn't have wanted to be handed over to anyone else."

Jack glared a little when he saw the reason for the commotion, but Draco just gave him a shrug and a winning smile. "He'll let me go as soon as you get the others to start training. He's just scared of all the people."

Jack glared some more, but told the others to get on the field. "Let's just try out the combinations we haven't had yet, okay." he told them and Draco realised too late that that meant that Luke would be facing Mike while Matt's talent was wasted on poor Larry.

Well, at least those two would be playing together, so maybe that would even things out a little.

Once the others were gone Billy calmed down a little and it only took a little coaxing with one of the squishy toys to convince him to let go of Draco.

"See, I told you, he'd let go." Draco smiled at Jack as he took his position in the goal.

Jack and Cathy turned out to work together well to Draco's surprise. They managed to use speed and fast combinations to confuse and outmanoeuvre Mary and Beth successfully.

Mike and Larry however failed at the passes. Mike did well enough, but Matt just had to wait until Larry tried to return the ball. At least Mike didn't take it as hard as Jack might have and kept trying even though it was hopeless. Matt looked almost bored as he kicked the ball back to Susie once again, but Draco didn't have time to watch. Another well aimed shot from Jack almost whisked past him and he quickly threw himself sidewards to catch it.

Mely arrived about an hour into their training and when nobody else reacted to her presence crouched down beside 'That Dog' and petted him a little while she waited.

Billy watched her looking a little unsure what to do. There was another stranger and she was petting his dog! Maybe he ought to be scared again? But she didn't look that big and she wasn't doing anything else either. Curiously he got up and toddled over to her. "Da!"

Mely stared. "Um .. Hi?"

Billy seemed to be happy with that answer and pushed his squishy toy into her lap. "Da!"

Seeing that Draco finally decided to drop the training and come over to rescue Mely. He picked up the baby and sat down in the grass beside Mely with him in his arms.

"Dako!" Billy squealed happily. It had been getting boring to sit and play all alone.

"So, anything to report?" Jack asked Mely coming over as well and trying hard to ignore Draco and Billy.

"Nino's pretty good." she answered at once. "He does get tired faster than he used to, but he's still a great player. I wish I could shoot like that."

"He's a lot older than you." Draco remarked still cuddling Billy. "He's had a lot more time to learn."

"I also watched Nick, like you told me." Mely added. "He doesn't seem to get along with Nino well. They're both great players, but not playing together at all, like Rob and Bob do."

"How's Nino with Rob and Bob? Did they pass amongst them a lot?" Mike asked eagerly.

"No, but that's normal for Rob and Bob. They pass only to each other." Mely reported.
"That means his only real partner is Babs," Mike pointed out. "How do those two get along?"

"Well enough, but I don't think Nino thinks much of her."

"He never did like to work together with girls," Jack shrugged. "Nothing surprising about that."

"Good," decided Mike. "I want you to watch Steve next. Try to find out what kind of ball he misses most often, what side of the goal he defends better, how long he takes to react and if you can, how he communicates with his team."

"How he communicates?" Mely repeated confused.

"He's the team captain. He has to have a way to give instructions during a game," Mike clarified. "I want to know how he does that. If he's using some sort of code, try to figure out some of the commands. If we know what they're planning, we'll know better how to stop them."

Mely nodded obediently and took off again.

"So, do you think we'll have to face Nino?" Jack asked Mike once she was gone.

"Why else would he start training again. This looks like Wednesday is his day off at the barber's. Maybe that's even why they set the game on that particular date."

"What's with his not getting along with Nick though?" Draco asked. "It seemed like that was important to you."

"There might be a serious rivalry there. Without Nino Nick is the Lions' star player. He might not like surrendering that status in such an important game," Mike grinned. "And it seems that he doesn't team up well with any of the other attackers. That might be our chance."

"Matt will have to take him on," Draco stated. "He might turn out to be too big for Beth and is probably too fast or tricky for Mary. And that means that Beth will have to handle Nick who definitely is too fast for Mary."

"And what about me then?" Mary asked with a frown.

"I was thinking maybe Babs," Draco let it sound like a suggestion. "Mely says she's really good at shooting, but can't run all that much so she shouldn't be able to evade you that well."

"What'd be the alternative?" Mary asked in a slightly friendlier tone.

"Rob or Bob, but if we really want to isolate Nino, it might be a good idea to let those two play their combinations. If they're free the others might pass all balls to them instead of Nino and Nick," Draco told her.

"I think, I'll stick with Babs then."

Draco smiled. Exactly what he wanted to hear, and Mary even thought it had been her idea. "But remember that I might still have to change the plan during the game. Do you still remember our sign language?"

A quick quiz proved that they did. Now all Draco needed was to find out what the individual Lions looked like and he was ready to use the signs in the game.
To Jack's surprise Mely continued to report daily for the rest of the week and the Rakers soon had a good idea of their opponents' style and weaknesses and adapted their training accordingly.

Larry was made to face Luke most of the time which gave both of them a chance and was supposed to prepare him to face Jerry or maybe Greg. The Rakers could only hope that Larry wouldn't be forced to meet with one of the Lions' bigger defenders, but most likely those would be too busy with the other attackers.

Mike usually got Matt for his opponent even though neither of them liked it. It was the most challenging combination for them both. Sometimes Beth got to try her skills against Mike since she was going to have to handle Nino or Nick in the game. Most of the time she played against Jack though.

That left Cathy and Mary as the last pair and Draco had to admit that that was a rather unfortunate combination. Mary was getting good at her new job, but she just couldn't match Cathy's speed and stamina and was usually completely exhausted by the end of the training.

Susie improved a lot after she decided to take her own ball with her wherever she went. It wasn't a real Soccer ball, just one of those multi coloured balls little children like to play with, but it still helped her to improve her skills.

'Now, if it weren't for Luke and Larry, we'd have a really great team.' thought Draco after their training on Saturday.

"So tomorrow will decide, if we'll play with you or with Luke." Jack reminded him as they trudged back towards the house.

Draco was a little surprised and confused about that. He'd almost completely forgotten about the visit to Gringolf Glizzard over the training and what was Jack up to? This wasn't his usual way home, neither to his mum's nor to his dad's flat and he'd never accompanied them home before.

"I'm not planning on staying with Gringolf 'Loving my Lover' Glizzard." he told him. "That guy's house's probably full of giggling girls that don't have enough brains to realise that he's just using them all."

"So? Bet they're nice to look at and maybe stupid enough to let you use them as well." Jack suggested.

"Maybe, but that'd just make it more difficult to find and keep a girlfriend that's worth my time. Under those circumstances I can certainly forget Pansy once and for all."

"Pansy?" Cathy asked suddenly interested. "Who's Pansy?"

"The girl my father expected me to marry. I'm not sure if she's still my girlfriend or if I want her to be, but I certainly don't want her to ditch me because of Gringolf Glizzard's little whores."

"Maybe he's nice though." Mike said. "You might regret not staying with him, if he wants you."

"Never." decided Draco.

"Well, I just wanted to tell you that I hope you'll stay. See you on Tuesday." and with that Jack turned around and walked off without another glance back.

Draco stared after him. What did that mean now? Jack wanted him to stay? For the game? Or was there more to it?
"That's all you'll get from him." Mike told him with a shrug. "It's just the way he is."

A/N - So do you think Draco will like Gringolf Glizzard? Will the Rakers win the big game? Does Jack really want Draco to stay?

In the next chapter - We finally meet Gringolf Glizzard, the one man boy-group, find out who his best friend is and Severus uses some Slytherin manipulation.
Draco tried his best to convince Severus not to visit Gringolf Glizzard at all, but Severus insisted that it sounded like the best solution for him.

"He's your mother's brother, Draco, not your father's. He's as rich as your father was and can give you all the luxury you're used to. You'll still be at Hogwarts most of the year which leaves him free to tour the world and put on his shows."

"Have you ever seen him perform? Have you heard his songs?" Draco argued. "You expect me to live with that sparkly, grinning idiot? He's ... he's ... disgusting!"

"That's probably just his stage persona, Draco." Severus tried to convince him. "Pop stars have to put on a shrill façade so the world will notice them. I'm sure that he's completely different as a private person."

"I don't know." Draco commented to himself as they approached Gringolf Glizzard's villa. "It reminds me a little too much of my mother and he is her brother after all."

The gate was quite impressive and painted yellow and light blue with a big pink plaque announcing that this was the home of Gringolf Glizzard in curly red letters.

"Yuck!" commented Draco.

Severus just sneered and bravely rang the blue doorbell. The door swung open either by magic or electrically. Severus assumed that it was the first intended to seem like the later to the wealthy muggle neighbours. To his surprise they were neither asked to state their business nor did anyone appear to meet them. Not even an over excited house elf.

So they walked down the wide path that led to Gringolf Glizzard's front door which was painted in light blue and red and sported a crocheted pink star spelling 'Welcome' right in the middle. Severus sneered at the star, but that didn't help any. It remained a crocheted pink monstrosity on a red and blue background.

Draco stared at it for a moment then deciding he didn't want to see it at all cast his eyes down to regard the floor instead. The first thing he noticed there was the doormat. Four odd chubby little creatures each in a different colour waved up at him happily. Or were they supposed to be children in odd costumes?
"What's that!" he exclaimed in disgust pointing.

Severus re-aimed his sneer at the four little monstrosities. "A wizarding doormat, it appears. Just step over it, if you don't like it."

He reached out to ring the second doorbell and after a moment of hesitation at its bright orange colour pressed the button.

DI-DI-DI-DI-DING sang the doorbell.

Draco sent another pleading look Snape's way, but he knew it was too late to run away. The door opened and there stood ...

"Lockhart?" Severus exclaimed in slight shock.

"Severus! What a wonderful surprise! How good to see you again!" Gilderoy Lockhart used Severus' momentary shock to throw his arms around him for a welcoming hug.

Severus quickly pushed him away to get another look, then almost wished he hadn't. Lockhart was wearing a green and orange striped robe decorated with little glittering glass stones.

"How nice of you to come and visit!" he continued his enthusiastic greeting.

"Actually I think we must have picked the wrong house." Severus informed him. "We were actually looking for Gringolf Glizzard. Please forgive the interruption." He quickly turned to go.

"Oh, oh no! You're absolutely right. Gringi does live here! We're room-mates at the moment, you see!" Lockhart called after him.

Severus turned back and regarded Lockhart with a wondering look. "Room-mates?" he repeated.

'Gringi?' thought Draco, but didn't dare say anything. He considered himself very lucky to have been ignored by Lockhart so far and didn't want to risk attracting his attention.

Lockhart blushed. "Well, you see ... it's like this ... I'm writing Gringolf's biography and since I need to do a lot of research into his experiences and personality, we decided I should move in with him. We've been best friends since our school days, you know."

"So?" it wasn't quite clear from Severus' tone what he thought about that. "In that case, could we please talk to your friend? If you've known him this long I'm sure you're aware that Draco here is his nephew. We've come all the way from Hogsmeade so he can meet his uncle."

"Oh, oh yes, do come in. I'm afraid Gringi is currently busy in his tone studio. He's practising for his next gig, you see. But I'm sure you'll understand the obligations of us famous people. I'll tell him you're here as soon as he takes a little break from his work."

Draco cautiously stepped over the offending doormat and entered the Glizzard - Lockhart house. And froze in shock once again. The walls were painted in pink, the furniture was either red or light blue and crocheted coverlets in all pastel colours were just about everywhere.

Severus dared step on the doormat and hesitated there for a moment debating whether to enter this vision of hell or not. One of the colourful waving monstrosities squeaked when he stepped on it.

"Oh, please be careful of my teletubbies!" Lockhart begged him. "They are such fragile young creatures."
Severus had no more an idea what a teletubby might be than Draco did, but Lockhart seemed to associate that term with the ugly things on his doormat, so he obligingly stepped off and into the house.

Loud guitar music filled the entire hall. "My name is Gringolf Glizzard." Gringolf's voice howled along with the music. "Hey, I'm a wizard!" he continued the rehearsal of his first and most famous song.

Draco cast another pleading look at his teacher, but Severus seemed determined to go through with this horror.

Lockhart happily led them into a sitting room painted in orange, with mostly pink furniture and the obligatory crocheted coverlets. At least the music drowned out his attempts at conversation.

"Shoobie doobie doo ... I'm the wizard Gringolf Glizard!" it went on.

"How much longer until he takes his break?" Draco shouted over the noise.

Lockhart said something, probably in response, but maybe he was just telling them that he couldn't understand them as Gringolf yowled on. "Touch the wand with trembling fingers."

"Mysterious whispers." squeaked the high voice of the lead garden gnome.

"He has his gnome band in here as well?" Draco asked shocked. He couldn't possibly live in a house with a bunch of gnomes!

Once again his question went unheard through Gringolf's rehearsal.

"And look at these twisters ... As the rival lingers ..."

'What twisters?' Draco wished the lyrics would at least make some sense.

Gringolf however remained unbothered by questions into the meaning of his songs and went into the chorus once again. "My name is Gringolf Glizard! Hey, I'm a wizard! ... Shoobie ..."

Draco wondered how impolite it was to cover ones ears while ones host was singing.

"Speak the words, cast a spell"

"Rustling leaves" squeaked the garden gnome.

"I caught the thieves .. Of your heart, Ma Belle" and once again Gringolf launched into the chorus.

Severus too seemed to be close to the end of his ability to endure the acoustical torture. Draco wished he could have told him that Gringolf had finally reached the last verses of his song when he launched into the next passage with "Take the broom, check it for ride!"

"Everything's in gear!"

"The world is ours now, my dear ... Join me there's no need to hide ... My name is Gringolf Glizard! Hey, ..." Gringolf finally ended his song with a last especially loud chorus.

There was a moment of silence as he probably was regaining his breath and for a moment Draco hoped that he was done now and they could finally get kicked out of the house. But then the guitar gave another painful squawk and Gringolf yelled up "Hey Gilderoy! Got a few minutes to rehearse our song?"
"Our song?" Severus asked with a raised eyebrow. Draco assumed that he just loved teasing Lockhart.

"Ah, Gringi, this might not be the best time!" Lockhart shouted down into the basement. "I think you'd better come up for a bit. We've got visitors!" then he turned to answer Snape. "The new version of Baby, Oh My Baby Darling. We've changed it to include a few rap passages sung by me. Please don't tell anyone yet. It's supposed to be a surprise for the tour. A special act to draw in the fans, you know."

At this point Gringolf Glizzard finally showed up dressed in pink and yellow clashing horribly with the orange shoulder strip of his guitar. "Who is it Gilderoy? Pretty fan girls that need a dose of our charm? Or is it the press for another mega-interview?"

"Neither." Lockhart had to disappoint him. "It's your nephew Draco Malfoy and my dear old friend Severus. You know the one who so kindly assisted me when I was helping out the poor guys at Hogwarts."

Draco suppressed a groan. What idiot had restored Gilderoy Lockhart's memory anyway? For once Ron Weasley had done something almost worthy of admiration and some fool had to go and undo it.

"My nephew? What nephew?" Gringolf asked obviously completely confused. "Oh right! Narcissa had a son, didn't she? So sorry about what happened there, boy. A true tragedy. She was such a sweet little thing, my sister Narcissa. Sorry I never visited, but your father never was one to approve of modern music. We just didn't get along. Now, if there's anything I can do for you?"

"Yes, in fact there is." Severus cut him of.

"But lets not talk about it all standing in the door like this, Gringi." Lockhart suggested. "Do sit down and I'll make us all some tea. Or would you prefer something stronger?"

"Tea will be fine." Gringolf smiled at Lockhart. "Gilderoy is such a great friend." he told Severus. "And such a great wizard. I'm his biggest fan."

'No big deal.' Draco thought. 'Can't be much competition for that position.'

Gringolf didn't seem to mind the lack of response from his guests. He just launched off into a retelling of Gilderoy Lockhart's great fictional adventures. Draco rolled his eyes at Severus, but he just shrugged helplessly.

'Please don't make me stay here.' Draco thought as hard as he could. After all some Gryffindor rumours claimed that Severus could read minds.

Gringolf was still busy singing Lockhart's praises when he returned with their tea about five minutes later. "Thank you, Gilderoy. I was just telling our guests about your great adventures. Won't you tell us the story about the werewolf again?"

Draco almost dropped his cup. Didn't Gringolf know better than to ask Lockhart to talk about himself? He'd endured enough of that during his second year at Hogwarts.

But to his surprise Lockhart shook his head. "Oh, you are so modest. You ought to tell them the great news about your new album. Gringolf just got another award, you know. Some day soon the queen is going to knight him. I just know she will." and soon they were listening to a detailed recount of Gringolf Glizzard's career and greatest hits.
"Ah, but Mr. Lockhart," Draco smiled his sweetest smile. "It seems you already know my uncle so well, you don't have to research any more about his life. Your book must be almost finished."

"Oh no! No, not at all. There's still so much work to do. It might take years until it's ready to be published." Lockhart almost squeaked like the garden gnome.

"I noticed you made the tea yourself, Gilderoy. Don't you have a house elf here?" Severus quickly steered the topic away from Gringolf Glizzard's biography. House elves were usually a safe topic. Hermione Granger was the only person Draco knew who was really interested in house elves.

"Ah well, you know with all the muggles around." Gringolf said vaguely.

"I see, but you could hire human servants." Severus suggested. "The muggles would expect you to have at least a cook."

"Uh yes, but we're both such private people. We just like to have the house to ourselves, you see." Lockhart jumped in.

"But I'm sure you didn't just come here to discuss household help." Gringolf took over before Severus could say anything else. "What can we do for you?"

'Kick us out of the house already,' Draco thought, but it didn't seem like they were going to oblige anytime soon. Instead they were both looking at Severus with expectant smiles.

"Well, you already know of the tragic death of your sister Mr. Glizzard and I'm sure you heard that her husband was consequently sent to Azkaban." Severus began. "Now I am trying to find the best new home for Draco. You will understand that after all he's been through that is a very difficult decision. None of his father's relatives qualify, I'm afraid even though Eusebia Coleman would be willing to take him in. She is a nice woman, but already has too many children to give Draco the attention he needs after such a loss."

"Oh, of course we'll take him in!" Gringolf exclaimed at once. "It'll be such great publicity! Pop star Gringolf Glizzard adopts his poor orphaned nephew. Oh, the headlines that will make!"

"We could even arrange a special charity concert for orphans or victims of domestic violence!" Lockhart added enthusiastically.

"You do realise of course, that caring for Draco will take up a lot of your time." Severus reminded them.

"Of course, but he's a big boy. It won't be a problem." Gringolf smiled. "The media will love it. Big photo articles, interviews. We'll get on all muggle TV-shows. It's just perfect."

"So is there a woman you could consider marrying?" Severus asked right into their discussion of career moves.

"W ... w ...woman?" Gringolf stuttered taken completely off guard.

"Marry?" exclaimed Lockhart.

Despite his shock at being wanted by the one person he didn't want at all Draco had to struggle hard to hide his grin.

"Well, a young boy needs a mother, so you'll need to get married." Severus told Gringolf perfectly straight faced.
"But ... but ... Gringolf just can't get married!" Lockhart exclaimed clutching a bright orange crocheted coverlet to his chest. "Gringi!"

Gringolf stared at Severus for a shocked moment, then looked at Draco and finally turned to Lockhart. "No, that's right. I just can't. I just can't possibly get married."

Severus watched his reaction calmly sitting comfortably in his chair as if everything were right with the world. "Oh, why not? People get married all the time. What'd be so difficult about it?"

"I ... I can't!" Gringolf squeaked. "I ... Look, don't you know how many of my fans are young hormonal teenagers? All those girls are hopelessly in love with me. If I were to get married, they'd all lose interest. It'd be the end of my career!"

Lockhart nodded enthusiastically. "Yes, think of all the poor disappointed little darling girls."

"You're absolutely sure that it's impossible?" Severus asked them hopefully.

"Impossible. Yes, absolutely impossible. All those poor pretty girls. A wife just won't fit my image." Gringolf confirmed.

"Please reconsider. You can't possibly take in Draco if you can't give him a mother. He absolutely needs that." Severus asked them.

Draco stared at his teacher in confusion for a moment. What was going on? He hadn't minded leaving him with a single man when he'd taken him to Uncle Thomas and Eugene had only failed his test because of his drinking. Then he realised that this was his chance to get away from Gringolf Glizzard and his horror show of music, garden gnomes and crocheted coverlets.

"Oh, I can't. I just can't." Gringolf insisted.

"Well, I guess it can't be helped then." Severus sighed. "But maybe you could give me the address of another relative? Someone who's already married perhaps?"

"Well, I do have a cousin, but I haven't heard from him in a while. I don't think he's married. He'd have invited me to the wedding." Gringolf said doubtfully.

"It might be enough if he's just living together with a steady girlfriend." Severus allowed. "It can't hurt to ask him."

"I don't know his exact address I'm afraid, but he lives somewhere in Wales on this big stud. Breeds horses for trotting races, I believe. Just ask the horse breeders. They ought to know where exactly to find him." Gringolf advised them. "His name's Edmond. Edmond Glizzard."

"Edmond Glizzard, horse breeder in Wales." Severus repeated. "He's a wizard though, I assume?"

"Oh yes, a very powerful one in fact. Always had top grades, but then all of a sudden he decided to retreat from the wizarding world and live almost like a muggle." Gringolf shrugged. "I guess he must really love horses."

"He didn't have any particular reasons to want to distance himself from our world, did he?" Severus asked cautiously. If Edmond had been a death eater, it would be a bad idea to leave Draco with him.

"Oh no, I think he just drifted away from it all. Got more and more involved in the race scene." Gringolf confirmed.
Draco wondered how well he really knew Edmond though. Well, a horse breeder sounded much better than a boy band singer in any case.

"Thank you for your help then." Severus told Gringolf and Lockhart. "We don't want to keep you from your rehearsal any longer. Could we use your floo to get back to Hogsmeade?"

"Ah, I'm afraid we aren't connected to the net." Lockhart answered with a winning smile. "For privacy, you know. Our magical fans probably couldn't resist the temptation to drop in at the most inconvenient times. After all we both have several huge fan clubs. We just need this one little retreat."

"The muggle bus leaves in about fifteen minutes though." Gringolf added. "It'll take you straight back to the train station, if you can't apparate."

"Draco isn't old enough to legally apparate." Severus reminded him with a glare.

"Ah, right. That's right. You have to be out of school to get an apparition license, Gringi." Lockhart informed his friend brightly. "But never fear, we'll entertain you while you wait."

"Yes, yes, come on downstairs and we'll sing our new song for you!" Gringolf exclaimed in delight.

All attempts to stop the two came too late. Draco and Severus were dragged down into the tone studio to listen to the new variation of Baby, Oh My Baby Darling sung by Gringolf Glizzard and 'Rockhart'.

"This will be the big sensation of the tour." Gilderoy Lockhart informed them as he grabbed an extra guitar. "The Pega Pony Collection is already producing the CD of course, but they're not in the shops and nobody outside of the company has heard it yet."

Draco stared at Lockhart and his guitar in surprise. "I didn't know he could play." he told Severus in a whisper.

"Who said that he can?" Severus answered equally softy. "This only proves that he thinks he can."

Severus turned out to be right as Lockhart strangled some tortured tones out of the poor instrument and Gringolf began to sing.

"From the first time that I saw you
You're caught in my heart
Baby don't you understand?
This may be a brand-new start"

"Maybe she just doesn't want to make a brand new start with him?" Draco suggested to Severus. "I certainly don't."

But Gringolf mercilessly went into the chorus.

"Baby
Oh, my Baby darling
It's true, it's true
I'm so in love with you
Baby
Oh, my baby darling"
Here Lockhart's first rap passage started. He launched into it with a lot of enthusiasm swinging his guitar around.

"Search you at your home
Try to call by phone
Every action that I take
Darling, puts my heart at stake
Looking for you all the time
Wishing that one day you're mine"

"I had no idea one needs musical talent to sing a rap." Draco stated once Lockhart mercifully shut up and returned to torturing his instrument. "But this sure could have been better."

Gringolf took over again immediately after the rap passage and howled:

"And sometimes my heart starts to fear
That you're just a dream, my dear

Baby
Oh, my baby darling
It's true, it's true
I'm so in love with you
Baby
Oh, my baby darling

I wished that you could see me now
I wished that I could show you how"

"What? In these clothes?" Draco asked Severus. "Doesn't seem like a good idea to me."

"I wonder what he means to show her." Severus answered. "Or did I miss a line?"

Gilderoy Lockhart's next rap didn't have an answer to that either:

"Sleeping without dreaming
Understand the meaning
Empty is my heart
When we are apart
Girl, this says that you and me
We were simply meant to be"


"Maybe the meaning of this song?" Severus suggested. "It is mysterious enough to me."

"So I'm calling out for you: Come to me!
Wherever you might be
Come to me
And you'll see"

Gringolf continued.

"Baby
Oh, my baby darling
It's true, it's true"
I'm so in love with you
Baby
Oh, my baby darling"

"Just how long is this song?" Severus asked Draco when Lockhart stated to rap again.

Draco could only shrug helplessly. He'd never really listened to a whole Gringolf Glizzard song before. Tape decks, radios and CD-players didn't work at Hogwarts and Narcissa had much preferred classical music.

"Miss Undercover
I'm your lover
Darling baby
Be my lady
Angel, honey
This ain't funny!"

"Well, he's right in the last line at least." Severus remarked.

"All the time, my beauty queen
Tell me now, where have you been?

Baby
Oh, my baby darling
It's true, it's true
I'm so in love with you
Baby
Oh my baby darling"

After one last repetition of the chorus the song finally ended and Severus quickly made their excuses before they could decide to give an encore.

Draco felt much better once they were safely on the muggle bus. "Now, that was a complete waste of time." he informed Severus.

"Not completely, no."

"What? What was useful about that? All we found out is that my uncle's a nut-case and enjoys hanging out with the worlds biggest idiot."

"We learned that you have a cousin named Edmond." Severus reminded him. "And since he's obviously staying away from your Uncle Gringolf as much as he can, he might actually be a sane person."

"Did we really need Gringolf Glizzard for that? Wouldn't we have found out anyway?" Draco asked unconvinced.

"No, I didn't find any recent books on the Glizzards in the library. The latest is almost a hundred years old." Severus told him. "It seems your grandparents didn't like publicity and Gringolf only presents himself."

Draco sighed. "Well, at least we got out of there alive. Did you get the dragon hair yet?"

Severus glared at him.
"What?"

"The muggles, Draco. I'll tell you later." Severus hissed.

"Oh, sorry." Draco blushed. If he wanted to go to muggle school he'd have to learn to be more careful about what he said around muggles. He could only hope that if any muggles had heard them they thought that the word dragon hair was an inside joke. "Did you hear from Headmaster Dumbledore?" he tried a safer subject. After all muggle schools had headmasters too.

"Yes, he sent me a letter back immediately. He thinks there's nothing to worry about since it appears to have just been a rumour. Harry will be back at school in a month anyway so there's no reason to worry his family."

Good, now he didn't have to fear that Potter might intrude on his holidays anymore. "Do you think it's true what they say about his aunt and uncle?"

"What about his aunt and uncle, Draco?" Severus asked. "I've heard a lot of stories about them. Most are probably nonsense."

"That they locked him in a cupboard to sleep in when he was small. Do you think that's true?"

Severus smiled. "People have a way of exaggerating things, Draco. Especially if they've been passed on from one person to another for a while. Harry probably has a very small room, that somebody compared to a cupboard once and the next person who told the story said that it was a cupboard. Or maybe he really was locked into a cupboard by accident or as a punishment once. Nobody would make their nephew live in a cupboard for years."

"Then why does Potter hate them so much?"

Severus shrugged. "Puberty? Teenagers are supposed to seek distance from their parents and that can sometimes lead to extreme reactions. Only because he says he hates his family it doesn't have to be true, by the way. It might be that he's just trying to convince himself that he hates them, because he has to spend so much time away from them."

Draco sat quietly for the rest of the way thinking about that. Did he too only hate his father, because he couldn't be with him anymore? No, he realised soon however. He hated his father because he'd killed his mother and that way he'd lost everything he'd owned.

"Do you think Uncle Edmond will like me?" he finally asked Severus when they were back on the wizarding train.

"I don't know. I haven't even met him yet." Severus answered. "But he seems to like muggles and has horses. That doesn't sound too bad."

"Maybe he doesn't want anything to do with wizards though." Draco suggested.

"Maybe, but Gringolf didn't seem to think so. If he's right, Edmond Glizzard simply likes muggles a lot and I think you ought to be able to understand that."

"He must know a lot about them, if he lives among them all the time." Draco suddenly realised. "I bet he could tell me all about them. That'll really help me catch up in Muggle Studies and I might get some help from him when I go on to muggle school."

All of a sudden life with Edmond Glizzard seemed a lot more attractive and now Draco could play in the big game as well. Only three more days until they would have to face the Lions. They just
had to win!

"Do you know any horse breeders, Draco?" Severus suddenly asked.

Draco stared at him in confusion for a moment. "No, why?"

"Because neither do I and we'll need one to ask for Edmond's address." Severus explained. "Looks like at least one of us will have to go watch a horse race sometime this week."

"Oh, is that very expensive?" Draco asked a little worriedly.

"Not if you don't place any bets, I think, but it'll be a big muggle event and I've never been to one before so maybe you'd better stay at home. You don't know how to hide among muggles that well yet and I can't tell you what to expect. It'll be an adventure even for me."

"Oh, but I bet it'll be exciting and I want to see all those muggles!" Draco begged. "I promise to be good and just watch quietly. I can be very well behaved if I want to."

Severus laughed. "I'm sure you can, but I don't know how muggles behave at horse races. Just watching quietly might be exactly the wrong thing. I think it's safer if you wait for your Uncle to take you to the races. He certainly has to know what he's doing."

"And you're sure, you'll know what to do when you get there?" Draco challenged.

"Oh, it's not that different from spy work and I've done such things before. I'll get by." Severus told him calmly.

"Maybe you'd better not take Munin along, though."

"I don't like going on adventures without a partner to help me out in case of trouble." Severus gently scratched the back of Munin's head where the raven's strong beak couldn't reach when he cleaned his feathers. "And even though it's unusual there are muggles who keep pet ravens. Munin will attract attention, but if it's too much I can always make him fly a bit behind me and pretend to be a wild bird."

"Then you'll take the dog as well?" Draco asked with a side-ward glance at the yawning bundle of fur on the seat beside Severus. Somehow he had his doubts whether 'That Dog' was still all that scared of train travel.

"I don't think so." Severus told him watching 'That Dog' as well. "It might not be allowed to bring dogs to the racetrack."

"Why not? They are the typical muggle pets, aren't they?"

"Yes, of course they are, but they might not allow them near the horses. Horses scare easily and dogs are predators. I've seen dogs chase horses before and their owners weren't too happy about it. A horse race is all about the horses so maybe possible horse chasers aren't allowed in and what would I do with the dog then? I can't just tie him to a tree outside. He'd bark and whine and probably get arrested."

"Get arrested? Aurors wouldn't really take a dog to Azkaban, would they?" Draco asked horrified.

"The police, that's what the muggles call their aurors, has special prisons for dogs and other animals. They're called pounds, I think. There are even special policemen that arrest them I heard."
"But don't the muggles know that dogs don't understand the law? They can't just lock up innocent animals!"

"It's not seen as punishing the animals, Draco. They just assume that these animals are lost or homeless and give them away to new owners. Those that nobody wants are sometimes killed though, if they run out of cells."

"Maybe someone would want our dog though." Draco suggested. "Someone who'd really be happy to have him."

"Maybe, but I wouldn't bet on it. Anyway, he's our dog now. We'll keep him even though he's a terrible nuisance."

"Are you sure you don't like that dog?"

Severus didn't answer that and Draco smiled to himself. It wasn't all that hard to see what Severus was really feeling once you knew him.

"No luck?" Sarah simply asked when they returned home.

"No," shrugged Severus. "Do you know any horse breeders, Sarah?"

"Do I look like I know horse breeders?" Sarah scoffed as she brought out the dog-food. "What do you want with a horse anyway? They're much too big to keep in a flat not to mention they can't climb stairs."

"We're not looking for a horse, we're looking for my Uncle Edmond Glizzard, who breeds trotting horses somewhere in Wales." Draco explained. "If Uncle Gringolf's memory hasn't been impaired by all the nonsense lyrics."

"So what was your uncle like anyway?" Sarah asked curiously. "Why couldn't he take you?"

"He shares his house with Gilderoy Lockhart." was Severus' only comment.

"So?"

"So what? Do you really think I'd do that to the poor boy? I wouldn't even leave Harry Potter to live in the same house as Lockhart. It's just plain cruel."

Sarah sighed. "We have to give him back to his family sometime, Severus."

"Not to Gringolf Glizzard. They only wanted him for publicity reasons anyway." Severus declared.

So once again it was Severus' manipulative talent that had saved him. Draco smiled. Maybe he shouldn't worry all this much about being left with unpleasant relatives only because they decided they wanted him. For some reason Severus didn't seem to want to be rid of him that badly.

A/N: So how did you all like Gringolf? Will Sevi find Cousin Edmond? And will he finally want Draco?
In the next chapter: Mike and Draco go on a Lion hunt, there's some gossip about the gang leaders and their girlfriends and we get a first look at the Lions' members.
Jack actually smiled at Draco when he rejoined the gang on Sunday afternoon. He really had to have been worried about maybe having to use Luke in the game.

There was no training on Monday since most of the gang members had no chance to convince their parents to let them run off on market day. Only Clever Mike must have come up with a trick for that, because he showed up at the Snapes' flat before they were even done with their breakfast.

"You're still eating?" he asked Draco impatiently. "Hurry up! We've got to get to the market!"

"Why?" Draco asked confused. "Do you have a particularly long shopping list this week? I have to do the dishes first."

"We're not going shopping today." Mike declared. "We're going Lion hunting."

"You can do whatever you like, Mike, but we're going shopping so we'll have something to eat for the rest of the week." Sarah informed the excited boy calmly.

"But I have to show Dragon the Lions before the game on Wednesday. The market is our best chance to catch all of them and we'll never find them, if we have to spend most of our time waiting at the stands!" Mike protested.

"The money we can save by buying at the market is a lot more important than a stupid ball game." Sarah told them sternly. "You play Soccer every other day of the week. Market day belongs to the families. We need Draco's help with the shopping."

"But you always got by fine before he came along!" Mike protested. "And this is the big game." he turned to plead with Severus instead. "The gang's honour is at stake here. Our whole game plan might fall apart, if Draco doesn't know the Lions' names."

Severus glared at Mike. Mike looked back with a pleading look that almost rivalled 'That Dog's' doggy looks.

"Very well, just this once, but don't let me catch you hanging out at the muggle shop instead." he finally agreed.

"But Severus!" Sarah scolded.

"Such games can be very important to a group of kids, Sarah. Don't you remember your own childhood?" Severus explained. "It can be more decisive than an actual fight and it's certainly a more constructive way to compete. We ought to further that. ... And don't you want to watch our team win on Wednesday?"

Sarah sighed. "At least take that horrible dog. I don't want to have to drag him about as well."

"But he'll attract attention. The Lions will notice us." Mike protested.

"So?" Sarah asked with a shrug. "The market is free for everybody. They can't mind you going shopping."
"But ..."

Draco just grabbed Mike's arm and pulled him out the door. "Come on. We'll just pack him away again. He can't do much when he's stuck in my backpack. Come here, dog!"

'That Dog' happily raced them down the stairs and to the Soccer lawn where he stopped in surprise when he found nobody waiting for them there. He tilted his head a little and barked, but that didn't bring any Rakers running either. Well, at least he had won the race. He raised his head proudly and waited for Draco and Mike to catch up.

His pride only lasted until Draco grabbed him and stuffed him into that hated backpack again. 'That Dog' struggled hard to get loose, but once again to no avail. He was caught in the bag again.

The boys arrived at the market long before the Snapes, but as usual there were already lots of people about. The cheese and fruit stands were already very busy, while the clothes and toy sellers were still setting up their stands and others were still laying out their wares.

Draco watched as one of the latecomers struggled to get a folded up table to stand. An about ten year old boy finally set down his load of mixed children's clothing and helped the vendor out. The man smiled fondly at the boy's expert handling of the wayward table and ruffled his head as a reward when they were done. The boy laughed up at him happily then darted off to pick up the wares he'd left and start laying them out on the table.

Draco smiled. Father and son? Knowing West Hogsmeade it wasn't that sure. It might just as well be stepfather and stepson or uncle and nephew. Maybe Cousin Edmond would like him like that?

"Hey Dragon!" Mike tore him out of his thoughts. "Come on! I thought we were here to look for Lions, not to get a new pair of jeans."

"I was just thinking about that vendor and his boy." Draco defended himself. "I'd like to have a family like that."

"What about Uncle Severus and Aunt Sarah? Aren't they your family?"

"I can't stay with them. I want a family to stay with." Draco tried to explain. "The Colemans would have been nice, but they had no room and none of the others would have loved me like that."

"Well, that's why Uncle Severus didn't leave you with any of them, isn't it?" Mike tried to comfort him without really knowing how. "You'll find the right ones sooner or later."

Draco just shrugged and said nothing. What was there to say? He knew very well that Mike was just trying to cheer him up. If none of his relatives wanted him, what could his friends do? They couldn't just conjure a nice loving family for him.

He pushed all thoughts about family and home out of his mind as much as he could and started looking around for green clothed people. The Lions had to be around here somewhere.

Then maybe they didn't come this early he decided after they'd searched the fruit and vegetable stands in vain. There still weren't that many people around and some stragglers still hadn't finished preparing their stands. Maybe the Lions would only start coming when the market was already in full swing.

He'd only just come to that conclusion when they almost ran straight into Big Babs.

They stopped just in time and Babs smiled at them. "Hey, have you seen Jack? I've been looking
"No sorry, we only just arrived." Mike grinned. "But I doubt he'd show up this early. Try again in another hour and I'm sure he'll be around."

Babs frowned ad took off again still looking around for Jack.

"Seems like she's serious about our boss." Draco commented.

Mike just shrugged. "Well, she's lost Steve to Robin and probably doesn't want to switch boyfriends with her. That makes Jack the best thing available."

"You think Cathy will take Mark then?" Draco asked his friend with a slight frown. He didn't want to see beautiful Cathy Cat with the cruel leader of the Sharks.

"I doubt it." Mike shook his head. "At least the Dance Mouse said that Mely told her she'd already turned him down rather decidedly, if you know what I mean."

"Decidedly?" Draco repeated clueless.

"Mely saw her slap him rather hard." Mike elaborated.

"Oh."

"Yes, I guess that must have been Mark's reaction as well."

"Hey, wait a minute! When did you talk to Susie?"

"Yesterday while you were away visiting your famous uncle. What's the great Gringolf Glizzard like privately, anyway?" Mike teased.

"He's a complete idiot." Draco stated as if there had never been any doubt. "Do you know who he lives with?"

"A muggle supermodel?" Mike suggested.

"Worse."

"A wizarding supermodel?"

"Close, but still worse."

"A wizarding fashion designer?"

"No, Gilderoy Lockhart."

"That pretty boy author who got himself fired from Hogwarts after erasing his own memory by accident?"

"Yes, that's him. The only thing that guy knows is how to annoy everybody who happens to cross his path. He thinks he's the world's greatest superstar. Behaves like a diva."

"How does one manage to erase one's own memory anyway?" Mike asked. "Was he working on experimental magic?"

"The way I heard the story Ron Weasley went to ask him for help when his sister was abducted by
the Slytherin monster and found him packing. He tried to stop him from running away. Lockhart managed to grab Weasley's wand and attempted to erase Weasley's memory to cover up his cowardice." Draco repeated the story as it had been told in the Slytherin dungeons.

"And erased his own memory instead?"

"Yes, and it didn't even surprise most of us anymore after his attempts to teach the duelling club. You should have seen him try to demonstrate to Potter how to block a hex. If Uncle Severus hadn't been there to undo the worst disasters he'd probably have erased his memory right there and then."

"Why didn't Uncle Severus teach the club in the first place?" Mike asked surprised. "I bet he must be a great dueller."

Draco shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe he doesn't want people to know?"

"You think the death eaters would get suspicious if he started teaching the next generation of aurors to fight them?" Mike asked in sudden realisation.

Draco hadn't even thought of that, but it did sound logical. "I guess so. Hey, isn't that Steve over there?"

"What? Where?"

"Over there by the meat stands." Draco tried to point, but the crowds had shifted and the spot he thought he'd seen Steve in was once again hidden from view.

The two boys pushed through the crowds towards the meat stands trying to get another look, but they only found Charlie and her ballet class there. They stopped for a moment and this time Charlie stopped dancing for a few minutes and came over to talk.

"Did you see any Lions yet?" Mike asked her.

"Steve was here a moment ago, but he just met up with Robin. They went that way." Charlie pointed.

"He met up with his girlfriend?" Mike repeated. "Oh, just great. That means he isn't meeting the rest of his gang at all."

"Well, no use following him then." Draco decided. "Let's try hanging out around the muggle shop. Maybe they'll come there."

Mike glared at him. "They're not very likely to be interested in muggle stuff, Draco."

"They might come to the toy stands though." Charlie suggested. "At least the younger ones will definitely be interested in toys."

"Okay, the toy stands sound like a good idea." Mike agreed. "Come on!"

Indeed when they arrived at the toy stands there were already two green dressed little boys looking wistfully at the Soccer balls.

"Bingo!" laughed Mike. "That's Frank the Wolf and the bigger one's Greg."

Draco watched the two closely, but they weren't doing much except stare at the toys and occasionally remarking on how much they wished they had the money to buy this or that. Frank was really small, Draco realised, maybe even smaller than Susie. He really didn't look like much of
a threat.

"Just how old are those two?" he asked Mike after a while.

"Nine and ten, I think. Definitely not going to wizarding school yet."

"Luke might actually have a chance against Frank, you know." Draco grinned.

"Maybe," Mike agreed. "But then Frank isn't exactly the biggest threat on their team."

"You're right of course." Draco decided after another look at the two little boys. They wouldn't even be on the Rakers' team due to their age, but the Lions didn't seem to mind. "Lets move on and try to catch a look at the older ones."

But Mike disagreed. "No, lets stick around for a bit. We don't know where to look for them and chances are good, they'll show up here sometime or that Frank and Greg will know where to find them. We can follow them and see where that takes us."

The two little Lions however showed no signs of leaving anytime soon. One of the vendors had opened up a broom race game and was demonstrating it to possible customers. Greg seemed fascinated and Frank too was watching with obvious interest.

Draco was beginning to get bored. If Mike would at least let him look at the toys a bit, that would be fun, but he insisted that they had to watch the Lions instead. He tried to convince his friend to go to the muggle shop again, but had no luck at all.

"No, we might lose our Lions. If they leave while we're hanging around a shop no Lions will visit we might not find them again."

Draco started to argue, but suddenly Frank jumped and started waving at somebody. Greg looked up in surprise, smiled and started waving as well.

Draco stopped in mid protest to see what was going on. Three girls in Lions uniform squeezed through the crowd to greet the boys.

"Come on, maybe we can get closer, if we pretend to be interested in those toy animals over there." Mike suggested and didn't even give Draco the time to say that he really was interested in the toy animals before he slipped away towards the stand.

'Billy would love those.' he thought as he reached the toys. There were cute stuffed teddies like Cuddly, the rubber snakes Mike had looked at the first time they'd been here, little toy horses that seemed to be especially popular with the girls. Even a big stuffed dragon looked back at Draco from the top of one of the boxes.

"Well, I'd still rather spend it on a new dress for my doll." one of the Lions said behind him. "I just don't like Soccer magazines and you can always look at them at the stand. Nick definitely won't mind. He does it all the time."

"That's Bianca." Mike whispered into Draco's ear. "The one who just spoke."

Draco looked at her out of the corner of his eye. She looked about his age. Wasn't that a bit old to be interested in dolls' dresses?

"Oh, at least buy something useful," the tallest girl seemed to agree with Draco on that. "It's enough money to get a cheap lipstick or some eye shadow. Just imagine what you could look like
with a touch of light green around your eyes. You might even win Steve back for us."

"That's Elena." Mike remarked. "The one Mely said is their best defender."

"Not exactly the way I imagined her." Draco commented. Elena was tall and would have been pretty except for the ugly scar across her right cheek.

"She got that scar in a fight with Robin when she was twelve." Mike explained. "Hates her more than the aurors now, they say."

"Or you could buy a new quill." the third girl suggested. "Your old one looks like it's been through a tornado. It'll never make it through another year."

"Pat?" Draco asked Mike softly. If this wasn't Bob or Rob, which seemed unlikely since Mely had insisted that they always stuck together it had to be Pat.

Mike nodded and Draco returned his attention to Bianca. He wasn't that interested in the defenders since neither he nor his defenders would have anything to do with them during the game and Frank and Bianca were the only attackers in sight.

Mike left him to it for a while, but then bent over to him and whispered. "Come on, there isn't much to see about them. Lets go."

"Go?" Draco asked in surprise. "Go where? I thought you wanted us to wait here for the rest of the Lions?"

"I did, but their conversation reminded me of something, we should really have thought of much sooner." Mike grinned. "Nick works at the newspaper stand. We'll find him and maybe even Jerry there. Come on."

It had to be the newspaper stand! Draco sighed and followed Mike into the dense crowds. He hadn't been there yet, but he remembered having passed it before. It was right in front of the bookshop, if the little store that sold mostly parchment and writing utensils alongside a few books could really be called that. Checking the place out might be fun of course, but it was right at the opposite end of the market place. They'd have to go either through the whole pushing and shoving crowd or walk around all of it. Neither seemed very appealing to him.

Still they managed to reach the bookshop after a while and Mike dragged Draco towards one of the boxes filled with magazines. "This is where they've got the Soccer magazines." He explained excitedly. "You've gotta see those. You'll love them. They're all muggle paper and have non moving pictures."

"Really?" now Draco was beginning to feel excited about the place. "I've always wanted to know what paper feels like."

He grabbed one of the magazines and started leafing through it. "Hey look! Here's an article about the keeper of the national team."

"Told ya, you'd love it." Mike grinned picking up another magazine. "Look, here they explain about different attack strategies. And there's an interview with the captain of the German team."

"Huh? The German team captain? How'd they talk to him without a translation spell?" Draco asked surprised.

"Well, they might have used a translator, but I think he speaks English anyway. Most muggles
know at least a little English and the big muggle Soccer clubs hire players from all over the world. They have to have some way to talk to their team-mates."

They spent quite some time looking at magazines and Draco almost completely forgot about Nick who was standing over by the wall of the bookshop reading a Soccer magazine as well. He only remembered him at all, when he came over to pick up another magazine to read.

"Hi Nick!" Mike greeted him casually. "Anything interesting in there?" He nodded towards the magazine Nick had just dropped back into the box.

Nick shrugged. "Depends. If you're interested in the African scene, it's certainly fascinating. I was looking for that interview with the Brazilian trainer though. You don't happen to have seen that?" "No, nothing." Mike answered. "How about you, Dragon? Anything about Brazil in there?"

"No, I've only got British Soccer in here." Draco glanced up for a moment. "I had no idea so much was written about Soccer."

"Told you, you'd like this place." Mike grinned.

"You ought to see the books inside." Nick told them proudly. "There are five different titles about Soccer. All of them muggle books of course. Won't see those anywhere else in the wizarding world."

"Really? Come on Mike, let's take a look inside." Draco dropped his magazine back into the box. "Thanks ... er Nick, right?"

"Yep, News Nick the paper-boy, that's me." Nick smiled. "See ya." and he returned to his place at the wall with his new magazine.

Draco eagerly dragged Mike towards the interior of the bookshop.

"We don't have time for that, Draco." Mike protested. "We still haven't seen Rob, Bob and Jerry."

"I already met Jerry last week." Draco declared impatiently. "And I just want to take a short look at those muggle books. This could be my only chance to see them. Just a minute to look at the books and then we can go Lion hunting again."

"Okay, but only a minute." Mike agreed. He was going to say more, but stopped abruptly when he got a first look inside the shop.

"Oh, he's so cool! I wish I could play like that. Isn't he just wonderful, Bob?" said one of the two Lions bent over a huge book full of Soccer pictures right beside the door.

"Yes, and he's even good looking." replied the other one who at second glance turned out to be a girl. With her boyish short haircut she could almost have passed as the identical twin of the boy who'd spoken first.

"Twins?" Draco asked surprised.

"No, just siblings. Rob's a year older than Bob." Mike whispered back. "Guess we found our missing Lions."

"Perfect!" decided Draco. "Then we can spend the rest of the day looking at Soccer books."

"We only have to meet the Snapes for lunch in about ten minutes." Mike reminded him.
"Oh no!" Draco exclaimed. "Couldn't you have told me that sooner? We promised to meet them at the muggle shop. We'll never get back there on time, if we don't go now."

"We can always come back here next week." Mike suggested.

"If Cousin Edmond doesn't keep me and we get our shopping done in time." Draco amended.

"The shopping shouldn't be a problem. We've always had enough time to visit the muggle shop or the toy stands," Mike decided. "And none of the others wanted you, so why should this Cousin be any different."

"One of them has to be. Else where will I live from now on?"

"Here?" Mike suggested innocently. "You fit in here just fine. You could go to school with us, play Soccer with us ..."

"I can't just stay with the Snapes forever. We're not even related."

"So? If nobody else wants you, who's gonna take you away from them?" Mike teased.

"I cost them money. Money that Billy will need someday."

"I wouldn't worry about that too much." Mike grinned. "The rumour mill says Billy has a very rich godfather who'll help him out in an emergency."

"Yes, sure. That sounds really likely." Draco rolled his eyes at his friend. "Come on, we'd better get back if we don't want Uncle Severus to be mad at us."

They hurried back out of the bookshop, but soon were slowed down by the dense crowds once again. Draco decided to take the direct route in order to be faster, but soon realised that the long way would probably have been better when they ran into the vicar and his chatting friends near the bread stands. The people trying to get past them seemed to be almost forced to a standstill and all the boys could do was squeeze into a group going their way and let the crowd carry them along.

That dog whined softly at being repeatedly bumped into, but there was nothing Draco could do to help him. He couldn't possibly turn back now that he was surrounded by people pushing and shoving him forward.

The crowd carried them off towards the clothing stands and they were a little late by the time they managed to break free and correct their direction.

Severus glared at them for a moment, but when he realised how ruffled they looked he decided not to say anything about the matter and just handed them some packages to carry. 'That Dog' whined a complaint at him, but he ignored that as well until they reached the side alley where 'That Dog' immediately stopped his whimpering at the prospect of being let out and fed.

Once out he dashed around them barking for a while much to Billy's amusement who laughed and clapped his hands at the show, but it lasted only until Severus returned with their drinks and Sarah started to hand out the sandwiches. The moment she opened her bag 'That Dog' was sitting in front of her staring up with pleading doggy eyes.

It didn't help much. He was as usual served last.

"It's for your own good." Sarah informed him when he tried to convince her with a little bark. "If I feed you before Munin, he'll just steal your food again and you won't get a chance to eat in peace."
"Woof!" argued 'That Dog' maybe meaning that she could always feed Munin first and him second and then tend to the rest of the family. Draco and Billy certainly wouldn't want his sausage, would they?

Sarah however ignored all the dog's arguments and brought the sausage out last once everybody else was happily chewing.

"Eeese!" Billy cheered happily at the sight of the sandwiches and Draco obligingly offered him a bite of his cheese sandwich which Billy ate without much difficulty after an initial surprised look at the strange taste.

"Well," smiled Sarah at the sight of that. "Looks like we can soon stop buying all that expensive baby food."

"Eeese!" Billy repeated stretching his little hands for the next spoonful of squashed banana with apple and orange juice.

"It doesn't look like he's really willing to give it up yet." Severus commented.

"Maybe not, but I'll still start offering him more of our food and less of the baby food." Sarah decided. "It's a lot cheaper and with four people and three pets to feed we really ought to stop unnecessary expenses."

Draco sighed softly at that and decided not to ask for a little money for a Soccer magazine of his own. He didn't really need that to survive anyway.

The Snapes let them run off again after the meal, but insisted that they took all the packages along. If the boys weren't going to do any shopping they at least wanted their own hands free for new packages.

Getting through the crowds with the heavy bags was even more difficult and they soon gave up the idea of fighting their way through to the bookshop once again and decided to stay on this side of the market instead. After a while of just drifting around looking at the wares and watching the people they returned to the toy stands hoping to find Jerry or at least a few of the other Lions there.

The only familiar person Draco saw there was the little red-headed Avenger boy he'd scared so much a few weeks ago. Two little wannabes in black t-shirts were arguing over which stuffed animal to buy. The smaller one absolutely insisted on wanting an owl, while the older one was trying to convince her that a frog or maybe that rabbit over there was much cheaper and they'd still have some money left for sweets, if they didn't buy the expensive owl. Draco smiled at the two's antics. He wished he had enough money for some sweets as well. He hadn't had any since he'd arrived at the Snapes'.

He'd probably seen the two girls before as well, but he didn't remember them. He'd never paid much attention to the Black Ring's wannabes. Angel Anna was too big a distraction.

In the end Draco went home without having seen Jerry or Nino, but he was pretty sure that Jerry had to be the boy he'd seen with Steve the week before and he'd know who Nino was if he'd show up. After all how many adults would come to their game in Lions uniform?

Tuesday was spent training for he big game despite almost unbearable heat. It was their last chance to prepare for the match and they went over their strategy once again and tested out their codes for the last time. Draco reminded his team once more that the Nino symbol could also mean Frank, in
case Nino didn't play after all. Mary tended to forget the Lions’ smallest attacker.

Mike protested one last time that they ought to have different symbols for Rob and Bob and combining the Rob and Bob symbol with the left or right symbol didn't seem that good an idea to him while Larry was confused because he'd only just noticed that the Nino symbol was the same as the Susie symbol.

Jack finally settled Larry's problem by yelling at him that he didn't need to know the symbols at all, because he was an attacker anyway. Larry grumbled a little, but calmed down again when Mary put her arm around him lovingly. Mary was definitely more important than some secret sign language or being mad at Jack.

"Okay, do all your people know their symbols?" Jack asked Charlie and Draco.

"Yes, all ready for the big game." smiled Charlie.

"I think so." Draco said with a side-ward glance at Mary.

A whispered discussion between the three little wannabes distracted Jack before he could ask Draco what exactly he meant by 'think so'.

"What's with you three?" he demanded of Beth.

"They want to know which ones of us will play." she replied glaring at Luke and Susie.

"You and the Dance Mouse as far as I know. Any changes there Dragon?" Jack turned back to Draco once again.


"No, definitely Susie. We didn't even train with Luke." Charlie decided at once.

Luke hung his head and sniffled a little.

"You'll be our reserve player in case somebody gets hurt." Mike tried to console him.

Luke continued sniffling. "I wanted to play."

"You're just not big enough." Draco told him. "The older players run right over you. You'll be ready to play in a year or two."

"Susie's smaller than me." Luke sniffled on.

"She's faster too." declared Charlie. "We need fast runners and big defenders. You're just not what we need."

"Okay, this is our last day for training." Jack reminded them. "Luke, stop crying like a baby and get to work. You're supposed to stop Larry. Come on! Take your positions everybody!"

Luke's performance was worse than ever this time, but Draco had no time to worry about him. Mike, Jack and Cathy kept him busy. They'd all improved a lot during the last week and even though the defenders had improved as well, they got through more and more often.

He wondered how they'd fare against unfamiliar opponents though. They knew their own teammates too well after all the training and that gave them a big advantage they wouldn't have against the Lions. But then the Lions didn't know the Rakers either.
Mely who'd been sent off to watch the Lions' last training especially closely dashed back in only a short while after they'd begun playing and was immediately surrounded by the little Raker wannabes. That didn't scare her anymore however. Even though the gang was using the Soccer lawn almost constantly the little wannabes had found some time to play during the last week and had gotten used to Mely hanging around them.

The excited chattering of their watchers got Jack's attention though. "What's the matter?" he yelled over at them angrily.

Mely took that as an invitation and stepped out onto the field.

Seeing her Jack dropped everything and came over to talk. "What are you doing here?" he demanded. "I thought you were watching the Lions."

"They're not even playing." Mely told him wide eyed. "They've gone swimming!"

"Swimming?" repeated Jack incredulously.

"Yes, I even followed them to the lake, but I couldn't quite stay there all dressed as I am." Mely reported. "They'd have noticed."

Jack stared at her in confusion for a moment trying to make sense of the Lions' actions. Then he turned to look for Mike and found that the rest of the gang had gathered behind him.

"The Lions have gone swimming." he repeated. "Any ideas why?"

"It's terribly hot today?" Larry suggested innocently.

Jack glared.

"Maybe." conceded Mike to everyone's surprise. "If they were going to plan out their strategy they might have decided to go to the lake to cool down a little."

"Then they'll be back on the field where Mely can see them after lunch." Jack concluded. "I just wish they'd stayed to discuss their strategy in the park. If we'd know that in advance ..."

"Mely wouldn't have gotten close enough to hear them anyway." Draco reminded him.

Jack still didn't look happy, but it was true. Mely's tree was great for watching, but she couldn't hear a simple conversation held on the field from up there. A shouting match maybe, but not a civilized conversation.

"Well, you'll just have to go back after lunch and watch them then. I expect you to report tomorrow morning before the game. Understood?" Jack demanded.

Mely nodded nervously. She still didn't like being around Jack. Draco couldn't blame her though. Jack was seven or eight years older than her and she'd seen him yell at people often enough. He had to look terribly threatening to her.

But just an hour after they'd started their afternoon training Mely was back again.

"I can't find the Lions anywhere." she reported. "They're not on the field nor anywhere near the Sharks border."

"Have you tried searching at the lake again?" Mary asked her.
"Why would they be there again? They must have worked out their strategy by now." Jack decided. "We have to find them."

"We also have only this afternoon left for training." Draco reminded him.

"And it won't help us much to find them, if they're not training." Mike added.

Jack frowned and looked from Draco to Mike to the questioning faces of the younger team members. With the exception of Luke who was probably at home crying all of the little wannabes had come to at least watch the training.

"Hey you little rats!" Jack yelled out to the group of wannabes that was sitting under a tree watching them curiously, but hadn't dared to follow Mely onto the field. "Get over here."

The little ones exchanged a few uncertain looks but got up and ran up to them with Larry's brother Bobby in the lead. Draco supposed that Bobby had temporarily taken over for Beth while she was busy training with the gang. Cedric would probably have been a better choice, but Bobby was bigger and stronger and to the little wannabes that had probably been a good enough argument.

Jack glared at the group. "I want you to swarm out and find the Lions. Search the park, their territory, the lake, the sweets shop, the market place, everywhere. I have to know where they're hiding."

"But we can't enter their territory!" protested Bobby. "Their kids will beat us up!"

Indeed that the Lions were gone didn't mean that their little wannabes weren't around and an invasion of Raker wannabes was bound to get their attention.

"There's only five of them and they're smaller than you." Mary told him with a shrug.

Larry just sneered at his little brother. "Coward." he hissed when Bobby looked down at his feet in defeat.

"All right, we'll check their territory, but we're all going together." he decided after a moment.

"Whatever." Jack sneered. "Just find them."

"I'm going too." Mely decided to Draco's surprise. "I can show you the best way to sneak through the Shark territory."

"The Black Ring would be safer." Cedric commented when Bobby nodded excitedly at that.

"You don't have a guide through there and there's a lot of them." Mely reminded him. "I can show you an absolutely safe way through and I can talk us out of trouble with the Sharks."

"But we're at war with them." Cedric protested.

"The way through the Black Ring's territory is longer." Bobby decided. "Lead on, Mely."

Draco smiled as he watched the kids take off. He remembered how scary it had been to sneak through the Sharks' territory, but they hadn't met anyone all the time they'd stayed close to the border. Maybe Mely really did know a safe path for them.

"Okay, lets get back to work." Jack ordered and Draco returned into his goal and once again focused his thoughts on the game. Mike was really giving him a hard time today.
He noticed some of the little wannabes run past during the next hour, but none of them stopped to report anything. Mely showed up again on the Shark side of the border arguing over something with Toby. Draco was too far away to hear what exactly they were quarrelling about, but it looked serious. In the end Mely stomped her foot angrily, stuck her tongue out at Toby, turned and walked away from him back into the Rakers' territory where Toby wouldn't dare to follow her. She met up with Cedric who was coming from the direction of the lake and they headed back to the tree where the wannabes had sat before Jack had sent them searching for the Lions.

The other little wannabes showed up as well and Jack ordered a break to hear their reports.

"They're not in their territory nor in the Sharks'." was all Mely had found out.

"And not at the lake or down by the river either." added Cedric.

Jack sighed exaggeratedly. He hadn't expected them to have invaded the Sharks on the day before the big game or to have gone swimming again anyway. The fact that they weren't in their own territory was a lot more interesting though.

"The Sharks are hatching some kind of plan though." Mely stated unexpectedly. "They still want to get back at you for the blue hair."

"Do you know any particulars?" Jack demanded despite his momentary interest in finding the Lions.

"No, just that they've retreated into the basement and they're not having a band practice. They're up to something."

"In that case, we'll deal with that later." Jack decided. "Bobby, where are the Lions?"

"Jerry, Greg and Frank are hanging out near the sweets shop sharing a package of lemon drops and playing with some rubber wizard dolls." Bobby reported. "I didn't see any of the others."

"I saw Steve through the barber's window." Joe piped up. "I think he was just chatting with Nino though."

"The girls are down by the marketplace." Dan reported. "Just hanging round and throwing pebbles as far as I could see."

"And Rob and Bob are at the bookshop." Little Linda supplied.

Draco looked at her in surprise. He hadn't even noticed that she was there at all. Usually Linda was just Luke's little tag-along and never said a word. Hadn't Luke once mentioned that she was his little sister? Draco wasn't entirely sure of that, but he was sure that he'd never seen her without him or even heard her speak before.

Jack seemed a little startled for a moment as well, but caught himself in time. "Which girls did you see, Dan? All of them?"

"Well, Big Babs and Elena and Bianca and Pat. Bob wasn't there, because she's with Rob." Dan answered.

"In the bookshop." Linda insisted.

"That leaves only Nick." Mike informed Jack.
"Yes, where's Nick?" the gang leader demanded of the little wannabes.

They remained silent. Jack glared at them tapping his foot.

The looked up at him nervously.

"Maybe he's stayed at home." Larry's youngest brother, Dick, finally burst out.

"Sure." Jack sneered.

"His parents might have kept him home because of some family thing." Dick insisted.

"And let Jerry run off with his friends?" Cathy continued the thought. "I doubt it."

"He might be sick or have gotten house arrest, though." Draco suggested.

"That'd be almost too good to be true." Mike turned to Mely. "Was Nick with the Lions when they went to the lake this morning?"

"Yes, I saw him play catch with Pat. I think he must have teased her or something." Mely reported.

"And he didn't look sick?" Mike continued.

"No, not at all. Looked just fine to me."

"Then I bet he's out somewhere." Jack growled. "Go find him!"

But all the little wannabes' efforts were in vain. News Nick remained missing for the rest of the day and Draco couldn't shake the feeling that he was hidden somewhere close by watching them.

And why weren't the Lions training? Did they feel so sure of their abilities that they didn't think they needed to prepare for a game against the Rakers at all?

Draco went home feeling very nervous about the game indeed.

A/N: Who will win the big game? What happened between Mely and Toby? And where was Nick?

In the next chapter: We finally get to see the game against the Lions, Mely dresses up for the occasion and the kids realise they forgot to appoint a referee.
The Big Game

Chapter Notes

A/N - Here's the long awaited big Soccer game. Want to know who won? Well, read and find out.

Chapter 29: The Big Game

Draco was terribly nervous during breakfast and kept fidgeting about until Sarah finally got so unnerved she asked him what was wrong.

"Uh nothing." Draco said then changed his mind. "It's just that I don't think the Lions even take us seriously. Are they really that much better than us?"

"Don't take you seriously?" Sarah asked surprised. "Whatever gave you that idea?"

"They didn't even train yesterday. They all just hung out around town with their friends." Draco told her miserably. "They think they've already beaten us."

To his surprise Sarah laughed. "Oh no, Draco, they don't think that. They don't think that at all. I even think that they're taking you very seriously indeed."

"They are?" Draco asked incredulously.

"Yes, it's a Lions' tradition not to train on the day before a difficult game." she explained. "That way their players will be well rested and ready when it counts."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Of course I am. I was a Lion once, Draco. I know my old gang." she smiled at him encouragingly.

"You were a Lion?" Draco asked alarmed. Then what side would she be on today?

"Yes, but that was a long time ago. I hardly even know today's gang members."

"But then why do you want Billy to grow up a Raker?" Draco asked. "I thought kids joined their parents' old gang."

"The Lions aren't and never were an option for Billy." Sarah told him calmly. "When I moved out of their territory I knew that my kids could never be Lions. We live on the border between the Rakers and the Sharks and Billy wouldn't be safe if he didn't join one of those two gangs. All in all the Rakers are the better bunch in my opinion so I'd prefer my son to be a Raker. The Sharks have completely forgotten who they are. Ratting their own kind out to the aurors, attacking babies. I don't want Billy to grow up to be a criminal."

"Some of the Rakers steal though." Draco admitted very softly.

"They all do when they get the chance." shrugged Sarah. "That doesn't mean that they have to
grow up to be thieves, but the way the Sharks used the aurors against you was absolutely amoral. That's something you don't do."

"The aurors," Severus cut in. "Are the enemy. They have been for generations. The people of Merlin Park cope with them by sticking together and helping each other out. What gang you belonged to has never counted under those circumstances at all. If you were in trouble with the aurors, the neighbours would stick up for you. The Sharks crossed the line when they abandoned that tradition. They proved untrustworthy. If they'll betray other Merlin Park kids to the aurors, they will also betray each other. Even their own families can't be sure if they're safe anymore."

Draco felt a little better about their chances in the game after that talk and managed to at least seem calm when he met up with the rest of the team at the garden shed.

"You all realise that we have to win this game." Jack told them glaring threateningly at the two little wannabes still on the team. Luke once again hadn't bothered to show up.

'That's right.' thought Draco. 'No pressure at all. We just have to win.' Not losing spectacularly would have been fine enough with him, but obviously Jack had set his goals a little higher than that. His speech however was more intimidating than motivating and Draco could only hope that Susie and Sammie would relax again once they started to play.

The little wannabes joined them on the way to the Lions' Soccer field and Draco was glad to see Luke among them. He didn't look as cheery and excited as the rest of the kids, but at least he was there in case any of their players got hurt during the game.

Mely had come as well and to celebrate the big occasion had discarded her red t-shirt and was instead wearing a blue bandanna and a blue towel tied squarely across her chest.

"Didn't have a blue t-shirt." she explained with a shrug. "And I have to show who I support somehow."

Mely wasn't the only outsider who'd come to watch the game as it turned out when they arrived. The Sharks were having a sort of picnic under Mely's favourite tree and waved a green banner at them tauntingly when they caught sight of them. Mely stuck out her tongue at her gang as a response which caused a little uproar under the tree, but none of the Sharks dared to cross the Lions' border.

The Black Ring on the other hand had claimed two park benches right beside the field where they had an excellent view. They seemed to be there by invitation for none of the Lions reacted to their presence at all. They hadn't brought along any symbols of support either, Draco noticed, so they'd probably only come to watch what all the commotion was about.

Little wannabes of all four gangs were running around everywhere obviously very excited. Only Toby didn't look happy about the game at all. He was sitting on the lowest branch of a tree a little out of the way and glaring accusingly at Mely who didn't seem to notice him at all and was happily chatting with little Linda who seemed to be getting really talkative. Maybe she'd been missing another girl to talk to all this time? Beth probably intimidated her and Susie didn't seem to care much for her company either. The age difference was probably a little too big between them.

The adults must have dragged all the benches in the park to the Soccer field, Draco thought. Or maybe they'd just levitated or summoned them? He could imagine Uncle Severus just waving his wand to arrange the little groups of benches that were set up around the field. The two of them closest to the path had been taken over by old witches and wizards who couldn't walk that well anymore while a much rowdier group of unemployed had settled down on the other end. The
young mothers with their baby buggies eyed that group suspiciously from time to time, but Draco doubted there'd be any attacks on the babies. The unemployed were just bored and maybe had had a few too many beers, if the empty cans that surrounded them were any indication. None of them were looking as drunk as Lucius had been when he'd killed Draco's mother, though.

'Guess you need to drink a whole lot of beer to get that drunk.' Draco thought. 'And they probably don't have the money to afford that.'

Severus, Sarah and Billy had found excellent places with a mixed group of mothers and elderly people. There were a lot of very small kids milling around them and Sarah had let Billy out of the buggy so he could get to know them.

Several little wannabes and people from other groups came over to Severus and Sarah's group and at first Draco didn't understand why. Only after some of them had wandered off again could he see the little stand a witch had set up there. It didn't look exactly like a market stand, but close enough that Draco wondered what she might be selling.

The witch looked up once she was done with her last customer and smiled when she saw them.

"Ah, there are our players!" she waved at them happily. "Come here kids, have some free lemonade before the game. You'll get thirsty running around in all this heat."

Lemonade? Now that sounded like an excellent idea. The Rakers and Lions didn't need to be told twice. They rushed over to the stand and each grabbed a paper cup of cool lemonade from the friendly witch.

She smiled at them all while they thanked her then suddenly asked: "Say children, did you think of getting a referee for your match?"

"Referee?" Jack and Steve gaped at her. No, they obviously hadn't thought of that.

"Such a big event needs someone to ensure that everything remains within the rules, don't you think?" the lemonade witch prompted.

"Yes," Jack agreed. "It probably does, but we forgot to arrange for one."

"I'll do it!" piped up Mely. "I know all the rules."

"No, no way!" protested Steve at once. "No little Raker brat's gonna referee our game."

"How about Mark the Shark or Angel Anna." suggested News Nick. "They're not part of either gang. Let's ask them."

"What?" yelled Mary. "Mark the Shark? Over my dead body! And Anna doesn't even know what a Soccer ball looks like!"

"Oh, children, children, calm down." the lemonade witch intervened just in time before the argument got physical. "I don't think any of those are what you really need. Such a big game needs someone who has a little more authority than just another kid, someone who is respected by both sides. I think you ought to ask one of the adults."

Steve and Jack glared at each other then reluctantly nodded.

"Okay," said Steve. "But who? It has to be someone who knows what he's doing."
The lemonade witch smiled at them once again and then turned to Snape. "Severus, you're a teacher. You're used to handling teenagers. Why don't you help the kids out?"

The Rakers cheered, but the Lions immediately protested. The lemonade witch turned towards them looking surprised.

"No," declared Steve. "He'll favour the Rakers. His boy's on their team." and he glared at Draco as if it were his fault.

"Then let me do it." said the old wizard who'd been sitting beside Severus. "I've got grandchildren on both teams, after all. Do you agree with that, boys?"

Everybody fell silent all of a sudden. It was as if the minister himself had spoken, thought Draco.

Then a few little whispers started up again. "Yes, yes, let Old Joe be the referee. He's wise and fair."

Old Joe still looked expectantly at the gang leaders.

"Yes, yes, of course." Jack agreed as humbly as Draco had ever heard him.

Old Joe looked to Steve.

"Yes, that's fine." said Steve with a little more dignity.

"All right then. Give me just a little moment to get ready." smiled Old Joe and pointed his wand right between his eyes. "Oculi aquilae. There now I can see everything as if I had binoculars, but don't have to limit my field of vision with the glasses. So don't even try to cheat. I see everything."

The Rakers and Lions just stared at him for a moment. Even Draco had never heard of that spell before. He looked towards Severus for help.

"A standard far seeing spell often used by aurors and hunters." Severus supplied calmly. "A lot of people claim that it makes them dizzy though. That's why it's rarely used for other purposes, I guess."

"Will we learn that at Hogwarts?" Draco asked excitedly. "It could be very useful."

Severus shrugged. "You'll have to ask Professor Flitwick about that. It certainly doesn't belong into Potions class."

"Let's start the game. Take your positions, everybody. Severus, please watch the kids for me, will you." and without even waiting for an answer he dumped the little baby girl that had been sitting in his lap into Severus' arms. "Be good, Nora. Grandpa has to go play with the big kids for a bit. I'll be back as soon as I can."

Draco watched with bated breath how Severus would react to a baby suddenly getting dumped into his lap, but Severus just put an arm around little Nora and watched the players run out onto the field. He didn't seem to mind at all. Maybe he considered Nora a good potential friend for Billy? She did look about the right age.

Draco decided not to worry about Severus that much. After all he had a job to do right now. The Rakers seemed to have been assigned the right side of the field for the first half of the game and he ran over to inspect his goal. It was rather exciting to get to defend a real Soccer goal for once. The net was torn in two places, but it still looked much cooler than the two stones that marked his usual
He was so fascinated that he hardly noticed the way the Lions stared at him and Mary. They obviously hadn't expected the Rakers' change of keeper.

Jack and Mike however noticed the confused looks and shared a secret smile. So far their strategy was working out perfectly.

The defenders were already positioned close to the goal and Draco quickly waved them over to go over their assignments once again. "Mary, you'll take Babs, just like we planned on."

Mary nodded gleefully. "And just like I wanted to. I'll show her she isn't that great. You can rely on me."

"That's good Mary." Draco confirmed looking through the ranks of the Lions. No sign of Nino anywhere and over there was little Frank the Wolf fidgeting excitedly next to News Nick. "They're not playing Nino after all. That means you can take over Nick, Matt and Beth you pick either Rob or Bob. Let the other shoot, but don't let them pass to each other. Each of you, concentrate on your opponents and leave those left over to me and remember not to follow them out of our half under any circumstances. If your opponent starts acting as a defender, take over either Rob or Bob, whichever is still free."

Charlie was having a similar conversation with the runners, probably telling them once more not to get too close to either goal and to look inconspicuous.

The attackers however weren't doing much at all. They stood near the centre line just staring over at the Lions who had taken similar positions. Both sides seemed to be waiting for their leaders to return from their talk with referee Old Joe.

Finally they returned and once Steve had reached his goal a shower of sparks from Old Joe's wand signalled the start of the game. Excited exclamations of the spectators documented Nick's first run for the goal, but Matt met him before he'd even gotten half way there. Nick tried to trick and pass him, but Matt recognised the manoeuvre as one of Mike's favourites and managed to kick the ball over towards Charlie.

The Lions' attack stopped disoriented. They'd lost track of the ball and what the hell had just happened?

"Behind you!" Steve yelled out to them. "Charlie's got it!"

This caused even more confusion as none of the attackers seemed to know where Charlie was. They'd only been paying attention to those players who'd remained in front of them when they'd started their attack and written all the others off as attackers. Charlie and her runners had taken the first opportunity to position themselves behind the Lions' attack line then followed them.

By the time the attackers finally turned to look the runners were already back at their positions looking innocent once again and Mike had the ball. The Lions' defence had reacted immediately however. Jack had been cut off from the rest of his team from the moment the game had started. Elena and Greg never left his side, but that was what they'd been expecting and Jack was keeping them busy with sudden changes of position and feints. Maybe he could tire them out and lose them in a sprint.

Pat had run out to meet Mike's attack and when the attackers turned they saw those two seemingly locked in a standstill. Then Mike suddenly turned around as if he were going back towards their
own side. Pat stopped in confusion and with another quick turn Mike went around her. He could go straight for the goal now, but that would attract the defenders attention to him and might draw them off Jack and towards him which they didn't want this early in the game. Larry was facing Jerry leaving Cathy Cat free to do whatever she liked. Of course they'd underestimate the girl. They should have expected that. Mike passed the ball to Cathy who shot immediately.

Steve had come forward towards Mike expecting him to shoot and managed to change direction only just in time to catch Cathy's ball. Much too close for the Lions' taste. Less than a minute into the game Steve requested a time out.

Old Joe halted the game with another shower of sparks and Steve ran out to meet up with his attackers. "Nick! What the hell happened? You were supposed to take the game into their half!"

"I ... I don't know." stuttered Nick. "Didn't you say the Rakers had no defence to speak of? Matt just took me completely by surprise."

"They didn't four years ago." Steve growled. "I thought I'd explained to you that they might have improved after the defeat they took against us back then. They saw that their lack of good defenders gave us an advantage back then, so it's only logical that they worked on that weakness."

"I don't think I can trick him, Steve!" Nick sounded slightly panicky.

"Then try to outrun them and pass the ball." Steve decided. "Make use of Babs before she gets too tired then bring Rob and Bob into the game. And don't forget Bianca and Frank either. They weren't covering all of you completely when you came in on them. They expected you to take the lead. If we can confuse them about who's going to attack we've got them wide open. And you back there!" he yelled out to the defenders. "Get somebody to cover Cathy! That shot was much too easy for my taste."

The game resumed once again and this time Nick left it to Bianca to start the attack. Beth started to go after her to get the ball. It looked like she was an easy target, but Draco thought it might be a trap.

"Beth!" he called out and showed her the Rob and Bob symbol. To his relief she nodded and turned towards Bob instead.

Bianca came up unhindered and passed the ball to Babs who managed to lose Mary in a sudden burst of speed and shot. Too slow. Draco grinned. He'd seen that one coming and caught it easily. The disappointment on Babs' face was obvious. This had most likely been the best chance she'd get in this game. If Draco could catch this shot so easily, she probably couldn't get the ball past him at all. And if she couldn't do it, Bianca and Frank stood no chance. A hopeful look towards Nick revealed that he was still blocked by Matt. That made Rob and Bob the Lions' best chance now.

In the meantime Charlie was on the move once again. Already behind the attackers she'd taken off fast and took the risk of darting through between Jack with his two defenders and Mike who was now closely trailed by Pat and passed the ball to Larry.

Steve caught Larry's shot easily enough, but the move pointed out to him that he had an uncovered attacker right in front of him and Larry and Cathy never retreated far from the Lions' goal. They were definitely too close for Steve's taste, but he couldn't afford to leave Jack whom he suspected to be the most dangerous player on the Rakers' team free and Mike had already proven that he could be dangerous as well.
He had two options if he wanted all four attackers covered. Either take Nick out of the attack which meant he had to rely completely on Rob and Bob to score once Babs burned herself out and she was already slowing down a little or use his least reliable player.

"Greg, cover Larry!" he shouted out hoping he was doing the right thing. Seeing how Larry towered over Greg he immediately regretted the move.

Draco watched the change with slight disappointment. That wasn't what they'd wanted to achieve. They'd hoped that Steve would not trust Greg to work on his own and assign Pat to Larry and Nick to Mike leaving Matt free to take over Rob.

This time Rob and Bob were on the attack. Beth proved to slow them down, but couldn't stop them completely. Draco got ready. Beth was staying between him and Bob perfectly even if she couldn't stop her from passing which meant that Bob had almost no chance to shoot. It would have to be Rob, if they wanted to score.

Still it was Bob with the ball darting left and right attempting to move past Beth. What if she was going to shoot after all? Draco was getting a little nervous. He was just about to shift his position for a shot from Bob when she finally passed to Rob, who shot immediately. One second later and Draco most likely wouldn't have caught the ball.

He took a few moments just to breathe after that one. It had been a hard shot and he'd caught it against his chest. Yes, the 'twins' certainly stood a chance to get through. Without Beth this could easily have been the Lions' first goal.

"Damn," he heard Rob say to Bob. "I thought he was supposed to be the weak point of their team. He might be even better than Steve."

Draco grinned. 'You bet I am.'

In the meantime Charlie and Sammie were approaching the Lions' goal as a team this time. Charlie passed to Sammie, raced past Jack and Elena, got the ball back and passed it on to Cathy when she saw that Pat was coming up to meet her. Pat stopped in front of her in confusion for a moment and Charlie shrugged at her with a wide smile.

Jerry tried to get at the ball, but Cathy was faster. Steve moved to the right side of his goal ready to jump.

But he'd missed Mike coming up on the left. With Pat off chasing after Charlie he was finally free to do whatever he liked and Cathy was fully aware of that. She pretended to shoot at the goal, but at the very last moment sent the ball flying off to the side instead. Mike's shot came much too fast for the surprised Lions.

Another shower of sparks and Old Joe's magically amplified voice announced: "First goal for the Rakers. 1:0 and fifteen minutes left to play in the first half."

Draco almost couldn't hear him over the sound of the little wannabes' cheering. Mely was waiving some blue piece of cloth as their flag and Cedric and Linda were jumping up and down like Susie the Dance Mouse when she was extremely excited. Even Angel Anna and her gang were applauding politely and Draco wondered if they meant it in tribute to Mike's skills, Cathy's trick or Charlie's cleverness not to pass to Mike immediately. In Draco's opinion they'd all three earned the applause and maybe even Sammie deserved some as well. Of course his part hadn't been spectacular, but if it hadn't been for him, Elena might have stopped Charlie too soon.
Another attempt by Rob and Bob followed, but Beth had learned from the last experience and took the ball off Bob before they ever reached the goal. Rob raced over to help his sister win it back, but Beth saw him coming and shot it off only roughly in Charlie's direction. Both Pat and Elena started to run for it, but Steve ordered them back to keep the attackers covered. Both Jack and Mike on the loose in front of his goal was the last thing he needed. Better to leave the ball to the Rakers for now.

Charlie and Sammie repeated the last manoeuvre, but this time Pat stayed with Mike. No problem for Charlie. She picked Larry this time. Poor little Greg tried to get between Larry and the goal and only got knocked over for his trouble when he ran smack into Larry as he shot. The shot went far past the goal and Greg climbed back to his feet immediately assuring everybody that he was fine, but Steve took another time out and called his whole team together.

Things weren't looking good for the Lions at the moment. The Raker's attacks were too unpredictable and none of them seemed to be able to get past their new keeper.

"It was the size difference." Steve told Greg in an attempt to keep up morale. "You're just not big enough to stop Larry."

He glanced over at the Rakers trying to find an attacker who was about the same size as Greg. There was Susie, but she hadn't done anything in this game at all so far. He wasn't even sure she was an attacker. The next in size was Sammie, but he seemed to be almost as harmless as Susie and he needed those four who were staying in front of his goal constantly covered. If he set Greg on Susie or Sammie, he'd have to use Nick and from what he'd seen of the Rakers' defenders so far he doubted Matt would follow Nick, if he retreated into the Lions' half of the field permanently. Steve had a feeling Matt would attach himself to Rob instead who was the only one who actually stood a chance against Draco at the moment.

"Switch places with Jerry," he ordered Greg in the end. "Cat's a bit smaller and she's a girl."

"She's still pretty big." Jerry commented remembering how easily she'd gotten past him with that pass to Mike that had prepared the game's only goal so far.

"We need to cover the Dancer." Pat insisted.

"Yes," confirmed Elena. "She seems to be the only common factor in all their attacks. Charlie starts them off, then seems to pick another attacker at random who'll shoot. If we can stop her early on, they'll never even get the chance to shoot."

"We can't risk having a free attacker right in front of our goal." Steve snarled. "And with the Rakers in the lead we can't afford to hold Nick back."

"The Rakers are risking it, though." observed Big Babs. "They haven't even made an attempt at stopping Bianca or Frank and they seem to be using Bob to slow down Rob. Leaving three attackers for their keeper to handle."

"Yes, they have much better defenders than four years ago, but still only three of them." Steve tried to analyse the Rakers' game. "But that's probably deliberate to strengthen their attack. They know Frank and Bianca aren't a threat to their keeper and they don't have any defenders left to stop Rob, so they've decided to risk that."

"It's strange that they're not at least trying to use Susie or Sammie against him." Babs commented. "Even if they can't stop him, they could at least annoy him. Okay, Sammie seems to be some sort of assistant attacker, but what is Susie's function?"
"Being number eleven?" Steve suggested. "The Ripper wasn't happy when I insisted on full teams. He's got only nine players and found one useful stand in in Beth, but most likely couldn't come up with another on such short notice."

"I don't know." insisted Babs. "He didn't seem that desperate to me. I've got a feeling she's just waiting for us to make a certain move. She has some kind of trick we don't know about."

"Ah, nonsense." Steve snorted and finally obeyed Old Joe's repeated reminders that they had to return to the game.

Only minutes later the Rakers were attacking again however. Steve once again moved to the right expecting Cathy to shoot. With Greg as her opponent she stood the best chances to get through. Always assuming that Charlie wasn't intending to shoot herself this time. Steve kept an eye on her as long as she had the ball, just in case.

But Charlie didn't shoot nor did she pass to Cathy. She picked Mike instead. Pat did her best, but a sudden sidwards move brought Mike past her and the ball went in.

"Second goal for the Rakers. 2:0." Old Joe announced.

"Damn it! Rob, do something!" Steve yelled desperately, but the first half was almost over.

Still Rob and Bob tried once more giving everything they had. Beth fought them all the way, but this time she couldn't get at the ball no matter what she tried. The two Lions' combinations really were great, Draco thought. Beth managed to force them into some awkward moves though and only metres from the goal it seemed like she had Bob cornered.

Bob hesitated probably considering to shoot herself since there was no way she could pass the ball back to her brother. She eyed Draco for a moment. He was ready for her. Yes, she could shoot, but it was very unlikely that she'd get past Draco from this unfortunate position. She tried to get past Beth again, but Beth had seen those tricks from Mike and didn't fall for them.

Time was running out for the Lions. There was probably just a minute or so left until the break. Bob had to do something.

In a surprise move Bob shot the ball almost straight up and over Beth's head. Draco quickly turned towards Rob, but then relaxed. The high shot had gotten the ball out of Beth's reach, but it would also sail over Rob's head as well. There was no way Rob could reach it with his foot.

To Draco's surprise Rob jumped anyway. The ball collided with his forehead and bounced off into the goal. 'What the?'

"First goal for the Lions. 2:1." Old Joe stated and sent them into the break.

"But he hit the ball with his head!" Draco protested. "I thought he was only allowed to use his feet."

"No, Dragon." sighed Mary. "He isn't allowed to use his hands, but the head's just fine. It's just too difficult to aim that way. That's why none of our attackers do it."

Even though they were still in the lead Draco felt miserable as he trudged back to the lemonade stand with his friends. He could have stopped that ball, if only he hadn't written off Rob too soon.

"Okay," said Jack once they'd retreated out of the Lions' hearing distance with their drinks. "We're in the lead and our strategy is working perfectly. It seems I can't shake Elena, but Mike and Cathy
are doing fine. We should win this one, if Dragon keeps the goal clean from now on."

"I didn't even know he was allowed to shoot with his head." Draco protested the hint. "It looked like he couldn't get to the ball to me."

"It doesn't matter." Mike reminded him. "We're winning and every move they can make now will only weaken them. They'll keep playing as they have and so will we."

Meanwhile Steve had assembled his team a little ways away from the field where there usually was a nice bench to sit on, but it appeared to have been dragged or summoned away to provide seats for people watching the game. So they were simply sitting on the ground.

"We need to change our strategy." he frowned. "Even with our special surprise we can't be sure we'll win this one. Their attack is much stronger than we expected even without Jack."

"It centres around Charlie, though." declared Pat. "If we take her out, they're in trouble. Let me take the Dancer, Steve. I know I can do it."

Steve glared at her for a moment, but she was right. Charlie did seem to be playing a mayor part in the Rakers' attack even though she'd never even tried to score. "Very well, take Charlie, Pat." he decided. "We can't leave Mike unwatched though. He's scored twice now while the other two only managed to get close."

"I can stop him." Elena offered. "He's tricked Pat a few times, but I'm not as easy to shake."

"That would mean leaving Jack unwatched." Steve shook his head. "We can't do that."

"Neither Greg nor Jerry stands a chance against him." Elena insisted. "They're both too inexperienced. It has to be me."

"No," repeated Steve more forcefully. "Nick can do it. We can't use him in the attack anyway, since he can't get past Matt and it won't matter much, if Matt goes after Rob now." he grinned. "They've somehow figured out that Nick was our main attacker, but they won't expect this. It'll confuse them and give us a few chances to score before they adapt to the new situation."

"Their keeper is damn good though." Rob remarked. "What if he won't be confused?"

"You got past him once. You can do it again and remember that you'll have help." Steve smiled. "It'll be easy."

"I can't repeat that shot too often, Steve. It's pretty hard to aim that way and once they expect it, they can simply force us into less advantageous positions. A little further back or to the side and I won't manage." Rob insisted.

"They don't know that." Steve said calmly. "And it won't be all that important. Now why don't you go get yourselves some lemonade while I try to catch Old Joe before he restarts the game."

Bright colourful sparks called the players and spectators back to the field a little while later.

"2:1 with the Rakers in the lead as we switch sides for the second half." Old Joe announced. "And the Lions are exchanging a player. Ninja Nino now playing for Frank the Wolf."

The Rakers stopped on the way back onto the field and searched the Lions' half, but the players hadn't come out yet. They could see something green shimmer through the bushes that definitely wasn't grass or leaves, but Nino was nowhere in sight.
Draco had to fight down a moment of panic, then caught himself. No problem, they'd planned for that eventuality. "Matt." he called softly and when the boy looked over to him gave him the Frank the Wolf symbol. Of course it meant Nino right now. "Beth."

"I know." said Beth and almost managed to keep the nervous trembling out of her voice as she made the Nick sign.

She wasn't sure if she could stop Nick as well as Matt had done, but she knew she had to try.

"No problem." Jack decided after a moment of hesitation. "We've been holding Mike back anyway. From now on he'll be the only one allowed to go for the goal. That ought to get us a few more goals to compensate for anything Nino might achieve."

"And if they decide to block off Mike by concentrating their defence on him, they'll have to give either Cathy or Jack more room." Charlie continued the thought. "I'll show you when it's time to change attackers."

Confidence restored they took their positions and only moments later the Lions arrived as well and the game started once again.

Charlie soon had the ball, but suddenly Pat was in her way. Charlie tried to go around her, but Pat was faster and took the ball immediately passing it to Bianca, who started the attack.

Babs made a dash for it, but Mary blocked her off. Big Babs might be rested for now, but her reserves weren't what they'd been at the start of the first half. She wouldn't be able to keep it up for long. Mary only had to keep her distracted until then.

Matt trailed Nino who was running only slightly in front of his sister obviously not trusting her to manage a long pass. Steve felt a little touch of disappointment at that sight. He'd hoped that it would take the Rakers some time to realise that they needed to stick a defender on Nino. It seemed that had been more obvious than he'd expected.

Rob and Bob on the other hand found themselves unexpectedly free of defenders and ran up on the other side of the field from Bianca and Nino. Of course if Bianca couldn't manage a long pass that wouldn't bring the Lions anything at all.

Beth was left far back waiting for Nick to cross the centre line and looking a little confused. Nick was staying beside Mike and didn't even seem to be watching the attack at all.

Draco took in the Lions' movements and smiled. He could see what Nick was up to, though Pat still sticking to Charlie worried him a little. It seemed the Lions had figured out the runners, but that also meant that Nick was needed in their defence.

"Beth!" he yelled out to the confused girl gesturing that she should take over Rob instead of Nick. She might know Bob better by now, but that unexpected goal had convinced Draco that Rob was the more dangerous of the pair.

Beth nodded happily at the command and took off after the siblings. She probably wouldn't reach them until they slowed down after this attack, but that didn't matter much. Bianca would pass to Nino. That much was obvious by now. Draco got ready for his shot.

Somehow Nino managed to get between Bianca and Matt for a moment and Bianca passed. Matt was between Nino and the goal in a heartbeat, but it was no use. Nino dove past him with ease and shot.
Draco threw himself to the side and felt the ball graze the tips of his fingers, but that wasn't enough, of course.

"Second goal for the Lions. 2:2."

Draco tried out some of the more creative curses he'd heard from his friends under his breath, because he wasn't sure how referees were supposed to react to that kind of thing, but it didn't help much. The Rakers now needed another goal.

He threw the ball out to Charlie once again, but again Pat took it after a short fight. Luckily Nino and Bianca were out of her reach and she tried to pass to Babs, who lost the ball to Mary, who tried to send it back to Charlie and soon Pat had it back again. Charlie had cleverly changed her position though so that Pat who'd had to follow her was now over on Rob and Bob's side of the field with Nino completely out of reach.

While Pat was still looking around for people to pass the ball to, Charlie took off. Maybe Pat would attach herself to Sammie, if Charlie wasn't anywhere near.

Pat noticed Charlie's attempt to break free and sent the ball off towards Bob with a quick kick, then dashed off after her.

Beth prevented Bob from passing to Rob and after a short moment of hesitation Bob took off on her own. Draco was ready for her however and caught that ball easily. A quick glance towards Charlie proved that Pat had already caught up with her again and they were now zigzagging about in the Lions' half of the field. Not good, not good at all. Charlie was obviously cornered as well as Jack.

Draco could only throw the ball out to Sammie which turned out to be a good move since the Lions hadn't expected it at all. Sammie took the ball to Mike, who managed to shoot past Nick, but Steve caught the shot.

"Bianca!" Steve yelled out as soon as the ball had left his hand again. "Cover Sammie!"

Draco almost cursed out loud this time. Sammie stood a chance against Bianca of course. His speed let him shake her for short periods of time, but this development certainly complicated matters.

Seconds later Nino attacked again, but this time Matt proved a little more effective against him and Draco caught the badly aimed ball.

It didn't help much though. Sammie managed to shake Bianca, but in his attempt to get it past Nick to Mike passed too closely by Jack and lost it to Elena. Matt caught it before it reached Nino again, but this time Sammie wasn't free and Bianca passed it to Bob once again.

Jack was getting nervous and tried to shake Elena with manoeuvres similar to Charlie's, but it didn't help. In a particularly desperate move Charlie even darted through between Jack and Elena almost succeeding in causing a collision between the two Lions, but they managed to stop just in time and all the two Rakers gained was a little distance from their pursuers.

Nino kept coming at Draco and the goal and even though Matt was getting better at getting in his way Draco barely managed to prevent another goal. He knew he couldn't go on like this forever. Sooner or later Nino would succeed and now it seemed like they couldn't get the ball into the Lions' half at all anymore and the time was running out.

Once again Draco caught the ball and looked around for someone to throw it to. If only they could shoot one more goal, if only there was a way to get past Pat and Bianca.
And then he saw it. It was so obvious. Now if only he knew the right symbol! Suddenly he remembered Larry. He'd been totally confused about that symbol the day before, because it was just the same as one of Draco's own.

"Charlie!" Draco yelled out to his friend who'd finally given up trying to shake Pat due to complete exhaustion. He lifted the ball over his head with his right hand and balled his left to a fist and wriggled it in front of his chest like a mouse. "For you!" and he threw the ball in Charlie's direction.

Pat quickly moved in front of Charlie again. How foolish of Draco to announce his move like that. Charlie most likely was too exhausted to get the ball through anymore anyway. If Draco told everyone what he was up to, she really stood no chance. Pat grinned. Situation completely under control. Her grin widened even more when she saw that the ball was slightly too high and Charlie appeared to be too tired to even go after it.

It soared past them and landed exactly where Draco had meant for it to go.

"Run Susie, run!" Draco called out and the little wannabes cheered as loudly as they had for Mike's two goals.

And Susie ran. With an angry shout Pat took off after her. The fastest of the Lions chasing the smallest on the Rakers' team. The ball was slowing Susie down, but she had a head start and she knew that she was their last chance to score. Having seen what Elena and Nick could do, she didn't dare pass to either Jack or Mike and she knew that she couldn't risk their last chance on Larry's poor shooting. So she took Cathy as her goal, concentrating only on reaching her. She didn't see that Mike had ducked around Nick as she raced past him. Pat's panting now right behind her never registered in her brain. All she saw was Cathy. Susie never knew how close she was to losing the ball to Pat the moment she passed it to Cathy.

Steve saw the pass, saw Mike coming up right beside Susie, and it looked exactly like the situation that had led to the first goal. Cathy would pass to Mike and Mike would shoot too fast for Steve to change his position. His only chance was to keep focused on Mike and ignore the feint towards Cathy.

And Cathy shot. Without ever stopping the ball she just kicked out to give it more speed and a little change of direction.

"Third goal for the Rakers. 3:2. Rakers in the lead with only ten minutes left to play."

Steve stood gaping at the ball for a moment trying to accept what had just happened. He'd been so sure that Susie was only there to fill up the Rakers' numbers. Even after he'd realised the Rakers' strange strategy with three different groups of players he hadn't made the connection. And he'd made another big mistake by writing Cathy Cat off as the weakest attacker, just because she was a girl and had handed her best chance to score over to Mike. She'd just been out to trick him! All through the game the Rakers had relied on tricks and unexpected moves instead of the straightforward attack strategy they'd always been known for.

Steve slowly picked up the ball and turned to stare at Jack. No, no this wasn't and never had been Jack's way. He knew Jack. They were after all in the same year and had almost all their classes together. Jack could never have come up with any of this. This smelled of Clever Mike's style or maybe, just maybe ... That new keeper of theirs was supposed to be a Slytherin as was Severus Snape. And weren't Slytherins supposed to be the sleazy ones? Snape most certainly was one of the best tricksters Steve knew of.
"Nick, get back into the attack! We need a goal and we need it now." he ordered almost before he knew himself what he was going to do about it. "Elena, cover Mike. Jerry, Jack. Greg, stop that little wannabe, no matter what." he got even angrier when he realised he wasn't even sure what her name was. Susie? Sally? Something like that. "Babs, you cover Cathy!"

"What?" gasped Babs. She'd never played as a defender before.

"You can't get past their keeper anyway, so try and be useful over here. I need help and a goal."

Mary stared blankly at Draco for a moment. Her opponent was running off to play in the defence? What was she supposed to do now?

Draco needed only a moment to rearrange his strategy though. With two quick gestures he reassigned Mary to Rob and Bob and Beth to Nick. Neither were optimal solutions, but he couldn't take Matt away from Nino. None of the the others stood a chance against him, if even Matt was having trouble. He'd just have to concentrate and catch all balls coming his way for the next ten minutes.

For those ten minutes the Lions were constantly on the attack. They kept the runners cornered and prevented any attacks by the Rakers, but Draco's defenders were giving their best as well. Bob was obviously scared of Mary and Mary knew how to use that to her advantage. Rob was left to play on his own. Nick found it rather difficult to get past Beth after she kicked his shin hard while Old Joe wasn't looking and even though Nino still found ways to shoot past Matt, he never got a good enough position to make a really clean shot.

Draco could barely believe it when there suddenly was a big shower of sparks and old Joe announced. "Game over. The Rakers win 3:2 over the Lions. Congratulations Rakers, that was a great game."

Even though he had no idea where he took the energy to walk back over to the Snapes from Draco had never felt this good before in his life. They'd won. They'd really won despite the Lions' having twelve members on their team, despite their real Soccer field, despite Nick and Nino. They'd won thanks to Mike and Cathy and Charlie and Susie and maybe just a little bit thanks to Draco who'd kept Nino from scoring a second goal even though it had been close more than once.

Sarah hugged him enthusiastically. "You did great, boy!"

Draco blushed, but it did feel good to be hugged like that, warm and safe and wanted.

Severus never comfortable with public shows of affection simply smiled proudly and handed him another cup of lemonade which right now was much more welcome than any Quiddich or House Cup ever could be. He was exhausted enough to drop right into bed and sleep away the rest of the day, but it was almost time for lunch even though it would be a cold one, because neither Sarah nor Severus had wanted to leave the game and cook, and then he'd have to wash the dishes and attend the big victory party in the garden shed. And somehow Draco didn't want to miss any of that for the world.

A/N: So do you think the Rakers deserved to win? Or would you have preferred to see the Lions victorious? And what will happen to the little wannabes now?

In the next chapter: Draco needs money, the Sharks take revenge and Sevi tries to find out
Edmond's address.
"I think Beth has earned her cap." Larry announced the next morning to everyone's surprise.

It wasn't like him at all to comment on others' achievements, but maybe Mary had put him up to it. She did look rather suspiciously disinterested.

"Well, so has Susie." Draco told him. "Without her we'd never have won that game."

The whole gang fell silent looking towards Jack expectantly.

Jack seemed to think it over for a moment then asked. "So what do the rest of you think about it?"

"We couldn't have won without either of them." Mike confirmed. "They both proved to be very effective and to be up to our level in the game."

"Steve mentioned a possible rematch." Cathy reminded them. "We'll need them again for that, so it'd be only fair."

"And they could watch that annoying dog for us." Mary remarked glaring at 'That Dog' who was sitting beside Draco looking up at them expectantly waiting for someone to bring out a ball for him to chase.

"I like Susie." Charlie said. "She's fun. And Beth isn't bad either." she added with a side glance at Mary.

"She'd be a great help against the Sharks." Matt grinned. "Bet they'll be almost as scared of her as they are of Mary. Susie is a little too small to be much use in a fight, though."

"We could leave Ricky to her." Larry suggested. "That'll scare him like hell and won't be dangerous for her."

Matt nodded at that. "She's even fast enough to have a chance to actually catch him." he laughed. "Poor Ricky!"

"Beth is too young." Sammie insisted however. "She shouldn't be in the gang yet."

"Very well." Jack decided. "Do we have the money to buy two caps on Monday?"

"If everyone pays two knuts, that ought to work out fine." Charlie observed. "And my Mum still has enough of the white cloth left over from Dragon's cap. I'm sure she won't mind making two more, if I offer to help her."

Draco blushed. "I don't have two knuts. Uncle Severus won't let me at my money until I'm older."

"Didn't they give you any money to go shopping with?" Larry asked him surprised.

"Of course, but I had to give all the return money back to them."

"Oh Dragon!" Sammie groaned. "Didn't anybody ever tell you that you never give back money, if
you can claim you don't have it? You just tell your parents that you spent a few knuts more than
did every time you go shopping and keep the difference."

"I'm no thief." Draco hissed at him. "The Snapes already spend more money on me than they
should. I won't steal from them."

"You're too honourable, Dragon." Charlie remarked.

"Well, you'll just have to ask them to lend you the money then." Mike told Draco. "Or steal it on
Monday."

"We might be able to buy the caps with two knuts less, if we're lucky enough to get a nice vendor
with two for sale." Charlie estimated. "But it'd be easier if we had that money."

"I'll try." promised Draco. "But Sarah's been saying we have to spend less so I can't promise
anything."

"Don't you have any old toys you could sell?" Jack sneered.

"No, the ministry took everything when they raided the Manor." Draco said at once. No way was
he going to mention Cuddly to Jack. He just couldn't sell his teddy. After all he was a gift from
Uncle Severus.

"Then lets just accept Susie." Sammie suggested. "That won't cost us that much money and she's
old enough too."

Jack glared at him. "We've discussed that. Beth is big enough and she did great during the game.
We have decided to accept her and we'll stick to that decision."

"It wouldn't be fair, Sammie." Charlie added. "Beth worked just as hard for our victory as Susie.
Her role may have been less spectacular, but it was just as important. We can't just accept Susie
and not Beth. She'd think that we don't appreciate her effort."

"We can't hurt her feelings like that." Cathy confirmed as well. "We've already hurt Luke, but he
really wasn't up to it. Beth is a tough girl and has proven she can keep up with us."

Sammie frowned, but didn't protest. Draco wondered why he disliked Beth so much. Or was he
jealous, because he'd not gotten into the gang as young? Was he afraid she might be a threat to his
position? But Sammie was the youngest and least respected gang member. His status could only
rise with new and younger members coming in.

Then again Sammie sometimes seemed to be more respected than Matt, but that was probably
because Matt was so quiet. He usually let the others talk and accepted their decisions.

Somehow none of them was feeling like playing Soccer. It was once again terribly hot and they'd
been training for two weeks before the game. Now that it was over they were just fine with leaving
the field to the little wannabes and just lying in the shade talking.

Draco rolled over to lie on his side so that he could watch the little wannabes play.

Susie and Beth didn't seem to have any problems playing with Mely even though they never had
before. They'd gotten quite adaptable during all the hard training.

Luke however didn't like the new team-mate at all and was doing his best to ignore her which was
rather unfortunate for his team, because Mely was their best attacker and despite Beth's excellent
defence, Cedric had already scored twice. Yes, both Mely and Cedric promised to become great attackers someday, Draco noted with satisfaction.

The gang needed young attack talents since Sammie was the only one of the younger members who'd be able to replace an attacker once the older members left. Draco wondered if Luke would someday qualify as an attacker as well. It was clearly what he wanted to do, but his shooting just wasn't anywhere near Cedric's or Mely's. His excellent passes might predestine him to be a runner instead and with Sammie, Cedric, Mely and possibly Susie, if she didn't decide to remain a runner, all attack positions were filled. A fifth attacker would cost them a defender or runner and they couldn't risk that.

Draco almost laughed out loud when he realised he was thinking of Mely as a Raker. He'd completely forgotten they'd only borrowed her from the Sharks!

Then again Mely was wearing a much too wide white blouse instead of her usual red t-shirt today. She must have borrowed that from her Mum, Draco thought. Or maybe she had an older sister? All he knew about her family was that her brother was a Shark, but he had no idea which one. The only person she'd ever seemed to be close to was Toby who wasn't even a Shark yet, but maybe the siblings didn't get along? A lot of older sisters and brothers felt embarrassed by little siblings.

Mary clearly cared a lot about Beth, but tried not to show it in public. Draco suspected that they had lots of fun together when they were alone in their room, but in front of the other kids Mary pointedly ignored Beth. Matt downright hated his little sister while Larry was openly protective of his two little brothers, but often very rough and demanding towards them.

Draco wondered what he'd be like if he had a younger sister or brother. A lot of people had called him Billy's big brother now and he had to admit that he loved it. He absolutely adored Billy and felt just as protective of him as Larry did of his brothers, but would he treat him as roughly? Would he ignore him in front of the gang? No, he didn't think he could do that. Billy was just too cute.

"We could go swimming after lunch." suggested Cathy who was lying beside him on her back watching the sky for clouds. There wasn't much to see though. The day was clear and hot.

"We ought to patrol our territory." Mike reminded them. "We've been too lazy of late."

Jack lazily opened one eye to blink at Mike. "So they'll all stay clear, because they'll expect us to do it any time now."

"So are we going swimming?" asked Cathy when Jack didn't continue.

"Okay." Jack yawned. "We're going swimming."

"Are we going to give the Lions their rematch?" Sammie asked sitting up. "That'd be fun."

"Of course we are." Jack answered not bothering to open his eyes and look at Sammie. "In the Easter holidays."

"Why not sooner?" Sammie pressed.

"Because there isn't much left of the summer holidays and I don't want to do it during school time. There's not enough time for training then." Jack sounded a little annoyed now. He'd been half asleep and Sammie was insisting on waking him up.

"Then let's use the Christmas holidays." Sammie suggested.
"Sammie." Charlie reminded him in a sing song voice. "Christmas is in winter."

"So?" Sammie asked her clueless.

"In winter there's snow." Charlie continued.

"So?"

"Do you want to clean all the snow off the soccer field, Sammie?" this time Charlie wasn't singing. "Because I'm definitely not going to help you."

"Oh." Sammie finally realised. "Maybe there won't be that much snow this year."

"Or maybe there will." Jack told him. "Easter is a better time for Soccer so Easter it is."

"If you're so eager to play, you can always ask Beth if she'll let you play with the little kids." Mary suggested with a sneer.

Maybe she was still cross because Sammie had spoken against accepting her sister into the gang?

Cathy stretched lazily and rolled over until she 'accidentally' touched Draco's arm.

He shouldn't allow this, if he wanted to stay with Pansy, Draco thought, but he didn't move. It was kind of nice and comfortable like this.

Mary smiled at the sight and snuggled a little deeper into Larry's arms. Charlie sighed wistfully and didn't even notice Matt watching her. Sammie frowned at them all and looked terribly bored.

Maybe he should have asked the little wannabes, if he could play with them, after all. Jack seemed to have fallen asleep for real now and Mike had that far away look again that usually meant he was cooking up some plan, or maybe he was just daydreaming. Sammie never quite knew.

A barn owl sailed in through the open window during lunch and landed on the table with an accusing look at Severus. Draco supposed that it meant 'Why the hell are you so hard to find?'

Munin immediately fluttered onto Severus' shoulder and glared at the strange bird. He watched sternly as Severus picked up the owl's letter and opened it and cawed in protest when he gave him a little treat as a reward.

The owl gave Munin an insecure look, quickly gulped down the treat and left with one last hooted goodbye. Satisfied that he'd chased off the intruder Munin shook his feathers and returned his attention to the letter Severus was reading.

"The dragon hair I ordered has finally arrived." Severus announced and Draco wondered whether he was talking to him or to the raven.

"Caw!" Well, that probably answered that question.

"We can take a little side trip to Diagon Alley on the way to the trotting races tomorrow and pick it up." Severus told Munin.

"Can I come too?" Draco asked at once, but Severus shook his head.

"I'm sure you'll get lots of chances to see the races, if you stay with your cousin Edmond. I'll get by easier if I'm alone this time. You can stay here and play with your friends. The summer will be
over soon. Enjoy your holidays while you still can." Severus advised him.

"I'd enjoy going to the races too." Draco grumbled, but then spending another day with his friends sounded good as well. After all it was already Thursday and he'd be going to Cousin Eugene's stud on Sunday. All in all living on a muggle stud didn't sound bad to Draco. It'd be full of muggles and horses, both rather interesting creatures. And if he went to live there, he'd get to go to the races often enough, but he wouldn't see the Rakers except for on Hogsmeade weekends.

"Dako! Wash!" Billy had to remind him, so lost was he in his thoughts.

"Alright boss, I'm coming." Draco grinned and picked the Baby up to put him on a chair beside the sink again.

Billy squealed with delight and started splashing Draco with water from the sink. Draco laughed. "You'd love it at the lake, wouldn't you?"

"Da?" Billy asked. The word lake obviously didn't mean anything to him yet.

"Can I take Billy along to the lake today?" he asked Sarah and Severus.

They exchanged a glance. "No," answered Sarah. "He's too small. Maybe next year, if we get him swimming trunks and water wings."

"But I won't be here to take him next year." Draco frowned.

"It's too dangerous, Draco. The lake is much too big and deep for such a small baby." Sarah explained.

Draco sighed. "He'd love it, though. And we'd have lots of fun."

Despite all his arguments Draco had to go swimming without Billy. He still had a great time though. After all the time they'd spent training for the big game it felt great to get a chance to just fool around in the water again and the water fight ended up being a lot longer than usual.

The Lions arrived shortly after the Rakers and after a while Big Babs swam over to the tree to sit beside Jack demonstrating her claim on him causing Cathy to snuggle up to Draco a little more closely than he would have liked. Not that it wasn't very ... erm ... nice to feel her well shaped body against his, but should he rally let her do this? What about Pansy?

But Pansy wasn't here and it was highly unlikely she'd ever meet any of the witnesses much less lower herself to actually talking to them. And all in all who cared about Pansy anyhow?

The only one who wasn't perfectly happy sitting on that tree was Mike and Draco wasn't entirely sure whether that was really due to his worries about someone invading their territory during their absence as Mike himself claimed, or maybe had something to do with the fact that he didn't have a girl to cuddle up with. After all he usually spent the time on the tree talking with either Jack or Draco and both of them were too distracted at the moment. Mary and Larry only had eyes for each other anyway and that left only Matt, Sammie and Charlie whose conversation soon seemed to bore him. Draco wondered if Matt was just trying to get up the courage to ask Charlie out.

What kind of dates did West Hogsmeade boys take their girls on anyway? Draco doubted that any of his friends could afford going to a restaurant or would even invest the little money they had in a butterbeer at the Three Broomsticks. So what kind of invitation would Cathy expect from him to
show her that he was trying to start a relationship?

Draco pondered that problem for a while while absent-mindedly playing with Cathy's beautiful black curls. Curly hair felt really nice, he decided, much nicer than straight hair.

Mike had to remind them that it was time to go back in the end or else they might have stayed on the tree until it got dark all around them.

Draco made another attempt to convince Severus to take him along to the racetrack during breakfast the next morning, but Severus simply reminded him to eat and disappeared while Draco was busy with his scrambled eggs. By the time the boy looked up again he was simply gone and Draco wondered if he might have disapparated because he definitely hadn't heard the door.

But then he would have heard the slight pop that always accompanied a disapparition, right? Or did Uncle Severus know a trick that allowed him to apparate completely soundlessly? And take Munin along as well? It would be a nice trick to have for a spy, Draco decided, but very unlikely considering that even his father had been unable to do either. So maybe he was just very good at sneaking.

So Draco trudged down into the park to meet up with the Rakers as usual after he'd done the dishes and found that Mike had finally convinced Jack to do a patrol of their territory.

It all started out rather boring. Neither the Black Ring nor the Avengers bothered to show up even though they were seen by their little wannabes who immediately dashed off to inform their gangs. Obviously Angel Anna and whoever led the Avengers didn't deem the Raker patrol worthy of much interest.

The Shark border looked completely deserted the first time they passed it and Draco felt a little uneasy when they returned to it and still didn't even see any wannabes about there. Of course Mely was on the Soccer field with their own wannabes, but usually Toby hung around here a lot as well. From what he'd seen so far it wasn't normal that the Shark wannabes left the border completely out of their sights for this long. The only time he'd seen that before was right after the incident with the aurors when they'd been expecting the Rakers' retribution, but now there was nothing to fear. They'd already taken their revenge.

Draco shrugged to himself. Maybe the Shark wannabes had simply all gone swimming or were hanging out at some shop or something.

Well, that was what he thought until they reached the well cut bushes that hid the garbage cans from view and a very smelly sack suddenly flew out behind them spilling its revolting content all over the Rakers.

They stopped confused for a moment and a few more garbage sacks came sailing out one of them hitting Jack right on the head.

Jack saw red. "Get them!" he yelled and stormed off towards the garbage cans.

The Sharks were hiding behind the bushes with several trash-bombs still ready to throw. In the Rakers' sudden rush at their enemies those were crushed and both gangs ended up rolling in the spilled trash. Pretty Ricky was nowhere in sight, Draco noticed while looking for Chris. Maybe he'd deserted his gang when he'd first smelled their hiding place.
Chris was in the back of the group and momentarily out of reach since Jack's sudden charge had thrown Mark the Shark back against one of the trash-cans which had been knocked over by the impact and was now blocking the Rakers' attack path. One of the twins was first to climb it and launched himself at Draco with his knife ready. That turned out to be a mistake though since it meant that he had to jump past Larry who grabbed him and threw him back against the trash-can where he collided with his brother.

The girls and Mark who were the only Sharks on the Rakers' side of the trash-can took off running when they heard the twins' frightened shriek as the climbing twin's knife accidentally cut into his thrown brother's arm. The rest of the Sharks screamed as well, but they couldn't get out. The only way to safety was blocked by a trash-can and a horde of very smelly, very angry Rakers.

Climbing over the can to get at them would be difficult for the Rakers and they'd have to come in one by one, which gave the Sharks a chance to pick them off one by one as well, but the Rakers had the same advantage, if the Sharks tried to climb out. Both Robin and Mark were already gone and the twins too ran as fast as they could the moment they managed to tear themselves away from Larry's grip. Mary was too slow to catch them, Jack still seemed a little dazed after his fight with Mark and Mike calmly stepped aside to let them go. There was little honour in attacking a fleeing and inured enemy.

The Rakers turned towards the group behind the trash-can and waited.

Chris glared back at them defiantly. With all the best fighters gone he was suddenly left in charge of an absolutely hopeless situation. Marvin and Bobby were cowering behind him in near panic. If he showed any fear now, they'd probably start wailing like babies.

Jack calmly stepped past Draco to get a better look at the situation. Chris stepped back even though the trash-can was still between them.

Jack grinned and in a sudden unexpected movement banged his hands against the trash-can CLANGGGGGG!

The three Sharks jumped at the noise and Bobby who'd already backed into the hedge somehow managed to squeeze through the bushes and after a moment of surprised hesitation jumped up and ran off badly scratched by the dense twigs. He was clever enough not to run straight for home as that would have meant he had to pass by the Rakers on the other side as the hedge opened on the side closest to the Sharks' territory. They'd see him at once since not all of them were inside the hedge anymore. Sammie, Charlie and Matt had stepped back out to give the others some room to move despite the large trash-can.

Instead Bobby fled deeper into the Rakers' territory probably hoping to get safe passage home through the Black Ring's territory which he knew from experience that the Rakers never entered without permission.

"Sammie!" Jack yelled. "Bobby's running towards the Soccer field. Get him!"

Marvin and Chris exchanged worried glances. For just a moment they'd hoped that the Rakers would all follow Bobby and give them a chance to run, but Sammie's absence wouldn't weaken the Rakers much. Chris wasn't afraid of Sammie at all and Marvin was usually more than willing to take him on. What scared them were all the older kids still out there. Jack who was almost an adult anyway, Larry and Mary who were so huge and strong, Mike who wasn't even afraid of Robin, who scared both of them even though she as on their side and Draco the kid who'd introduced himself by beating up their great idol Mark.
Chris started twirling his chain. He'd hurt a few of them anyhow.

Marvin however wasn't that heroic. He started sobbing slightly, which brought evil grins onto the Rakers’ faces which widened when they heard a surprised yelp and a shout of pain from the direction Bobby had run to.

Only moments later Sammie returned looking very satisfied with his work. "He looked back, saw me and didn't look where he was going so scared was he." Sammie reported loud enough for the two trapped Sharks to hear as well. "Ran straight onto the Soccer field and collided with Mely. Beth and her little rats were a little angry at the interruption of their game."

"Mely?" Marvin asked to Draco's surprise. "Is she all right?" "From the way she was kicking Bobby's leg when I left, I'd say she can't be hurt too bad." Sammie reported.

"That little traitor deserves to die." Chris hissed behind clenched teeth.

"She's still my sister!" Marvin shouted angrily. "Traitor or not!"

"Then maybe you're a traitor too." hissed Chris letting his chain slash out in Marvin's direction as a threat.

It never got close to touching Marvin, but frightened and cornered as he already was Marvin probably didn't realise that it wasn't a real attack. He jumped Chris causing him to drop the chain in surprise.

That was all the opening the Rakers needed. Jack nearly jumped the trash-can in a single leap and landed on top of the two and even though Draco wasn't far behind him he found very little left to do by the time he'd gotten over the trash-can.

Marvin was crying all out now while Jack was holding down Chris. Draco just grabbed the trembling Marvin by the collar and looked to the gang leader. "So what do we do with them now?"

Jack regarded the two captives for a moment then looked over at the fallen trash-can "Larry, Mary, turn that trash-can aside a bit so we can get past it. I think it's time we started cleaning up a little."

'Cleaning up?' thought Draco. It wasn't like Jack at all to be this considerate.

And indeed the moment the trash-can was turned Jack ordered "And now take these two pieces of trash and throw them back in with the rest of the dirt."

Mary and Larry happily grabbed the two Sharks and tossed them into the trash-can while the rest of the Rakers threw the rest of the little plastic sacks in after them. None of the Rakers wanted to touch the spilled trash so it stayed outside.

"Good, now put the trash-can back up and close it and we can go." Jack grinned.

"Nooo! Please noooo!" whined Marvin, but nobody listened to him, not even Chris who glared angrily at everybody until the sudden shift as Mary and Larry pushed the trash-can back up sent him rolling out of sight. Sammie pulled down the lid, before he could get up again.

"There, all done." Sammie announced proudly.

"Good work." Jack congratulated his team. "This was a decisive victory."

On the way back to the flat Draco began to wonder if Jack had been right with that statement,
though. He was all covered in very smelly garbage and felt rather miserable. What would Sarah say when she saw him?

"It was the Sharks." he informed her the moment she opened the door. "They started throwing trash at us."

Sarah just wrinkled her nose at the smell and pointed at the bathroom door. "Put all your clothes on the floor and wash yourself." she ordered. "Thoroughly! And don't forget your hair!"

Draco trudged into the bathroom, stripped and turned on the water to wash. It was cold again. Obviously the boiler problem still hadn't been fixed.

He stared at his filthy clothes accusingly. Maybe if he just started washing them instead? But he knew that wouldn't help the smell. Well, he could at least start by washing his face and hands. How long did it usually take for the hot water to come back? Unfortunately he didn't know.

A few moments later there was a knock at the bathroom door and Sarah's voice calling for him to open up.

What? But he was all naked! Didn't she realise that?

"Come on boy. I made a potion for your hair. It'll take away the smell." Now that sounded promising. "Just a moment!" Draco called back quickly grabbing a towel to cover himself with.

When he unlocked the door, Sarah handed him a little bottle with a pink liquid that smelled strongly of strawberries. "You just have to rub it into your hair once you're done washing it." she instructed. "And hurry up a little. Lunch's getting cold."

"Strawberries? You want me to wear strawberry perfume?" Draco asked accusingly.

"The smell won't be as intense once you've applied it and it is certainly preferable to your current perfume."

Draco sighed. Unfortunately that argument made sense. "The water's cold again." he complained. "How am I supposed to wash myself thoroughly with ice cold water?"

Sarah glared. Fortunately she was looking at the tab and not at him. "I'll heat up some water on the stove, but you'll have to make due with the cold water mostly. I can't heat up more than one cauldron full there and I've got a potion to clean your clothes with on the burner. I can't take it off right now."

Well, at least that was better than he'd expected. So the stove was a boiler after all.

Since none of the other Rakers came out to play, Draco spent the afternoon helping Sarah and Billy with the laundry. Over lunch Sarah had left his filthy clothes to soak in the cleaning potion she'd brewed and once Draco had changed eaten and done the dishes she declared that they were ready to be stuffed into a washing machine.

So Draco grabbed Billy and Sarah put the still wet clothes into a plastic bag and added that to the laundry basket's contents and they went down into the basement where they found Cathy throwing her still very stinky clothes into one of the washing machines still looking rather gloomy because the garbage aroma still clung to her hair. Unlike Draco she hadn't had anyone to go home to who could have brewed her a smell remedy. Her mother was still at work serving and cleaning tables in
some pub near the market place. She'd be coming home very late again and be exhausted from all the hard work.

Draco knew that Cathy's mum hated her job, but it kept her and Cathy fed and clothed and that was all that mattered to Mrs McDougall. Or was that Miss McDougall? Had Cathy's parents been married once? Cathy had never mentioned it and Draco wondered if she even knew. She often complained that her Mum never wanted to talk about her father.

"Hi Cathy!" Draco greeted her smiling happily. "Everything okay?"

"I'd be better, if I knew how to get that smell out of my hair. I still stink like a trash-can" Cathy sighed and got up from her crouching position in front of the washing machine to give Draco a little hug. "Say, you smell really nice. How'd you do that."

Draco blushed. "Oh, Mrs Snape gave me that potion to use after I'd washed my hair. I think the smell's a bit too sweet, but at least it did help."

"Well, I think the smell's wonderful." Cathy decided. "You don't happen to have any of that potion left?"

"I'm afraid not, Cathy, but I can brew you some more once we're done with the laundry." Sarah promised. "It's quite a simple and fast recipe."

"Really? That'd be great. Thank you, Mrs Snape." Cathy smiled.

So Cathy helped Sarah hang up their laundry while Draco chased Billy all over the attic and came back to the flat with them afterwards. Sarah even invited her to use their bathroom to wash her hair so she could dry it with a spell afterwards. "You don't want to catch a cold waiting for it to dry, after all."

"All right, but you'll have to let me cook dinner for you then." Cathy insisted. "I don't have enough money to pay you for the potion, but I can work for it."

"You don't have to pay for it Cathy. Won't your mother expect you to cook at home anyway?"

"Oh no, I just cook for myself when Mum's at work. She gets to eat at the pub anyway. There's always some leftovers there. Please, let me do something for you in return. I don't want to be living on charity."

Sarah rolled her eyes in frustration. "It's not charity, Cathy, just a little gift among friends."

"Then let me give you something back."

Sarah sighed. "All right, you can help us with the cooking, but you'll also help us eat it all, okay?"

"Fine." agreed Cathy and finally disappeared into the bathroom.

Severus just smiled when he returned home to find two teenagers cutting vegetables into very irregular pieces, because they were watching each other a lot more than their work. He wondered if he should warn them, before they cut themselves with the knives, but he could easily heal a minor cut and interrupting them now might spoil all their fun.

Instead he decided to just greet Sarah quietly and ask her why the flat smelled of strawberries. He was sure that they hadn't bought any at the market this week.
Draco didn't seem to notice Severus at all until they sat down to eat, but then he suddenly remembered where he'd been. "Did you find out where my Cousin Edmund lives, Uncle Severus?" he asked unexpectedly.

Severus looked up in surprise. He'd thought that Draco wouldn't think to ask until Cathy had left, but it seemed the boy had remembered that he might have only one more day left with her. "Yes, it's a stud in Wales, just like Gringolf Glizzard said. It's not even very far from your Cousin Jeremiah's cottage."

"Oh. Do you think they know each other well?" Draco wasn't sure how he felt about that. He'd liked the place, but somehow didn't feel like visiting Jeremiah again very soon.

"I doubt it." Severus answered after a moment. "From the descriptions of his friends at the racetrack he's got very few friends who haven't got something to do with horses. I guess a horse breeder has to spend a lot of time on his professional contacts. Maybe that's why he's drifted away from the wizarding world."

"So what's it like at the races?" Cathy wanted to know. "Is it expensive?"

"Well, I wouldn't recommend placing any bets if you ever go there and you should bring your own food." Severus told her. "But I suppose you knew that much anyway."

"But what's it like there?" Draco pushed.

"Crowded." Severus told him with a slight sneer. "Crowded and noisy. Much like the market only without all the stands and with a racetrack and rows of seats like in a Quiddich stadium. It's a little better in the stables, though it wasn't easy to get there, but even there it's all very hectic. Dogs are allowed after all, but I doubt the atmosphere would have done our dog any good. He's hectic enough in a calm environment."

"Aren't horses very nervous animals, too?" Sarah asked surprised. "I always thought they needed a quiet and peaceful atmosphere."

Severus shrugged. "They did look a little jumpy, but I'm no expert on horses. I guess they must be used to it all."

"And what was the race like? Who won?" Draco asked eagerly. It all sounded like a lot of fun to him.

"I don't know who won. I hadn't come to watch the races so I took the first chance I got to disappear behind the scenes and talk to the stable hands."

"The stable hands?" Draco repeated surprised.

"Well, I tried to catch some of the trainers or breeders, but they were all much too distracted. For them there's a lot at stake in those races. The outcome decides their future. The stable hands were the calmest people I could find and they know everything and everybody there. They'd make good informants, if Voldemort had anything to do with trotting races."

"Why are they called trotting races anyhow?" Cathy asked. "I thought a horse's fastest gait is gallop."

"It is." Severus confirmed. "But in trotting races they aren't allowed to use it. They get disqualified immediately. In normal horse races you have jockeys riding, while in the trotting races the horses pull their drivers in two-wheeled carts. They look rather funny, because the carts are very small and..."
light and the drivers sit very low to the ground. Don't ask me how they even see past their horses."

"They're like the races they had in ancient Rome." Draco added to show off some of his historical knowledge.

"Not really." Severus corrected immediately. "The carts were slightly similar, but the drivers were standing, they had four horses in front of each cart and they were gallop races. Today's trotting races have only one horse per cart and the drivers sit in their carts."

"So those Roman race cars looked like those old muggle post coaches they show in cowboy movies?" Cathy was getting interested in the subject.

"What are cowboy movies?" Draco interrupted before Severus could answer.

"Oh, just something we saw on TV in Muggle Studies." Cathy told him. "Did they look like that?"

"No," said Sarah. "They looked like the ones in Ben Hur. Didn't they show you that movie? They show an actual Roman race in there."

"No, we just saw cowboy movies and gangster films and something about a big war ..." Cathy began.

Draco listened in fascination. He had no idea what she was really talking about, but he just knew he wanted to see it all too. Maybe some of it was even electric.

"The Roman carts were just little platforms with U shaped walls mounted on wheels. They were open on the back end so you could walk right in without using a door and the diver stood in the front with the reins slung around his body." Severus interrupted Cathy, before she started about disgustingly sweet love stories. "The horses were all tied beside each other in one row. I don't know why. It must have been difficult to steer them round the bends that way since the one on the outside had to run all around the others."

"So why did the Romans do it?" Draco asked.

Severus shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe the muggle historians do, though. You'd have to ask them."

"Maybe your Cousin Edmond knows." Sarah suggested when she saw Draco's disappointed look. "You can ask him when you meet him on Sunday."

That reminded Draco of why Severus had gone to the race track in the first place. "Do you think he'll want me? What did the stable hands say about him?"

"We'll see, Draco. I don't see any reason why he shouldn't want you, but if he doesn't, I won't force you to stay with him." Severus promised. "We'll find you a good home Draco. Even if it takes us a whole year to do it."

A whole year? Draco had always thought that he'd be handed over to his family within a few days. The thought that Severus was willing to keep him for a whole year was somehow reassuring. He wasn't going to get kicked out and sent to live with Eugene anytime soon after all.

Draco smiled. He hadn't even realised that he'd been worried about that, but he suddenly felt a lot better.
A/N: How will the Sharks react to the outcome of their revenge? Whose side is Mely on? And where will Draco get those two knuts from?

In the next chapter: 'That Dog' goes swimming, we meet Edmond Glizzard and maybe a few of his horses as well.
To Draco's surprise Saturday was a very calm and peaceful day. He'd expected Jack and Mike to call for another patrol after the fight, but instead they went swimming again. Maybe his friends felt like they still needed to wash off some left over garbage smell?

'That Dog' got to come with them for once and at first was overjoyed, but soon found that he'd gotten himself into big trouble when he ended up in the middle of the water fight. Draco had to call for a cease-fire and lift him onto the tree trunk before he drowned in all the splashing and sudden waves. Of course 'That Dog' got thrown back into the water when the kids climbed the tree and Draco had to fish him out once again.

After that second bath he just lay on the tree staring out at the water whimpering softly to himself, since everybody else simply ignored him. How was he ever going to get back home? He definitely wouldn't jump back into the water and swim!

His problem solved itself when the Rakers jumped off the tree causing it to spin and throw 'That Dog' in against his will. He was forced to dog paddle after the children since he was unable to climb the tree on his own. Once ashore he only shook the water out of his fur and then collapsed where he stood. Draco had to carry him back to their towel and back home.

"We ought to do that more often." Mary decided. "It actually shuts up that dog."

'That Dog' opened one eye at hearing his 'name' and whimpered a response, but again nobody saw his point. Only Draco grumbled something about having to carry him around all day.

On their way back from the lake Mary called Beth over and asked her what the Sharks had been doing while they'd been gone, but Beth hadn't seen any of them at all. "They've got to be hiding in the basement after the beating they took yesterday."

"Serves them right though." Bobby who'd trailed along behind her commented. "They even attacked Mely!"

Draco was a little surprised at that statement since from Sammie's report it had seemed like the other Bobby's collision with Mely had been an obvious accident and not an attack, but it looked like the little wannabes saw that differently. It worried him a little, but none of the others seemed concerned so maybe it wasn't such a big thing after all.

"So you're moving to Wales again tomorrow?" Jack asked Draco just before they left.

Draco shrugged. "Ask me again on Monday? We'll see."

"Well, don't forget to ask that Uncle of yours for some money, if he doesn't want you." Jack grinned.

"Cousin." Draco corrected. "And what do you mean, if he doesn't want me?"

"I mean, you could tell him he has to pay you, if he wants to get rid of you. He's a rich guy, so it just might work."
"Yeah, sure. Keep dreaming."

"You are the only one who hasn't paid the two knuts for Beth and Susie yet." Charlie reminded him. "I expect you to give them to me by Monday."

"You'll get them once I've got the shopping money." Draco promised, but he didn't feel good about that promise at all. Even if they were only two knuts, it was stealing from the Snipes and he really shouldn't do that. Too bad it couldn't wait until he was back in school. He could have stolen them from Potter then.

Yes, he could have grabbed Potter's book bag, searched that for money and then thrown it somewhere nasty. On the owlery floor, perhaps, or maybe into the cage of Hagrid's newest monster. If he found a way to tie it to the cage Potter wouldn't be able to summon it with a simple Accio charm and would have to climb into the cage. After that adventure he would hardly notice two knuts missing. Or he could simply turn it over and spill the contents on the floor. Then Harry could assume that the two knuts had simply rolled away and been lost.

Those thoughts brought a mischievous smirk onto his face that caused Sarah to ask him what he was planning when she let him in.

"Oh, nothing. I just thought of a good prank I could play on Potter." Draco answered as he slipped past her and put 'That Dog' down onto his blanket. "Maybe I'll give it a try when I get back to school."

"And what did you do to the poor dog?" Sarah scolded.

"He can't swim that well." Draco diagnosed with a shrug. "It exhausted him more than he thought it would, I guess. He'll be fine once he gets some rest."

"You took the dog into the water with you?" Sarah asked.

"No, he ran in after us on his own. I'd have left him with my towel, but there was no safe place to tie him and I thought he'd know how much swimming was good for him." Draco told her. "And isn't he supposed to hate water anyway?"

Indeed 'That Dog' hated rain or taking a bath. Sarah stared at the sleeping bundle of fur for a moment then shook her head deciding not to wonder about it.

Severus woke Draco up himself the next morning. Draco wondered, if the pets had figured out that Sunday was the day he always tried to hug them and had refused their usual wake up duties. Severus didn't tell him, but when he came into the kitchen the cat was suspiciously absent.

'That Dog' was well rested and as hyperactive as usual once again. He almost tripped Sarah, tried to pull the table cloth down upon himself and interrupted breakfast with his barking. The only one who wasn't thoroughly annoyed with him by the time Draco and Severus had to leave for the train was Billy who'd actually enjoyed all the excitement.

Severus almost decided to leave him behind this time, but that would have meant to leave him with Sarah who already had Billy to take care of and didn't want to worry about having to walk 'That Dog' as well.

"I'll have to do it everyday when you're back at that horrible school of yours anyway." she reminded him. "You can at least take care of your dog during the holidays."
So 'That Dog' came along once again. He whined a little when he realised that they were on the way to the train station once again, but the only one who seemed to notice him at all was Munin who looked down at him from Severus' shoulder with disdain. The lack of response convinced 'That Dog' to give up the show and follow Draco quietly once again.

The train to London was almost empty when they got on, but at the next station a witch with two little girls joined them in their compartment.

The children eyed Draco and Severus curiously, but also a little shyly. Finally one of them, obviously the bolder of the two, got up and stuck her hand out to Draco. "Hi! I'm Angie." she announced when Draco obligingly shook her hand. "I'm six and we're going to London and we'll stay over night at some place called the Leaky Cauldron and tomorrow we're going to Diagon Alley to buy things for school!"

That appeared to be extremely important news and Draco wondered what response might be appropriate, but Angie didn't give him time for one anyway.

"I want to have a real school bag like the muggle kids in our town, but Mum says they might not have them in Diagon Alley, but I'll get a real brand new eagle feather quill and an ink pot. None of the muggle kids have their own ink pots, not even the big ones who're starting fourth year."

"They don't?" Draco asked surprised. How did the muggle kids write without ink pots? Or did they get those from their schools? Then how did they do their homework?

"No, they don't." Angie explained wide eyed. "And they don't use quills either. They've got those pens and little plastic things they put inside the pen and then it writes all without ink. And then I'll get lots and lots of parchment all for myself and I don't have to share it with anyone. And I'll get books. Not picture books. Real school books with lots of words inside, and a school uniform and maybe, if I'm a really good girl, I'll even get my own toad."

"I'd much rather have a kitten." said the other little girl, "But my Mum said I'm not old enough to have my own pet and I should be happy that I get to go with Angie, because I'd have to wait another week until she could take me and then I couldn't sleep in the same room with Angie and that's reason enough to be good, my Mum said."

"And we have to get exactly the same things so everybody in school can see that we're best friends and if we didn't go together we wouldn't know what things to buy and then they might not be the same."

Somehow Draco didn't quite understand that reasoning, but he supposed that it was extremely important and logical to two six year old girls and at least trying to figure it out helped to pass the time. Not that they gave him much time to think about anything they told him. Angie and her friend, who never introduced herself, continued to talk until they reached Kings Cross and had to get off.

The two girls were very disappointed that Draco and Severus wouldn't come with them to Diagon Alley, but Draco assumed that they'd find a new person to tell about their big adventure soon enough.

"Can you believe some people are already stressed about buying school supplies?" Draco asked Severus as they walked over to the muggle platform for the train to Wales.

"It's only a few more weeks until school starts again." Severus reminded Draco. "And for the kids just starting school it's a very big thing. A lot of Hogwarts students will already be school shopping
next week as well."

"But the letters haven't even arrived yet." Draco reminded him.

"They're not all sent out at the same time, remember? Minerva's been busy with them for a while now. Your letter ought to arrive any day now."

"Do owls even come to Cousin Edmond's stud?" Draco asked a little worriedly. "If it's supposed to be a muggle place, I mean."

"Draco, the school owls even deliver the school letters to the muggle born students. I don't see why they should have a problem with wizards living in the muggle world." Severus reminded him very softly, because they were on a platform full of muggles by now.

"But I thought muggles don't use owls to deliver their mail." Draco was getting a little confused. "Won't they think it odd if one just flies in to hand them a piece of parchment?"

"That's why the owls just drop the letters into the regular mail for muggle born first years." Severus explained. "By second year, their muggle relatives at least know about owl post and aren't completely confused when they see it. There's always some discussion about whether to make the owls deliver the first years' letters directly or not, though. Some muggle born witches and wizards never answer their letters, either because they don't have any owls available or because they think it's a joke. The owl delivering it would lend the letter more credibility and give the muggles a chance to respond easily by return owl."

Draco's thoughts kept returning to that information during the whole train ride. It seemed only logical that the muggles who had always been told that magic didn't exist wouldn't believe in the existence of Hogwarts easily and throw their children's acceptance letters away with a laugh, but then how many muggle born witches and wizards were there really? He'd always thought that the number was rather small, judging from the number that went to Hogwarts, but there were other wizarding schools as well and just how many just didn't believe the letters and were never trained at all?

If about half of the muggle borns in Great Britain were invited to Hogwarts and half of them decided not to go or mistook the letter for a joke then the actual number of magical children born to muggle parents was four times as big as Draco had always thought. Suddenly Voldemort's campaign to eradicate all muggle borns seemed very foolish. Kill them all off? That many? And it wouldn't be done with once they were all dead. Muggle parents would go on having magical children. It seemed to be part of the natural order of things, if it happened that often.

"Voldemort is a fool." he finally concluded after they'd gotten off the train.

Severus didn't answer, but Draco thought he'd seen the ghost of a smile on his face when he'd said that. It was really strange how Severus never told him what he wanted him to be when he grew up, but Draco had the feeling, that not becoming a death eater was part of it at least. But did Uncle Severus expect him to grow up to be an auror or not? It seemed to be the best way of fighting death eaters and Draco supposed that that was what Severus would want him to do, but at the same time he kept telling him that the aurors were the enemy and the ministry was dangerous. That seemed to leave Dumbledore as the only other option, if he wasn't part of the ministry side after all, but Sarah didn't like Dumbledore. Or at least the way she talked about Dumbledore made Draco assume that she didn't approve of him.

Well, at least he knew for sure now that he wouldn't join Voldemort. That was a first step towards a decision.
Severus led him towards the bus station next to the train station and soon an old muggle bus arrived and they got on. There were only three other passengers, but they all stared at Munin, who was perched comfortably on his favourite spot on Severus' shoulder.

"That bird had better not cause any damage to the upholstery on my bus." the driver informed Severus with a glare.

Severus looked to Munin for a moment then assured the driver: "He won't."

The driver looked doubtful, but let them pass and returned his attention to the road, but the passengers kept staring.

Draco glared back at them. What was wrong with travelling through Wales with a raven on your shoulder anyway? Draco thought it was a totally normal thing to do, but for some reason the muggles didn't seem to agree.

They got off in the middle of nowhere. Draco looked around for horses, but all he saw were a few farm houses and a lot of 'wilderness'.

"Are you sure we're in the right place?" he asked Severus tentatively.

"I'm afraid this is as close as the bus will take us. We'll have to walk for a while." Severus answered calmly.

"Why can't any of my relatives live next to a train station?" Draco complained after they'd been walking for about five minutes.

"Gringolf Glizzard lives next to a bus stop." Severus reminded him. "And Eugene wasn't far from the public floo station."

"This region is getting more lonely with every step, though." Draco observed. "Are you sure we're headed the right way."

"Yes, Draco, I'm sure."

And indeed a little while later they arrived at a wooden fence that looked like it might belong to a horse paddock. They followed it and soon found the first horses. Six half grown little stallions trotted up to the fence to check out the newcomers.

"See, there are the horses. We're almost there." Severus told Draco.

"And they're trotting so they must be trotting horses." grinned Draco and tried to touch the most curious one's nose.

The young horse sniffed his hand and grabbed for it with his scruffy upper lip.

Draco drew back quickly. "They're hungry. Did we bring anything for them to eat?"

"No, but they can't be that hungry. There's enough grass here."

"Then why are they trying to eat me?"

"Maybe because they're hoping for candy?" Severus suggested. "Come on, I'm sure your cousin Edmond will have something you can feed some horse."

"But the little black one with the white star on his nose is so cute."
"Woof?" 'That Dog' had taken an interest in the black foal as well and was sniffing noses with him. He was probably trying to ask why Draco called that huge odd smelling dog little, though.

The young horse was about a year old and even though he was still far from reaching his adult size he was definitely not small.

"Draco, this is a stud. It's full of horses and I'm sure there's more than one that you'll find cute. Right now we're looking for your cousin, though and he obviously isn't here."

Draco sighed, gave the black horse one last pat and moved on. Soon after they reached what looked like a small manor house surrounded by several stables. Unsurprisingly no house elf appeared to meet them, but there didn't seem to be a door bell either. So Severus knocked on the door.

Nothing happened. Still no house elf, no butler, not even a stable hand.

Edmond probably didn't have a house elf, because he didn't want to have to explain strange monsters dressed in tea towels to his muggle friends, but where were the human servants? He couldn't run this place all on his own. At least he couldn't run it without using magic and that was another thing he couldn't explain to the muggles.

"So what do we do now?" Draco asked Severus after staring at the door for a while.

"We check the stables of course." Severus told him calmly. "There has to be someone around here who can tell us where to find Edmond Glizzard."

So they walked into the next building they found, but found it completely empty. There was fresh straw in every box and the doors were standing open invitingly, but the only living creature inside was a grey tabby cat who was industriously liking his paws and stopped only for a moment to eye the visitors, especially 'That Dog'.

"I guess this must be where the horses we saw out in the paddock live then." Draco decided. "What do we do if they're all outside?"

"We'll see. For now let's just try another door."

And indeed the next building wasn't deserted. There were several horses inside most quietly munching their hay. They looked up when the door opened, but most decided they didn't care much about the strangers and returned to minding their own business. One of them kept watching curiously as Severus and Draco walked deeper in and discovered another horse tied at the end of the centre isle. The large brown horse was standing on three legs while a muggle looking girl was holding his fourth hoof and doing something to it. Draco couldn't tell exactly what, because she had her back turned towards them.

After a moment she let go of the horse's leg and turned around so she could see them. "Hi!" she greeted. "Are you friends of Mr. Glizzard, or just here to see the horses?"

Draco changed his mind about her when she spoke. She was more likely a young woman than a girl. The clothes she was wearing probably made her look younger, but considering that she was working with the horses it made sense that she'd be wearing old practical clothes that could take being chewed on or stained with mud or dust.

"Actually neither." Severus told her. "We are here to talk to Mr. Glizzard about family matters. Do you know where he is?"
"Ah, so you're relatives?" she smiled at them as she put the strange tool she'd used to clean the horse's hoof aside.

"He's my mother's cousin." Draco explained. "Uncle Severus isn't related to him."

"Ah, I see. That's why you don't look like him at all. Follow me, I'll show you where to find him." She led them back out and to another stable.

"Do you work for Cousin Edmond?" Draco asked hoping that she wouldn't consider it prying. She looked nice and even if she was really a few years older than him, she would probably make a good friend.

"Sometimes." she answered and laughed at Draco's confused look. "I'm no groom, if that's what you meant." she explained. "I just like the horses and Mr. Glizzard sometimes lets me ride in exchange for the work. Mostly I work just for the fun of it and to be close to the horses. Say, aren't you afraid that your raven will fly off, if you just let him ride on your shoulder like that? Or are his wings clipped like the tower ravens?"

"Munin's trained not to fly off. I'd never clip his wings or lock him in a cage if I can avoid it. Birds are born to fly. Clipping their wings is like sending an innocent to prison." Severus told her with a very mild glare.

The young woman shuddered at that look and quickly turned her attention back to finding Edmond Glizzard. They walked down another isle and when they turned the corner at the end they found a young man grooming another horse.

"Mr. Glizzard?" the young woman addressed him.

Draco stared. That was his cousin Edmond? He had dark hair! Draco almost couldn't believe that he had a dark haired relative. All the Malfoys they'd visited had been Malfoy-blond and even his mother and her brother had been blond, though a more golden shade. No wonder the young woman had said they didn't look like Edmond.

Edmond looked up when he heard his name and smiled. "What is it?"

"These two say they're distant relatives and need to talk with you about family matters," she told him and turned back again. "Got to go again. I left Knight tied in front of his box." and before Draco could even thank her or ask her name she was gone again.

Edmond smiled at them. "I'm sorry for the inconvenience, but please allow me some time to finish up here. I can't just leave Apollo hanging around all day and I had to fire the stable hand who usually worked in here. Not that I'd have let Christoph touch Apollo. It was bad enough that I had to let that drunkard into the horses' boxes with a pitchfork."

"That's a very beautiful horse." Draco commented taking a closer look at Apollo. The horse was a shining golden and reddish brown with a beautiful white stripe down the length of his nose. "He looks different than the others though."

"That's right, he's a different breed. The others are trotting horses, Apollo's a warm blood. The others are either breeding stock or for sale. Apollo's for me to ride." Edmond bent down to check on the horse's hooves. "Ah yes, that looks okay now. I had to call the smith last week after part of his hoof broke off and he lost his shoe. It was hard to get the nails in right without hurting him, but it seems that the smith managed alright."

Draco gave Apollo's shoulder a cautious pat and the horse turned his ears towards him curiously.
He looked a lot bigger than the foals out in the paddock, Draco thought. He wondered what horses did when they didn't like you.

'That Dog' was totally unimpressed by the horses' size. He'd been sniffing around curiously until now, but it seemed that the novelty of horse smell was wearing off and the actual horse was getting more interesting. 'That Dog' stood before Apollo's front legs looking up, tail wagging madly.

Apollo looked down at the dog not seeming particularly interested.

'That Dog' barked.

Apollo snorted and threw his head back.

Draco quickly grabbed 'That Dog'.

"Don't worry, he won't harm him. He's used to dogs, but doesn't like the noise. Horses have excellent hearing so they perceive a dog's barking much louder than we do," Edmond explained. "Apollo's probably just wishing he could plug up his ears somehow right now."

Draco still decided to keep 'That Dog' in his arms. Maybe the horses were used to dogs, but he doubted that 'That Dog' was used to horses.

"There, all done." Edmond announced a few minutes later and led Apollo into one of the boxes. "I'll just give him a few carrots and then we can go back to the house for some tea."

Some carrots turned out to be a whole bucketful, but that didn't seem to bother Apollo. He just dug right in.

"Can he really eat all that?" Draco asked surprised.

"Oh, he'd eat the whole sack in one go, if I'd let him." Edmond answered with a smile. "Now, I think I never introduced myself properly. I'm Edmond Glizzard."

"Severus Snape, head of house Slytherin at Hogwarts." Severus introduced himself and for a moment Edmond's eyes went very wide in surprise. "And this is Draco Malfoy, my student and your cousin I believe."

"Ah yes, Cousin Narcissa's son. I've read about her tragic death in the newspaper. I'd have come to the funeral, if I'd known where and when." Edmond said to Draco, but his eyes never left Severus. Something about the man seemed to have captured his attention. Was he that impressed by the mention of Hogwarts? Was he wary of the word Slytherin? He did seem to regard Severus with a mixture of admiration and caution all of a sudden.

"The ministry had her buried in the family crypt right away to avoid the funeral turning into a big public spectacle. We weren't informed of it in time either." Severus explained returning Edmond's gaze calmly.

"You never mentioned that." Draco complained.

"It was too late to do anything about it and it would only have hurt you."

"So you were a friend of Narcissa's?" Edmond asked.

"Personally I consider myself Draco's friend, but some people will tell you that I was also close to Lucius. Not that he had many friends. He trusted noone and with all those who really knew him the
feeling was mutual."

"Indeed." Edmond confirmed and the knowing look in his eyes as he said it made Draco wonder if Severus had said something completely different that only Edmond could understand. "I have met the man."

That was all he said about Lucius, though. Instead he led them into the house and invited them to sit in a comfortable living room decorated with horse pictures and trophies. Just like his cousin Gringolf and Gilderoy Lockhart he had no house elves or servants and had to make and serve the tea himself. Unlike Lockhart he used the magical way to heat the tea water and was done in mere moments however.

Obviously Cousin Edmond didn't mind the use of magic, Draco noted with rising hope. This place seemed nice enough and he'd immediately taken a liking to Edmond. Maybe this would really make a good home.

"I know you're probably used to being served by house elves and all that, but you have to admit that it would be too odd for the muggles. House elves are so hard to hide once you invite a muggle into your home." Edmond explained as he poured out the tea.

"Oh, we are quite aware of that." Draco laughed remembering Gringolf. "I did expect you to have some muggle servants though."

"Only the people who work in the stables and many of them are just girls from the neighbourhood who like the horses, but can't or won't pay for expensive riding lessons. I let them ride the horses who are too old for the races. The exercise does them good and it's a lot cheaper than a lazy drunkard groom." he frowned for a moment, probably thinking about that Christoph guy he'd just fired again. "I am a very private person and once you share your home with people, they'll get curious and want to know things you'd rather keep to yourself." he looked at Severus again as he said that.

"I see." said Severus calmly. "Then you will probably not be too happy about the cause of our visit. You see, we've been looking for a new home for Draco and so far none of his relatives seem qualified to care for him at all."

Edmond regarded Draco quietly for a while.

"I'm not much trouble." Draco promised. "I spend most of the year at Hogwarts and I know how to stay out of other people's business. My father never wanted me to nose around in his things either."

Edmond looked back to Severus with an almost pleading look. Pleading, but not pleading for help. He wanted him to understand something he wouldn't say.

"I can't." Edmond finally said. "Not because I don't want to, I'd love to help out. I'd love to have somebody to leave all this to someday, but I can't. I cannot have any family. It wouldn't be safe."

Snape's eyes narrowed, but he didn't say anything about it.

"Not safe?" asked Draco confused. What was going on between Edmond and Severus?

"Not safe because of my job." Edmond elaborated without clearing anything up for Draco. "You'd be in constant danger, because of what I am. It's not fair to you and the worry for you would hinder me in performing my duties."

"Your job?" Draco repeated incredulously. "Duties?"
It didn't make sense. Edmond seemed to be a really nice guy, but this had to be some crazy excuse not to have to bother with him. After all he was a horse breeder. What could be so dangerous about breeding horses? Draco decided that he had to convince Edmond. Maybe if he promised to help in the stables?

Severus however didn't see it like that. "It is your choice of course," he told Edmond. "I chose differently myself, but I cannot and will not give you any advice on how to cope with these things. We all have to find our own ways."

They spent some more time with Edmond who told them some funny anecdotes from the racetrack and also a few things about horses, then gladly accepted his offer to use his floo to return to Hogsmeade.

"It was despite everything an honour to meet you." Edmond told Severus as he handed him the floo powder. "Please tell your ... headmaster that he has my respect."

"It was nice to meet you as well, though I'm afraid I can't say the same about your superiors." Snape answered in the same very serious tone.

"I guess there would be too many bad memories there." Edmond conceded and turned to the boy. "I'm sorry, Draco, I really am, but it would be too dangerous for both of us."

Draco stepped out of the Hogsmeade floo station completely confused. What had that all been about? Who were the superiors of a horse breeder? It didn't make any sense. He couldn't stop thinking about it for the rest of the day and when Severus came into the lab to say good night he finally decided to ask him what he'd missed.

Severus stood in the door for a moment obviously unsure if he should answer that at all. When Draco had almost given up hope Severus suddenly shut the door and came over to sit by his bed.

"Edmond Glizzard isn't a horse breeder, Draco, nor has he truly left the wizarding world behind. He does breed horses, but that isn't his real job." he paused to look at Draco quietly for a moment. Maybe to reconsider his decision to tell him the truth one last time. "Your cousin is an unspeakable." he finally said. "A ministry spy."

A/N: Are there any more relatives left for Draco to meet? What will he do when school starts again? And why hasn't he gotten his Hogwarts letter yet?

In the next chapter: Draco's back with the Rakers, he has to find a way to get two knuts and the gang accepts two new members.
New Members

Chapter 32: New Members

It wasn't until breakfast the next morning that Draco remembered the money he had to give Charlie that day. Of course it was market day and the Snapes would give him his shopping money soon, but he still felt uneasy about stealing from them.

They'd never even know, that he hadn't spent those two knuts on the fruits and vegetables they usually sent him to buy, but it just didn't feel right. It would almost be easier if they at least suspected him.

"Uncle Severus?" he asked surprising himself since he hadn't really made a decision yet. "Could you lend me two knuts?"

Severus and Sarah exchanged confused looks.

"Two knuts?" Severus repeated.

Draco nodded. "I'll give them back sometime. I just don't know when I'll have some money of my own again and I need them now."

"Ah, and what do you need them for?" Severus asked him.

"Charlie's buying caps for Beth and Susie today. You know, the two girls who played with us in the Soccer game?" Draco explained. "She said everyone had to pay two knuts so she could get them and I had to promise to give them to her today."

Severus smiled and handed him the money. "Well, I guess we can spare two knuts for a good cause and little Susie did do very well in the game."

"So did Beth." Draco reminded him. "She's a good defender and we really need those. We've got lots of attackers, but Matt's our only defender. With Beth our teams will be more evenly matched."

For a while Draco suspected that Mike wouldn't come today, but he caught up with them half way down the stairs. "Sorry, Mum overslept and breakfast was late." he explained once he stopped panting.

'That Dog' wagged his tail at him, but didn't bark or jump up and down. He saw another stay in the backpack coming and was trying to escape attention. If Draco forgot he was there, he might forget to pack him away as well.

He had no luck though. Just before they reached the marketplace Draco grabbed him and stuffed him into his backpack again. 'That Dog' whined softly, but it didn't help. He was hoisted up and slipped onto Draco's back again.

"Come on. Let's hurry with the fruits so we can go to the bookshop again." Mike urged Draco.

"We've got to find Charlie first." Draco told him.

"What? Charlie? Whatever for?"
"I've got to give her the money. She's buying the caps today, remember?"

"Don't you have to get some change first?" Mike asked surprised.

"No." grinned Draco. "Come on, maybe she's dancing by the meat stands again."

But Charlie wasn't there. The rest of her class was dancing without her. For a while the boys just stood there wondering what to do.

"Maybe she's just late." Draco suggested. "Lets wait a little longer."

"But then we won't have time to go to the bookshop." Mike argued then turned to regard the dancers. "Isabelle! Hey, Isabelle!" he called suddenly. "Have you seen Charlie?"

"No," answered a pretty blond girl after finishing a fast twirl. "She said she can't come today."

Draco frowned. "Great! What do we do now?"

Mike thought for a moment. "Lets try the clothes stands. She'll have to come there to get the caps and there might not be any left, if she's late." he suggested.

So they squeezed back through to the other end of the marketplace and searched the clothes stands, but in the end it was Charlie who found them first.

The boys started when she suddenly called out to them from behind and she laughed. "Hi, have you seen any caps yet."

"No, but we weren't even looking. We were too busy trying to find you." Draco answered. "I wish you'd told me where to meet you to give you the money."

"You've got it then?" Charlie sounded almost surprised.

"Of course, I've got it. Here, two knuts." Draco smiled as he handed over the money.

"And I already feared that I'd have to pick some pockets, if I didn't find any cheap caps."

"You still might have to." Mike pointed out. "Two knuts won't make that much of a difference."

"We'll see. Maybe we can get the vendors to go down to our price, but first we have to find the caps."

They pushed their way through to the next stand, but found that it sold mostly trousers and a few shirts. The next had all sorts of clothes for adults and even a few caps, but they weren't the right colour.

"We could ask an adult to change them magically." Draco suggested, but Charlie and Mike shook their heads.

"They're too big for the girls anyway. If they aren't even blue, we could at least get children's caps that will fit." Charlie decided.

"Then maybe we should try the big stand over there." Draco suggested. "It had lots of children's stuff last time I looked. I think we even bought some things for Billy."

"That'd be too small then." Mike argued. "We're looking for children's caps, not baby clothes."
"They've got all sizes. I got my jeans from there as well." Draco told him.

"It can't hurt to try." Charlie said and they made their way over to the stand.

"Are you sure it can't hurt?" Mike asked as soon as they caught sight of the customers there. "Shark alert."

Indeed a red bandanna showed through the crowd, but it was low enough not to truly worry the three Rakers. Mark and the twins were a lot taller than this and at first, Draco thought that it had to be Bobby, but when they finally managed to push through to the stand it turned out to be Marvin who was leaning against the table looking very annoyed.

The reason for his bad mood soon became obvious as well when Mely who'd been digging through one of the boxes beside him suddenly squealed with delight pulling out a blue t-shirt with a picture of a Soccer ball on the front. "Look Mum!" she shouted excitedly as she waved it in front of the woman who'd been standing behind her. "That's just what I've been looking for. Can I have this one, Mum? Please! It's so cool."

The woman took the shirt out of Mely's hands and checked it for possible damage then held it against Mely's chest to see if it'd fit. The shirt might have been slightly too large, but she nodded and smiled, probably satisfied that it'd survive Mely's next growth spurt.

Mely gave another delighted squeal and returned to digging. Marvin frowned.

"I want some new clothes as well." he whined. "I have to replace the shirt that was ruined in the garbage fight."

But his mother shook her head. "Your shirt's still good. I had to wash it again and the colour faded a little, but you can still wear it until you grow out of it. Today we're buying shirts for Mely."

"But if she gets new stuff, I want something as well. It's not fair!" Marvin protested.

"Mely also agreed to sell all her old shirts to get three new ones. Do you want me to sell two or thee of yours?"

"Hi, Mely!" Draco called just to see Marvin's reaction as they squeezed past.

"Hi!" Mely called back happily. "Look, I'm getting proper clothes!" She waved her new shirt at them.

"That's a really nice shirt." Charlie told her. "You're lucky you found it."

Mely beamed, Marvin glared.

"Mum! Please, Chris already called me a traitor. You just can't let Mely do that!"

"Mely made her choice. It's not my decision who she chooses as her friends, but I have to tell you, I'm glad she didn't chose yours. That Chris is no good and your precious Mark isn't much better." Mely and Marvin's mother said. "I wish you'd at least spend more time with Ricky or Bobby. They seem to be okay."

"They're cowards." Marvin whined on. "Chris is much cooler."

"I just hope you'll grow out of this worship of violent junior criminals." his mother sighed.

Draco laughed. It really was true. Even the Sharks' own families weren't happy with their children.
He wished he could overhear what Mark's parents thought about their son and his gang as well.

"Come on, Dragon." Charlie pushed him forward. "They don't have any blue caps either. Lets try that stand over there. It always has great Soccer stuff."

"Yes, I think that's where the Lions get their shorts." Mike confirmed. "I bet they have all kinds of caps."

Mike turned out to be right. There were two boxes filled with caps of all sizes and colours. Draco fished out two blue ones, but Charlie just gave them a critical look and picked one out of his hands.

"This one looks about right for Beth, but the other's too big for the girls. Try to find another like this one or smaller." she instructed the boys.

So they started digging. There was a blue cap at the very bottom of the first box, but it wasn't the right blue.

"It's almost turquoise." Charlie pointed out. "It won't fit in with the others."

Meanwhile Mike had dug another cap out of the other box.

"No, the colour's too faded. We need one that looks new."

"You're too picky, Charlie." Draco complained. "Lets just take the big one and ask some adult to shrink it for us. We could even ask Susie's Mum to do it and get it exactly the right size."

"No, it has to be right when she gets it." declared Charlie. "Try again."

It took them another five minutes to finally find a cap that pleased Charlie, but then she managed to bargain with the vendor until they even had one knut left over.

"There, now we even have a start for the day we buy Bobby's cap." Charlie smiled. "I'll just take those to my Mum and with any luck we'll have them done by tomorrow evening."

"Great, we'll tell Jack if we see him." Mike promised and Charlie hurried off to find her Mum who had the week off from work and was probably somewhere around shopping. "Come on, Draco. There's still enough time to take a look around the bookshop."

"No, there isn't." Draco reminded him. "We've still got to do all our shopping."

"Oh, damn! We'd better hurry or we'll be late."

They tried to run towards the fruit stands, but didn't get far before they were stuck in the masses of pushing and shoving people. 'That Dog' whimpered into Draco's ear, but there was nothing the boy could do about it. He had to get the fruits and vegetables the Snapes needed for the week.

In the end they got all the important stuff except for the carrots. The vicar and his crowd of gossiping witches were blocking the path to the stand they usually bought those at and there just wasn't enough time to go around them and still meet the Snapes in time for lunch.

Draco tried to get carrots at one of the other stands, but they were much too expensive and he knew he couldn't come home with only two or three carrots. That would be just barely enough for one vegetable soup and then what would they eat with the potatoes?

They'd have to come back and try to get through to their usual stand after lunch.
Feeling rather disappointed with their failure the two boys trudged back to the muggle shop where Severus, Sarah and Billy were already waiting.

"We didn't get the carrots yet." Draco explained when Severus asked him for the return money. "We'll have to buy them after lunch."

"You didn't get the carrots?" Sarah asked doubtfully. "How hard can that be?"

"The stand was so crowded that we decided to buy the other things first, but when we came back it still wasn't any better and there just wasn't enough time left." Mike explained hastily.

"And the other stands were much too expensive." Draco added. "We'll get them right away once we've eaten."

"No, you won't." Severus decided. "I won't let you run off again and get lost. We'll get them together."

"Oh, come on." protested Draco remembering their planned trip to the bookshop. "We won't get lost."

"No, but you'll be late and we'll need your help carrying and putting away our purchases." Sarah obviously wasn't going to help them either.

"We'll have to go to the bookshop next week, then." Draco told Mike later when they were squeezing through the crowds once again and Severus and Sarah had more important things to worry about than what the boys were up to.

"Unless you move in with the next relative you're going to visit on Sunday. Whose turn is it this time anyway?" Mike asked.

Draco thought about it for a moment. What had Severus said about that? But he couldn't remember Severus mentioning it at all and he'd been so busy wondering what had been going on between Severus and Edmond that he'd never thought to ask.

He shrugged. "I don't know yet. I think Uncle Severus will have to look up his list of Malfoys again since there aren't any more Glizzards and we've tried all the most likely Malfoys he picked out last time. Maybe it'll take him so long to make up his mind that we won't even go anywhere this week." he added hopefully.

"Even, if none of your relatives want you, we've only got two more market days left." Mike told him to his surprise.

"What? Why? Are you moving away? Are they closing down the market?"

"No, you idiot! School's starting again." Mike reminded him.

Draco quickly went over it in his head again. He'd spent one week at the Snapes during the trial, then visited Uncle Thomas, Eugene, Jeremiah, Eusebia, Gringolf Glizzard and Edmond. Yes, that made six weeks, one and a half months. The holidays were almost over and he still hadn't gotten his Hogwarts letter. Something had to be wrong there.

Later that day, after they'd gotten home he asked Severus about it.

"I'll ask Minerva when I visit Hogwarts this week." Severus promised not seeming concerned at all. "Unless it arrives before then, of course."
Draco opened the window wide before he sat down to do his Math exercises that day. Maybe the owl would come sooner, if he made it easier for him to reach him?

But the only thing that flew in through the window was a very confused insect that Draco immediately shooed out again. Who knew, it might have been a mosquito.

Charlie didn't come to play on Tuesday morning, but Jack seemed to take that as a good sign and actually smiled most of the day even though his team lost again. He even chose Sammie for his side leaving Mike to Draco for the day.

"We have to keep in training for the next game against the Lions." he explained when Draco asked him about that. "We can't just always play in the same combinations. Next time I'll take Charlie and you get Larry."

Draco frowned. "Oh great, you get my secret weapon and I the guy who'll forget his job over staring lovingly at your keeper."

Indeed for once Larry didn't storm off to make clumsy attempts at Draco's goal. Unfortunately he didn't defend Mary's goal either. He just hung around close to it and kept distracting Mary. With both Mike and Cathy on the team winning was just too easy that way.

"Where is Charlie anyway?" Matt frowned it wasn't clear whether at the thought of Larry daydreaming about Mary or at Charlie's absence. "Did she say anything yesterday?"

"Well, she did say she was hoping to convince her Mum to make the caps today." Mike reminded them. "Maybe she's stayed home to help her with the sewing."

"She can't sew." Draco argued. "She's a squib. She can't perform the needle charms and even if she could, she wouldn't be allowed to use magic during the holidays."

"Of course she can sew." Matt defended her at once. "I can too. Better than you even, I bet."

"Oh really? How do you charm the needle then?" Draco challenged though he couldn't sew at all. He'd watched Sarah do it and when he'd been smaller sometimes the house elves at Malfoy Manor, but he'd never needed to know the needle charms and hadn't learned them.

"I don't." Matt grinned. "I simply move the needle by hand."

Draco stared. "That works?"

"Of course. Muggles have been sewing for centuries, you know and they've never even known about needle charms." Matt responded smugly. "I bet they'd laugh at you depending on magic to help you do something so easy."

"Charlie's Mum can do both." Cathy added. "She works at a tailor's in some muggle town."

"She works in a muggle town?" Draco repeated confused. "How does she get there?"

"Why, by train of course." Mary explained as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "That's what the station is actually for. It isn't a problem to floo to wizarding places, but it would scare the muggles, so those people who work among muggles commute by train."

"I always thought the station was for the Hogwarts express." Draco said surprised.
"For a train that goes only eight days a year?" Mike shook his head. "They could have built a floo station at Hogwarts instead. That would have been cheaper. No, the Hogwarts Express just uses the rails and station that were already built for the people of Hogsmeade."

So after all the time he'd been living in West Hogsmeade now there were still new things to learn. Who'd have thought that an actual witch would take a train to go to work at a muggle tailor's. And it seemed there were a lot of other people who had similar jobs. At least Draco doubted that the Hogsmeade train station had been built especially for Charlie's Mum.

"Did you go to Hogwarts today?" Draco asked Severus as soon as he got back home for lunch.

Severus looked up from the letter he was writing. "Tomorrow, Draco, tomorrow. Today I'm checking the list of your surviving relatives and writing a letter to your aunt in Ireland."

"Ireland? So you want to take me to Ireland on Sunday?"

"Not unless she invites us. She's a very old witch and I doubt she'll be able to take you, but she is one of the few relatives left on my list I have the address of. I'll have to look up the others in the library tomorrow, but I decided to get started by sending a first letter to someone whose address I already have."

"I thought you already made a list of all the Malfoys?"

"Of their names and age yes, but not of their addresses. I didn't think we'd need to know where the ones we weren't going to visit live."

"And now we're going there after all." Draco grinned.

"No, we aren't. Not yet at least. I'll just write all of them asking if they could imagine taking you in. There's no need to visit those that can't at all."

"You could have done that sooner, you know. It would have spared us Jeremiah and the Glizzards."

"Maybe, but I didn't expect those reactions. I've never tried to find a new home for a child before. I thought your relatives would be glad to have you back."

"Just like you thought you'd find the owner of the dog?" Draco laughed. "What do you do in the holidays when you're not trying to return any foundlings?"

Severus smiled. "Oh, I have enough other things to do, believe me."

Charlie did come out in the afternoon and reported that the caps were ready to be handed over to their new owners in the morning. That left the question of where and when they could catch the two girls.

"I can tell Beth I need to go buy something and she can come along for company." Mary told them. "I need a new ink-pot anyway and Beth loves to go out with me. Then you can wait for us on the Soccer lawn when we get back."

"That's easy enough to arrange." Jack confirmed. "But what about Dancemouse? She'll be much
"Why?" Draco asked confused. "We know where the kids meet up in the mornings. All we have to do is walk over there and tell her."

Jack groaned.

Mike laughed.

"What?" Draco asked them.

"It doesn't work that way, Draco." Cathy told him. "We have to catch Susie alone. It's just something you don't do in front of the other kids."

"We should just knock on her door tomorrow morning." Mike suggested. "If we meet early there's a good chance that she'll still be at home."

"Do we know where exactly she lives?" asked Jack.

"Yes, second floor, first door on the left." Charlie reported.

"Good, we'll meet in the garden shed tomorrow then. And the last one there will have to play look out and wait for Mary and Beth to come back while we play." Jack decided.

Larry was the unfortunate one who arrived last the next morning. Apparently his father had needed his help with something and held him up. He didn't take it too hard, though. After all the 'punishment' was waiting for Mary, something he already had a lot of practise at.

Mely looked at them curiously when she met them on the stairs in her house, but Jack glared at her and pointed down towards the door. Mely sighed and obeyed, but Draco suspected that she'd be waiting right outside the door until they came out, probably together with half of Beth's gang.

Sammie led them to the right door, but didn't ring the doorbell. He just stopped outside the flat and whispered "This is it." excitedly.

The Rakers shuffled around before the door a little until Cathy pushed through and pressed the button. In answer to the now familiar BRRRING! sound they heard somebody push back a chair inside and walk to the door.

Just before the door opened Draco suddenly felt some fabric pushed between his fingers. He looked up in surprise and found a small blue cap in his hand and Charlie standing beside him.

"You suggested her, so you do it." Charlie whispered and there was no time to argue, because the door opened and there stood ... well, Draco assumed it was probably Susie's father.

Was he supposed to say something now? Shouldn't Jack be the one doing all this? But Jack was standing at the back of the group looking cool and like an unconcerned spectator.

"Good morning." Cathy took the lead once again. "Is Susie home? We'd like to talk to her for a moment."

The man nodded at her and called back into the flat: "Susie! Your friends are here."

For a moment Draco wondered why he was still at home at this time of the morning, then realised
that he was probably unemployed. Or maybe he was having his day off.

"Who is it, Daddy?" Susie could be heard talking with her mouth full. They'd obviously disturbed the family's breakfast. "Mely? Beth? Cedric?" She must have swallowed sometime between that, because the names came out clear.

"No." answered her father and stepped aside to let her dash out the door.

Susie hopped out, saw them and stopped in surprise her eyes going very wide. "Hi?" she managed in a nervous squeak.

Charlie gently elbowed Draco.

"Morning Susie." he began hoping that he didn't sound like he hadn't the slightest idea what he was going to say next, which he really hadn't. "We decided that you showed a lot of effort during the Soccer game and that that helped us to win, so we want to thank you by giving you this." He held out the cap to her hoping that he had managed to look dignified enough. Well, he'd had a lot of practise pretending to be dignified at Hogwarts, so maybe it had worked.

Susie the Dancemouse distracted everybody from any blunders Draco might have made during his speech anyway by squealing in delight at the sight of the cap and throwing her arms around Draco almost knocking him over in her joy. "Oh, thank you, Dragon! Thank you!" She actually jumped up and kissed him on the cheek.

Draco blushed and looked to his friends for help, but they were too busy laughing.

"Er ... don't you want to try it on?" he suggested. "Lets see how it fits."

That worked. Susie let go of him nodding excitedly and took the cap. She looked at it for a moment with gleaming eyes then finally put it on. "Fits perfectly." she declared.

"Then, I think, you'd better get back in fast and finish your breakfast so you can come down to play." Mike advised her. "We'll be on the Soccer field."

"Oh yes! I'll hurry!" Susie squealed, but stopped just before she dashed back inside. "What about Beth?"

"Off shopping with her sister." Charlie answered. "We'll catch her when they get back." "Great! Oh, I just can't wait to show everybody!" and Susie hopped back inside pulling the door shut behind her.

"Phew!" breathed Sammie. "You mean we're going to have her jumping around us all the time now?"

"You'll get used to it." Jack announced and it wasn't quite clear whether that was a statement or an order. Knowing Jack Draco suspected it was meant to be the later, though.

Mely and Cedric were indeed sitting under a tree not far from the door when they left the house. "Beth isn't coming out, you know." Larry told the two as they walked past them. "She's gone shopping with her sister."

"Are you going to use the Soccer field today?" Melly called after them.

Jack stopped and turned around to sneer back at her. "Yes."
Draco still thought that Jack's sneers needed some work, but it did seem to impress Mely and Cedric who took off probably to report to Bobby what they'd found out.

Poor Larry had to crawl into the bushes behind the Soccer field despite his size to wait for Mary and Beth where they wouldn't see him. Mike volunteered to play keeper on Jack's team and Sammie and Susie were assigned to replace Mary.

"Are you sure, you want to play like that? I've almost got my complete team." Draco reminded Jack.

"Ah, but I'll just keep Sammie and get Mary, Larry and Beth once they come back." smirked Jack.

"Hey, that's not fair! I'm going back and we should at least get Beth!" Sammie yelled at that.

"Oh, maybe I'll give you Larry then." Jack grinned. He obviously enjoyed teasing Sammie.

"We really should reassign the teams." Draco suggested more calmly.

"Maybe, but today I just want to have some fun. We'll think it through tomorrow." Jack promised.

Winning against Jack's team had gotten harder since the game and Draco wasn't sure whether that was due to all the training or simply the fact that Jack was calmer about their games now. He no longer seemed to think that he had to win against Draco to prove himself. Was that because he thought he had proven himself sufficiently in the game against the Lions? But he hadn't done much then.

Holding Jack and Sammie's balls was hard, but then Mike was having a lot more trouble then Draco. He wasn't used to playing keeper and Cathy wasn't very impressed by Susie's attempts at playing defender. Yes, Susie was fast, but she didn't know how to stop an attacker the way Matt did. Simple tricks that wouldn't have gotten her past Beth were all Cathy needed against Susie.

"I'll definitely take Beth." Jack told Draco when Cathy scored yet again. "I need a defender on the team and she'll work better with her sister in the goal."

"So who's left for us?" Draco asked him. "You also need a runner."

"Larry?" Jack suggested. "I don't really need the third attacker."

"I don't have much use for Larry either." Draco reminded him. "I'd use him as a defender, but he always forgets his position when I do."

"You want Mary as a defender? We could try making Larry the new keeper, but then I want Matt on my team."

"Is Larry reliable enough in the goal?" Draco asked him. "Won't he run off just like he does as a defender?" He'd never seen Larry do that when he'd played keeper before, but then he hadn't seen him as a keeper often enough to be sure.

Jack started to answer, but at that exact moment Larry came crawling out of the bushes signalling that Mary and Beth were coming down the path.

Everyone ran over to meet him and help him extricate himself from the branches. Only Charlie remembered to get Beth's cap, which she'd left in a plastic bag under the tree Draco had tied 'That Dog' to.
That turned out to have been a bad idea. 'That Dog' had suddenly decided that he wanted to be a
guard dog and was sitting on the bag. When Charlie pushed him off he grabbed it tightly between
his teeth and growled his best menacing growl.

The growl didn't impress Charlie in the least, but she just couldn't tear the bag away from 'That
Dog'. Commands like 'Stop!' and 'Drop it!' failed of course. This was 'That Dog' not Munin. The
raven might sometimes ignore such orders as a prank, 'That Dog' didn't even understand them.

Charlie looked over to Draco with a pleading look. Somebody had to help her. If she kept tugging
at the bag and Draco tried to grab the dog, they might get him to let go or at least tear the bag open.

"Scratch his belly!" Draco shouted at her.

Charlie stared at him for a moment. Scratch his belly? How was that supposed to help?

"Pet him and scratch his belly!" Draco repeated.

So Charlie tentatively let go of the bag with one hand and slipped it under 'That Dog'. A gentle rub
against his belly and 'That Dog flipped over onto his bag stretching all four legs into the air.
Charlie rubbed a little harder and 'That Dog's' mouth opened into a happy dog laugh. The bag
slipped out completely forgotten over the joy of being petted.

With a shout of triumph Charlie grabbed the mistreated bag and ran off to join the rest of the gang.
'That Dog' looked after her and whined disappointedly. She could at least have untied so he could
run around with her, if she wasn't going to continue playing tug or petting him.

Luckily it turned out that 'That Dog' had only chewed up the bag and the cap was undamaged.

"Well Larry, your turn." Charlie said as she handed it to the boy.

"Huh? What?"

"You're the one who suggested Beth, so you have to give her the cap," Charlie elaborated.

"You want me to ...?" Larry stared at the cap. "How?"

But there was no time left for tips. Mary and Beth had already reached them and the gang stepped
in their way. Beth stopped and looked up at Mary confused.

Larry apparently had decided to do it the easy way. He simply held out the cap to her. "For you."
he explained.

Beth stared at the cap without comprehension for a moment, then a wide smile crossed her face as
it dawned on her and for a moment it looked like Beth would hug and kiss Larry like Susie had
Draco, but then she regained her self control. She drew herself up straight, accepted the cap almost
casually and put it on her head. "Thank you." she said calmly.

Draco almost laughed at the contrast between the two girls' reactions and for a moment he
wondered which one the gift meant more to. And which one would get further in the gang? At first
glance Beth had the better chances. She was bigger and stronger, more impressive and she'd even
led the wannabes, but then Beth also wasn't much brighter than her sister. Mary was valued for her
strength by her fellow gang members, but Cathy held more rank and Charlie seemed to have gained
influence since she'd been made the leader of the runners. She might even outrank Mary now.

So could it be that in the long run Susie's intelligence would outweigh Beth's strength and
Severus wasn't home when Draco returned for lunch and soon after Munin fluttered in with a short note saying that he wouldn't be back until dinner.

Draco sighed. Obviously his relatives were all rather secretive about their addresses and indeed, when Severus returned he'd only found four of them.

"I'll search some more when we're back at Hogwarts." he promised Draco. "I just can't take home any books with Minerva around all the time."

"Did you ask her about my school letter?" Draco asked him feeling a little nervous.

"Yes, it appears the owl got lost. At least when Minerva counted them one of the school's birds was missing and she doesn't remember which one she gave your letter to deliver."

"The owl just disappeared?" Draco asked incredulously.

"Minerva assumed that he had an accident and was either killed or badly hurt. He was a healthy young barn owl, though and it seems rather unusual that he'd just die on the way from Hogwarts to Hogsmeade. He didn't have to cross the forest or get near any muggle towns and the distance isn't big enough that he'd have been likely to land and rest on the way."

"But why would anyone be after the Hogwarts owls?" Sarah interjected. "Not even your Voldemort would have any reason to kill a simple school owl."

"Maybe if he thought that he was carrying an important message from Dumbledore to the ministry." Draco suggested.

"No, most likely he was attacked by a flying hunter. Not many animals I know eat owls however and if one makes his home around Hogwarts that might turn into a serious problem. We'll have to find a way to protect the owls, if it happens again."

"What about my letter then?" Draco pushed.

"Minerva made me a copy of the book list, but you'll have to do without the actual letter this year."

"Was there anything important in it?"

Severus shrugged. "If there had been, I suppose Minerva would have at least told me."

Relieved that he was at least still wanted at Hogwarts Draco returned to his Math exercises. Once he got back to school he didn't have to worry about finding a new home for almost a year and everything would be back to normal.

Or would it?

A/N: This isn't going to be in the story, but after writing about them so much, I've got a rough future time-line for the Rakers in my head up to the time Billy joins the gang. Now I'm a little curious: Who do you think will lead the Rakers after Jack? Who'll be the first girl to lead them and who'll be the leader that welcomes Billy? And who else do you think might be leaders in between?
Letters and Homework Shocks

Munin flew back in on Thursday looking rather exhausted and carrying a very small envelope from Ireland.

Draco had been just about to dash off to meet his friends, but stopped in the door curious to hear what the owl said. Or could one call a letter delivered by a raven an owl at all?

Severus, despite his own curiosity, fed Munin first and only after the raven had settled down to sleep opened the letter. The note inside was very short saying that Sabrina Malfoy was much too old and sickly to take care of a child.

"Much as I expected." Severus informed Draco. "She suggests we try some of your younger relatives. I'll send Munin off with the next letter tomorrow after he's gotten some rest."

Draco nodded. "Where are you sending him this time?"

"Cornwell. You've got an uncle and aunt there, but they're not much younger than Sabrina so don't expect too much." Severus answered.

"What about the other three addresses you found?"

"All in due time. Munin can only deliver one letter at a time, since they all live in different parts of the country. We might find a more efficient way once we have all the addresses, but right now that's the best we can do."

Draco sighed. "They don't sound very promising, though. Can't you send him to someone more likely to want me first?"

"We visited all the likely ones. None of those we have at the moment are promising." Severus told him calmly. "But sometimes it turns out the least likely candidate is the best of all. We just have to try all of them now."

To Draco all that didn't sound good at all. What if none of his relatives wanted him? Uncle Severus would keep trying until he ran out of people he could ask, but what would he do when he did? Well, there was always Aunt Eusebia's offer to take him in, if there was no other way. Draco just hoped that she'd really meant it.

Deciding to try not to worry about it yet he turned and slipped out the door. He'd most likely be the last one to arrive at the soccer lawn today.

After their lazy period following the big game the gang returned to their usual habit of playing Soccer at least once a day. The two new members fit in without many problems. They'd already gotten used to playing with the older members during the training and were accepted by everybody.

The only exception remained Sammie who refused to work with either of the two. After a while Draco actually found that he was glad that Jack had claimed both of the new members for his team and only occasionally lent him one of his players to keep them used to playing with and against
everybody in the gang. If he'd had to deal with Sammie's refusal to work with them everyday, he'd probably have despaired.

The exchange of players was fun, though and Draco also took it as another sign of his improving relationship with Jack. They were able to accept each other's abilities now and sometimes Draco even felt like an actual partner in Jack's efforts to train his team. Still it took him completely by surprise when Jack greeted him with an almost happy: "You're on my team, today." on Friday afternoon.

"W ... What?" Draco stuttered in reply. "But then who'll captain the other team?"

"I will." Mike grinned. "And Mary'll be our keeper."

"We have to keep practising all possible combinations." Jack reminded Draco. "And you'll be back at your school in only two weeks and won't get to train with us much. So we'd better make use of the time we've got."

"Does Hogwarts have any really good Soccer players at all?" Sammie asked with a slight sneer.

Draco thought about it for a moment and realised: "I don't know. I suppose some of the muggle born kids would have to know how to play, but I can't remember ever seeing anyone do it at Hogwarts. We always just played Quidditch."

The gang stared at him in shock. "Then how will you train when you're back in school?" Susie finally asked.

"Well, I'm still seeker on the house Quidditch team, but maybe I could convince the captain to let me try to play keeper instead." Draco mused.

"That's not the same as Soccer." growled Beth.

Draco shrugged. "Maybe I'll find a Soccer team, if I look for them. I never had a reason to before. I'll have to wait and see."

Playing with Jack's team turned out to be surprisingly easy to get used to. For once he didn't have to worry about Jack's well placed shots, though Mike and Cathy were quite a challenge as a combination and Mike was a much better strategist than Jack. The hardest part was not interfering with Jack's leadership of the team. Draco could easily come up with a better game plan, but that would just drive Jack mad.

Still he enjoyed the game a lot and it was interesting to see what problems Mike encountered working with his team. It gave Draco a few new ideas for the next time he'd be captain.

To Draco's surprise they saw nothing of the Sharks all week. Their wannabes showed up near the border from time to time and Toby sometimes hung around to watch the Raker wannabes play, but he didn't seem interested in the gang's activities at all. He just stood around looking lost and lonely.

Mely however didn't seem to care at all. She was almost always seen in the company of Cedric and Linda. Luke still didn't like her, but Bobby had taken over the group and Luke's opinion apparently didn't count much.

Munin took his time to return from Cornwall. Of course it was a long way, but he'd been surprisingly fast on the trip to Ireland. How had the raven managed that anyway? Draco didn't know much about ravens, but owls couldn't fly that far over the ocean. They needed to rest sometimes in between and they couldn't swim. Considering the look of Munin's talons Draco
doubted that ravens could either.

Severus smirked when Draco asked him about it. "No, he can't swim, but unlike an owl, he knows how to make use of muggles."

"Make use of muggles?" Draco repeated trying to make sense of the answer.

"Muggle ships and planes." Severus elaborated. "Munin knows how to sneak on board and be carried along. He sometimes has problems determining his muggle transport's destination, though. Especially planes can be difficult and there's also a big risk of getting caught, so he usually sticks to ships. All he had to do to get to Ireland was fly down to the coast and land on a ship. For Cornwall he'll have to fly all the way."

"And that's why he's taking so long." Draco realised.

"Exactly. It's a very long trip." Severus confirmed. "He'll return sometime next week, don't worry."

"So where are we going on Sunday, if Munin isn't back? Do you have any addresses left that we could try?"

"I do have three, but I don't think we should just try them and there are still some things I have to prepare at Hogwarts. Since I want to be here for market day, I was planning to do that on Sunday."

Draco frowned. "Do I have to come along for that?" He could already see himself counting potion bottles, vials, cauldrons, ingredients ...

Severus looked surprised. "Do you want to? I wasn't expecting you to, but if you're bored here."

"Oh no, not at all!" Draco exclaimed. What had given him the stupid idea to ask that in the first place? Severus had never made him come along on his Hogwarts trips before, after all. "I'm sure, I can find something to do around here. Maybe play a little Soccer, study some Math ..."

"Have you done all your homework, by the way? There are only two more weeks left to finish it."

Draco froze. His homework! But what exactly had been the assignments? He had written them down on a parchment that he'd put in his desk at home in Malfoy Manor. After a first moment of panic when he thought that he didn't remember any of them he realised that he did in fact remember the Potions one and had a general idea what the Charms one had been all about. But how should he actually do them? He didn't even have his school books anymore! Well, there were Potions books enough in the lab. And much better ones than any of his classmates could hope to get their hands on. He could even outdo Hermione Granger, if he used those for his essay.

"Oh no, I forgot!" was all he got out as a response though.

"Well, then you'd better get to work." Severus smiled encouragingly. "Two weeks ought to be enough time to manage. I bet most of your classmates aren't far ahead of you. Some might even wait until the last week to rush their essays."

"No, you don't understand. I forgot what exactly the homework was. I'd written it down, but the parchment was lost in the raid with all the rest of my school things. The only one I'm sure I remember correctly is the Potions assignment, because I was going to start that first and had already done some research." Draco gave Severus a pleading look even though he had no idea what he was asking him to do about it. "I think I know what Charms was, but I don't remember how long it was supposed to be. Guess I'll just have to make it as long as possible. Professor Flitwick has never complained about homework being too long before. Not even Granger's."
"All right, then get started on Charms and I'll try to find out the rest of the assignments." Severus promised. "The one you remembered couldn't have been Care for Magical Creatures, could it?" He added after a moment. "I have no idea where Hagrid is or how to reach him."

"No, sorry. I think it was something about ... some animal?" Draco finished lamely. "Well, I'm going to drop the subject anyway. Maybe if I manage to convince the headmaster before Hagrid's first lesson, he won't even notice?"

To Draco's surprise Severus nodded. "I'll talk to Albus, if I can. He ought to be back by now so maybe we can get your switch of subjects over with right away. Now, you'd better get to work on that Charms essay."

"Can't I do Potions first? It's easier and I already know which books might work. I've never tried to read any of your Charms books."

"No, leave Potions for last." Severus ordered. Then added more softly so Draco almost didn't hear. "Then, if you don't manage in time I can always forget to ask for it in the first week."

Draco smiled. "Don't worry, I'll manage."

Still he dashed into the lab the moment he had finished the dishes and picked out the Charms books. There were only five of them and thanks to his sorting efforts after the raid he didn't have to worry that he might have missed any. Unfortunately his first looks inside revealed that they were all too advanced for him, though they weren't quite as bad as some of the Potions books he'd come across in here. With some effort and a good dictionary he might have been able to read some of them. That didn't help much at the moment, though. He needed help with his homework fast.

"Uncle Severus, do you have any other books on Charms? These are a little too advanced." Maybe now he'd have to go along to Hogwarts after all? There had to be lots of books he could use in the library.

Severus and Sarah jumped apart when Draco entered the living room. Ups! Had they been kissing? 'Wrong moment to show up, Draco.'

"Well, there are our old school books." Sarah suggested. "You'd have to dig them out in the basement though. I'm not sure where exactly we put that box."

Severus nodded. "Bring your book list, Draco. Maybe we can save some money on school books this way too."

Draco looked a little confused, but he went and got the list which he had put into the Math book as a bookmark. That way he couldn't lose it and it wouldn't be crumpled when he stuffed it into his backpack.

'That Dog' joined them on the way out. Maybe he was hoping to be taken out for a walk, but he didn't seem to mind when the excursion took them past the front door and deeper down the stairs into the basement.

Draco felt a little nervous when he saw all the graffiti down here since it reminded him that he was deep in Shark territory. He supposed that they wouldn't dare harm him as long as he was with Severus however and they didn't go anywhere near the Sharks' hide out anyway. Instead Severus led him into what looked like a large, dark hall of wooden cages. There were no animals inside, though. Most of them were cluttered with boxes of all kinds, but some even contained furniture.

"What are those?" Draco asked Severus confused. Why would anyone build cages for furniture?
"Storage rooms." Severus answered as if it were obvious. "We can't keep everything in our little flat, so we put whatever we know we won't need for a while down here. That's what basements are for." he added when he saw Draco's confused look. "Every flat has one of these rooms."

"I know what basements are for." Draco pouted feeling slightly insulted. "But I've never seen one with wooden cages before."

Severus laughed. "They're cheaper than walls." he explained. "You have a door you can lock to protect your possessions from theft and vandalism and don't have to pay as much material as you'd need for a full wall. Come on now. This one's ours."

Severus opened the door with both a key and a spell, Draco noted. And it was a spell he didn't recognise at that. A thief would probably find it easier to saw through the wooden cage than to break this lock.

Inside he found himself surrounded by all sorts of boxes that looked almost the same in the dim light. The lamp closest to them kept flickering which made it even harder to see.

"I suppose the books would have to be in one of the boxes in the corner." Severus told him. "Let's start looking there."

He levitated the top boxes down to the ground so Draco could reach them and opened the first one. Draco peeked over his shoulder curiously. "What's in there?"

"Sarah's winter clothes." Severus reported with a shrug.

"Oh." Now that really was disappointing.

"That means the next two are probably clothes as well." Severus decided. "Try pulling down the smaller ones over there."

Draco did so and found some sort of kitchen utensils. "Why don't we try the one next to the door?" he suggested as he watched Severus levitate another one of the big boxes.

"Because I know that one's full of batteries and light bulbs." Severus answered promptly. "We're looking for books that we haven't used in a while. Those won't be that close to the door." he opened the box, peered inside and closed it again.

"What did you find?"

"Photos. Of Sarah's family mostly. We're digging in the right direction."

"Really?" Draco suddenly felt excited. "Can I see them?" Maybe there even were some pictures of her at muggle school.

"Not today, Draco. We're looking for the books." Severus reminded him. "Look into the next box. It's low enough so we don't have to pull it down."

With a disappointed sigh Draco pulled open the box. "Hey, there really are books in here."

Severus closed the photo box quickly and came over to check Draco's discovery. "Yes, that's it. Let me see your book-list"

Draco obligingly handed it over. It wasn't the usual list of books he would need for the year, but a complete list of all schoolbooks used in all classes at Hogwarts this year. Either McGonnagal had
made a copy of the headmaster's own book-list or this had been the list she'd used when she'd written the other student's letters. At least Draco couldn't imagine that anyone else cared about having a complete list of all books used at Hogwarts.

Severus took the parchment and looked for the fifth year, but in the flickering light it was hard to read the hand written list. He tried lighting his wand to compensate for the times the light went out, but still the light was too unsteady to read comfortably.

Severus glared at the parchment for another moment, then decided: "It'll be easier to do this upstairs and you might find a use for more than just the Charms books."

They quickly returned the other boxes to their former places and then Severus put a floating Charm on the book box so that Draco only had to push it on their way back up the stairs. Draco found that it was fun to make the box wobble and dance through the air in front of them by poking it forward with just one finger. 'That Dog' however wasn't that fond of the show. He stared at the box fearfully as it passed over his head and crawled behind Severus whimpering softly.

"It's alright." Severus tried to calm him. "It won't hurt you."

'That Dog' whimpered some more and looked up at Severus accusingly as if to say: 'Well, that's easy for you to say. You're all the way up there looking down at that heavy floating box, but I'm down here where it might drop on my head any moment.'

Severus looked back at him. "Oh, come on."

"Whiiiiii!" argued 'That Dog'.

"Oh, all right." Severus finally gave in and picked the dog up to carry him up the stairs.

"You know, he just tricked you." Draco remarked giving the box another push that sent it tumbling towards the stairs.

"Would you prefer to listen to his whining the whole way up?" Severus asked him. "If he'd followed us up the stairs at all. He might have forced us to come back down to get him instead."

Draco conceded that with a shrug. Yes, maybe it was better to carry the dog than to climb up and down the stairs twice. Then again they could have just left him where he was overnight. That would have taught him not to insist on being carried sure enough.

He tried poking the box in a few different spots to see how it would react and finally sent it spinning into a wall.

"Careful." Severus admonished him. "Don't spill the books. That'll damage them and some of them are already in a rather bad condition."

"Oh, some of Sarah's books would have been old when she got them, wouldn't they?" Draco realised.

"Yes, but I was thinking more of my old Transfigurations books." Severus admitted. "I might have thrown them after Potter a few times too many."

"Potter? I thought these books have been in the basement for years. Why would you throw them after Potter there?"

"Not that Potter. The other one." Severus growled.
"Other Potter? What other Potter?" Draco still didn't quite get it. There as only one Potter left as far as he knew after all.

"James Potter." Severus clarified. "Not Harry."

"James Potter? But he's been dead for longer than these books can have been in the basement. ... Oh." Suddenly that made sense. If the books hadn't been in the basement at the time, James Potter wouldn't have had to come into the Snipes' basement for Severus to be able to throw them after him. "When did you meet James Potter then?"

"We were in the same year at Hogwarts. Transfigurations was one of the subjects we had with the Gryffindors back then."

That made sense. That way there would have been ample opportunity for Severus to throw his Transfigurations books after Potter. Still one thing didn't make sense here. "You weren't in the same year as my father, though, were you?"

"Oh no, he'd already left the school a few years before I started." Severus smiled. "I can't say that I regret that."

"But then how can I be in the same year as Potter and Billy is only a baby? Did the Potters have their son that early?"

Severus thought about it for a moment. "Maybe a little. Lily Potter was muggle born and muggles tend to have children at a younger age than we do, because they don't live as long. She probably felt it was time to have children. Your father on the other hand took his time to get married and have children. I think he only married your mother, because he needed to continue the Malfoy line. He never wanted to have a family and postponed it as long as he could."

Draco nodded sadly. Yes, that sounded like Lucius. "But what about Billy?"

"Azkaban." was all Severus said, but for the moment Draco felt that he didn't really want to know more.

Severus had been out of the prison long enough to have much older kids than Billy, of course, but then starting a family probably wasn't the first thing one would do after getting out of Azkaban.

"Do you really think my school books will be the same as yours?" he asked Severus after a moment.

"Some of them might. They're all standard books that have been used in schools for decades. The editions mightn't be the same, but the difference won't be that big and it'll save us some money. It will be hard enough to pay the school money and get everything else you need."

Draco hadn't even thought about that until now. Everything he had owned had been lost in the aurors' raid on Malfoy Manor. He wouldn't just need new books. He'd need new robes, potions ingredients, a cauldron, gloves, a new broom, a new trunk, a book bag ...

"I could use the backpack." he realised.

Severus stopped and raised an eyebrow at him.

"The backpack you gave me. I could use that instead of a book bag. It's healthier to carry heavy things on your back anyway."
Severus thought for a moment then nodded. "If you're sure you want to be seen like that."

"Of course I am. I take it to the market every week where all of Hogsmeade can see me. Why shouldn't I take it to school?"

"Your classmates will see you at Hogwarts." Severus reminded him. "Potter will see you."

Draco winced at that thought at first, but then shrugged. "Potter hangs out with Weasley and his muggle clothes aren't exactly the latest fashion either."

"You can have my old trunk as well." Severus offered.

"Really?" Draco was still impressed by the old trunk that had actually been to a muggle school. He could hardly believe that Severus would actually let him use it. "But what about all your Chemistry equipment?"

"We can put that in a cardboard box for the school year." Severus decided. "It won't look very good, but I'm not planning on entertaining guests in the lab. And if the aurors come for another raid they won't care one way or the other. They dig through everything and leave a mess no matter what they find."

Sarah wasn't pleased when they dragged the dusty box into the flat and Draco had to admit that the dust covered old cobwebs didn't look very good on the living room's carpet, but Severus just told her. "I'll clean it up afterwards." and ignored her scolding.

'That Dog' was still scared of the box and hid behind Sarah when Severus set him down to open the box. There were quite a lot of books inside, more than Draco had expected should fit from the size of the box. A magical cardboard box? Well, in West Hogsmeade anything was possible.

They started sorting the books out by year and building stacks on the table and once she realised that nobody except 'That Dog' was listening to her tirade Sarah went and got a cleaning rag and Draco's old friend the feather duster. To Draco's surprise the books weren't as dusty as the box had been however. They were easy to brush clean, but still kept that odd smell of old parchment.

While Draco and Sarah were busy with the cleaning Severus kept unpacking the books and soon found two fifth year Charms books which he handed over to Draco. "There. Will these do for your homework?"

Draco leafed through them quickly and found most of what he needed in both. Yes, these ought to enable him to produce an essay that would satisfy Flitwick. The Charms professor wasn't very strict anyway, so all Draco really had to do was stick loosely to the topic.

"The second one is also your Charms book for the year." Severus reported after glancing at Draco's book-list once again.

Draco checked the book again and found that it was one of Sarah's. It looked old but except for a few smudges here and there well kept. "It says here that it was printed in 1962." he remarked. "Are you sure that'll be okay?"

Sarah shrugged. "Why not? We always had at least three different editions of each book in our classes and nobody ever had any trouble. The only real differences are the page numbers in most cases anyway."

"It's not that normal at Hogwarts, though." Severus told her. "Most students get new books every year. Only a few get them from older siblings and reading assignments are often just given as page
numbers. You'll have to keep that in mind and always check that against your classmates' books."

Draco also got two of Sarah's old books for Muggle Studies since Severus didn't know what year Draco would be in that class, Severus' Runes textbook and one of those ratty Transfigurations books. That one looked really bad. Obviously Severus hadn't just thrown it after James Potter. It seemed he had also spilled at least one potion over it, used it as a message board and drawn pictures on it. Draco just hoped that no important pages were missing.

Sarah was probably harbouring similar doubts as she turned the book over in her hands a few times. "Maybe we should try to get a slightly less used copy of this one," she suggested. "They'll most likely have school books in the market on Monday."

But Draco shook his head. "No, it'll do. There are enough other things we'll have to buy." He was too curious about the things Severus had scrawled into his Transfigurations book when he'd been fifteen. If he took this book to Hogwarts with him, he'd have plenty of time to explore it's contents undisturbed. And who cared about Transfigurations anyway. It wasn't something he'd need much as a Physics teacher or electrician after all. "What about the Potions book, though?" None of the books in the box had been about Potions.

"I keep those at my office at Hogwarts." Severus explained. "You can have my copy, if you promise to let me see it when I need to check something."

That left only Astronomy, Herbology and History of Magic since they didn't need books for their flying lessons. Severus considered giving Draco the old books for the first two subjects even though they were the wrong titles, but decided against it. It wouldn't be a good idea to anger Professor Sprout. The Herbology teacher did supply him with lots of good potions ingredients after all. The old History of Magic books wouldn't do anyway. They'd been written at the beginning of the Voldemort war and were therefore hopelessly outdated.

"What about the rest of my school things? I'll need robes and a cauldron and potions ingredients and gloves ..."

"We'll see about the gloves. Maybe we can get them at the market, but I doubt it. They don't usually demand dragon hide at West Hogsmeade. Most parents would simply refuse and buy something cheaper anyway, so we might have to go to Diagon Alley for them, but we'll have to get the robes there anyway. They don't sell Hogwarts uniforms in the market and the shops in the town centre are just too expensive." Sarah decided.

"I'll take Draco shopping next week." Severus promised. "I'll need an excuse to go to Diagon Alley anyway."

Sarah sighed. "You shouldn't do that, you know. You should tell all your precious informants to just owl Albus directly. You've done enough for their war. Their little power games shouldn't concern us. After all they never concern themselves with us either."

"They raid us every once in a while." Severus reminded her.

"And they wouldn't do that so often, if you'd never gotten involved in the war in the first place." Sarah insisted. "It's always been that way, Severus. They raid us now and then to pretend that they're doing something, but generally they live in their world and we live in ours. Whoever is in power out there won't change a thing here in West Hogsmeade. They won't share the good things with us, why should we share the bad ones?"

"If Voldemort wins, West Hogsmeade will feel it, Sarah. I guarantee you that." Severus said
calmly. "Maybe not at first. At first they'll just kill off the old order and the muggle borns and we'll barely notice, but those are thousands of people murdered just for the circumstances of their birth. And once he can no longer satisfy his blood lust that way Voldemort will look for new victims. Who do you think he'll choose? Not the purebloods, nor the rich ones, that's for sure. They are the ones he's built his power on. So who? The squibs? The other magical races? The half bloods? The werewolves? Those are our people, Sarah, our neighbours and friends. Do you want to wait until they come to drag off Tess' Joe or Draco's friends Mary and Beth? Or maybe the goblin family that runs the flower shop around the corner? If we don't stop him now, Voldemort will pick us all off one by one. Once he has done away with his strongest opposition he will be impossible to stop. I don't like Fudge any more than you do, more likely even less, because I've actually met him, but if we allow Voldemort to take over the ministry, we will all die for that mistake."

"It's still not your fight. You've done your part and there's little more you can do. Voldemort knows what side you're on now. He won't accept you back. If he actually puts together an army, then we can fight him with our wands. Until then we ought to stay out of it all."

"Albus needs me. I'm known for my association with the dark, so nobody gets suspicious when they see me talking to dark wizards. Even the dark wizards themselves still think I sympathise despite knowing that I betrayed Voldemort. Our informants can't be seen with a known light wizard like Albus, but I'm one of his staff. People expect me to have to talk to my boss sometimes. Everybody else would be suspicious." Severus explained. "And I'm not just a messenger." he added, but wouldn't say any more about it.

Draco spent the rest of the evening on his Charms homework. It was terribly boring, but by the time he finally gave up and went to bed he'd already written three feet of parchment and had found enough material for two more. If he stretched that a bit he'd most likely manage to make it three. Flitwick ought to be satisfied with six feet of parchment considering how boring his topic was. Draco doubted Gregory would manage to hand in much more than two feet and Vincent would probably slack off a little as well. He'd just finish his essay on Sunday evening and then get started on whatever other homework assignments Uncle Severus brought home.

A/N: What answer will Munin bring from Cornwall? What will McGonagall say when she sees Draco's Transfiguration book? And will Draco find someone to play Soccer with at Hogwarts?

In the next chapter: They go shopping a lot, try to buy a pet for only four knuts and Draco does some more homework.
Sunday with the Rakers was somehow different from other days to Draco's surprise. The Soccer game was the same as always, of course, but Merlin Park itself was different on Sunday, Draco found.

Instead of the usual occasional unemployed and old people walking by, there were people everywhere. Families with small children were walking leisurely down the paths, groups of young adults were standing around chatting, some couples were walking hand in hand and occasionally stopping to kiss. Draco even saw one young man drag his girlfriend behind a couple of bushes to do who knew what. From time to time someone would sit down on one of the benches to watch the Rakers play for a while.

These spectators made Draco a little nervous at first, but they never did anything more than watch. Maybe they were just remembering playing Soccer themselves when they'd been children.

As lunchtime neared some people even came out with picnic baskets to eat either on one of the benches or simply on a blanket spread on the lawn, enjoying what was left of the summer. Even though the weather hadn't changed yet it was almost September and in a few more weeks it would be getting cold.

The sight of the picnickers inspired Mary to ask Larry out for a picnic by the river on Tuesday and judging from the wide grin with which Larry accepted the invitation that was a really special date.

"Awww! How romantic!" Charlie promptly commented. "I wish I had somebody to ask out, too."

Matt stared at her longingly, but still didn't get up the courage to say anything. Draco considered giving him a little push for a moment, but he wasn't sure if that would really help Matt or make him even more self conscious about his feelings.

Beth just snorted at it all. Romance, picnics and boyfriends were obviously still far from her mind, but it was Susie who dragged them back to their game. The little Dancemouse was getting ambitious. All she seemed to think about was winning the next game against the Lions, even though there wasn't even a date set for it yet. She'd set her mind on playing a bigger role in that game and if she continued training as hard as she was at the moment, Draco was quite sure that she'd be one of the key players by then.

In the end Susie's insistence on continuing the game made Draco late for lunch, but luckily Severus was still at Hogwarts and Sarah forgave him after he'd fed Billy and put him to bed. Draco smiled down at the sleeping baby for a moment, before he returned to eat his own lunch.

He'd miss feeding and playing with Billy when he returned to Hogwarts. Maybe he ought to spend some more time with the baby until then, but then he couldn't play with the Rakers as much and he'd miss them, too. And then there was his homework to think of. He should at least finish his Charms essay so he'd be ready to start his next essay when Uncle Severus returned with his homework assignments.

However the late lunch left just barely enough time to do the dishes before Mike arrived to drag Draco off to the lake.
"You can do homework in the evening." Mike claimed. "We've got only one last week left to enjoy the lake and who knows, it might be a rainy week."

The lake on Sunday turned out to be so overrun it wasn't as much fun as usual. Angel Anna and her gang had already claimed the tree trunk when the Rakers arrived and their favourite place under the tree was taken by a group of adults.

"Did we really have to go swimming on Sunday?" Cathy Cat growled at the sight of all the people, but Jack just glared at them and led them over to where a group of little wannabes in yellow were arguing over an inflatable ball.

"Get lost!" he snarled at them and the children quickly grabbed their toys and towels and ran.

The Rakers claimed their spot without as much as a second glance after the children who Draco assumed must have been the Avenger wannabes. 'Well, if you get too close to Merlin Park territory, that's what you get.' he thought as he stretched out on his towel as best he could with so little room. Cathy had once again managed to get the spot right beside him and might have been lying a little closer than absolutely necessary, but then they did have to leave some room for the other bathers to walk past on their way down to the water or back up to their towels.

They didn't even swim much. With all the people in the water it wasn't as much fun as usual and with the tree trunk taken, they had no real destination anyway. Getting into the water meant to fight your way through hordes of yelling and laughing children splashing about and once you got away from them to where you could have your own water fight adult swimmers would complain about the noise and chase you off.

'Like market day without stands.' Draco thought as they fought their way back out of the water and to their towels. 'Noisy, crowded and still somehow a great event.'

He returned home tired, but happy, to find that Severus was back and had brought a whole stack of homework assignments with him. And he hadn't even finished the Charms essay yet!

Draco's happiness vanished at the realisation that he couldn't just drop into bed after dinner as he'd planned. He had to get that essay done and should try to get a start on the next assignment as well.

"I talked to Albus about your wish to take Muggle Studies instead of Care for Magical Creatures." Severus remarked.

"Really? What did he say?" Draco asked excitedly.

"He'll try to arrange the schedules so you can take either third or fourth year Muggle Studies, but he expects you to cover both years in one."

"What?"

"That way you can take your Muggle Studies OWLS exam at the end of your sixth year and the NEWTS together with the rest of your class. If you'd start in third year now, you'd have the OWLS exam in your seventh year and then still two years to go for the NEWTS." Severus explained.

"Oh. Do you think I could do both classes?"

"I doubt your schedule will allow that. Albus won't be able to arrange all of them so they won't collide with any of your regular classes." Severus reminded him. "And you'll be very busy with the OWLS this year."
Draco quickly went over his list of subjects in his head. How often would they have Transfigurations this year? "And there's Quiddich practise as well." he realised all of a sudden.

"Draco." Severus suddenly sounded very serious. "There's something we need to talk about."

"What?" Draco asked alarmed. "You're not going to kick me off the Quiddich team, are you?"

"Not directly, but I'm afraid the results will be the same." Severus answered gravely.

"The results will be the same?" What was that supposed to mean?

"Sarah and I will have to pay your school money for this year," Severus explained. "We'll have to buy your clothes, your books, everything you will need." he stopped for a moment, then continued. "We can not afford to buy you a broom as well. It is not required and extremely expensive."

"And with a school broom I don't have a chance in a game." Draco realised.

Severus nodded. "They'd kick you off the team, I'm afraid. It'll probably be less embarrassing for you to resign before they do that, though."

"They're sure to ask me why and what do I tell them then?" Draco sighed. Life just wasn't fair. He'd been looking forward to playing Quiddich again this year, had even hoped that he had a chance to become team captain.

"If you want, I can inform everybody that you've decided to step down from the team to concentrate on the preparation for your OWLS." Severus suggested. "I'll have to announce the open positions to the house anyway."

Draco sighed again. This sounded exactly like something his father would have made him do and most of his friends would realise that and attribute the decision to Lucius, if Lucius weren't in Azkaban. Maybe he could tell them that the decision had already been made at the end of the last year and Uncle Severus had already been informed? They'd agree that something like that was hard to take back.

Would he be able to play Quiddich again in his sixth year? The new seeker wouldn't step down voluntarily and there'd be no gift of seven brooms for the team to help along the decision this time. Draco had always been convinced that his father's donation had had nothing to do with his getting the spot on the Slytherin Quiddich team, but what if he'd been wrong about that? Was he really good enough to take his position back from a possibly successful younger player? He was small for his age, but still not as small as the average second year. And he'd probably have another growth spurt or two sometime this year. He had to catch up to his classmates sometime and most sixth years looked more like adults than boys.

Of course he wanted to grow. It had been very embarrassing to be smaller than some of the third years last year, but the bigger he was the slower he'd be in the air. Seekers had to be small, fast and agile. If they picked a second year for the new seeker now, that kid would most likely still have the size advantage over Draco next year.

It was hard to concentrate on boring Charms theory while such thoughts were constantly nagging in the back of his mind. Draco angrily shook his head to clear it and return to his work. He had to finish his Charms essay today, he just had to.

But one look at the last foot of parchment he'd written revealed that he had no chance. He'd have to brew an erasing potion or start the whole essay over again and he was just too tired to do either today. Instead he climbed into bed feeling miserable and lay awake for a long time worrying over
Quidditch and his homework. If he kept going at this speed he'd never get it done in time.

Monday morning Mike showed up so early that after watching them eat he actually volunteered to help Draco with the dishes out of pure boredom.

"Just why are you so eager to get going today?" Draco asked him surprised when Mike actually grabbed the towel away from him to speed things up.

"I have to buy my school things today." Mike explained hastily rubbing the towel over Sarah's favourite tea cup. "I don't want to get the most torn up books in the shops."

"Then why didn't you buy them sooner?"

"Because they aren't sold any sooner. They don't sell school equipment all through the year. Only on the last two market days before and the first two after the start of school they put up some extra stands around the bookshop where you can buy everything you need for school. You can buy them new all the time, of course, but then you have to pay the full price." Mike pushed the last plate back onto it's shelf with such force that Draco worried he might break it. "Come on, lets go!"

Sarah shook her head at the boy's eagerness, but Severus seemed to be in an unusually indulgent mood and relented to Mike's pushing.

Draco quickly dashed back into the lab to get his backpack, Mike picked up the bag he'd brought with him and they took off almost forgetting 'That Dog' in their hurry.

'That Dog' saw bags and backpacks whirling past him and recognised the signs of a trip to the market approaching. He might not be the most intelligent dog in Great Britain, but he had learned by now that that meant getting stuffed into Draco's backpack. Maybe if he could stay here he could gnaw at the furniture a bit instead? Or maybe tear up a pillow or two?

'That Dog' slowly inched over to the couch. If he managed to crawl under it and they couldn't find him, they might leave without him and he could find out what couch tasted like while he was down there. There, he'd almost made it! He ducked his head down and flattened his belly close to the ground. Just a little further now and he'd be safe.

Suddenly something grabbed him by the scruff of his neck, pulling him back and up and he found himself dangling in front of Sarah's face. "Draco! Come back, boy! You forgot something!" he heard her call and Draco reappeared in the door he'd just walked out of and came over to accept him from Sarah.

'Oh, noooo!' No whining or struggling helped. He was once again stuffed into the backpack. Well, at least he got carried down the stairs this way.

"You look ridiculous with a dog in your bag, you know." Mike informed Draco.

"It's better than getting tangled up in his lead every few steps." Draco shrugged it off. "What's in your bag anyway?" He'd never seen Mike bring a full bag to the market before.

"Some old school books I don't need anymore." Mike answered. "I'll sell them to one of the vendors or trade them for the new books. We'll see how it goes."

Draco too had an unusual shopping list today. Instead of the usual fruits and vegetables it listed such things as:
2 ink pots (black and green)
a quill (new, if possible)
parchment
....

That last one had no number attached and after a moment's thought Draco decided to simply leave it for last and buy as much as his left over money would allow. After all, this time he really needed to buy everything that was on his list.

At the very bottom he found the three school books he still needed. Astronomy, Herbology and History of Magic. Maybe he ought to get those first? Mike was going to buy books anyway.

The market was crowded as always, but something seemed different. The first thing Draco noticed was the clothes stands which seemed to have an unusual amount of green clothes among their wares. He wanted to head over to investigate, but Mike stopped him and dragged him along in the other direction.

"We'll buy school robes later. The books are more important."

'School robes?' Draco thought surprised. Hadn't Uncle Severus said that they'd have to go to Diagon Alley for those? He rechecked his shopping list and found that it didn't mention any robes either. "I don't have them on my list." he told Mike when his friend gave him a curious look. "Uncle Severus said we'd go to Diagon Alley this week."

"Oh well, then you'll just have to watch me buy mine." Mike grinned. "Do you have books on the list?" "Only three. I've already got some old ones from Uncle Severus."

"Let me see. What year are you in anyway?" Mike asked leaning over Draco's shoulder to see.

"Fifth, why?"

"You can have my History book from last year. My Mum insisted that I don't sell any of last year's books yet, but I really don't need that one. I'll bring it over tomorrow."

"But don't you want any money for it? I bet it cost you a few sickles even if you got it used."

"That's okay. I'm just lending it to you anyway. Just give it back to me at the end of the year and I'll sell it together with the other fifth year books." Mike grinned. "That way Mum will never know."

"Great. That leaves only Herbology and Astronomy. Thanks, Mike. That'll save me some money for the parchment."

"Can't help you with those two, I'm afraid. I've never heard of them before."

Apparently the rest of West Hogsmeade hadn't either. The whole area around the bookshop had been taken over by stalls selling school stuff and Draco wondered for a moment where the stands that he was used to finding around here had been moved to. He soon forgot about it though when he started looking for his books and didn't find them.

There was an abundance of the books Mike was looking for, some looking almost new while others were in worse condition than Severus' Transfiguration books. Mike picked up the best looking copies and bargained the vendor into selling them for less than half the price in exchange for his old books.
"See," he told Draco grinning happily. "It pays to take care of your books."

Indeed Mike must have treated his books very well. They looked no worse than the ones he'd just bought. Draco smiled. At least Binns wouldn't get a chance to complain about the way his book looked. Then again Binns probably wouldn't notice, if all his students brought comic books to read in class.

'Maybe then we'd even stay awake and learn something.' Draco thought. There had to be something one could learn from reading comics. Draco had no idea what, though as he'd never been allowed any. His father had been more fond of educational books. On dark curses, for example. For a moment he wondered what Sarah would have to say about that, if she knew.

Ink pots were easily found and so were most of the other items on Draco's list. Only the quill gave him a little trouble. Not that he couldn't find any, but he was a little worried about having to make one quill last the whole year. They did break rather easily when grabbed carelessly and Vincent Crabbe had a habit of playing with anything Draco left lying on his desk.

"Do you have any idea what sort of quill Larry uses?" he asked Mike after staring at the quills for a moment.

Mike thought about it, then shrugged. "No, I never really cared much about Larry's quill. Why?" "I need something that has a chance to survive being manhandled by Vincent and Greg. Larry is about the same size and I doubt he wants to spend all his money on new quills. How about Mary? Do you know her quill?"

"No, nor Beth's either." Mike declared before Draco could start asking any further. "I've got a better idea, though. Take a short goose feather quill. Goose is rather sturdy and a short quill will fit your hand fine, but will be uncomfortable for someone with big clumsy hands."

Indeed Draco remembered that both his friends preferred longer quills. Of course small ones didn't look that good and goose was hopelessly out at Hogwarts, but actually the white goose feather quills he saw at the stand, looked rather pretty.

"White isn't normally my colour." he remarked picking one up. "Most kids at Hogwarts have eagle feathers."

"Eagle is terrible expensive and according to my Mum they don't even write that well." Mike pointed out as he picked up a brown owl feather quill and inspected it closely. "You could try plucking out one of Munin's tail feathers for an unusual writing tool, though."

Draco thought about that for just a moment. Yes, Uncle Severus had a black quill that looked suspiciously like one of Munin's pretty feathers, but he doubted Severus would approve of ripping them off the poor bird. It had probably fallen out naturally at some time and Severus had just picked it up and put it to use.

"I can't just rip away at Uncle Severus' bird." he informed a giggling Mike. "Raven would make a nice quill though. Don't they sell any raven feather quills here?"

"No, I've never seen any. I think they're rather unusual, you know." Mike forced himself to stop laughing. "I'd stick with goose, if I were you. They're good and cheap and I doubt anybody would consider a quill a fashion statement."

"You'd be surprised." Draco grinned, but started trying out goose feather quills anyway. The first two were too short, but the the third one fit his hand exactly. Mike was right. This quill would be
very comfortable to write with, while it would just disappear in Vincent's huge paws. It shouldn't be very tempting for him to play with something he could barely hold properly. "Okay, I'll take this one."

They quickly paid for their quills and ink pots and went on to buy parchment. It was quite a surprise for Draco how many different kinds of parchment there were. Of course the expensive kind Draco had always gotten from Lucius wasn't available in the West Hogsmeade market, but there were still lots of different, shades, qualities and sizes. After simply staring at them for a while Draco decided to simply take the same kind as Mike. If it was good enough for his friend, it would have to be good enough for his teachers as well.

"Okay, now all we need are the school robes and with a little luck, I'll even have some money left over for sweets." Mike announced happily.

"That's your own money?" Draco asked him surprised.

"Of course it is. They're my school things."

"My parents always bought everything for me. The pocket money they gave me was all just for sweets or whatever else I wanted to buy on Hogsmeade weekends." Draco explained when he saw Mike's confusion.

"You shouldn't buy anything in Hogsmeade itself anyway." Mike advised him. "Those shops are even more expensive than Diagon Alley. I suppose they're just meant as tourist traps. They just don't mind the Hogwarts students getting caught there as well."

Remembering the prices he'd paid at Honeydukes and comparing them to what Larry had paid for Mary's every-flavour beans Draco had to agree with that. He really shouldn't buy anything on his Hogsmeade weekends anymore. Or maybe he could just buy it here in West Hogsmeade? He was going to use the weekends to visit his friends in Merlin Park anyway. He could just make a little detour over the market place on his way. Too bad he couldn't come here on market day, but at least the sweets shop and some of the other regular shops would still be here. He could buy whatever he wanted there.

If he had any money, that was. What if Uncle Severus didn't give him any pocket money for his Hogsmeade weekends? It wasn't an absolute necessity and he'd cost the Snapes too much money already.

Their arrival at the clothes stands distracted Draco from those worries only a few moments later. All the green he'd seen from a distance before turned out to be the West Hogsmeade school uniforms. They all wore Slytherin green at school!

For a moment Draco almost felt jealous. This looked so much better than the black Hogwarts uniform. Maybe he ought to try to convince the Snapes to send him to school in West Hogsmeade? But then he remembered that West Hogsmeade wasn't a boarding school. It would mean that he had to continue living in the Snapes' potions lab. They were probably glad to get rid of him soon and have their lab back.

He leaned against one of the stands and watched Mike try on robe after robe until he finally found one that fit.

"I think this one is right." Mike finally told him. "I didn't even notice that I grew so much over the holidays."
"It fits you perfectly." Draco agreed. "Come on, buy it and we can still visit the muggle shop before we have to meet the Snapes for lunch."

"I still need a spare." Mike reminded him. "And then I want to go to the sweets shop. We can still see the muggle shop next week."

Draco sighed and gave in. The search for another school robe would probably take too long to go anywhere afterwards anyway.

But this time Mike found a fitting robe much faster and soon they were squeezing through the crowds again trying to reach the sweets shop. Luckily once they had squeezed out of the immediate area around the clothes stands the crowds got thinner and Draco no longer felt like he was getting squashed.

Every West Hogsmeade student seemed to be buying school robes today and Draco suddenly suspected that West Hogsmeade had a lot more students than Hogwarts. He took one last glance back to try and judge the number of teenagers trying on robes and noticed something unexpected for the first time.

"Hey Mike! Why are some of the kids trying on red robes?" He yelled after his friend.

"Huh?" Mike looked back to see what Draco was looking at. "Oh, those aren't from West Hogsmeade. Some of the Hogsmeade folks don't want to spend all the money for Hogwarts and send their kids to the London Academy for Magic. I heard some kids even go to an Irish public school."

"And they've got red robes there?"

"London's red and Ireland blue." Mike nodded. "I've never seen any blue robes in the market, though. I guess they have to buy them either in Ireland or Diagon Alley."

"Northern Ireland?" Draco asked suddenly.

"No, I think it's actually on the southern end of the island." Mike shrugged. "Never cared much to find out, though."

"So there are three British Wizarding schools." Draco summed up surprised. And only two months ago he'd been convinced that there was only one.

"Four. Four and a half actually." Mike corrected him. "There's another one in Wales and a very small one in Dublin. They don't get any students from outside the city anymore, though. At least that's what I heard. People are too afraid their children might be harmed by the muggle terrorists. Even some families from Dublin send their kids away to school."

Draco stared at Mike for a moment. "Just how many wizards are there really in Great Britain? Five schools seem a bit much."

"Well, Dublin probably has around forty students all in all and Wales from what I've heard somewhere around one hundred. The reason that one's still there is that they teach in Welsh while all the other schools teach in English. The old Welsh families just prefer that." Mike explained. "Hogwarts has about three hundred students, but you have to remember that not all of them are British. West Hogsmeade is the only school for squibs. London probably has the largest number of actual wizards, but I don't know the actual number."

Draco decided he had to ask Severus about it. "Do you know if they accept muggle born students
in all those schools?"

"Why wouldn't they? I know that West Hogsmeade doesn't invite them the way Hogwarts does, but then it isn't a private school. I know that some Scottish muggle borns transfer from London to West Hogsmeade every year. The muggle borns have real problems getting to school, because most of them don't have access to the floo network in their towns and they just can't take the train to London every day. West Hogsmeade is simply closer."

"So London would have to have muggle born students. Wales and Dublin probably don't." Draco decided.

"Can't say that for sure. They're both small schools and probably don't get many students so they might be eager to invite muggle borns to increase the numbers."

By then they'd reached the sweets shop and Mike turned his attention to the wares. Draco tried not to feel jealous at the sight of all the chocolate frogs, everyflavour beans and other candy. Maybe he could buy just one little chocolate frog and claim he'd spent the money on school supplies? Sammie would certainly do it.

Mike chose a box of lemon drops, paid and dragged Draco out of the shop with all it's temptations. "Come on, or we'll be late again. With all those people out there it'll take us five minutes or more to get to the meeting place."

"What are those anyway?" Draco asked with a quick nod towards the box Mike had just bought.

"What, don't tell me you don't know lemon drops?"

"I don't. What do they do?"

"Do? They don't do anything. They just taste good." Mike laughed.

"Are they muggle sweets then?" now Draco was getting really interested. Sweets that didn't do any sort of magic? Who'd have thought that they even sold muggle sweets in West Hogsmeade!

Mike shrugged. "I guess so. I never asked. The only thing I was ever interested in about them was the taste. You can have one after lunch, then you'll see what I mean."

Indeed lemon drops tasted very good Draco decided later when Mike pulled out his candy again after they'd eaten and offered them to everybody. Even Billy got one, though he looked a little confused that he couldn't chew it and ended up swallowing it whole.

"I just wish I knew whether they're really muggle." Draco said leaning back against a cardboard box that almost collapsed under his weight. Only the other empty boxes inside kept it standing.

"They are." Severus declared without hesitation. "Albus always keeps a box in his office and he gets them in the muggle world."

"He does?" Sarah asked surprised. "Why doesn't he just buy them here? It'd be a lot easier."

"I don't think he knows they sell them in the wizarding world at all." Severus shrugged. "There are a lot of things in this market that only we natives know how to find."

Draco smiled. Yes, West Hogsmeade and it's people sure were special.
Munin returned on Wednesday with another polite refusal and looking only slightly ruffled from his long journey. Draco was impressed. Even his eagle owl would have been exhausted after such a long trip, but Munin seemed to be ready to take off again right away.

Severus had the next letter written as well, but he made no move to send the raven off even after he'd fed him and given him enough time to rest and straighten out his feathers. Munin spent the rest of the day perching on Severus' shoulder or hopping around him pulling away whatever utensil Severus happened to pick up or commenting on whatever he did. Severus sometimes pushed him aside gently, but mostly settled for scratching the bird's head until he let go of whatever he'd just grabbed.

Draco watched the two in fascination. Could it be that Severus had actually missed his bird? He himself had only ever missed his owl when he'd wanted to send off a letter while he was still off delivering the last one. Severus however seemed to actually enjoy Munin's company.

Then of course, Munin did a lot of things no owl ever could. And that was the point when Draco realised the reason for the rivalry between Munin and 'That Dog'. Company was the only thing 'That Dog' was really good for and Munin was quite capable of filling that spot along with most of his other duties. Only when he was off delivering mail did 'That Dog' get a chance to have his wizard to himself and Munin felt threatened by that takeover of his duties.

Severus finally sent the raven off again on Friday morning just before they left for Diagon Alley. He tied the letter to Munin's leg, scratched the bird's head one last time and watched him fly out the window before he turned back to regard Draco. "We're going to take the floo, Draco. There's no need to wear muggle clothes for this trip."

Draco looked down at himself taking in his dragon t-shirt and slightly grassy jeans. "I like these clothes."

"Go put on your robes, boy." Sarah ordered.

"Why? What's wrong with my jeans? I always wear them in the park and to the market." Draco argued.

"Everybody wears muggle clothes in West Hogsmeade, but in Diagon Alley everybody will be wearing robes." Sarah reminded him.

"So? I might have come in from muggle London."

"You'll attract attention, Draco." Severus remarked. "And my informants might think you're muggle born. That would be bad for my image."

"Your image?" Draco repeated surprised. Since when did Severus care about his looks?

"I'm supposed to play a dark wizard and death eater sympathiser. And attention is the last thing you want when working undercover." Severus explained.

"Oh. Does that mean I can be a secret agent too?" Draco asked excitedly. "Will I meet your informants?"

"No!" both Sarah and Severus shouted at once.

"You'll be a good kid and go look at the new brooms at Quality Quiddich Supplies and eat some ice cream while I talk to them." Severus added sternly.
Draco pouted. "I won't even get to play Quidditch this year. What's the fun in looking at the equipment, if I can't buy any?"

"Well, maybe they have Soccer stuff there, too." Sarah suggested.

"I doubt it." Severus mumbled, but at least Draco didn't protest anymore.

He quickly threw his robes on over his muggle clothes, which he regretted later because it got terribly hot under all the clothing, put on his Rakers cap and followed Severus to the floo station feeling very excited about getting this close to actual spy work. Maybe, he thought, he'd even meet one of his father's death eater friends while Severus was off talking to his informants, and be able to collect some information of his own.

His improved mood only lasted until they reached Diagon Alley and he saw one of the older Slytherins stride proudly past beside his father both wearing exquisite elegant robes. Suddenly Draco felt a little shabby with his old backpack and muggle cap.

Severus however didn't seem to mind the student or the fact that he hadn't even noticed them as he walked by. He simply continued walking towards the bookshop.

There it got even worse. Most of the customers inside were Hogwarts students and their parents and none of them were Slytherins. Draco knew people were staring at him while he picked up the books he needed. At least Uncle Severus was there to help him. Nobody dared to tease him with the feared Potions Master around and Severus also seemed to have a knack for finding the books he was looking for.

From the bookshop they went straight to Gringotts and Draco got a view of how little money there really was in the Snapes' vault. Severus counted out an exact amount that he took with him totally unlike Lucius who'd usually simply grabbed as many coins as his money pouch could hold at a time and dashed right off again unwilling to waste any more time than absolutely necessary inside the bank.

Not that Severus seemed to like the place any better than Lucius had. He probably just had a different view on what was absolutely necessary. And he probably didn't want to give the goblins the satisfaction of showing them that their presence made him uneasy. They definitely weren't as scary as the dementors he'd met in Azkaban and Severus probably felt worse around Aurors as well.

"So, where do we go next?" Draco asked as they stepped back out into the sunlight.

"To buy clothes. We have almost everything else you'll need, but still have to buy all your school clothes."

This time Draco didn't protest that he could wear his muggle clothes whenever he wasn't wearing the school uniform anyway. Nobody in Slytherin wore jeans and the robes he was wearing right now would be much too thin in summer. And he couldn't possibly wear the same clothes everyday!

"Madame Malkin's then?" he asked, but Severus shook his head and pointed towards a small second hand store Draco had never even noticed before.

"No, that's much too expensive. We can't go back for more money, Draco. What we took now will have to suffice for everything we buy today."

'Just great.' Draco thought. This was probably where the Weasleys bought their clothes, but then he'd been absolutely fine with the idea of buying second hand school robes back in the market on
Monday. This wasn't any different, he told himself. It was just a regular shop instead of a market stand.

Once inside they even had some fun with Draco trying on robes of different sizes. He even chose some much too big and much too small ones deliberately just to have a good laugh at his appearance. The other customers enjoyed the show as well and two kids who were probably going to be first years joined in with the dressing up. They looked even funnier then Draco in adult robes and soon everybody was laughing.

Draco completely forgot his worries about his looks and felt great for the rest of the day not even noticing the stares he was getting as he strolled through Diagon Alley alone while Severus was checking up on his informants.

He walked from shop to shop looking at all the shop windows filled with things he couldn't buy, but mostly didn't want or need anyway. A short trip through Quality Quiddich Supplies revealed that they had no Soccer stuff in there and looking at the Quiddich gear was rather painful for Draco at the moment. Especially the brooms threatened to destroy his good mood again. So Draco left the shop and continued window shopping through the alley until he finally ended up in front of a pet shop.

'New kittens arrived just this week' a big sign announced over the large pen that took up almost all the room behind the shop window. Five adorable little kittens were playing around in there, but that wasn't what drew Draco's attention to the shop. He only thought for a moment that the poor little things looked much too young to have been taken from their mother when he glanced at them, then his attention was snatched away by the owl in the cage beside the kittens' pen.

She was a large eagle owl who looked almost exactly like the one he used to own. Only this one was a female and most likely younger than his had been. Draco watched her for a long time even though the bird hardly moved at all. After all it was bright daylight and it was a miracle she wasn't fully asleep at all. Draco wondered briefly if the shop owner might have put a spell on her to disturb her sleep. After all it wouldn't do his business much good to put a sleeping owl into his shop window.

It took Severus a while to find Draco as he probably hadn't expected him to be interested in pets and had most likely checked the Quiddich shop first. He frowned when he saw what Draco was looking at, but didn't say anything about it.

"Ready to go?" he asked instead. "Sarah's probably already waiting with our lunch."

"That owl looks exactly like mine did," was Draco's unexpected answer. "And she's probably terribly unhappy in there. Please, can we buy her, Uncle Severus?"

"No, Draco." Severus answered decidedly. "You can borrow Munin or use the school owls to deliver your letters."

"But just look at her! She's all sleepy and unhappy displayed like this in full daylight. We could give her a good home."

"Two things, Draco." Severus stated calmly. "One: Never buy animals from shop windows. They've usually been tempered with to make them look more attractive to customers and that's bad for their health. They'll get sick pretty soon and die on you. Two: We don't have the money to buy her anyway. There are only four knuts left of our shopping money and I already explained that we can't go back for more."
Draco sighed and nodded to indicate that he understood, but he didn't move. "Can I take the dog to school?" he asked after a moment of silence.

'That Dog' who'd been hopping around Severus as usual barked happily at the suggestion. Dog, that was him! His master's boy was talking about him! He wagged his tail excitedly.

"Dogs are against the school rules and I really don't want him running after me at Hogwarts." Severus told Draco. "He'd only wreak havoc wherever he went. I doubt Albus would watch that for very long."

Draco nodded again. "The cat?"

"He's Sarah's familiar. You could ask her, but I doubt she'd part with him easily. I know they don't appear to be close, but they are. They're just both rather secretive about their relationship."

Another nod and sigh. Severus stared at the sign above the kitten's pen for a moment.

"We could try to find a pet for four knuts, though." he suggested then. "If they've got new kittens, the left over older ones are probably on sale. Most people go for the youngest, because they're cutest and there's always a risk that the leftovers won't be bought at all. A lot of petshops kill their cats once they're over two years old, but of course they want to cut their losses so they'll try to sell them at lowered prices first."

Draco looked at the kittens and had to fight down a shudder. They just killed them off once they weren't cute anymore? Couldn't they just give them away for free? He bet his friends in West Hogsmeade wouldn't mind getting an already adult cat and he knew that not all of them had their own pets like Mike did. Susie would probably be overjoyed if somebody gave her her own pet. She'd even be happy to have an old toad.

But then it was probably bad for business to give anything away for free.

"The ones left won't be the prettiest ones, but if you're desperate enough to take that dog, they'll do just fine." Severus added indicating the happy little dog at his side.

There were indeed two kittens left from the last batch, but they were still cute enough to cost more than four knuts. Even when Severus pointed out that one of them had uneven eyes the shop owner wouldn't hear of selling the animal at less than seven knuts.

Draco sighed and gave the kitten one last little pat. He knew enough about bargaining by now to know that he wouldn't get this one so he'd better set it back down before he got too attached to it. The toads caught his eye as he put the kitten back into it's cage and he walked over to check the price tags trying to figure out whether he'd like having a toad at all. They weren't much use after all. A quick check of the tags showed that his chances of getting one weren't very good anyway, but there was a terrarium that held a few snakes next to the toad section.

Of course a snake was out of the question for a fifteen year old wizard, but they were interesting to look at. Behind the snake terrarium were the even more unusual pets like spiders and lizards. There weren't many of them and some had really extravagant prices. It had to be because they weren't bought much, Draco thought. The shop owner had to keep them fed and cared for until somebody finally wanted them and it probably cost him more than the actual purchase of the animal from his suppliers.

Draco's tour of the unusual pets had taken him almost into the last dustiest corner of the shop by the time he looked up from the lizards' cage. Maybe it was time to get back to where Severus and
the shop owner were still discussing the cats? This part of the shop was dark and dusty and he probably wouldn't see much of the animals kept in that last corner anyway.

He gave the corner one last glance and turned back, then stopped. Had he really just seen a price tag saying three knuts? He turned again to take a closer look. There! His eyes grew very wide when he read the rest of the tag.

"Uncle Severus!" he called excitedly once he'd fully realised what he'd found. "They've got raven eggs!"

Draco stared at the two ordinary looking eggs in fascination. Ravens for only three knuts each? Was that even possible?

Severus came over to take a look at Draco's discovery followed by the shopkeeper.

"They're only three knuts." Draco whispered eagerly. "Can I have one, please? I've always wanted a raven."

"Ravens are very difficult to raise." the shopkeeper cautioned. "They require expert handling. I doubt a boy your age could manage."

"I wasn't much older than Draco when I got my first raven." Severus' glare silenced him at once.

"Please?" Draco repeated. Severus' reaction had to mean that he'd grant him his wish. It just had to!

Severus calmly picked up one of the magically warmed eggs and held it up to inspect it closely, then laid it back down to repeat the procedure with the other. Finally he spoke a quick spell over both eggs, then looked back to Draco. "Would you rather have a male or a female?"

Male or female? Draco just wanted a raven. He needed to think about that question for a moment. He wanted a raven just like Munin, but did the gender make any difference? Munin was a male, though.

"Male, I think." he answered finally. "It's not really that important, though."

"Then let's take the male." Severus decided and picked up the first egg once again. "You can keep your cats." he told the shopkeeper. "We're buying this raven."

The shopkeeper sighed at the realisation that he could have gotten four knuts out of these customers instead of just three, if he'd just agreed to sell the uneven-eyed kitten and it would have spared him some cat food as well. Eggs had the advantage that they didn't need to be fed. All he had to do was put a simple warming charm on them every few weeks and the raven eggs would be fine. He frowned after the pair as they left his shop with their purchase.

Draco and Severus in contrast were perfectly happy with the deal they'd made. Draco's statement that he'd always wanted a raven might have been slightly exaggerated, but they'd really become his favourite pets over the holidays and he'd always thought that it would be years until he could get his own. He just couldn't believe his luck. Who'd have thought that ravens were this cheap!

He didn't know what made Severus so happy, but maybe he'd been worried that he'd have to disappoint him about the promised pet. Or maybe it was because Draco had chosen a raven just like Munin?

Whatever the reason they were both happy with their day and for the moment Draco had completely forgotten about such things as having to wear second hand robes and not having a
A/N: Will Draco's goose feather quill survive his friends at Hogwarts? Will he be able to live without Quiddich? And will Albus let him bring his raven to school?

In the next chapter: Sevi shows Draco how to take care of his raven egg, the Rakers go back to school and Draco has to finish his homework.
The Last Week

Chapter Notes

A/N - Here it finally is. The last chapter before we return to Hogwarts.

Chapter 35: The Last Week

Draco's new raven egg turned out to be quite the attraction in Merlin Park even though Severus didn't allow Draco to take it down to the park to meet the Rakers.

"The egg's much too fragile to take to a Soccer game." Severus explained when Draco frowned at the news. "If you want to show it to your friends, you'll have to ask them to come up and see it here."

They'd made a nice little nest in a box Sarah had found for them and Severus had even explained the warming charm that he kept on the egg to Draco. Unfortunately it was still the summer holidays however and Draco wasn't allowed to try it out.

"I'll teach you when we're back at school." Severus had promised and with a sigh Draco had settled down to just watch the egg and dream of all the things he'd teach his raven once he'd hatched.

The younger Rakers were very excited about Draco's trip to Diagon Alley and Susie soon bugged him into telling them everything he'd done and seen there. Jack sneered and rolled his eyes at it all at first, but he probably realised that Susie and Sammie wouldn't leave it alone until Draco had told his story.

When Draco got to the part about the pet shop the others started to get interested as well.

"A kitten?" Charlie asked at once. "Did you really get one?"

"No," Draco grinned. "The kittens were all too expensive, but we found something cheaper."

"So you did get a new pet?" Beth asked sounding a little surprised. "I thought you've already got a dog?"

"That's Uncle Severus' dog and he isn't allowed to come to Hogwarts. He's too troublesome." Draco explained. "And I wouldn't really want to show up with such an embarrassing pet anyway. I got something much cooler."

"Something cool?" Mike repeated. "Then it can't be a toad and you said the cats were too expensive. Owls are even more expensive than cats, so it can't be an owl either."

"I know, I know! It's a rat right?" Susie asked excitedly. "Dragon bought a rat!"

"You can't know, you weren't there." Sammie hissed at Susie the momentary peace they'd shared while trying to convince Draco to tell his story broken. "It isn't a rat, right Dragon?"
Draco shook his head and laughed at them. "No, its not a rat. Its something much cooler."

"It could be a spider." Mary suggested. "Spiders are cool."

"No, much better than a spider." Draco grinned. This guessing game was fun.

"A snake?" Beth asked eyes gleaming. "Snakes are the best."

"You also need a special permission from the ministry to keep a snake." Mike reminded her. "And getting that probably costs a fortune in bribes."

"And you have to be at least seventeen to get it." Draco added. "Uncle Severus says they're not allowed at Hogwarts anyway, though, so it doesn't matter. And my pet is way better than a snake anyway."

"Maybe it's a dragon." Sammie suggested.


Draco tried to imagine a dragon living in the Snapes' flat and had to fight down his laughter. Sammie would think he was laughing at him and Jack's reaction had probably already hurt him enough. Then he remembered the little dragon Hagrid had hatched in his hut during his first year and the idea didn't seem all that ridiculous anymore.

"No, nothing that fancy. I've got a raven." he announced before anyone could annoy Jack with an even crazier suggestion.

"A raven? Just like your uncle's?" Susie asked excitedly.

Draco had given up explaining that he wasn't really related to the Snapes some time ago since he'd realised that the kids of West Hogsmeade didn't quite get his explanation. Blood relations meant little to a community where step parents were just as, if not more, common as real ones. The Snapes had taken him in and he called them uncle and aunt, so according to his friends' view he obviously was their nephew and there was no convincing them otherwise.

"Well, at the moment he's still just an egg, but someday he's going to be just as big and beautiful as Munin." he explained and was immediately rushed with requests to see the egg.

"I can't bring him out." he tried to fend them off. "He's got to stay inside until he's old enough to fly."

"Oh, come on. Just for a moment. I so want to see a real raven egg." Susie begged.

"No, if you want to see him, you'll have to come up to the flat after lunch and look at him there." Draco declared.

He expected that to be the end of it. Maybe Susie and Sammie would really show up at the Snapes' door to see the egg. Perhaps Beth would join them or Mike might take a look the next time he came over, but he didn't think there would be any more attention to his new raven.

How wrong he was!

They weren't even done with lunch yet when the doorbell rang the first time. Draco hastily swallowed a mouthful of vegetables and hurried to open the door.
Outside stood Mely and Cedric looking very excited. "Uh, we heard that you've got a raven egg." Mely started a little shyly. "Do you think we could um ... take a tiny little peek at it?"

"We've never seen a real raven egg before." Cedric added making puppy eyes at Draco.

So Draco showed them his raven egg, then tried to return to his by then cold lunch, but he'd only just sat back down when the doorbell rang again. This time it turned out to be Larry and Mary with Beth and Larry's little brothers in tow.

"Sorry," Larry grinned a little sheepishly when he noticed that Draco was still eating. "We didn't mean to interrupt your lunch, but the little ones wouldn't stop bothering us about seeing your raven."

"He's just an egg." Draco reminded them as he led them inside to see the nest.

It didn't seem to bother them as they all stared at the raven egg with wide eyes. Draco almost laughed at the thought that they were all acting as if they'd never seen an egg before, but then he had to admit that he spent a lot of time just looking at his egg as well.

When Susie and Charlie arrived only a few minutes later he finally gave up all thoughts of finishing his lunch and he wasn't even surprised anymore when Mike and Cathy showed up as well.

It did surprise him however when Sammie and Matt came accompanied by Jack. Why was he here? He couldn't be interested in Draco's raven, could he?

"It was just too boring down in the park with everybody else gathered up here." Jack explained before roughly shoving Susie and Bobby aside to get through to the raven egg.

Mike shrugged and grinned at Draco probably trying to remind him that 'that's just the way he is.'

Draco just smiled back at him wondering if he should have brought the egg out into the living room instead of leading everybody into the lab. It was getting a little crowded, but luckily no more visitors showed up. The rest of the wannabes probably didn't dare to approach Draco like that and he wouldn't have let any Sharks in anyway. For a moment he wondered what he'd do if any members of other gangs showed up, but he doubted they even knew exactly where he lived.

The weekend passed very quickly and it was already Sunday evening when Beth's sudden declaration that she had to go home early to get some homework done reminded Draco that he had only one week left to write the rest of his essays. So far he'd only finished the Charms homework and made a rather weak start on Transfigurations.

He simply didn't know what to write about animal transfigurations so he'd been pushing the essay away for a while. Now he had to get it done or else he'd never finish the rest of his homework on time. So he went home together with Beth and pulled out his new old Transfigurations book. Unfortunately most of the basics about animal transfigurations had been in his fourth year book and the ones in the new one turned out to be the ones most scribbled on, crumpled up and sticking together thanks to what might have been a spilled potion or maybe just some pumpkin juice.

Draco spent an hour just separating the pages without damaging them too much. To his surprise the notes he found scrawled into the book were either very unflattering remarks about Potter, Black, some guy called something with P or McGonagall or complaints about cruelty towards animals. In several places they suggested using humans instead of beetles, mice or hedgehogs.
Draco wondered for a moment what Potter might look like if transfigured into a hairbrush before he reminded himself that Severus had been referring to a different Potter anyway.

All of that didn't help him any with his homework, though and he desperately needed help. Well, there was a teacher right in the next room. Draco gathered up his book and essay and went into the living room.

"Uncle Severus?" he asked. "Could you help me with this? I just don't know what to write."

Severus held out his hand and Draco gave him the meagre beginnings of his essay. He glanced down at the parchment then looked right back at Draco saying nothing for a while.

"Animal transfigurations?" he finally asked with a slightly pained voice.

Draco nodded. "I don't really know much about it. Wasn't really interested and might have drifted off a little during class."

"Well, I definitely wasn't interested and did my best not to hear anything Minerva had to say about it." Severus answered. "I'd most likely get you a failing grade on this essay. Maybe Sarah can help you with it."

So Draco took his problem to Sarah who actually invested two hours into searching her old Transfigurations books for any helpful information and managed to provide him with another inch of meaningless dribble to write, but after that she too had to give up.

"It was just too long ago," she told him. "I work with potions and medicines, not Transfigurations. I might still be able to turn a mouse into a hat, but I have no idea of the theory behind it. I just have no use for that information. Maybe you should ask one of your friends for help. Both Cathy and Mike are good students according to their parents."

Draco thought that over while putting his Transfigurations book and homework away and getting out the History of Magic book Mike had lent him and a new roll of parchment instead. His first impulse was to ask Cathy to get the chance to be alone with her, but he wasn't entirely sure that that would be a very efficient solution. He had a habit of getting distracted when Cathy was around. He could have afforded that two weeks ago, but now he just didn't have the time left to waste. Mike had the additional advantage of being a year older. He had to have already learned all of this, while Cathy was in his own year as far as he knew and would only know the basics.

That decided Draco concentrated fully on his History of Magic homework. For once Binns had managed to assign an essay that wasn't hopelessly boring. He was to write about a wizard, witch or group of wizards and witches that had greatly influenced the history of the magical world.

Somebody who'd caused a big change in history? Voldemort, of course. Even though he was officially dead and defeated nobody could deny that the Voldemort war had changed the life of everybody in the wizarding world and they were still feeling it's consequences.

He started to write about Voldemort's rise and ideology when a new thought occurred to him. Wasn't this what Voldemort wanted? Was calling him an important influence on history not spreading propaganda for him?

His father would want him to do that, no doubt, but wouldn't Uncle Severus be disappointed? Voldemort couldn't be the only important wizard that had ever lived. There had to be more appropriate people he could choose. Yes, Draco decided, it would be better to write about somebody who had changed the wizarding world for the better, a hero of the light.
Suddenly he remembered the lesson when Binns had assigned this homework. Both Gregory and Vincent had immediately decided to write about Voldemort as well, but Pansy had announced that she wanted to do something different and choose an earlier dark wizard. Maybe she'd write about Grindelwald, she'd said and one of their Hufflepuff classmates who'd heard that had wanted to write about Dumbledore who'd brought Grindelwald down and thus saved the world for the side of the light. That had prompted another Hufflepuff to choose Harry Potter, who'd defeated Voldemort and yet another had announced that she'd write about Bartemius Crouch senior, who'd seen to it that all of Voldemort's death eaters went to Azkaban and that the world was once again safe for average wizards and muggles to live in. Crouch, she'd said had been one of the most important fighters on the side of the Ministry during the Voldemort war. Susan Bones had claimed that Cornelius Fudge had influenced history by becoming minister and that that qualified him as well.

Draco immediately pushed aside all the suggestions made by his so called friends. Writing about Grindelwald would be no different from writing about Voldemort, only that he knew less about him and would have to do more research. The Hufflepuff's ideas however were worthy of consideration. Draco wrote them down on a small piece of parchment he'd kept for his notes. They were all true light wizards and as such appropriate to write about, he thought at first.

Upon closer inspection however ...

Harry Potter was the first name Draco crossed out. He was fully qualified of course, but Draco would never write an essay singing the praises of the boy who'd so rudely refused his offer of friendship back in their first year.

The next name to go was Cornelius Fudge. That guy might have managed to become minister, but that didn't mean he'd done anything truly noteworthy. If ordering raids on Merlin Park was the best he could do to fight back against dark wizards, he was not worthy of even a footnote in a history book, Draco decided.

That left Crouch and Dumbledore. And maybe the option of writing about one of the earlier ministers of magic, but Draco couldn't think of any that stuck out enough. There had been good and bad ones of course, but none that he considered truly great and he was by now determined to write about somebody he looked up to, a true hero.

Bartemius Crouch's name was scratched off the list with one quick stroke at that realisation. The guy had cleaned up after Voldemort, yes, but his attempts in the war had been too clumsy to be considered truly important. He was just another politician who'd claimed the glory for the deeds of others. The one who'd truly made a stand against Voldemort had clearly been Dumbledore and not any of the ministry's glorified secretaries.

Dumbledore. That was the last name left on the list, up there for his defeat of Grindelwald, but that was the topic for a Hufflepuff's essay already and she had completely overlooked that the same wizard was just as worthy of recognition for his part in the Voldemort war as he was for his defeat of Grindelwald. Nobody had been more effective in the battle against Voldemort and his army of death eaters than Albus Dumbledore and his circle of spies who'd risked their lives to supply the light side with vital information. Spies like Uncle Severus. Of course the ministry's own unspeakables, people like his Cousin Edmond had done similar things.

Draco grabbed the beginnings of his essay once again. He knew what he had to write. His essay would be unique, politically correct and would give tribute to the ones it was really due.

Rereading what he'd written so far he realised that he didn't even need to throw it away. He could continue right where he'd left off. He quickly finished his outline of Voldemort's ideology and added a very short account of what he'd achieved.
'Voldemort,' he wrote. 'Certainly set out to make great changes in all the wizarding world and even though he did not reach his ultimate goal his legacy is still quite obvious in our world today and will continue to be for a long time. Thus he would certainly meet the topic of this essay, but much has been written about him already. Though Voldemort is an important figure in our history others are just as deserving of our attention.

The first person that comes to mind is of course Harry Potter the cause of Voldemort's fall, but again much has already been written about him. Harry Potter certainly received his due recognition and perhaps even more than that, but there are others whose contribution to Voldemort's fall is often overlooked.

One could argue that the minister of magic or several famous aurors had a great part in this fight. They certainly made great and honourable efforts, some more successful than others, but all worthy of recognition for the good intentions and effort behind them at the very least.

What is often overlooked however is that Harry Potter might never have been born to defeat the dark lord, if his parents hadn't learned of Voldemort's intention to have them murdered and gone into hiding. That warning, like many other similar ones at that time, came from Professor Albus Dumbledore, one of the, if not the most powerful defender of the light against Voldemort.

Dumbledore too has received some recognition for his efforts and Harry Potter was not the only one he saved, but what of the people who gave him that information?

Dumbledore could only be the one who passed on the warning. He had no way of obtaining the information by his powers as they were much too well known and feared by Voldemort and his death eaters. Who were the people who risked their lives to inform Dumbledore or the ministry of Voldemort's plans? Who snuck into the death eaters' well guarded headquarters to steal or copy their death lists and plans making all the warnings Dumbledore passed out, all the actions of the aurors possible?

Their names aren't even known to the general public. It is unknown whether even the ministry was ever informed of the name of the witch or wizard who gave the the warning that made it possible for Harry Potter to be born. Maybe we will never know who discovered the death eaters' plans for the attack on the Leaky Cauldron which aurors like Alastor Moody so gloriously defended, but had that person not sent that warning all the aurors' bravery would not have stopped the death eaters that day.

The information obtained by the unnamed spies of both the ministry and Dumbledore was vital for the survival of the entire wizarding and the muggle world for without it Voldemort would have won. There is no telling where Voldemort would have stopped the killing, if he had won or if he would have stopped at all, but it is safe to say that all muggle borns and all wizards and muggles who stood up to defend them would have died.

The spies of the light side during the war changed history and we do not even know their names.'

Draco sat back to stare at his finished essay. It had taken him only a little over an hour from the time he'd pulled out a piece of parchment not knowing what to write to the moment he finished an essay that even slightly exceeded the length requirements. And for once he was perfectly satisfied with what he'd written. This essay was unique. He only hoped that Binns would appreciate it.

"Are you still up?" Severus asked from the door. Draco hadn't even heard him enter. "You really should be going to bed. We're going to the market again tomorrow."

"I just want to reread my History of Magic essay once more then I'll sleep right away." Draco
promised.

"History of Magic?" Severus came over to stand beside Draco. "I thought you were still working on your Transfigurations homework and now you've finished History?"

"Aunt Sarah tried to help me with Transfigurations, but we didn't really get anywhere and I decided to ask Mike to help me tomorrow and start on History of Magic instead. Somehow I managed to finish it in one go." Draco held up his parchment. "I think it even turned out pretty good. Do you want to see?"

Severus took the essay and started to read. He shot Draco a quick glance. "Voldemort." he said with a slight sigh.

"No, not Voldemort. Just setting the scene." Draco corrected.

Severus read on. "Potter?"

"I couldn't avoid mentioning him along with Voldemort and the rest, but it's not about him. Nor is it about the ministry or the aurors or even Dumbledore."

"Dumbledore would really deserve it, you know." Severus remarked.

"I know, but so do enough others as well. Somebody is sure to write about him. I chose to write about people who everybody else will definitely forget."

Severus read the rest of the essay then looked back to Draco. "Spies have to stay unknown to all except the people they work for. That's the only thing that keeps us alive."

"So? I didn't mention any names. This is just a little anonymous recognition."

"You'd better not show this to your friends at Hogwarts." Severus warned him. "They might start to suspect you."

Draco hadn't thought of that. Vincent and Gregory had definitely been raised to become death eaters just like he had and Pansy's family was no better either. He still didn't know about Blaise, but he'd never trusted that boy anyway. Now he began to wonder about the others as well.

What about Millicent, for example? She was pretty close with Pansy even though her grandfather was an auror. Draco didn't think that her parents were death eaters, but could he be entirely sure? Just because his father had never mentioned them as supporters of Voldemort didn't have to mean they weren't.

What of the kids in other years? He knew some of them to be from death eater families, but hardly anything about the others. Slytherin had produced as many aurors as it had dark wizards and just how many had become spies like Uncle Severus? Slytherins had a perfect position to start from as dark wizards tended to trust in the prejudice that all Slytherins had a tendency towards the dark. The Slytherin aurors were simply overlooked.

Until now Draco had always made his allegiance known openly, but now he began to realise that that was probably not the wisest thing to do. Making friends with those in his house that didn't support Voldemort would probably be impossible by now.

The market seemed even busier than usual the next day and Draco wondered whether that was due
to the approaching end of the holidays or the fact that the weather had gotten a little colder already and the people were no longer bothered by the heat as much. Or maybe it was all just Draco's imagination?

He and Mike went to buy fruits and vegetables again and tried to spot some of their friends in the crowd. They watched Charlie and her ballet class dance one last time and then Draco managed to drag Mike off to a last visit to the muggle shop. With a touch of surprise Draco realised that he'd miss all the noise and excitement of market day. Would he get to come back and shop here the next summer? Somehow he doubted that whoever took him in would do their shopping themselves.

Mike rolled his eyes at his request for help with his Transfigurations essay, but he did come over that evening to help.

Draco showed his friend what he'd written so far. "Think you can help me make something of that?"

Mike read the essay over twice ignoring Draco completely for a while then finally pushed it aside with a little shake of his head. "That's five inches of nothing, Dragon. It'll be easier to just start over and write a real essay."

And he wouldn't be satisfied with a halfway decent essay either. Draco had to use quotes from both his and Mike's book and add details about all the exceptions to the rules he wrote down before Mike was satisfied.

"McGonagall will never believe that I wrote this." he groaned after he reread the finished essay. "This looks like one of Granger's essays."

"You can always tell her that you were so bored during the holidays that you spent a whole week working on your Transfigurations homework." Mike grinned.

"She knows I didn't even remember the assignment until Uncle Severus asked her last week. She'll probably think he did it for me."

"Oh, I doubt that very much." Severus laughed. "She remembers my own Transfigurations homeworks too well. She'd never believe that I could write anything like that."

"Tell her to ask you questions about what you've written, then." Mike advised. "She'll have to accept that you wrote this if she sees that you know all that you've written about."

Draco wasn't so sure about that, but at least he finally had a Transfigurations homework to hand in. That left Astronomy, Herbology, Ancient Runes and Potions. After a little consideration he decided to do the runes translation next. It didn't require any searching for material or much creativity and would therefore go fastest. Astronomy would take a lot more time as it included drawing a star chart and he just didn't feel like doing Herbology.

Luckily Draco wasn't the only gang member who still had some last minute homework to do and the Rakers' meetings were shorter than usual during that last week and usually at least one gang member was missing.

He managed to finish Ancient Runes on Tuesday evening and got a good head start on the star chart and accompanying essay, but didn't feel like drawing at all on Wednesday. So he just finished the essay and started to search for material for Herbology.

And it turned out that there was a lot of material to be found in the Snapes' book collection. Most of the Herbology books he found had something to do with Potions of course, but that wasn't a
problem. He'd just concentrate on plants that were used in potions as Professor Sprout hadn't specified any particular species. She'd only said to write about the special needs of magical plants that required a tropical climate.

On Wednesday he finally finished the Astronomy chart, but didn't get any Herbology done at all. Still things were looking up. He still had three days left and only two homework assignments to go and Uncle Severus had promised him an unofficial extension, if he couldn't get Potions done in time.

Thursday was filled with frantic preparations for the start of school at West Hogsmeade and most of Draco's friends were busy and in a bad mood. Susie danced around more than ever happy and excited over starting at her new school while Jack was in such a black mood that even Mike didn't want to go near him.

Mike was also the only one who was behaving normally so Draco decided to follow him home and help him pack his bookbag for the first day of school.

"Do you really think you'll need all your books on the very first day?" he asked when he saw how full Mike was stuffing his bag. "You can't have every subject tomorrow."

"But I don't know which ones I'll have and it'll please the teachers. Anyway I can leave the ones I won't need at home over the weekend in my locker already." Mike explained.

"Your what?" Draco asked completely confused.

"My locker." Mike repeated. "You know that little cupboard in school where you keep your things in?"

"You've got your own cupboard in school?" Draco asked incredulously.

"It's really small, of course, but I can always put a spell on it to make more room, if I have to. Don't you have lockers at Hogwarts?"

"No, just our trunks, which we bring with us from home. Does everybody have their own locker at your school?"

"Well, first years are usually assigned lockers until they run out. The rest either have to wait for the next year or convince a fellow student to share until they get their own."

"Isn't that a little unfair? How do they pick the ones that get the lockers?"

"By alphabet. They think using the alphabet is always fair, because it isn't playing favourites. Of course, if you have a name like Snape, that's really bad luck." Mike grinned. "But that's just the way life is."

"Poor Billy."

"Ah, I'm sure Billy will go to Hogwarts anyway, so he won't need a locker at West Hogsmeade." Mike tried to cheer Draco up again.

"No, he won't. Uncle Severus said they couldn't afford Hogwarts for Billy and that he'll go to West Hogsmeade with all his friends."

"They're paying the school money for you this year, though." Mike pointed out.
"Well, I guess my family will pay that back later and it's only one year. Billy would need them to pay for seven years."

"But by then Aunt Sarah will be working again, so they'll have more money and there's always Dumbledore."

"Dumbledore? What's he got to do with it all?"

"Well, he's your headmaster, right?"

Draco nodded still wondering where this was going.

"And he's Uncle Severus' friend." Mike continued as if that was a fact everybody knew. "He even was his best man at the wedding."

Draco gaped back at Mike for a moment. "Dumbledore? Best man? But ... But Aunt Sarah hates him. She's always going on about how he's using Uncle Severus and getting him involved in things that don't concern us and ..."

"Yeah, well, she hates the dog, too, doesn't she?" Mike shrugged it off.

"No, she doesn't. She only just complains about him all the time but ... Oh." he finished lamely. He should have learned by now not to judge Sarah's feelings by the things she said.

Friday morning Draco watched his friends walk off to school in their beautiful green uniforms from the lab's window and almost wished he could join them. It would be a boring day without them.

Then again he had to finish his Herbology essay and do his Potions homework and he finally had time to spend with Billy again. After all he'd have to say good bye to the baby on Sunday.

He smiled at the sight of Susie hopping excitedly around a very annoyed looking Sammie and Charlie trying to get her to hold still to straighten her robe.

Mely and Beth were a little ahead of them with Mary and Larry and his brothers, the little ones all wearing grey robes and yellow hats, which seemed to be the uniform of their primary school.

Draco waited until the park was entirely empty before he went back into the living room and picked up Billy and his Herbology homework. It was a little distracting to have a baby in your lap while writing an essay, but at least it kept him from getting too bored with Herbology even if he could have been done a lot sooner, if he'd just put Billy down to play on his own once he started squirming around and grabbing for the ink pot.

As it was Draco finished just in time to help Sarah cook lunch. After they'd eaten and Draco had put Billy to bed and done the dishes he went in search of material for his potions essay. Sarah and Severus were in the lab working on the werewolf cure again when Draco came in and started digging through the Potions books.

"What are you up to?" Sarah asked him looking up from one of those odd Chemistry tools she often used instead of her Potions equipment.

"Researching for my Potions homework." Draco answered putting one of the books back onto its shelf. This one was still too complicated for him, but it didn't matter. He'd already found three
others that would do just fine. It was hard to believe how hard it had been for him to use any of the
Snapes' Potions books when he’d first arrived. Now some of them felt like old friends to him and he
almost resented the thought of being stuck with only the school book in Potions class when he
returned to Hogwarts.

"What about your other assignments?" Severus asked sternly, but didn't look up from his cauldron.

"All done." Draco reported happily as he snatched one more book off the shelf. He couldn't
possibly do his homework without this one. After all it was the first one he'd learned to use. He
picked up the five books he'd chosen and was about to take them back into the living room when
Severus finally looked up.

"Any one of those books will do fine, Draco." he remarked. "You don't have to read all of them for
a simple school essay."

"I want to." Draco told him with a grin. "I want to give you the best homework essay you'll get this
year and beating Granger takes extreme measures."

"Hermione Granger is very unlikely to have any of these books available, you know." Severus
commented. "Even though I admit that she'd probably make use of them if she did."

"Well, I have them right here, so I'll just do that." Draco smirked and left.

"He's still a little extreme about his studying, you know." Sarah remarked once the door had closed
behind him.

"Somehow I don't mind that as much when it's directed towards Potions. Maybe his example will
inspire the rest of his class at least a little."

"Didn't you say that Granger girl was very hard working as well? If she doesn't inspire them, why
should our boy?" Sarah reminded him.

"They think Hermione Granger is just unusually talented." Severus explained. "She's top of almost
every class and everyone knows it, while only very few students have noticed just how good Draco
is. They consider him average, so if he can do it, they'll know they can too."

"He seems not to be very good at Transfigurations." Sarah observed.

"Yes, and that's probably what makes him appear more human than Hermione to the other
children." Severus confirmed. "And he's better at Transfigurations than I was, so there's no need to
worry. If I made it, so will he."

"If he showed a little more interest, he'd probably do fine."

"It's a Gryffindor subject. The Gryffindor subject, actually." Severus shrugged. "Few Slytherins do
well at it and none of us like it."

"Like Divination?" The way Sarah said it it wasn't quite clear if it was a question or a statement,
but Severus supposed the first.

"The future isn't for us to know and the results are highly unreliable anyway. Logical deduction
will lead you to as good a prediction as magic, so why bother?" Again he shrugged. Slytherins
liked hard facts to build their plans on. That was why Arithmancy and Ancient Runes just suited
them better than Divination. "Transfiguration's a different matter for most. They might actually like
it, if they had a different teacher, but they just don't get along with Minerva and that dislike
transfers to her subject. Things won't change until we get a Ravenclaw or Hufflepuff to teach Transfigurations."

"Is that likely?"

"Not anytime soon." Severus answered. "Did you take the fly wings? I'm sure I left them right here on the desk."

"I think I put them back on the shelf along with the beetle eyes. What do you need them for anyway?"

Draco had originally planned to spend all of Saturday saying good bye to his friends, but most of the day was taken up by packing. It wasn't only his own trunk that needed to be prepared, after all. Severus was moving back to Hogwarts again as well and carefully packing away all the potions ingredients and books he wanted to take took a lot of time. And then there was Sarah who didn't want to be left without brewing supplies.

It took several minor arguments before they finally agreed on which ingredients Severus would take and which were to be left at home for Sarah's use.

In the end they had Draco's trunk, two large bags, one containing only potions supplies, the other Severus' personal belongings and Draco's backpack. 'That Dog' raced around and over the luggage excitedly, while the cat had given the commotion one condescending look and stalked away to sulk on the windowsill in the bedroom. The only reason he hadn't just left the flat was probably the rain that had been falling all day. The noise of packing humans was bad, but getting wet was worse. The living room was where the bags and trunk stood and 'That Dog's' barking was loudest, in the lab Sarah and Severus had their arguments and Draco was moving out and packing up all his belongings. Even the bathroom door stood open most of the time with people going in and out.

"Did I already pack my hairbrush, Sarah?"

"How would I know? Just look if it's still in the bathroom cupboard."

Clang! The bathroom door had just slammed shut again.

The bedroom occasionally got invaded as well, but at least there was some room to avoid the humans in here and they didn't shout as much as they did in the lab. They just opened and closed cupboards and dug out clothes. Stupid humans! The cat rolled up tightly and decided to pretend he didn't hear them. Instead he stared out the window at the rain. Stupid water! Behind him 'That Dog' raced once through the room barking out his joy at all the commotion. Stupid dog! No self respecting cat should live in a place like this. But life on the streets had been bad, he remembered and he'd have to leave his witch. And they weren't always as noisy as this.

Sunday morning Draco dressed in his Hogwarts uniform, went through his usual hugging ritual and after a quick breakfast put on his shoes and grabbed his trunk. "Come on, Uncle Severus, or do you want to miss the train?"

"Draco?"

"Yes, Uncle Severus?"
"There is no train from Hogsmeade to Hogwarts. We'll just walk and we've only got to be there before the sorting. We'll leave after lunch."

"Oh." So Draco took off his shoes again and went to play with Billy, then helped cook lunch one last time and even found time to do the dishes before Severus decided it was time to go.

Once again he quickly put on his shoes and grabbed his trunk. Severus looked him up and down critically.

"Draco?"

"Yes, Uncle Severus?"

"Didn't you forget something?"

Draco looked down at himself. He was wearing his school uniform and shoes. His school things and spare clothes were in his trunk along with the Math book. He'd done all his homework and put it in the trunk as well. Cuddly, the teddy, and the light rain cloak they'd bought at Diagon Alley were in his backpack, which was on his back and Severus had taken the 'nest box' with his raven egg claiming that it was safer if he carried it while they were dragging all their luggage along.

"What?" he asked Severus feeling a little irritated at the laughter in his uncle's eyes.

"You can't wear your Rakers cap to Hogwarts, Draco."

Draco grabbed for his head and indeed he'd put on his cap out of pure habit. He tore it off and raced back into the lab where his forgotten wizard's hat sat next to the couch that had been his bed for two months. Sarah had already removed the bedding this morning and the room seemed strangely empty without it.

He grabbed the hat and put it on, but then stared down at his cap unhappily. He'd only be able to wear it on weekends from now on. It wasn't easy to put away the Rakers' gift and symbol of his belonging at Merlin Park, but he had to do it. After a moment's hesitation he decided to put the cap into Cuddly's soft, loving paws. The teddy would watch over it whenever he couldn't wear it.

A/N: How would the Slytherins react, if they find out about Draco's History of Magic essay? Will they find out? And what will Draco name his raven?

In the next chapter: We come back to Hogwarts, Draco meets his friends and finds out what happened to his Hogwarts letter.
Chapter 36: Back to School

With a feeling of relief Harry dove through the wall and onto platform nine and three quarters. Finally he was away from the muggles. The worst holidays of his life were over.

Well, maybe that was slightly exaggerated, but it had been bad. The Dursleys hadn't even allowed him to keep Hedwig with him and only a few days into the holidays Ron had written that he couldn't send Pig over anymore either. Apparently Professor Dumbledore had informed the Weasleys that it wasn't safe to owl Harry during the summer anymore and Mrs Weasley had forbidden Ron all contact with his best friend.

Harry had kept hoping that Ron would manage to sneak at lest one owl past his mother, but not a single letter had arrived from any of his friends all summer. He'd finally had to resort to calling Hermione on the phone while the Dursleys were out so he could ask her to buy his school books for him when she went to Diagon Alley to get hers.

Now he just couldn't wait to finally see his friends again. He pushed his trolley down the platform trying to spot the Weasleys in the crowd.

"Harry! Harry!" Harry looked up and saw the Creevey brothers race towards him excited as usual.

"Hi, Colin, Dennis!" he called back considering his chances at a quick retreat pushing a trolley through this many people while the Creeveys seemed to have already loaded their luggage onto the train and were darting through the crowd unhindered. No chance, he decided and stood to await the onslaught.

"How was your summer, Harry?" Colin asked as soon as he'd reached him. "Ours was great. We went to France and ..."

Harry let him rattle on long enough to hopefully seem polite. "That's great Colin, but I'd better get on the train now. You two don't happen to have seen Ron or Hermione, do you?"

"Oh, sure we have. They're right in the next car, third compartment." Colin grinned. "They're saving you a seat."

"Then I'd better go before they decide I'm not coming and give it away. See you, Colin." Harry quickly steered his trolley towards the next car and luckily the Creeveys didn't pursue.

"Over here, Harry!" he heard Ron call out to him after only a few steps and when he looked up, he saw him and Hermione waving out of the window of their compartment.

"Ron! Hermione!" he called back to them.
"Hand us Hedwig in through the window." Hermione suggested instead of a greeting and held out her hands ready to receive the cage that held Harry's snowy owl.

Hedwig hooted sleepily at the suggestion which Harry assumed to mean that she approved of the plan and so he lifted her up as carefully as he could and Hermione and Ron pulled her inside the compartment.

"I'll be with you in a moment!" Harry called up to his friends and lifted his heavy trunk to drag it onto the train.

Thankfully he'd grown a little stronger since his first year and even though he was still small and thin for his age he was now able to carry his trunk up the steps without needing help. He smiled at the memory of Fred and George helping him in his first year. Where were those two anyway? They still had one last year to go at Hogwarts, but Harry couldn't see them anywhere when he dragged his trunk down the isle and peered into all the compartments he passed.

He soon forgot about the twins, though, when he found Ron and Hermione's compartment and his two friends greeted him excitedly.

"Oh Harry, I'm so glad to see you!" Hermione exclaimed throwing her arms around him for a quick hug.

"I'm so sorry I couldn't owl you all summer, but Mum put a spell on Pig so he'd have to show her every letter I gave him to deliver and then Percy caught me when I tried to use Errol when Mum had gone shopping."

"Sorry I couldn't owl you on your birthday, Harry." Hermione added. "But you know Dumbledore said it wasn't safe and if Dumbledore says so ..."

"I know, Hermione. I really missed you, though." Harry answered with a smile.

He was so glad to see his friends again that he didn't even notice Neville Longbottom sitting quietly in a corner of their compartment until Ron handed him his birthday present and Neville wished him a shy: "Happy birthday, Harry."

"Hi Neville." Harry greeted him surprised. "Sorry I didn't greet you before. It's just because I was so excited to see Ron and Hermione again and I didn't expect to find you in here as well."

"That's okay. My friends' compartment was already full, you see, and I didn't want to sit all alone in case Malfoy came by." Neville stared at the ground looking embarrassed.

"Malfoy? He didn't pick on you again, did he?" Harry asked angrily. He always felt a little protective of shy, clumsy Neville. The poor boy didn't deserve the treatment he often got from the Slytherins.

"No no, I didn't even see him, but after this summer. Who knows what he's going to do." Neville tried to explain himself.

For a moment Harry wondered what might have happened this summer to make Neville so nervous about Malfoy, but before he could make up his mind to ask, Ron started talking about his holiday adventures and when he told them of the twins' latest prank on Percy Harry forgot about Malfoy completely.

The train soon started to move out of the station and about an hour later the witch with the food trolley came by. Neville insisted on buying a big box of chocolate frogs and some every flavour
beans for all of them. Harry took several pumpkin pastries and Hermione dug out some sugar free muggle candies that her parents had given her.

Ron blushed a little when all he could add to their 'picnic' were some cheese sandwiches, but Neville took his cue from Harry and Hermione and ate a sandwich without complaint.

"Thanks Ron." Hermione even said. "We really need to have some real food before all the sweets."

Ron blushed again and started to say something when suddenly there was a knock at the door and the big pudgy face of Gregory Goyle peeked in almost shyly.

Harry stared since when did Goyle knock before entering a Gryffindor compartment?

Vincent Crabbe appeared behind his friend a moment later and pushed him inside. There they stood for a moment looking around in a way that reminded Harry of Neville when he'd lost his toad.

"Looking for something?" he asked Malfoy's two goons in an almost neutral voice.

"Yeah." said Goyle looking like a lost puppy.

"Draco." added Crabbe. "Have you seen him?"

"No." all four Gryffindors shook their heads.

"We've searched the whole train." Goyle complained. "What are we going to do without Draco?"

"We'll find him." Crabbe tried to reassure his best friend. "We didn't search the bathrooms yet."

"Right." said Goyle. "Let's go look in the bathrooms."

"Uh, guys." Hermione stopped them.

"What?" asked Crabbe who was already out in the isle.

"If Malfoy was in the bathroom when you first searched the train, chances are that he's already back in his compartment by now."

"Oh." was all Goyle found to say to that.

"But nobody in the compartments has seen him either." Crabbe pointed out.

Hermione shrugged. "Maybe they were just teasing you?"

Cрабbe and Goyle exchanged a look, shrugged at each other and shuffled off down the corridor.

"Hey, maybe Malfoy really isn't on the train." Ron grinned happily. "Maybe he's never coming back."

"Nonsense, Ron." Harry shook his head at his best friend. "Of course Malfoy's coming back to school. How else would he finish his education? And I doubt his parents would let him transfer to another school now."

"But Harry, haven't you heard?" Hermione exclaimed and Ron and Neville stared at him incredulously.
"Heard?" Harry repeated. "Heard what?"

"Malfoy's Dad, Lucius." Neville whispered excitedly. "He ... he murdered his wife."

"Killed her in cold blood." Ron added. "He beat her to death and tortured her."

"Actually the Daily Prophet said that he got drunk and they had an argument which got physical and Narcissa fell and broke her neck." Hermione corrected.

"And when they arrested him they found the whole house full of dead muggles and dark arts stuff." Ron went on ignoring Hermione who was rolling her eyes at him and Neville who was shivering with fear at the gruesome story.

"Stop exaggerating, Ron. You're going to start a rumour that'll only frighten the poor first years." Hermione ordered. "They didn't find any bodies other than Narcissa Malfoy's and even though they found a lot of dark arts objects they weren't all over the house. They were all stored away in a secure hiding place and only a few of them showed any signs of recent use."

Harry still shuddered slightly at the thought of Lucius Malfoy showing his son how to use all sorts of dark tools. He certainly hoped Malfoy wasn't bringing anything the ministry had overlooked to school with him. That was if he was coming back to school at all. Maybe he'd never have to see Malfoy again.

"They arrested Lucius?" he asked Hermione, not quite trusting Ron's account to be entirely correct about that either.

"Yes, he was put on trial and sent to Azkaban for life." Hermione reported. "It was all over the papers. They also said that he lost all his money in the process."

"And what happened to Draco?" asked Harry.

Hermione opened her mouth to answer, hesitated, then closed it again. "I don't know." she said in a tone of wonder. "The papers didn't say."

She looked to Ron and Neville hopefully, but Ron just shrugged.

"I guess the social services department of the ministry will have taken him to his grandparents or something." she concluded after a while.

Neville shook his head, though. "The social services department is a joke." he told them. "It exists only in name. They never even showed up when my parents ... well you know. My gran just took me and nobody ever asked what had happened to me at all."

"They can't just do nothing, Neville." Hermione insisted. "Somebody in the ministry has to take care of orphaned children."

"They never seemed to bother with me either." Harry reminded her. "It was Dumbledore who took me to the Dursleys, not the ministry. And unlike Neville and me, Malfoy isn't even an orphan. His father's still alive to take care of him."

"Lucius was sent to Azkaban for life." Hermione corrected.

"Maybe his gran took him?" Neville suggested. "That would be the most natural thing to happen, wouldn't it?"
"Lucius Malfoy's parents are dead." Ron supplied happily. "I bet he murdered them himself."

"What about Narcissa's parents? Or maybe aunts and uncles?" Harry asked.

Ron thought it over for a moment, then shrugged. "I don't know who Narcissa's family are. I guess one of the old rich pure-blood families, though."

"My gran once mentioned a Jeremiah Malfoy." Neville remembered. "I think she said he wasn't quite as bad as Lucius, but still a typical Malfoy."

"So who cares where Malfoy is anyway." Ron grinned. "As long as he isn't coming back to Hogwarts that's cause for a celebration."

No more Draco Malfoy? Harry smiled at the thought. No more taunts, no more strutting about Slytherins ...

"And why wouldn't his relatives send Draco back to school?" Hermione argued. "Do you even know where Jeremiah Malfoy lives? If he really is the one who took Draco in at all. He'll most likely just board the train at a different stop this time."

"Uh ... maybe they're sending him to a different school." Ron didn't want to give up hope. "He always wanted to go to Durmstrang. Maybe he got his wish and we're finally rid of him."

"Nobody would switch schools in fifth year." Hermione shook her head. "The curriculum is too different and he'd have problems with the language as well. Victor told me they have language courses for the first years, but the older students usually can't take them, because they'd miss other classes."

Still Harry, Ron and Neville kept hoping that Malfoy wouldn't show up and it seemed they were in luck. Every time the train stopped they opened the compartment window and leaned out to look for Malfoy among the kids boarding the train, but despite his distinctive silver-blond hair, they didn't see him anywhere.

The closer they got to Hogwarts the more they started to believe it. No more Draco Malfoy! Yes!

And indeed when they got off at Hogsmeade station, there still wasn't any sign of Malfoy. They stopped to watch the other students get off the train still looking for any sign of silver-blond hair, but all they found was Crabbe and Goyle still looking lost and confused.

"Yes!" yelled Ron. "We're rid of him!"

"There's still the smaller train from the north." Hermione pointed out.

"Oh, that'll be here in only five minutes." Hagrid informed them in between his shouts for the first years. "Now you'd better get going or you might be late for the feast."

Ron and Harry still wanted to stay and watch the second train come in, but Hermione grabbed their arms and dragged them along to one of the coaches. "Come on. There won't be any room left in the last coaches when the train arrives."

Reluctantly the boys agreed and only a few minutes later they reached Hogwarts and squeezed inside with the big crowd of excited kids happy to be back. They tried to push through the crowd quickly hoping to secure good seats at the Gryffindor house table so they'd have a good view of the sorting ceremony.
Harry managed to squeeze into the hall just in time to see Draco Malfoy calmly walk in at the other end of the hall. Harry groaned in disappointment. Malfoy was here after all! And not only that he even smirked at him obviously feeling smug at not having to fight his way through a huge crowd.

Wait a minute? How'd he gotten to that door anyway? That was one of the corridors leading to a stairway down into the dungeons, not to the entry hall. Had Malfoy arrived so early that he'd had time to visit the Slytherin common room in between then and now? That didn't seem likely and moreover that wasn't the door the Slytherins usually used when coming in for dinner. The stairway it led to was rather small and came out closer to Snape's office than the Slytherin common room entrance.

And what was that strange box in his hands?

Draco arrived in the great hall just at the same time everybody else was coming in. He smirked at the sight of Harry Potter getting almost squeezed to death in the door and hurried over to the Slytherin house table. There. Now nobody should realise that he hadn't arrived on the train like everybody else.

"Draco! There you are!" somebody shouted only a few moments later.

He turned his head to see Vincent and Gregory heading his way.

"We missed you." Gregory informed him as they arrived.

"You weren't on the train." Vincent elaborated. "We almost thought you weren't coming."

"I didn't take the Hogwarts Express this year." Draco smirked at their surprised faces.

"Why? Where were you?" Gregory asked. "I tried to owl you, but the owl kept coming back."

"Oh, I had a really great holiday in a top secret location." Draco told them.

"Really? Despite ... er ..." Vincent broke off very suddenly, but luckily his best friend took over for him.

"Where's that? Come on Draco you can tell us." Gregory pushed.

"If I'd tell you you'd only be scared." Draco grinned.

"You mean a really dangerous place?" Vincent asked.

Draco nodded. "A place your parents would never let you go."

"The Forbidden Forest?" Gregory asked.

"No, more forbidden."

"The aurors' headquarters in London?" Vincent picked the most dangerous place he knew.

"Of course not!" Draco snorted. "Who'd want to spend their holidays there? No, I was somewhere much cooler, where even the aurors are afraid to go."

"Voldemort's headquarters?" Gregory suggested immediately.
"No, that's probably dead boring and in the middle of nowhere. I got to go to all kinds of places and met lots of people."

"Oh come on, tell us already!" Vincent begged.

"No, you'll have to guess." Draco insisted.

"We're out of ideas." Gregory complained after a moment.

"Well, then you'll just have to give up." smirked Draco.

For a moment the two looked almost disappointed, but then got distracted by the arrival of Blaise, who greeted them in his usual friendly but distant manner then turned to sneer at Draco. "Couldn't afford any better robes than those?"

Draco just shrugged it off. "These will do. And I won't have to be careful not to rip them in a fight."

Blaise seemed to be put slightly off balance by that comeback, but caught himself after a moment. "And what is that thing in the box you've got there?"

"Yes, Draco." Gregory asked eagerly. "What's in the box?"

"My new pet." Draco grinned proudly.

Everybody in hearing distance turned to stare at the box which didn't move. Severus had covered the egg with a charmed piece of cloth to keep it warm, so all they could see was some fabric.

"Well, what is it?" Vincent finally asked.

"A raven egg." Draco whispered back.

"An egg?" Blaise repeated with a snort. "What's so great about an egg?"

"You have to buy a raven as an egg or he won't obey you." Draco informed him calmly. "You have to train him yourself."

"Oh, and you think you can do that?" Pansy Parkinson said derisively.

'Well, so much for still having a girlfriend.' Draco thought. "Professor Snape thinks I can and he knows everything about ravens."

"Oh, really?" asked Blaise.

"He happens to have one as a familiar as well." Draco answered with a sweet smile.

"Yes, that's true." Gregory confirmed to everyone's surprise. "I saw it in his office once."

"Him." Draco corrected. "Munin's a male raven."

That silenced everybody for a moment, then they started asking questions in earnest and only stopped when Professor McGonagall arrived with the first years.

Draco just glared a the sorting hat through most of it's song as it had started it off with declaring how the founders had founded a school that provided all wizards and witches with an education. Even the damn hat should know better. It had to have at least heard of the school in London.
The sorting was rather boring after having seen it three times already. The only interesting thing were the green faces of the first years when they were called and had to walk up front under the eyes of the whole school.

Draco watched the rapidly diminishing crowd of nervous children and soon spotted the two girls that had played dress up with him in the second hand clothes store. He waved at them and the more courageous one waved back while the other just smiled at him. Both seemed a little less nervous afterwards.

"Carter, Araminta!" McGonagall called soon afterwards and the courageous one stepped up to the sorting hat.

'Araminta.' Draco thought. 'Gotta remember her name.' Or would she prefer to use a shortened version? He thought he remembered her mother calling her Minty.

The hat didn't take long to decide Araminta's fate. "Ravenclaw!" it announced after only a few seconds.

Draco applauded along with the Ravenclaws as she walked over to her new house's table.

"You know this firsty?" Vincent whispered into Draco's ear.

"Met her and her friend in Diagon Alley during the summer. We had some fun together, so I guess she deserves a little support." Draco answered without turning his face away from the sorting. After all he had no idea when the other little girl would be called and being the more nervous of the pair she definitely needed his support even more.

But the sorting went on and on and the group of first years grew smaller and smaller.

"Smith, David!" McGonagall called when there were only five students left.

Smith, David? David Smith? Where had he heard that name before? Oh, right!

Draco shot one look over to the head table and saw that Severus' attention was fixed on the boy who walked stiffly up to the hat as if he were in a marching band. He just barely managed to suppress a snigger at the kid's military haircut. 'Like a little zombie' he thought.

David sat on the chair very erect with his hands folded in his lap and frowned slightly as the ratty old sorting hat was placed on his head.

They waited. Little whispers sprang up all over the room as time went by without a decision. This boy had to be really hard to sort. Unfortunately Draco couldn't see David's face as the hat had fallen over his whole head. He wondered idly, if the boy could even breathe under there, but then the hat had holes enough.

At the head table Professor Flitwick leaned past Professor Snape to ask the headmaster what they'd do if the hat didn't manage to sort this one at all.

"The sorting hat has always been able to sort every student." Dumbledore answered calmly. "No need to get nervous just because it takes a little longer for Mr. Smith. I remember several other students that took even longer to sort than this."

As if on cue the hat finally made it's decision. "Slytherin!" it announced with a slight note of relief in it's voice.
Draco quickly looked to Severus as everybody around him started clapping. There was a dangerous gleam in his uncle's eyes. Draco grinned. This prey had been delivered right into the snake's fangs.

David appeared to be very nervous as he delivered a stilted introduction to his fellow first years.

They stared back at him for a moment, then a fat little blond girl burst out laughing and soon almost everybody at the Slytherin table was at least sniggering. David seemed to be fighting down tears.

At the head table Dumbledore looked to Severus who shrugged slightly. "I can't quite jump up and make a big scene right now, can I?"

Albus who knew very well that Severus could usually curb unwanted behaviour by much more subtle means filed the incident away for later examination. Something seemed to be up with Severus and Mr. David Smith.

A sixth year prefect finally took matters into her hands and reminded her house mates that Slytherins didn't pick on or laugh at their own.

At about the same time the sorting ceremony finished with McGonagall calling "Zoran, Jana!"

The left over little girl from the clothes store almost ran to the stool just to get away from all the stares. She was lucky enough to be sorted quickly and for the first time in his life Draco found himself clapping for a Hufflepuff. Well, at least neither of his little friends had had the misfortune to end up in Gryffindor. He supposed Hufflepuff wasn't that bad. At least Jana would make a lot of really nice, if most likely stupid, friends there.

Less then a minute later the food appeared on the tables and Draco suddenly realised that he had hardly eaten any meat all summer and hadn't even missed it much. Still there were a lot of things here that the Snapes couldn't afford and he quickly filled his plate forcefully reminding himself to add some vegetables as well. After all vegetables were good for you even if he'd eaten lots of them all summer.

He'd just started eating when suddenly an owl fluttered into the hall. The poor bird looked completely exhausted. He must have flown for days, maybe even weeks for his feathers to get this ruffled and his wings this tired. No longer able to fly in a straight line the owl wobbled towards the Slytherin table where he dropped into a bowl of mashed potatoes in front of Draco.

Draco pulled him out and set him down on the table and the owl immediately held out his leg to him. As soon as the boy had untied the letter from his leg, the owl gave an exhausted sigh and sagged into his plate too tired to even nibble at the food.

"What's that?" Gregory asked curiously.

"My Hogwarts letter for this year." Draco answered absent-mindedly.

"How was this possible? All the owl had had to do was fly from Hogwarts to Hogsmeade, the same distance he and Severus had walked that same day. Severus had said that the owl was young and a closer look at him seemed to confirm that. He looked exhausted, not old. Could he be sick?

Draco gently lifted the animal out of his food and walked to the head table ignoring the curious looks of his fellow students.

The teachers stopped eating and watched almost as curiously as the students as Draco carried the unmoving ball of feathers to Severus.
"What is it, Draco?" the Potions Master asked almost gently.

"My Hogwarts letter." Draco answered. "Is this the missing school owl?"

Severus looked at the owl for only a moment then turned to McGonagall. "Minerva?"

The head of Gryffindor got up to get a better look at the bird, then shrugged. "It could be. He is the right size, but I don't know him well enough to recognise him. He's one of many, after all."

Hagrid reached over the table with one large hand and picked the owl out of Draco's hands. He gently stroked his ruffled dripping feathers, picked a pea out from under one wing, then looked back up eyes full of pity for the poor animal. "Yes, that's Chip. He's been missing for a whole month. What have you done to the poor guy?"

"Nothing." Draco defended himself. "I've never even seen him before. He was just supposed to deliver my Hogwarts letter and only arrived just now."

"This is very strange." Severus remarked. "Draco was in comfortable reach of the owl during the whole time he was gone. There's no real reason why he should be late or this exhausted."

Headmaster Dumbledore calmly suggested. "Perhaps you had better keep Chip isolated from the other owls until he has completely recovered, Hagrid. It looks like he might be suffering from some virus. Maybe you'd better take him to see Madame Pomfrey as well."

Hagrid nodded. "I'll do that Professor. Poor little Chip. He's usually such a happy, lively little bird."

"I seem to have bad luck with owls this year." Draco commented to Severus. "Gregory sent me one as well, but it didn't find me and brought his letter back."

"Well, he can't have had your address, so maybe his owl wasn't able to locate you." Severus tried to explain it away. Actually it was a very unlikely coincidence, as if somehow Draco had been invisible to the owls. It was theoretically possible to hide people from owls, but Chip had found the boy now. He'd headed straight, or as straight as he still could, for him from the moment he'd flown into the hall.

"But shouldn't an owl be able to find a wizard without an address?" Draco asked.

"Many can, but it's a difficult trick. I suppose Mr. Goyle's owl just isn't very bright." Severus answered his mind still busily working on the mystery. If Draco wasn't invisible that had to mean that for some reason the owls had been unable to reach or find the flat in West Hogsmeade, which meant that there had to be a spell on his flat.

But Munin had no problem finding his way home and the owl from the potions shop in Diagon Alley had reached him without delay as well. If the flat was invisible specifically to owls he shouldn't have gotten any anymore than Draco.

Unless ... "Can I see your letter for a moment, Draco?" Severus asked as casually as he could manage.

"Sure. It fell into the mashed potatoes, though." Draco held it out to him.

Severus quickly checked the envelope. No address, just as he'd suspected, but who'd ever heard of a spell that could make a place invisible to owls unless they were carrying a letter addressed to it? Not many people had ever visited him at Merlin Park and even fewer were powerful enough to work such a spell without Severus detecting it at some point.
"You should get back to your dinner." he told Draco as he handed the letter back. "You must be hungry."

Draco nodded and hurried away. Severus looked after him for a moment, then turned his attention to the old wizard sitting beside him. Just what kind of secret safety measures had Albus taken to protect his family?

"Draco, there's something I have to tell you." Vincent stated the moment Blaise had left the dorm to go to the bathroom that evening.

"Oh really? What?" Draco asked wondering why Vincent hadn't brought it up at the feast. The way Vincent had said it sounded like he thought it something important, so why had he waited this long?

"Greg, watch the door." Vincent ordered. "If Blaise or anybody else wants to come in here, warn us. It's important."

"Oh, it's about that." Gregory nodded. "I'm sorry, Draco." He added as he went out.

"Sorry?" Draco repeated looking up at Vincent quizzically from where he was sprawled on his bed.

"Message from the Dark Lord." Vincent explained his precautions.

"The Dark Lord?" Draco repeated. "You spoke to Voldemort himself?"

"My father did. He asked me to tell you that the Lord thinks it wouldn't be safe for you to be initiated with the rest of us." Vincent reported. "He thinks that the aurors are on to you now and you'd only endanger all of us, so you're out. You can't become a death eater until we have taken over and destroyed the ministry."

Draco had to fight not to laugh out loud at the unhappy pitiful look Vincent was giving him. "It's okay, Vincent. I already realised that myself. I'll just have to live with it."

"It's gotta be hard." Vincent remarked still full of pity. "I mean right after what happened to your father and all the money you lost."

"I'm over that, Vincent." Draco suddenly saw a great chance. "I've already made my plans to deal with the situation."

"Really?" Vincent's curiosity stirred right on cue. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to take Muggle Studies." Draco grinned.

"What?" Vincent obviously didn't believe his ears.

"That way I prove to the ministry that I'm a nice muggle loving light wizard." Draco explained. "It's going to take years to fully convince them, if I even manage to at all, but I bet they'll at least give me less trouble that way."

"Did they bother you already?" Vincent asked sympathetically.

Draco nodded. "We were raided during the holidays and I even spent an hour or so in jail and was interrogated."
"They really locked you up?" Vincent was horrified. "Oh, only until Professor Snape came to get me out." Draco was having lots of fun leading Vincent to misinterpret his holiday experiences. "He's really good at handling aurors, you know. One looked almost scared. But of course he was only a second rate prison guard. The ones that are really out in the field are a lot tougher, Snape said."

"They're not even afraid of Snape?" Vincent gulped. "Oh man, they've got to be really terrible then."

Draco almost couldn't fight down a triumphant smile. "You know, if they scare you this much, maybe you shouldn't become a death eater either. You'll most certainly run into them a lot if you do and they won't give you the 'gentle' treatment I got once you're an adult. Professor Snape told me a few really horrible stories."

Vincent grew very quiet at that. Obviously he was seriously considering Draco's warning. When he didn't say anything more for over a minute Draco opened the door and waved Gregory back in. "I'm really sorry about it all, Draco." Gregory told him again.

"I'm fine, Gregory. I already knew." Draco reassured him. He decided not to repeat his story for Gregory. Let Vincent do that for him. With any luck he'd make it even scarier and Gregory was easy enough to convince. With a little luck a little comment from Severus might suffice to cost Voldemort another two followers now.

At the very least Vincent would start a rumour that would explain away his sudden interest in Muggle Studies.

Blaise returned only moments later. "What are you still unpacking?"

"No, I haven't even started." Draco grinned back at him. That had two reasons. The probably more important one was that he was feeling too lazy at the moment, the other that he wanted to avoid getting involved in the usual chaos caused by four boys unpacking at the same time.

"You intend to live out of that old junk?" Blaise sneered at Draco's trunk.

"I intend to unpack tomorrow." Draco informed him coldly. "And I like this trunk, by the way."

"Really? It looks like it's been used before." Blaise remarked disdainfully.

"That's because it has." Draco told him. "Professor Snape was so kind to lend me his old school trunk since mine unfortunately disappeared in the ministry raid on Malfoy Manor."

"Snape's trunk?" Gregory asked fascinated. "Oh, wow!" He and Vincent immediately came over to inspect Draco's trunk.

"Keep your paws off!" Draco warned them. "I want to return it in one piece."

"I'd still have preferred something new." Blaise sneered.

"That's a matter of personal taste, I suppose." Draco answered in kind. "I for one like all the old stuff Professor Snape gave me."

"Snape, Snape, Snape." Blaise repeated. "That's all you talk about today, isn't it? Where'd you spend your holidays? At Snape Manor?"
"There is no Snape Manor." Vincent informed him. "It was sold a long time ago. To cover some debts, I think."

"Then where does Snape live?" Gregory asked surprised. He probably couldn't imagine anyone not living in a manor house at all.

"Here at Hogwarts?" Blaise suggested with a shrug.

"No, he doesn't." Gregory shook his head. "Or he'd be here every weekend. I once asked Filch where he was and he told me he'd gone home."

"Maybe he's got some old castle?" Vincent tried.

"Why sell the manor, if they had a castle?" Blaise shot back.

"Maybe he bought a new manor." Gregory decided. "One that just isn't called Snape Manor."

"I bet Draco knows where Snape lives." Vincent said. "Right Draco?"

Draco just nodded. He was laughing too hard to answer.

"Well, where is it?" Blaise demanded impatiently.

Draco fought to get his laughter under control, but he was still giggling slightly as he answered. "I can't tell. It's secret."

"Secret? Why would Snape have a secret address?" Blaise wondered.

"So he won't be bothered by curious or vengeful students during the summer?" Vincent suggested. "With the way the Gryffindors hate him, he has reason enough not to want to be found."

That cleared up the question sufficiently in Gregory's mind and he returned to unpacking his trunk. Vincent turned away as well, but Blaise wouldn't leave it alone.

"Oh, and Draco is the only privileged one who knows?" he hissed. "Why should he be the only one?"

"Because I'm the only one Snape ever invited to his home, that's why." Draco declared. "And I promised not to tell, so I won't."

"Okay, which one of you took my white socks?" Gregory demanded suddenly. "I put them right here in my trunk and now they're gone."

"Your socks?" Blaise repeated exasperatedly when he realised Gregory was looking at him. "Why should anyone want your socks?"

"They were here in my trunk and now they're gone." Gregory repeated angrily.

"Well, I didn't take them." Blaise growled back. "I wouldn't touch your stinking socks if you offered me money for it."

"My socks don't stink! Our house elf just washed them!" Gregory yelled angrily stepping closer to Blaise and balling his fists.

Vincent held him back by grabbing the back of his robes, though. "Don't step on my dress robe. You'll leave footprints."
"What is your dress robe doing on the floor anyway?" Gregory asked with a frown.

"I just unpacked it, but I have to rearrange my school robes to make room in the cupboard. So I left it on the floor in the meantime. Now be nice and get back to your own trunk." Vincent tried to push Gregory back.

"But I need my white socks." Gregory protested.

"Maybe you already unpacked them?" Draco suggested rolling over onto his stomach so he could open his trunk without having to get up.

"I don't think so." Gregory answered.

"Did you check if they're already in the cupboard?" Vincent asked while Draco dug out his pyjamas.

Gregory went over and searched the cupboard. "They're not here."

"Didn't you leave some socks on the chair, when you went outside for a moment?" Draco asked now grabbing for his backpack.

Gregory checked the chair. "Oh, there they are! Thanks, Draco!"

"Where is my second shoe?" Blaise shouted only a moment later.

Draco sighed and pulled out Cuddly and his Rakers' cap. He put on the cap and sat the teddy on his pillow. There, almost like home.

"What's that?" Vincent asked wide eyed.

"My teddy." Draco explained. "I'm keeping him because he was a gift from someone." He didn't want to say Snape again, because that might remind Blaise that he knew where Snape lived.

According to the looks Vincent and Gregory gave him they must have assumed that he was talking about his mother or father.

"I didn't mean the bear." Vincent said a little uneasily. "What's that thing on your head?"

"My cap?" Draco asked incredulously. "That's just an ordinary cap, like muggle kids wear them all the time. They're really comfortable when it's hot and the sun is shining into your eyes."

"Um, there's no sun shining in here, Draco." Gregory reminded him.

"I know, I just like to wear it." Draco explained patiently. "It was a gift from my new friends."

"New friends?" Blaise repeated. "What new friends?"

"Just a bunch of kids I met during the holidays." Draco said defensively. "You don't know them."

"You made friends with a bunch of muggle kids?" Vincent asked horrified.

"No, they're wizard kids." Draco corrected. "They just go to a different school. Mike told me that there are three other wizarding schools in Great Britain, that I never knew about."

"Mike?" Gregory asked. "That seventh year Ravenclaw?"
"No, my friend Mike, who doesn't go to Hogwarts at all." Draco insisted. Ravenclaw might fit Mike, though, he decided. His knowledge of Transfigurations at least would do any Ravenclaw proud.

All in all the first day at Hogwarts hadn't been as bad as expected, Draco thought later when he lay in bed. His classmates had been more curious, but less aggressive than he'd expected. Of course tomorrow would be the first day of classes and that would most likely mean having to deal with the Gryffindors. He just hoped that would be as easy.

A/N: How will the teachers react to Draco? When will his raven hatch? And will he manage to deal with Blaise and Pansy?

In the next chapter: Draco meets the Gryffindors in class, hands in his homework and has to deal with McGonagall.
Chapter 37: Transfiguration Troubles

At breakfast that next morning most of the Slytherins seemed to have forgotten their curiosity about Draco and his new pet so all he had to endure were the stares from the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs and the usual glares from the Gryffindors. Draco simply ignored them as he put down the box with his raven egg and grabbed some toast.

The post owls swooped in only seconds later to deliver the mail.

"Isn't your owl coming with some sweets?" Gregory asked wistfully.

"I don't have an owl anymore, Gregory." Draco reminded him between two bites. "And who'd send me sweets now?"

Gregory opened his mouth to answer that, stopped and closed it again looking slightly embarrassed. Draco wondered what he'd been about to say.

"So what are you going to name your raven when it hatches?" Vincent asked in an attempt to save the situation.

Draco looked down at his box thoughtfully. "I haven't really thought about that." he admitted. "Professor Snape said it was a male egg."

"A male egg?" Gregory repeated. "How can an egg be male?"

"Well, the bird inside is male." Draco explained. "Any ideas what to name a male raven?"

"Uh ... Raven?" Gregory suggested.

"Not exactly very creative, Gregory." Draco sneered at first, then added more kindly: "But thanks for trying."

"Maybe Blackfeather." Vincent suggested.

"Better." Draco conceded. "But still sounds odd."

"Catfood." Blaise grinned evilly. "That's exactly what he's going to end up as."

"Just watch your own owl." Draco sneered back. "He sure is stupid enough to get himself eaten."

"My owl is a pure-bred French eagle owl from a renowned breeder." Blaise protested the insult to his pet.

"Looks a little inbred to me, you know." Draco stated getting up and turning to fully face Blaise.

Blaise stepped back at the sight of the gleam in Draco's eyes. Something was definitely wrong here. Draco was supposed to sick his bodyguards at him now, not stand there and look like he was itching for a fight.

"Draco, we've got to go." Vincent actually stepped in to diffuse the situation. "We'll be late for class if we don't."
Draco slowly nodded not taking his eyes off Blaise. "All right. Some other time then, Blaise."

It was surprisingly hard not to launch himself at the boy the way he'd have done with Chris or Pretty Ricky. A side glance at the head table revealed that Severus was watching them closely. Was he worried about Draco or did he think he was actually dangerous?

The boys walked back to their dorm with Blaise trailing behind a little obviously not wanting another confrontation. Draco quickly checked his schedule. Transfigurations and History of Magic before lunch. He grabbed his books, quill and parchment and stuffed them into his backpack.

"What's that?" Gregory asked pointing.

"My backpack." Draco grinned at him. "Much more comfortable than a book-bag"

"Don't tell me that's another gift from Professor Snape!" Blaise groaned.

"You've got it." Draco smiled back as he slipped it on. "Okay, lets go!"

"Wait!" wailed Vincent still digging through his trunk. "I can't find my Voldemort essay."

"Your what?" Draco asked confused.

"My Voldemort essay. For Binns." Vincent repeated now searching the cupboard.

"Oh that." Draco finally realised.

"Are you sure you wrote it at all?" Blaise asked sneering again.

"Of course I wrote it. It was the first thing I did and the first thing I put in my trunk." Vincent hissed tearing open another drawer.

"You can always hand it in later, Vincent." Draco tried to calm his friend. "Binns won't even notice it's missing. After all he doesn't even know our names."

"That's easy for you to say. You've got your essay." Vincent shot back. "I'm proud of that one. I want Binns to read it."

"Here it is!" Gregory suddenly called out. While they'd been arguing, he'd calmly checked Vincent's trunk and indeed found an overlooked piece of parchment at the bottom.

Vincent rushed over to check and indeed. "Thanks Greg! I could kiss you for this! You're the best!"

"Oh no, you don't!" Gregory declared in alarm. "I like girls, Vince!"

Draco laughed at the sight of Vincent's red face as he realised just what he'd said. Maybe Gregory wasn't that stupid after all.

They got to Transfigurations just in time and had to take the last remaining seats. Luckily Pansy had saved one for Blaise, so Draco wasn't forced to sit next to him after Gregory and Vincent chose the very last desk in the back. Instead he wound up next to Millicent who frowned at his backpack, but didn't comment.

The first thing McGonagall did was demand their homework. She frowned at the small wrinkly
piece of parchment Gregory handed her then narrowed her eyes at Draco's long essay. Draco answered her with a sweet smile and a shrug.

McGonagall relented and handed out candles to turn into matchsticks.

"This isn't a very difficult transfiguration so you all ought to be able to do this." she explained. "Just remember to change the size of the candle first or your matchstick will end up much too big."

As the students bent intently over their candles she pulled out Draco's homework again and started to read.

Draco glared at her over his slowly shrinking candle. Did she have to read his essay first? She was just making him nervous that way.

POP! Draco had lost his concentration and the candle had sprung back to it's original size.

He sighed and started over.

"Mr. Malfoy." McGonagall called out.

Draco frowned again. For some reason he didn't like his last name anymore. Maybe it was because it reminded him of his father. "Yes, Professor?"

POP! Draco sighed. Not again! If he continued like this he'd never get this assignment done.

"Comparing this essay with your usual work I have to wonder a little. Could you perhaps explain that." McGonagall gave him one of those intense stern looks he hated so much about her.

"I asked a friend to help me a little since my own attempts never quite managed to reach the required length, Professor." Draco tried to smile a little. "He kind of overshot the mark, I think, but I learned a lot from his tutoring."

"Ah, and who would that friend of yours be?" McGonagall asked sternly.

"You don't know him. His father's a friend of Professor Snape and he's in sixth year at another school." Draco explained hoping that she wouldn't ask any more questions abut Mike.

She didn't. Instead she just looked worried and Draco wondered how much McGonagall knew about Professor Snape and what friends he kept. She'd been working for Dumbldore even longer than Severus, so she probably knew that he was a spy. Did she think all his friends had to be death eaters because of that?

"Mr. Malfoy, you are the only one who hasn't transfigured his candle yet." McGonagall drew him from his thoughts.

"You distracted me at a crucial moment." Draco reminded her. "I have to start over."

"Well, hurry up then. If you don't remember how to shrink something page 13 in your book ..." McGonagall stopped in front of his desk to pick up his Transfigurations book. "What is this thing?"

"Another friend lent me that." Draco explained and grabbed for the book. "I have to give it back at the end of the year."

McGonagall looked down at the book in her hand. Somehow it looked familiar. Very familiar. She distinctly remembered this book sailing through the air and hitting James Potter's back, losing a few pages on the corridor right in front of this very classroom in the process.
She leafed through it quickly and found her suspicions confirmed. "There are pages missing in here." she stated with another intent look at Draco.

"Then I'll just have to ask Gregory or Vincent to let me see theirs when I need them." Draco told her. "Unless you've got an extra you could lend me?"

"It's your family's duty to supply you with the school books you need, Mr. Malfoy." McGonagall said tight-lipped.

"Well, they aren't going to buy me a better one, so this one will have to do." Draco smirked back at her. He knew it wasn't wise to challenge the head of Gryffindor like this, but she'd insulted Severus' Transfigurations book.

"I think I'll have a word with your head of house about this." McGonagall informed him before returning to today's lesson.

Draco wondered for a moment what Severus would say, but then returned to his candle. Shrink it and change it.

The matchstick looked a little crooked, he decided after looking it over critically, but it was definitely a matchstick. He wouldn't get a perfect grade for it, but McGonagall couldn't fail him either.

History of Magic right before lunch was torture, Draco decided about an hour later. There was nothing to distract him from his hunger. The most interesting thing to do was watch Gregory and Vincent whisper to each other. Unfortunately their conversation was just quiet enough that Draco couldn't understand the words.

Up in front Binns was droning on about another Goblin rebellion. At least the History book promised that it was the last one. The next chapter led up to Grindelwald's threat and it looked like they'd be studying him for a while. It might even be interesting, if Binns managed to tell it properly.

The homework essays were still lying on Binns' desk untouched. He was probably saving them to serve as entertainment for his lunch break when all the living inhabitants of Hogwarts would be in the great hall eating. Binns never showed up for meals unless he had to. As a ghost he couldn't eat and he didn't seem to like watching others do it.

Draco suppressed a yawn and pulled his backpack closer under the desk. Could he risk bringing out his Transfigurations book now? He was sitting in the last row and Binns hardly ever noticed anything his students did during class, but what about his classmates? He'd ended up next to Estella Rashton this time, a very quiet girl whose parents had both been in Ravenclaw.

And that was pretty much all he knew about Estella. She was friendly enough with her classmates and could get petty mean to any Gryffidor that got in her way, but she usually kept to herself. That was probably why she'd ended up next to Draco this time. Nobody had bothered to save her a seat and since Gregory and Vincent had once again chosen to share a desk, Draco had been the only choice left unless Estella wanted to sit with the Hufflepuffs.

She probably wasn't a death eater, Draco thought. Death eater parents weren't disappointed if their children got into Slytherin. Of course Estella could have chosen to follow Voldemort on her own, but in Draco's opinion fifteen was very young for such a choice. She'd also never tried to make
friends with any of the known death eater kids and what was the fact that Draco read his Transfigurations book during History of Magic going to tell her anyway?

Draco pulled the book out under the desk and switched it for the History of Magic book while Binns was busy spelling goblin names onto the blackboard.

"Trying to improve your Transfigurations grade?" Estella's voice was only slightly mocking.

"Well, the teacher doesn't like me, so I guess I'd better not fall behind." he answered. Let her think he was going to study.

"That book really is shabby, you know." she continued. Was she trying to start a conversation? The class was boring enough for such desperate measures, but Draco had never considered Estella to be the talkative type before.

"I like it." he answered shortly as he flipped open the book.

The first page was decorated with a few nice caricatures of what probably were some of Severus' old classmates. He'd even added their names under the drawings to help with identification. The first target had of course been James Potter drawn with over-large glasses and given an eagle owl's ears to go with them. The next one was of a little fat boy who seemed to be shivering with fear and trying to hide behind Potter at the sight of what appeared to be a normal chair.

"Who's Pettigrew?" Estella asked leaning over to peer into the book.

Draco shrugged. "I don't know. You'd have to ask the owner of this book, I guess."

"Who is?"

"Not likely to want to answer you, I think." Draco smirked.

Estella pouted. "I can always ask around the other Slytherins." she pointed out.

"Good luck." Draco wished her with a grin. "You'll need it."

"The ones that are in his year have to know him and he can't be much younger than us judging from this drawing." Estella informed him. "He's only a little smaller than Potter."

"Well, if you feel like it." Draco smirked. "Tell me if you find out anything."

She had no chance to answer that, because Binns ended the lesson and everybody rushed out eager to get to lunch. Draco threw his book back into his backpack got up and walked out with the rest of the class leaving her behind without another glance.

Draco soon realised that his biggest problem wasn't as he'd expected his lack of money. Most of his house mates accepted that surprisingly easily. They were a lot more interested in where he was living now and didn't want to accept "Well, here at Hogwarts, of course." for an answer for long.

He finally admitted that nothing had been decided yet to a sixth year he hardly knew over lunch. It seemed to be the easiest way to get them to leave him alone, but it also started new questions.

"So where did you spend the summer then?" she asked immediately.

"With friends." was all he could think of to say at first.

"What friends? Crabbe and Goyle?" she frowned at the two boys beside him.
"No, not my school friends." Draco answered hoping that she'd conclude that it was somebody she didn't know and stop asking.

"But who?" asked Millicent who'd obviously been listening in however. "And where do they live? You weren't on the train."

"How would you know that?"

"Gregory and Vincent looked for you. They asked me where you were at least three times during the journey." Millicent smirked. "If you'd been on that train somebody would have seen you."

"Alright so I didn't take the Hogwarts Express from London. What's the big deal?" Draco shrugged. "It's not the only way to get to Hogwarts."

"But where do your friends live?" Millicent repeated eagerly.

"Here in Scotland." Draco finally relented knowing that if Gregory and Vincent could piece that together with what he'd told them the day before, they'd know a little more than he wanted them to, but then those two weren't exactly the best at logical deduction. Gregory definitely wouldn't pick up on it. Vincent might be able to do it, but he usually left the thinking to others. Draco hoped he'd do the same today.

"So you took the other train?" another sixth year asked. "But you were already here when I arrived and I was in the first coach."

Well, there was no way to deny it anymore. "No, I didn't take either school train or one of the horseless carriages. We were down in Hogsmeade long before the trains arrived so I walked up here."

"Walked?" sneered Pansy looking completely disgusted at the very thought of such physical exercise.

"Yes, walked." Draco grinned. "You know, that's when you put one foot in front of the other in order to get some-place? It's good for you and it's something to do instead of waiting for a train that won't come for hours. Certainly better than sitting around being bored."

"But to carry your own luggage, Draco?" Millicent frowned.

"It was enspelled of course." Draco informed her haughtily. "Or did you think my friends don't know how to perform a simple first year levitation spell?"

That silenced them to Draco's relief. He'd almost thought that he'd have to reveal that he'd spent his holidays in Hogsmeade and that would no doubt have lead to even more questions. And Vincent couldn't possibly miss the significance of that.

He'd have to ask Uncle Severus what to tell people about his summer holidays, Draco decided. He couldn't go on like this or he'd give away the Snapes' secret sooner or later.

Luckily they had double Potions after lunch, unluckily once again with the Gryffindors, but Draco had already expected that. Slytherin-Gryffindor seemed to be the most common combination in Potions classes in the school. Some students even suspected that Dumbledore did it on purpose. It was a school tradition that each house had classes with each of the other houses, supposedly to improve inter house relationships, but it was also known that several teachers feared that particular
combination and did whatever they could to avoid it. Professor Snape was probably the only teacher who could really keep such classes under control at all times and that was most likely why the years with the strongest Gryffindor-Slytherin rivalries usually had that combination in Potions.

He went down to the Potions dungeon early hoping to catch Severus alone before class, but unfortunately Pansy and Millicent were already there. Pansy turned her nose up at him and tried to pretend that he wasn't there, but Millicent at least gave him an apologetic smile and a shrug before she turned away. Draco took that to mean: 'I don't know what's gotten into Pansy either, but she's my best friend, so I don't want to make her angry.'

He smiled back at Millicent, even though she was no longer looking at him. To his own surprise he didn't mind the girls' behaviour much. He still had Gregory an Vincent to keep him company when he wanted it. Maybe he ought to write to his friends tonight? There was a lot he wanted to tell them, especially Cathy Cat.

Severus almost grinned at the faraway look on Draco's face. He knew that look only too well and it was obviously not directed at either of he girls in the room.

Even though Severus managed to not actually grin Pansy noticed the slight twitch of his lips. Snape hardly ever had to fight to control his facial expressions, so whatever he was looking at had to be interesting. Pansy looked up to see.

What was that? Draco smiling to himself? He was supposed to be heartbroken over their break-up, not smiling happily as if he were glad to be rid of her! Pansy frowned, then glared.

It didn't help. Draco didn't even notice her reaction at all.

The rest of the class soon began to arrive most of them in small groups and chatting happily until they caught sight of the Potions Master and quickly lowered their voices.

As usual Potter and his friends were the last ones to arrive and had to take the leftover seats in the first row on the Gryffindor side. Draco had chosen the first row as well as that meant being closer to Severus. Gregory and Vincent had hesitated a little, but then chosen to sit beside him even if it was right in front of a teacher. Snape was their favourite teacher after all and he was usually on their side.

Severus glared at Potter for a moment, but unfortunately he'd arrived still in time before the start of the lesson, though just barely. There was no chance to deduct points right now. A sudden gleam in the teacher's eyes however told Draco that he'd just had an idea how to remedy that. Draco smirked.

"All right class, hand in your homework." Professor Snape ordered and Draco quickly pulled out his essay and handed it over.

Yes, he'd even managed to be first, before Granger.

Severus smiled at him, accepted Granger's homework with a cold look, then turned to Potter.

"Well, Mr. Potter?"

Harry Potter blushed and handed him a few pieces of muggle paper.

Severus frowned at it. "Paper? Whatever is that supposed to mean?"

"My uncle refused to let me use ink and parchment, Sir." Potter tried to explain. "He caught me trying to smuggle some into my room at night and took it away, so I was forced to write my
homework on muggle paper and with a muggle pen."

"Ten points off Gryffindor for the messy look of your essay, Potter." Severus announced calmly. He collected a few more rolls of parchment from the rest of the Slytherins and various Gryffindors until he noticed Neville Longbottom digging frantically through his book-bag "Forgot your homework, Longbottom?" he sneered.

Neville jumped at hearing his name and the Slytherin side of the room broke into laughter. Draco thought he could even hear a few snickers from the Gryffindor half of the room.

"N...n...no, Sir!" Neville stuttered eyes flying desperately through the room trying to avoid looking at anybody and coming to rest on his desk. Suddenly his face lit up. "There it is!" he exclaimed triumphantly and picked up the roll of parchment that had been lying there.

Snape accepted the essay looking only mildly disappointed. "It appears to be a little short, Longbottom."

Neville's face drained of all colour. "I...i...it's ex...exactly the re...required length, Sir.” he managed to stammer.

"Very well, I'll check that later." Severus said with just enough doubt in his voice to not let Longbottom relax yet. "Mr. Weasley, where is your essay?" he turned to the last student who hadn't handed anything in.

"I ... er ..." Weasley grew almost as red as his hair. "My sister's cat ate it, Sir."

"Cat?" escaped Lavender Brown of Gryffindor. "What cat?"

"I believe you have only one sister, Mr Weasley." Snape sneered down at the boy. "And as far as I know, Miss Virginia Weasley does not own a cat."

"Uh ... she only just got one." Ron tried to save himself. "A friend asked her to take care of hers over the holidays."

Snape glared at the obvious contradiction. "So you thought, just because you happen to be friends with the great Harry Potter of the messy muggle paper you don't have to do your homework, did you." he hissed. "Ten points off Gryffindor for not doing your homework, Mr. Weasley, and another ten for being such a bad liar. Maybe you should have asked your brothers for advice. The twins always come up with creative excuses that at least seem credible at first glance. Then again, despite all their other shortcomings they always do bring their Potions homework."

Weasley blushed even deeper at that remark. Even Draco had to admit that he was surprised. The twins had always seemed to enjoy getting detention, and not to have any respect for their teachers at all. Was it really possible that they were afraid of his Uncle Severus?

Professor Snape started the year with what Draco considered an easy exercise, an antidote to a sleeping potion. It wouldn't work against something as powerful as the drought of living death, but would be quite efficient against lighter sleeping potions or a sleeping charm.

The potion required only ten ingredients, but two of them had to be put in at exactly the right moment for the potion to work. After helping Severus work on the werewolf cure, Draco thought it was boring at best. He set up his cauldron, lined up the ingredients and had already stirred the first two of them in when Gregory finally arrived with his own cauldron.

"What were the ingredients again?" Gregory asked him.
"They're on the blackboard and in the book." Draco informed him not looking up from the root he was cutting.

"But there's so many of them." Gregory complained.

"Many?" Draco repeated incredulously. "There's only ten. What will you do when we start brewing potions with twenty ingredients?"

"Twenty ingredients?" Gregory asked in a tone as if it were hundreds. "No potion has that many, I'm sure."

"Check your Potions book, Gregory." Draco smirked. "They're in there."

"Can't remember ten ingredients. I'll forget some." Gregory complained.

"Take a piece of parchment and write them down." Draco advised him while dropping the chopped up roots into his potion. "And check which ones you have in your Potions kit first and cross them out."

Gregory started to fumble around his book-bag for parchment and Draco returned his full attention to brewing.

"Beetle eggs! Where the bloody hell did I put the beetle eggs!" a voice came from somewhere in the back.

"Ten points off Gryffindor for your language, Mr. Finnigan." Severus' voice announced from somewhere behind Draco. "And with the chaos on your desk I'm not surprised you can't find them. Can't you Gryffindors keep order at all?"

Seamus Finnigan stared miserably at the mess of jars on his desk. All of a sudden he realised that he couldn't even remember which ones were his and which ones belonged to the school. He picked one up at random and stared a it. Did that belong in the potion or not? What was already in his cauldron anyway?

Only seconds later the class was alarmed by a frightened squeal from Neville Longbottom as his potion started hissing and foaming.

Severus calmly stalked over pushing his way past the students who were cautiously inching away from Neville and his cauldron. "It's bat teeth not bat blood, Longbottom." he informed the frightened student. "Add two goose feathers to neutralise the effect. And ten points off Gryffindor for not being able to read properly."

Draco quickly packed his quill away to make sure that it didn't end up in Neville's potion, then returned the jars he'd borrowed from the students' cupboard. All he had left to do was wait five minutes, then add the final two ingredients.

"What? You're already done?" Vincent asked incredulously.

"No, but I won't need these anymore, so I'm putting them away while I wait." Draco explained. "And don't put that in yet. That's the last ingredient."

Vincent stopped and stared at the green powder in his hand, then at the blackboard "Oh, you're right. The bat teeth are next."

"Bat teeth?" Draco smirked. "Better hurry up, Vincent. You're behind Longbottom."
It seemed he wasn't the only one either. Granger seemed to be the only student in class who wasn't hopelessly confused about what ingredient to use next and even she kept misplacing jars. Longbottom for once seemed to be doing rather well. Maybe it was because he always had problems like that thanks to his forgetfulness and had learned to set his jars up in order back in second year, when they'd first started brewing potions with more than three ingredients, out of sheer necessity.

Whatever the reason Longbottom looked like he might be one of the few students who'd actually finish their potion today.

Draco returned his attention to his cauldron to check the colour of his potion, then looked at his watch again. One more minute and then he could finish it up.

BANG!

Draco turned around to see that Pansy's cauldron had exploded. "Bat teeth not bat wings, Pansy." he stated almost at the same time as Professor Snape who added a short. "Two points off Slytherin and clean up this mess!" and a "Very good, Mr. Malfoy. Ten points for knowing your potions ingredients so well."

The Gryffindors grumbled something about 'unfair' in the background, but Draco knew that he deserved those points. After all he hadn't even seen Pansy add the bat wings. He bet even Granger wouldn't have been able to deduct what had gone wrong with Pansy's potion this quickly. The extra work with Uncle Severus was really paying off. Even without the points, the look on Pansy's face had been worth it. The Gryffindors' anger at the added points was just a small bonus.

He quickly finished his potion and cleared away the last two jars. "I'm finished Professor! Can I study something else until the class catches up?"

"Let me see." Severus came over and checked the potion carefully. "Very good. Twenty points to Slytherin for being the first to finish this potion. You may do whatever you want as long as it doesn't interrupt my class."

Draco smiled and pulled out the Math book. "This won't interrupt anything, Uncle Severus." he promised.

Suddenly the class was dead silent. You couldn't even hear the clatter of Neville Longbottom's clumsy stirring anymore.

"Uncle?" Draco heard Harry Potter whisper incredulously into the silence.

"Shhht!" Ron Weasley hissed at him, but it was too late.

"Are you done with your potion as well, Potter?" Snape glared at his favourite victim.

"No, Sir, not yet." Harry had to admit.

"Then why are you talking instead of working? Potions is an exact art that requires full concentration as I have been telling you for over four years now. When will you finally learn to save your private conversations for after my class, Potter?"

Harry gulped at the sight of the Potions Master looming above him now. "I'm sorry, Sir. I was just surprised that ..."

"I don't want to hear your excuses." Snape snapped. "Just get back to work and ten points off
'Ten must be his favourite number today.' Harry thought as he grudgingly returned to his search for bat teeth. He was sure he'd put them somewhere on his desk, but somehow his ingredients had gotten mixed up with Ron's and Hermione's, which meant that there should actually be three jars of bat teeth somewhere in this chaos. Any of them would do, but for some reason he couldn't find one.

He wished he could ask Hermione for help, but Snape was watching him closely right now and would no doubt use the chance to take another ten points and they'd already lost too many in this lesson. After all the school year had only just started and they hadn't had time to win that many yet. They might even be in the negatives already.

Next to him Ron threw some odd looking roots into his cauldron, which reacted by creating one last huge bubble and then Ron's fire went out. Ron grimaced.

"You just failed this assignment, Weasley." Snape announced sounding almost bored. "You were supposed to cut the roots first."

"Oh no, please, Sir!" Ron exclaimed desperately. He'd promised his parents to get good grades this year and now he'd already gotten a failing grade for his missing homework and failed the very first potion of the year. "I'll start over."

"There isn't enough time left." Snape informed him coldly. "Just clean up your workspace."

Harry felt terrible for his friend, but there was nothing he could do to help him at the moment. He had to find those bat teeth.

"I'm done, Professor Snape!" Hermione announced about two minutes later.

"And just barely in time, Miss Granger." Snape commented after quickly checking her result. "Clean up and don't let me catch you whispering to any of your classmates."

"Yes, Sir." Hermione confirmed resignedly.

Harry wondered if she'd actually hoped to get some points for her work. He didn't doubt for a moment that she deserved them, but she ought to know by now that Snape hardly ever awarded points to Gryffindor and Malfoy had been a lot faster than her this time. 'I wonder how the git managed that.' he thought to himself. 'He must have cheated somehow.'

"There are only five minutes left." Snape announced calmly. "Those of you who won't finish in time, clean up your workspace and bring me twelve inches of parchment on this potion to make up for it."

Harry sighed and checked the potion recipe again. No, he was much too far behind to manage in time. At least with both Ron and Hermione having already put theirs away he didn't have any problems sorting out which jars were his and which he had to take back to the students' cupboard.

Exclamations of "I'm finished, Professor!" or "Done!" sounded through the classroom while he wiped his desk miserably.

Soon only Neville Longbottom was left frantically stirring.

"Class over." Snape announced. "Longbottom!"
Neville jumped.

"That's enough." Snape continued to everybody's surprise. "Just put out the fire and lets see your result."

With trembling hands Neville did as Snape had told him.

"The colour is a little too light, but considering your earlier mistake the potion is just barely acceptable, Longbottom." Snape decreed. "If you bring me a good essay on the potion, I might grade it a 2."

Neville beamed. "Thank you, Sir. I'll do my best."

"That'll never be good enough." Draco Malfoy smirked at him as he walked past.

"That Malfoy is such a jerk!" Ron hissed as soon as they were out of the room and Snape could no longer overhear him.

"He's even worse than Snape and that's saying something." Harry agreed.

"Snape was almost nice to Neville back there," Hermione pointed out. "And you shouldn't talk about a teacher like that."

"That doesn't change anything about Malfoy, though," Ron insisted.

"And did you hear how he called Snape Uncle?" Harry reminded them.

"I bet that's why Snape favours him," Ron stated. "They're related."

"They don't have to be," Hermione argued. "Snape could just be an old friend of the family that Draco just calls Uncle. They certainly don't look related."

"All those old pure-blood families are related," Ron insisted. "They're all inbred for centuries."

"You're old pure-blood too," Hermione reminded him. "Are you related to Malfoy or the Snapes?"

"Of course not!" Ron exclaimed looking insulted.

"See, not all pure-bloods are related. And little children call almost everybody uncle. If Malfoy has known Professor Snape since he was very small, it's only natural that he'd think of him as an uncle," Hermione explained. "He's probably just an old friend of Lucius."

"Maybe he's even Malfoy's godfather," Harry suggested.

"I don't think the Malfoys are even Christians," Ron muttered.

"What else would they be?" Harry asked surprised. The Dursleys very rarely went to church, but in primary school he'd gotten the impression that everybody in the United Kingdom was a member of the Church of England. Or maybe that was only the English? That would explain the name.

"A lot of wizards especially the Slytherins still hold on to pagan beliefs," Hermione informed him promptly. For a moment he wondered where she'd read that, but decided not to ask.

"And how did Snape know what paper is?" Ron asked sounding offended.

Harry almost smiled at his friend. Ron had never seen paper before and had been fascinated with Harry's homework when he'd first seen it and Neville and the other children from wizarding
families had been very curious as well. Even Professor McGonagall had seemed a little unsure what to do with it at first. After all the sheets were a little too short and flat to form a proper roll.

Snape however had accepted the paper without hesitation.

"Maybe he got some from a muggle born student before?" Harry suggested.

"But McGonagall has been teaching here much longer than Snape. If there was a student here who did his homework on paper she must have known him as well." Hermione argued. "Maybe he took Muggle Studdies and she didn't?"


"Actually, there were two Slytherins in my Muggle Studdies class back in third year." Hermione informed him.

"Must have been part of a Slytherin trick." Harry decided. "But who cares where Snape has seen paper before. I'm much more interested in his relationship with Malfoy. I wish there were a way we could trace their family trees."

"There is." Hermione smiled triumphantly. "Come on! Lets go to the library."

Not waiting to see if they would follow she took off.

Ron stared after her. "The library again? I don't believe it. Anything you ask Hermione, she runs off to the library."

"And she always finds an answer." Harry reminded him.

"But not this time." Ron grinned. "There can't be a book on Snape and Malfoy's ancestors."

A/N: Will Draco beat up Blaise or Ron? Will he be able to visit West Hogsmeade on his next Hogsmeade weekend? And what will Hermione find in the library?

In the next chapter: Draco's raven hatches, Minerva and Severus talk and David Smith serves detention.
Minerva McGonagall had managed to push the daunting task of talking to Professor Snape off until the evening, but finally found herself with nothing else to do about an hour after dinner. For a while she'd even entertained the hope to get to talk to him during the meal when the presence of headmaster Dumbledore would have given her a feeling of support, but Severus had spent the whole time at the Slytherin table eating and talking with his students.

Minerva sighed at the memory. She'd repeatedly pointed out to Albus that it wasn't right for one teacher, a head of house at that, to distance himself from the rest of the staff like that, but Albus had always just smiled and shaken his head at her.

"Minerva," he'd said. "Don't you realise that that's part of the way he ascertains his position as head of Slytherin? Severus does that to remind his students that he too is a Slytherin and it also gives him an opportunity to talk to those students who won't come to his office for advice."

"It furthers the Slytherins' tendency to close themselves off from the other houses." Minerva had pointed out the last time they'd talked about it.

"Actually I've noticed that since Severus became their head the Slytherins have been slightly less cut off from everybody else. Friendships with Ravenclaws aren't as rare among them as they once were and there are even a few who've taken up talking civilly to Hufflepuffs." Albus had winked at her. "Not to forget they don't cut themselves off from their own head anymore as they'd been doing for almost sixty years until Severus arrived. Severus must be doing the right thing to be able to inspire such improvements."

"You consider it an improvement that they're systematically attacking my, our house?" Minerva had protested.

"Remember what it was like twenty years ago, Minerva." Albus had told her calmly. "Slytherin was completely out of control. There were times when their head of house was afraid to enter their common room. They wouldn't listen to anything we told them. The only leader they accepted was Voldemort. Then along comes Severus and suddenly Slytherins turn to him with their problems. It was as if they'd always been looking for someone like him and you can't deny that he can control them."

Minerva had just shaken her head and left it at that. Yes, Severus was the first in a long time who was able to do such basic things as send the Slytherins to bed at night. They didn't talk back to him and he could call even the gang leaders off when he wanted to. Still it wasn't proper for a teacher to eat at one of the house tables, even if he only did so occasionally.

Thanks to that impossible habit of her colleague she now had to visit him in his office in the dungeons. Oh, she hated the dungeons. Not only were they gloomy and cold, but also full of Slytherins and probably rats as well. Why Severus spent so much time down here was a mystery to her. Still, it wouldn't do to let any Slytherin notice her discomfort inside their realm especially not their head of house. He was in a position to use it against her and would certainly not refrain from doing so out of kindness or because he considered such actions beneath him.
With an effort she schooled her face into a stern professional expression and knocked on Severus’

door.

"Just a moment, please!" she heard Severus shout and about a minute later the door opened and a
small second year Slytherin walked out smiling happily.

There was a large purple bruise on his right cheek and Minerva suddenly remembered that he'd
already had that at the sorting ceremony the day before. Back then he'd looked miserable, though
and she'd briefly wondered who he'd fought with. The boy was usually quiet in class and didn't
seem like one to pick fights at all, but of course with Slytherins you never knew.

"Found out who punched the little rascal in the face, yet Severus?" she asked as she entered the
office and closed the door behind her.

"None of your business, Minerva." Severus hissed warningly.

"It is, if it was one of my students, or if you're going to let the kid go unpunished." she insisted just
out of spite.

"It wasn't a student." Severus said darkly. "Or a child."

"What?! You're not implying that one of the staff ..."

"Of course not." Severus cut her off at once. "It wasn't anybody at Hogwarts that hurt him at all, nor
was it the boy's fault in any way."

"Then why did you summon him?" Minerva asked surprised. If he hadn't done anything to be
punished for, there was no reason to order him down here.

"I didn't. He came to ask me for some healing salve." Severus answered deliberately vaguely.

"Salve? Why didn't he go to the hospital wing for that?"

"Because he trusts me more than Poppy." Severus glared at her. "What is this? An interview for
the Daily Prophet? I don't interrogate you about the way you handle your students and I'd thank
you if you'd show me the same courtesy."

"Actually I'm here to talk to you about Mr. Malfoy." Minerva decided to change the subject before
Severus decided to get really nasty. Just what was the big deal about that boy's visit to Severus'
office?

Severus' look darkened even more. "Why? Did he do anything to your precious Gryffindors?"

"No, but ..."

"Then leave it alone. That's my boy, not yours and I decide what to do with him." Severus said
sharply. "If the matter does not concern you, leave him alone."

Minerva suppressed a nervous gulp and drew on her Gryffindor courage. Why the hell was the old
snake hissing at her like that? He seemed ready to strike just because she'd mentioned Draco
Malfoy.

"His Transfigurations book does concern me and so does his Transfigurations homework." she
declared bravely.

"And what is wrong with his Transfigurations book and homework." Severus asked in a tone that
suggested that he was quickly running out of patience.
"Well, the homework is a little too good to be his own work, but he does claim he had some friend to help him." Minerva began.

"Mike Tiller. Mike's father told me the boy's top of his class in Transfigurations. A very bright and hard working sixth year. Of course public schools don't always offer the same quality of teachers Hogwarts does, but I guess Mike should be able to give a fifth year some tips."

Oh, so he was complimenting her now? Was that a sign of a guilty conscience about the book?

"Well, I guess I'll accept the essay. After all enough of the other students probably had some help from their parents so it won't be too unfair." Minerva decided.

"There was something else I wanted to talk to you about as well, since you're already here."

"Oh, what's that?" Damn, now he'd managed to distract her from the topic.

"Neville Longbottom." Severus answered.

"Neville?" Minerva repeated. Oh no, not that again. She felt so sorry for the poor boy. "Look Severus, I know you don't like Neville, but he is just a little clumsy. He doesn't have much talent, but he tries really hard. If you'd only give him a chance, I'm sure he'll become a decent wizard in the end."

"I am giving him a chance, Minerva." Severus pointed out. "Despite his poor results I haven't failed him yet and I've been trying very hard to inspire him to improve his performance and grow a backbone, but whatever I do only seems to make things worse. That's why I brought the boy up. I'd like to hear your opinion how I should treat Longbottom to stir some interest in his performance in my class."

"He is interested in his performance, Severus." Minerva tried to explain. "Sometimes too much so, I fear. He knows he isn't as good at it as he'd like to be and that makes him nervous."

"He did better than I expected today." Severus admitted. "Handled the first assignment with a bigger number of ingredients better than Weasley or Potter in fact."

"He did?" Minerva asked surprised.

"Yes, he managed to complete the assignment with only one actual mistake at the beginning. I was quite surprised since five other students failed to do so. Students who are usually considerably better than Longbottom." Severus confirmed. "He was only just barely in time, but a lot of students don't even manage that much each year."

"You should tell him that." Minerva urged Severus. "Tell him that he did surprisingly well and that he's showing definite signs of improvement. If you just help him along a little and keep telling him what he's doing right instead of what he's doing wrong, he'll gain more confidence and do better, you'll see."

"It doesn't feel right to coddle him like that, though." Severus frowned. "We need to prepare him for the adversities of life as well as to teach him how to use his magic. The wizarding world is heading for another war as big or even bigger as the last one, Minerva, and the children we're teaching right now will be right in the middle of it when they graduate. Longbottom is a friend of Harry Potter at that. That means he's even more at risk than most of the others. How do you expect him to stand up to Voldemort's death eaters, if he almost faints at a simple look from me?"
"Neville doesn't have enough self confidence to stand up to anyone and I know it." Minerva explained. "But your constant putting him down only makes things worse. It might work with the other children, because they feel that they don't deserve to be treated like that. Neville however will only think that his lack of talent rightfully earns him such punishment. He'll never stand up to you, because he thinks he deserves being wronged and has no right to defend himself. We have to teach him that he is somebody worth fighting for before we can expect him to stand up for himself."

To her surprise Snape nodded. "Very well Minerva. Somebody else, whose opinion in such matters I value very much, has given me similar advice so I'll try to do it your way for a little while and see what happens."

"Thank you, Severus." Minerva had to hold herself back so she didn't hug him for such a rare concession. Feeling triumphant she turned around and had almost reached the door when she remembered why she'd actually come, "About Mr. Malfoy's Transfigurations book, though ..." she started when suddenly the door behind her flew open.

"Uncle Severus! He's hatching!" Draco Malfoy raced past her without even a glance holding that dreadful box in his hands that he had dragged around with him all the time since the sorting ceremony.

Minerva sighed. Now she definitely wouldn't get a chance to talk about the boy's book. And for the rest of the year a baby bird would disrupt her classes. She just couldn't understand why Albus had allowed the boy to get a raven of all things. Minerva had a hard time accepting that some people preferred owls over cats, but at least owls were useful. Ravens on the other hand were more trouble than they were worth. Why couldn't young Mr. Malfoy just have gotten an owl, if it absolutely had to be a bird?

Since neither Draco nor Severus paid her any more attention, she stalked out angrily. She'd catch Severus about that book over breakfast. Then at least Albus would be present to help stop him from distracting her again. Then again, Albus was very easily distracted himself. Well, at least he'd be there for moral support.

Draco meanwhile had put the box on Severus' desk right on top of the essay Severus had been about to grade when he'd been interrupted by the second year boy. "Look, there's a small crack in the shell and you can hear him struggling to get out."

"CAW!" came a loud protest from behind the door that led to Severus' quarters.

Severus smiled indulgently at the sound and went to unlock the door for Munin. The raven might have been an expert at opening doors, but he still hadn't found a way to counter locking charms.

Munin immediately fluttered over to the table, landed next to a pot of red ink and walked over to stare at the egg. Just like Draco he watched in fascination as the crack widened and soon turned into a small hole. Now movement became visible inside the egg and Draco thought he saw a small beak, then a leg. Or could it have been a wing tip?

It was hard to believe that a creature as big as Munin could ever have fit into such a small egg.

Munin cawed an encouragement and a tiny voice answered from inside the egg.

"Patience." Severus admonished his bird. "He'll manage."

Draco reached out a hand to help his raven break free, but Severus stopped him. "Don't spoil him. He can do that himself."
And indeed only a few minutes later the egg finally broke and the tiny pink creature struggled free.

"Now you can remove the shards." Severus told Draco softly. "Don't throw them away, though. I know just the potion to make from them."

Draco was so enthralled by the view of his raven, that he didn't even ask what potion and just threw them into the empty jar Severus handed him. Severus left the jar on the desk and disappeared into his office. A moment later he was back with another big jar filled with all sorts of worms, larvae and other disgusting things.

"Here," he said as he set it down next to the little raven's nest. "Try to feed him some of these. He ought to be hungry after such a big effort."

Draco looked at the jar with a touch of disgust, but he opened it and grabbed a at worm without complaint.

"No!" Snape grabbed his hand. "Don't feed him directly from your hand until he's learned how to properly use his beak. Jung ravens are very greedy and their beaks are surprisingly strong. He'll only bite your fingers."

"Then how do you expect me to feed him?" Draco asked surprised. The little raven definitely wasn't old enough to eat on his own yet.

Severus calmly pointed at a long pair of tweezers that lay next to the jar. "With this."

Draco picked it up and inspected it carefully before he used it to pick up the worm. "Isn't this a little big?" he asked doubtfully wondering for a moment what it might normally be used for.

Severus shook his head. "No, it's just as it should be. This way he can't swallow it by accident. You'll find that he's quite capable of tearing it out of your hand once he gets a little bigger. He'll be almost as big as Munin before he learns to feed himself."

Draco gingerly held the worm out to the baby bird and indeed it was snatched away from him immediately. As he picked out another tasty morsel from the jar he wondered how the little raven had recognised the food. After all he couldn't even see, nor had he ever eaten before.

Severus waited until the little bird decided that he'd eaten enough and fell into an exhausted sleep before he asked Draco: "So have you thought of a name?"

Draco nodded and looked at the adult raven with a smile. "Yes, I'll call him Hugin."

Severus' eyes narrowed in surprise. "An excellent choice. Are you aware what the name means?"

"Hugin and Munin are the mythological ravens that accompany Odin in his travels and bring him the news of the world and advice." Draco shrugged. "I just thought we should complete the pair."

"Their names mean Thought and Memory." Severus said earnestly. "Hugin advised Odin to think his decisions through and never just accept the ideas of others without giving them proper thought and consideration first while Munin served to remind him of the lessons learned from past mistakes. Munin was the more knowledgeable of the world, but Hugin was the wiser. With their aid Odin ruled wisely."

"But that's only old fairy tales." Draco laughed.

"The concept behind it is very real, though." Severus stated calmly.
"What? Of Odin and Thor and dwarfs and giants?"

"No, of the roots of wisdom being thought and memory." Severus corrected. "I didn't just pick Munin's name for its sound and if you're going to choose to name your raven Hugin, you'd better know what that means. Let your raven remind you to make your decisions wisely."

At first Draco only laughed at that, but on his way back to the common room the thought of Odin's ravens wouldn't leave him alone. What stories had once been told about Hugin? If the raven's name was still known today something must have been written about him and if something had been written about him, chances were he'd find it in the library.

With a quick decision Draco walked past the entrance to the common room and on towards the stairs that would take him to the library. It couldn't hurt to check those stories out.

His path took him past the caretaker's office in front of which a small figure stood nervously clutching what was probably a detention slip. As Draco got closer he recognised the pale face of David Smith.

"Detention already?" Draco smirked. "That has to be a new school record. And I always thought that only Gryffindors were stupid enough to set records in the detention department."

David blushed and stared at the ground. Now he'd really done it and he'd tried so hard to be a big proper boy, just like his Daddy expected him to. Still he hadn't only gotten a detention on his very first day of school, but also earned the disapproval of both his head of house and one of his older housemates. Would the blond boy go and tell all the older students how he'd shamed their house or would he forget about an unimportant little first year over whatever business was taking him up into the school itself?

David could only hope for the later and that no other older Slytherins happened to come by here and see him. Considering that this was the main corridor that led from the Slytherin common room to the stairs, there wasn't much chance of remaining unnoticed unless he got away from here as quickly as possible. And getting away from here meant to enter the caretaker's office.

All colour drained from David's face at that realisation. Trembling all over he raised his hand and knocked on the office door.

"Yes?" came a sharp voice from inside and David turned the handle and stepped inside on weak knees.

"G ... good evening, Sir." he greeted the terrifying man he found inside. This was the caretaker? Oh no! "I'm here to serve two hours of detention with you, Sir. What do you want me to do?"

The caretaker glared at him. "Two hours, huh? What did you do, you little brat? Set the headmaster on fire?"

"No, Sir. I slipped and accidentally upended a classmates' cauldron during Potions class." David explained looking miserable. "Professor Snape thought I did it on purpose and gave me detention."

"Two hours?" Argus Filch almost smiled. "Seems like he's really got it in for you, brat. I think you and I are going to spend lots of time together."

"Oh no, Sir. I'm a good boy usually." David assured him.

"That won't help you." Filch grinned. "Not if Professor Snape hates you enough to give you two hours of detention just for upsetting a cauldron. You're a Gryffindor, brat?"
"No, Sir. I'm a Slytherin." David answered.

"Of his own house? Oh, yes, we'll spend lots and lots of time together. Well, come on, brat! We're going to clean the Astronomy tower. I'll do the dusting while you mop the floors."

"Yes Sir." David answered meekly.

Filch led him through corridors and up stairs until he felt completely lost. "Uh Sir?" he finally dared to ask when they started climbing yet another fleet of stairs.

"What is it, brat?" Filch asked gruffly.

"Well, I ... I've never mopped before. Could you ... uh ... please show me how it's done correctly before we start?"

Filch glared at him once again. "Very well, but I'll only show you once. Next time I'll expect you to know how it's done."

"Yes Sir. Thank you." David answered relieved. Maybe this wouldn't be all that bad after all.

While David was making his introductions to the caretaker Draco continued on his way to the library. There weren't many students about in the halls at this time of the day and he reached his destination without further delay. As he entered the History section he noticed Potter, Weasley and Granger poring over a stack of books next to the genealogy selves. Were they looking for the Weasley family tree just like he and Severus had looked for the Malfoy one during the summer? If the Weasleys had always had as many children as his father had often implied that had to be one very huge task.

But then Weasley probably had enough living family members to satisfy his curiosity. Orphaned Potter however was probably terribly interested in his family.

Yes, Draco decided they were probably looking up the Potter family. That had to be it.

He turned away from the three Gryffindors who hadn't even noticed him and walked into the isle he knew he'd find the mythology books in. He quickly scanned the shelves and soon found a book titled 'The Wisdom of Odin'. Yep, precisely what he'd been looking for.

Considering what Uncle Severus had said about the ravens, there just had to be some information on them in there.

"Did you find anything, Hermione?" Ron asked pushing away his book and leaning back in his chair.

"No, not yet. Continue searching." Hermione answered distractedly.

"But we've been searching all day!" Ron complained.

"Don't exaggerate, Ron. We've been here for about two hours since our break for dinner." Hermione corrected him and returned to her book.

"What about you, Harry?" Ron asked his other friend. "Have you found anything, yet."
"Ron, you've been asking us that about every five minutes." Harry sighed. "Maybe we'd actually find something if you didn't keep distracting us."

"Research takes time, Ron." Hermione reminded him as she closed the book she'd been perusing and picked up another one. "There, I've got something. Here's the family tree of the Malfoys."

"So? Are they related to the Snapes?" Ron asked eagerly.

"Oh, give me some time to look, will you?" Hermione scanned the family tree page for page, but she didn't find the name Snape anywhere. "No, nothing in here."

"Then why does Malfoy call Snape uncle?" Ron insisted. "That doesn't make sense. There has to be a Snape in the Malfoy family tree."

"Maybe not." said Hermione calmly. "They might be related through Snape's or Draco's mother's family. It says here Narcissa Malfoy's maiden name was Glizzard. All we have to do now is find the family tree of either the Snapes or the Glizzards. If we can prove that Snape's related to the Glizzards, we've won."

"And if we don't?" Harry asked feeling a little disappointed.

"Then we check Snape's mother, Lucius's mother, Narcissa's mother, every woman in the last ten generations of Malfoy and Snape ancestors." Hermione answered calmly. "Going back any further than that will be useless. The relation would be much to distant to speak of. If we can't find anything in the last ten generations, we'll never find anything. Ron, you'd best start by copying the last ten generations of Malfoys on a roll of parchment. We don't need their dates, just the first names of the Malfoys and the first and maiden names of their wives."

Ron took a look at all the names in the book Hermione pushed over towards him and groaned. "You really want us to look for all those people's family trees?"

"Of course. I thought you wanted to find out the relation between Snape and Malfoy. This is the only proper way to do it." Hermione reminded him. "Harry, keep looking for the Snapes and the Glizzards."

They searched for another hour until Harry finally gave a shout of joy. "The Glizzards! I've found them."

Hermione immediately scrambled over to take a look. She frowned. "This one is too old. It doesn't even have Narcissa in there."

Harry sighed disappointedly. "Doesn't it help us at all?"

"Well," Hermione conceded after a moment of thought. "There are only two lines at the end of it and from the dates it's the generation of Narcissa's parents, so her mother was either Caroline Larson or Monica Porter. Ron, are you done copying the Malfoys?"

"Not yet." Ron whined. "There's just too many of them."

"Well, keep going. Harry, take a new roll of parchment and copy down the last nine generations of the Glizzards. Leave some room at the bottom so that we can add the last generation once we find them. I'll continue looking for the Snapes, the Larsons and Porters and a newer version of the Glizzards' family tree."

But even though they kept looking until the library closed down for the day and they had to leave,
they found nothing more.

"Well, at least we have a first two family trees, even if we can't tie either of them back to the Snapes yet." Hermione decided. "It'll be a lot easier once we've got the Snapes as well. With a little luck we'll find at least another three or four tomorrow."

Ron only groaned and Harry even considered giving up the search for a moment. Yes, he wanted to know if Malfoy was related to Snape, but was it worth spending all his spare time in the library? Right now the weather was still good enough to have fun flying his broom. Once it started to snow frozen fingers and toes would turn it into a rather unpleasant experience.

Still flying in winter was fun as well. The cold air was unpleasant, but it smelled clean and fresh and the white winter landscape was quite a sight to fly over. Harry smiled remembering the feeling of scraping snow off a roof in mid flight.

By this time Draco had long left the library with 'The Wisdom of Odin' under his arm and little Hugin's nest held safely in both hands. He intended to go straight back to the Slytherin common room to do some Math exercises and maybe read in his Muggle Studies book afterwards.

He'd had the luck to catch the Muggle Studies teacher during lunch break today and she'd recommended that he should take her third year class during the first semester and then ask Professor Binns to let him switch to fifth year Gryffindor - Ravenclaw History of Magic on Tuesday instead of Slytherin - Hufflepuff Mondays for the rest of the year so he could attend fourth year Muggle Studies. He only had Muggle Studies twice a week and the second lesson was at the same time the fifth years had Divination and Arithmancy, so there wasn't any problem with that one.

He'd almost reached the stairs that led down into the dungeons when Hugin suddenly woke up and cawed at him. Remembering what Uncle Severus had told him about the activities of baby ravens Draco took that to mean 'I'm hungry!'.

The jar with the raven's food was right in his backpack, but he needed a place to set down the nest in order to get it out and feed Hugin. Should he wait until he reached the common room?

No, that might take too long. He didn't want his raven to suffer any unnecessary discomfort. Instead he turned back and entered the great hall where he set the nest down on a corner of the Slytherin table and took off his backpack.

Unlike the other house tables the Slytherin table wasn't much used outside of mealtimes. Very few Slytherins had friends in other houses and socialising with their housemates usually concentrated in their common room. Only to meet Ravenclaw friends did the Slytherins come to the great hall in their spare time. Thus Draco was very surprised when he heard somebody greet him.

He quickly set the jar of raven food beside the nest and turned around. "Oh, hello Jana! Sorry, I didn't see you before."

"That's okay, you probably couldn't see me because I was sitting next to a really big sixth year that blocked your view." Jana smiled. "What are you doing?"

"Preparing to feed my baby raven." Draco smiled as well. "Want to watch?"

"Oh yes!" yelled Jana and the three other little Hufflepuffs behind her.

"Is it a girl raven or a boy raven?" Jana wanted to know a moment later after Hugin had swallowed the least disgusting treat Draco had found in his jar. After all his audience were eleven year old
Hufflepuff girls. He didn't want them to see anything too gross.

"Boy." Draco answered still smiling. What was it about little children that made him like them so much?

"What's his name?" Jana wanted to know next.

"Hugin."

"That's pretty." she decided. "Hi, Hugin."

Hugin however wasn't interested in the girl. Once he'd eaten his fill he went right back to sleep.

"He's only just hatched today." Draco explained. "I think he won't do much besides eating and sleeping until he starts to fly."

"I still like him." Jana whispered, probably afraid she'd wake him if she talked any louder. "He's cute."

"So, how do you like Hogwarts so far?" Draco asked his young friend. "I see you already made some friends."

"Oh yes, I love it in Hufflepuff. Everybody's so nice." Jana beamed. "I'd have liked to be in Slytherin with you too, though. Or maybe in Ravenclaw with Minty."

"I don't know, Jana. If the hat put you in Hufflepuff it must have thought that that's the right house for you and it usually knows best. If people being nice is the most important thing to you, Hufflepuff is definitely the right choice. Hufflepuffs are usually chosen for being nice." Draco smiled again. "Slytherins can get really mean and you'd probably hate it there."

"Mean? You're not mean at all." Jana insisted.

"You've never seen me around the Gryffindor idiots." Draco informed her calmly. "I'm only nice to my friends."

"So, am I your friend then?" Jana asked wide eyed.

"Well, I'm nice to you."

"You're great, Draco!" Jana exclaimed and hugged him tightly.

Draco was glad that neither Potter nor any of his Slytherin classmates were there to see him hug the little Hufflepuff back. The startled looks of everybody present were more than enough discomfort. Just to prove that he still was the same old mean Draco Malfoy he tripped a third year Gryffindor on his way out and asked his friend whether that mop on her head was really supposed to be hair.

The glares that followed him out of the great hall after that felt much more normal.

Blaise Zabini dressed up in full flying gear raced right over the moment Draco entered the common room. "Where the hell were you? We've got Quiddich practise in two minutes."

Ouch! Hadn't Uncle Severus told them yet?
"In the library, but I don't see what that's got to do with any of your business." Draco informed Blaise stepping around him. 'Just don't let him see it hurts.'

"If you're late for Quiddich practise it is my business." Blaise shouted after him. "I'm on the team too and I want us to win this year."

Draco stopped and turned around to face Blaise. Now if only he could make them believe that he didn't give a damn. "Well, that's nice to hear, but it's got nothing to do with me, Blaise. I'm no longer on that team."

"What! Why? You can't do that, Draco!" Millicent squealed from the corner table behind Blaise.

Where'd she come from all of a sudden? Oh right, she must have been there all he time doing homework or something. Since when did the girl care about the Quiddich team, though?

"Why not?" Draco asked her coldly.

"You're the seeker. How can they play without you?"

Okay, maybe Millicent was just a little naive about these things. As far as Draco knew her participation in the sport was limited to coming to all the games and staring longingly at the beaters. Yes, both of them. Maybe she was attracted to their clubs?

"By putting a new seeker on the team, of course." Draco shrugged. "There are some new players every year."

"But you can't just desert the team without a good reason!" Blaise yelled at him.

Oh, and not having a broom wasn't good enough? But he couldn't tell Blaise that. At least Uncle Severus had given him a plausible excuse.

"I've got a good reason, Blaise. So I guess I can." Draco smirked. If he kept thinking of it as a way to rile up Blaise, he might actually start enjoying having to leave the Quiddich team. At least he could pretend so.

"Oh, and what reason might that be?" Blaise asked as if he thought Draco had just made it up.

"Schoolwork, Blaise." Draco answered with exaggerated calm. "We've got OWLs this year and I've added a new subject, which means I'm terribly far behind. I just don't have time to train two hours a day."

"But doesn't Quiddich mean more to you than stupid school-work?" Millicent asked.

"Quiddich is fun and all, but my OWL results are important for my future. Quiddich has made some people famous, yes, but never powerful." Draco smiled at them. "Maybe I'll play again next year. Oh, and Blaise."

"What?" growled Blaise.

"Aren't you late for practise?" Draco asked sweetly. "I thought you wanted to win this year."

Blaise cursed and dashed off leaving Draco free to calmly walk up the stairs and into his dorm. Or so Draco thought.

"Why did you call Snape Uncle Severus, Draco?" Millicent asked the moment Blaise was gone.
"Because that's what I call him." Draco hissed. Why couldn't she just leave him alone. He wished there were some place to hide from everybody. Preferably one where he never had to come out.

"But why do you call him that?" Millicent repeated annoyingly stubborn.

"None of your business. Just do your homework and let me feed my raven, okay?" There he'd finally found a good excuse to get away.

"He's hatched?" Millicent squealed.

"Yes, he's hatched and now he's hungry. So I'm going upstairs to feed him." Draco hissed at her and walked to his dorm as quickly as he could without looking undignified. He couldn't let anyone think he was fleeing from Millicent after all.

The room was empty. Blaise would be busy explaining his tardiness to the captain and then training for a while, but Draco had no idea where the rest of his dormmates were. What kind of activities did Gregory and Vincent get up to when he wasn't around? And more importantly, how long would those keep them away?

Well, he'd definitely hear them when they came back. Draco let himself drop onto his bed as soon as he'd set down Hugin's nest. He pulled Cuddly tightly against his chest, kicked off his shoes and drew the curtains closed then rolled up into a small tight ball.

There, he'd done it. He'd quit Quiddich. It was over and done.

He sniffled a little.

Nothing to it. Hadn't been hard at all.

No, he was not going to cry.

A single tear ran down his cheek and, since he didn't want to let go of Cuddly long enough to brush it away, on down his neck until it ended up soaked up by his robes.

There was no reason to cry. He had a brand new little raven after all. Wasn't that wonderful?

Another tear followed the first, this time ending up in his mouth. Somehow nice, that salty taste.

He should get changed if he intended to stay in bed already. His school robe was going to get all wrinkled up, if he stayed like this.

Another tear, this time from the other eye, fell straight onto his blanket and left a tiny wet spot that he could feel if he moved his cheek.

He ought to use the time to do some Math exercises. Once the school year got into full swing there wouldn't be much time left for it.

Would he ever get to fly again?

A/N: Will Draco ever get a chance to fly again? Where did Gregory and Vincent go to? And will David manage to avoid further detentions?
In the next chapter: Estella's still on the case of the mysterious Pettigrew, Draco has a run in with Ron and Harry has detention with Professor Snape.
Looking back on the aftermath of his little encounter with Blaise later Draco felt rather stupid. What was the big thing about telling Blaise that he wasn't going to play Quiddich anymore? It certainly didn't warrant losing valuable time he could have used to study Math or read up on Hugin.

He was just glad that nobody had been in the dorm to see him. Gregory and Vincent hadn't returned until well after curfew that day, but Draco supposed that they’d been down in the common room most of the time they'd been gone. Blaise had come in before then to change out of his Quiddich equipment, but Draco had been ready for him by then.

Well, actually that had been thanks to Hugin, who'd woken up again just in time and demanded to be fed. Thus Blaise had found Draco feeding his raven instead of curled up in bed.

All in all the new school year wasn't going too badly.

Estella sidled up to Draco at breakfast the morning of the second day. "There's no Pettigrew in the second or third year." she reported. "I almost asked the first years as well, but a first year couldn't be in that book yet unless you got it from a time traveller."

"You're too curious for your own good." was Draco's only answer to that information.

"Oh, come on. I bet you want to know who he is just as much as I do." Estella told him with conviction.

"If I were that curious about him, I'd know whom to ask." Draco reminded her calmly.

"So, did you?" Estella asked eagerly.

"No." Draco smirked at her. "And I wouldn't tell you if I had."

"Oh, you're cruel, Draco." Estella complained. "But I'll find out anyway. And I haven't had a chance to ask the fourth years yet. I bet you two galleons that he's a fourth year."

Two galleons? Now, if she really meant that, that might finance his first Hogsmeade weekend. He could actually buy some sweets at the sweets shop near the West Hogsmeade market with two galleons. And it was a safe bet to boot. Pettigrew, whoever he was had to be out of school for about twenty years and it was very unlikely that he happened to have a fourteen year old son.

"You're on." Draco declared to Estella's surprise. "I bet that he isn't a fourth year."

"Two galleons?" Estella asked just to be sure. That was a very low bet for Draco Malfoy, but then again she'd never heard of him making this kind of bet before.

"Two galleons." Draco confirmed with his customary smirk making her wonder, if he'd already asked the fourth years himself.

Then again, judging from the drawing, Pettigrew had to be younger than Potter and she'd already established that he wasn't a third year or below. She'd know him if he were a fifth year and no sixth
year could possibly be smaller than Potter. The only weak spot in her reasoning was the drawing in
Draco's book itself. What if the unknown artist hadn't paid attention to such details as the size
relation between his stick figures or if he'd intentionally drawn Pettigrew smaller than he actually
was as an insult? The drawing was a caricature after all.

Still she shook hands with Draco to confirm their bet. She was risking most of her Hogsmeade
budget for this, but she could always write home for more money, claiming that some expensive
potions ingredient had run out or she'd accidentally ruined one of her school robes. Maybe she
could even claim that her Potions partner had blown up her cauldron.

She gave Draco one last mischievous smile and slipped away to find a fourth year.

"What was that all about?" Vincent asked Draco around a mouthful of porridge.

"Oh, nothing really." Draco shrugged at him. "Estella's just got it into her head to find out who that
Pettigrew guy is."

"Mmmm ... Who's Pettigrew?" Gregory asked with his mouth full of toast.

"Gregory, how often do I have to remind you not to talk with your mouth full?" Draco asked with a
sigh.

"Mmmmph?"

"Just chew and swallow and then talk." Draco advised his friend.

Gregory chewed and swallowed. Then opened his mouth, hesitated with his eyes on the toast in his
hand and finally stuffed another huge bite into his mouth.

"Weren't you going to say something, Greg?" Vincent asked his friend.

Gregory shook his head.

"I guess his breakfast is more interesting than my little bet with Estella, isn't it Gregory?" Draco
smirked.

Gregory nodded eagerly while grabbing for the marmalade jar.

"Well, Gregory might be too hungry to care at the moment, but I'd like to know why you called
Professor Snape Uncle Severus yesterday." Vincent demanded.

"Slip of the tongue." Draco shrugged. "I already told you I stayed with him during the summer and
I couldn't well call him Professor all that time. It's just a stupid habit really."

"So where are you living now?" Vincent asked.

left Hugin's food in the common room and he's getting hungry."

"Hugin?" Gregory repeated for once not talking with his mouth full since he'd just been busy
gulping down a glass of orange juice. "Who's Hugin?"

"My raven." Draco declared proudly lifting the small piece of cloth that covered the tiny pink baby
bird.

"Doesn't look like much." Gregory commented. "I thought ravens were supposed to be black."
"He will be once he grows feathers." Draco glared at Gregory accusingly. "He's only just hatched. Bet you didn't look much better as a newborn."

Gregory frowned. "I must have looked better than that."

"Can you remember what you looked like back then?" Draco hissed.

Gregory thought hard for a moment. "No," he finally admitted.

"Then you'd better not make assumptions like that." shot Draco, grabbed Hugin's nest and marched off.

Estella paid him that evening and Draco almost suggested another bet saying that Pettigrew wasn't a sixth or seventh year either, but thought better of it. Right now Estella thought he'd made a lucky guess. If he kept it up she might start to suspect that he knew something.

Instead he just packed his Hogsmeade money away safely and went off to find Uncle Severus. At this time of the day it was usually a safe bet that he'd find him in his classroom or office and Draco felt like having company. If Uncle Severus was grading homework, he might let him do some Math as long as he was quiet enough not to disturb him.

A slight smile on his face Draco stepped out of the secret entrance to the common room and was about to turn towards the Potions classroom when he heard voices behind him.

"So what did you do this time, brat?" said the unmistakable voice of Argus Filch.

"I'm not entirely sure, Sir." answered a small childish voice. Was that David Smith again? "I think it was the way I ate my soup at dinner. At least that was what I was doing when Professor Snape told me to see you for detention."

Yes, that was David Smith. Draco fell back into his customary smirk trying not to laugh right out.

"You can start right over there." Filch ordered gruffly. "The third year Gryffindors had Potions right after Herbology today and of course not a single one of them remembered to clean their boots before entering the castle. No, don't use that! Can't you see that the water's all filthy? You'll only drag the dirt around like that."

"I'm sorry, Sir. Do I use your bucket then?" David asked timidly.

"Just a moment. I still need to put in the cleaning solution." Draco heard Filch mutter. "There, now you can use it. Remember how I showed you, yesterday?"

"Yes, Sir. Dip it in, draw it out straight and press it against the side of the bucket to squeeze the excess water out." David reported dutifully. "Right, Sir?"

"Good, now remember to wash it out regularly, brat." Filch growled almost affectionately.

Draco couldn't believe it. Did Filch actually like David Smith? Was it even possible that Filch liked anyone other than his cat?

"Mr. Filch, Sir?"

"What is it, brat?"

"How much of the cleaning potion do you put into one bucket of water?" David asked sounding actually interested.
"Half a cap full." Filch answered. "Take any less and it won't clean properly, and any more will make the floor slippery and then Madam Pomfrey will have you by your ears for endangering the students."

"Oh, is she very bad, Sir?" David asked sounding a little intimidated.

"Well, as far as I know even the headmaster's a little afraid to visit her and he did defeat Grindelwald." Filch told him.

"Oh, I do hope I never meet her then." decided David.

"Then you'd better be a good little boy and use your cleaning solution wisely." Filch threatened as he picked up the second bucket to clean it out and get fresh water.

Draco had to fight down some more laughter as he walked on. The Potions classroom proved to be empty, but the door to the lab was open. The lab was used only by Severus himself and occasionally older students working on special potions projects. Draco had never been inside, but decided that, if he didn't touch anything, there wasn't any danger and since it was occasionally used by students the lab couldn't be any more dangerous than Severus' lab at home, which he had let him sleep in after all.

"Draco!" Munin's voice announced him the moment he entered the room.

"Hi, Munin. Uncle Severus?"

"Ah, Draco." Severus appeared from under the huge worktable in the centre of the lab a small jar in his hand. "Something wrong?"

"Oh no, I'm perfectly fine. I just thought I'd visit you, if I may." Draco smiled. "What were you doing under the table?"

"Just looking for the dragon hairs. I put the box with the rare or dangerous ingredients under the table, so any student that might wander in here when I'm not around won't see them." Severus answered.

"But I thought the dangerous ingredients are all locked in the storeroom?"

"Not if I'm working with them. I put them back overnight, but sometimes leave them out, if I'm going to need them again the same day." Severus explained. "The lab is actually quite safe as most students that are allowed in here know better than to touch anything they don't know, but there's always the danger of some Gryffindor idiot sneaking in looking for explosives for a prank. You never know what those might take."

Draco walked a little closer and cautiously peered into the cauldron. "Is that your wolves-bane experiment again?"

"Yes, I'm still working on the temperature control. It's much better, but still not perfect." Severus smiled. "Want to help me again?"

"I'd love to!"

"Then you can stir in the dragon hairs. You remember how to do that, right?"

"Of course." Draco grabbed the jar and a stirrer. The dragon hairs were tricky, because you had to be careful to add them in one at a time stirring three times clockwise and once counter clockwise
after each hair. It was a wonderful feeling to know that Uncle Severus trusted him with that.

They worked on the potion for a few minutes until they were interrupted by a timid knock on the door. "P..Professor Snape?"

"Stay right there, Longbottom!" Severus ordered and Neville froze in the door trembling all over.

Severus sighed. "I'm not going to bite your head off, Longbottom. I just meant not to come into the lab. It's only for advanced students. Fifth years aren't allowed in. I'll be out in a moment."

Neville nodded slightly still trembling and eyes fixed on Draco. He didn't dare ask what he was doing in there, though.

"Okay, don't add the lion claws without me, Draco. I'm not sure how they'll react with the new combination." Severus said before he walked out to talk to Neville.

Draco kept stirring, but at the same time strained his ears to hear what was going on outside the lab. What did Neville Longbottom want here on a day he didn't even have Potions? Shouldn't he be overjoyed not to have to see his most hated teacher?

"I...I...I..." Neville stuttered outside, but didn't manage to get out an actual sentence.

Severus took a deep breath to calm himself. "All right Longbottom, do you remember what you came down here for?"

Neville nodded and tried again: "T...t...to..."

"Maybe to get something you forgot yesterday? A quill or book?"

Neville shook his head. "No, no, I...I...I..."

"Then is it about your homework?"

Neville nodded looking slightly relieved.

"Do you need help? An explanation? Something you don't understand?"

Neville shook his head once again. "No I...I'm done." he finally managed to say. Timidly he held out a roll of parchment to Snape.

Snape took it and unrolled it slowly. "Done? You mean you want to hand it in early?"

Neville nodded eagerly.

"This is quite long, Longbottom. You must have worked all day to have written this much."

"Gran would be so proud, if I could tell her I got a 2 on a potion."

"It is a very difficult potion.″ Severus conceded. "Two Hufflepuffs and Mr. Weasley already failed it this year and several others didn't finish it in time.″ He thought for a moment. "If there aren't any blatant mistakes in this essay, I might be able to make it a 2 considering the special effort.″

Neville beamed.

"You are doing much better this year." Severus added remembering Minerva's advice. "I'll tell you your grade in your next potions lesson."
"Th ... thank you, Professor." Neville managed to stammer before he dashed out.

Severus almost smiled. At least the boy was still afraid of him.

"Why are you so nice to Longbottom all of a sudden?" Draco asked in an almost accusing tone.

"Sarah suggested that it might improve his performance in class." Severus explained. "And he did do well in his first lesson this year."

"Do well? He only just barely managed to finish the assignment and that only because you allowed him some extra time." Draco complained.

"Longbottom isn't Granger, Draco. For him it would have been an improvement if he'd only managed not to blow up his cauldron. I never expected him to actually manage to brew a passable potion." Severus smirked at Draco. "And giving him credit for his result will also give me a chance to rub Potter's nose in the fact that he did worse than Longbottom. I might even fail his essay and tell him to study Longbottom's to see how it's done."

Draco laughed. "Okay, that might be worth it." he agreed. "What about Weasley, though?"

"Weasley already failed the assignment and no essay can make up for that." Severus said looking strangely disappointed. "I meant what I said about his brothers, you know. Fred and George may be two of the worst Gryffindors I've ever seen, but they do take Potions seriously and are among the best students in their year. Their older brothers Bill and Percy were hard working students and young Ginny is doing her best even though she doesn't have the twins' talent for the subject. Ron is quite a disappointment to me."

"You almost sound like you like the Weasleys." Draco pointed out.

"Not really. They're too Gryffindor to actually like, but I do respect those that do well in my class and most of them do." Severus answered. "Not that I let them know of course. Ready for the lion claws?"

Draco nodded eagerly. Maybe this time they'd get it right.

But when Severus added the second lion claw the potion turned a dull dark green and the Potions Master shook his head sadly. "No, it's too cold again. We'll have to think of something else."

"Maybe if we added only one lion claw?" Draco suggested hopefully.

"That would most likely correct the temperature, but we'd lose the balance of the poisons again." Severus answered without looking up from his notes. "The dragon hair is too strong to use for such fine tuning and any additional ingredients will completely unbalance the whole. No, if we want a stable potion we'll need to correct the temperature long before we add the dragon hair."

Draco leaned onto the table to see the notes as well, but he still didn't understand the complex interactions of the various ingredients well enough to really help here. Severus' special wolfsbane potion had grown a lot more complex since the first time Draco had seen it back in Merlin Park.

They were still studying the parchment when there was another knock and Harry Potter walked into the lab uninvited.

"I'm here for my detention, Professor Snape." he announced sending a triumphant look at Draco.
He probably thought Draco had detention as well.

"Ah Potter, you're just in time to clean out this cauldron." Severus told him. "Then you can wash up this table and I'll tell you what your detention is once you're done."

"And don't forget to dry up properly afterwards." Draco smirked after him as Harry struggled to carry the huge cauldron to the sink without spilling any of the potion. He was quite aware that, if he did, Snape would make him clean the floor of the lab as well. Before getting him started on his actual detention, of course.

"What about you, Malfoy?" he growled. "Aren't you going to work?"

"No, I just came to watch you suffer. It's such excellent entertainment."

Harry grumbled something incomprehensible, but didn't dare challenge Draco any further with Snape around. Who knew maybe they were related after all.

Ironically it was their research into the Snape family tree, that had led to his serving detention with Snape right now. They'd finally found a book on the Snape family and over his excitement he'd completely forgotten that he had Quiddich practise that afternoon. By the time they'd determined that the book did not include an actual family tree he'd already been five minutes late for the practise.

He'd raced out of the library and down into the entrance hall determined to jump onto his broom just he way he was instead of losing even more time by going back to Gryffindor tower to change into his Quiddich gear. Unfortunately he'd knocked over a Slytherin second year in his mad dash down the stairs and Snape had chosen exactly that moment to enter the castle some freshly dried herbs from Professor Sprout's stores in his hands and a huge frown on his face.

Considering Snape's mood Harry had probably been lucky to get away with only five points deducted and a detention.

The encounter with Snape had also cost him more time than he'd probably needed if he'd returned to Gryffindor tower and changed however, and his only salvation when he finally reached the Quiddich pitch was that the new team captain was Fred Weasley, who couldn't have managed to keep a straight face while scolding somebody if he'd tried. As it was the Weasley twins had been laughing so hard at the way Harry had lunged for his broom the moment he'd arrived they'd just barely managed to ask him where he'd been.

Still, it didn't change the fact that he had to clean the whole potions classroom without magic after he'd cleaned the lab. To his surprise the floor and even some of the tables were caked with mud which had reacted badly with whatever potion had been spilled on the second table in the third row. The result didn't seem solvable in water at all and had to be scratched off. In the last row somebody must have dropped a jar of dead cockroaches without noticing, since the students must have walked around on them for quite a while to squash them this badly and smear them about halfway down the isle. In the first row somebody appeared to have stepped on a piece of red chalk, which looked rather terrible on the black floor. The hardest work of all however was the charred spot on the ceiling which required even more scratching and scrubbing while standing on a very wobbly ladder. If only Harry's arms hadn't ached that much already from scratching away the altered mud in the third row.

To top it all off Snape had left Draco behind to oversee Harry's work. At first Draco had at least been studying, but then he'd pushed his book away, leaned comfortably back in Snape's chair and was now watching Harry's desperate attempts to reach a particularly bad looking spot that appeared
to be just out of reach without falling off the ladder.

"Oh come on, Potter. I don't want to be here all day." he drawled taking another bite out off a very juicy looking apple Snape had thoughtfully provided.

Harry finally gave up and climbed down to move the ladder. "Really? I didn't think you had anywhere important to be, seeing as I heard that your girlfriend broke up with you and you can't afford to pay the idiots you call friends anymore."

"Oh jealous because at least I had a girlfriend to break up with, Potty?" Draco taunted. "Of course with a face like yours ..."

"At least I don't look like a ferret." Harry shot back. "Pansy only ever liked your money, just like those friends of yours."

"Actually, I'm the one who broke up with Pansy, because I found somebody prettier, but lets not bother with such technicalities. After all I don't want to ruin poor Pansy's chances to find somebody new with such nasty talk." Draco stretched comfortably and took another bite.

"Oh really? So where is your fabled new girlfriend?" Harry taunted sure that Draco had made her up on he spot.

"Probably sitting at home in her room doing her homework at the moment. Her mother didn't want her to go away to boarding school, I think. You missed a spot back there, by the way." Draco pointed.

Of course it was out of reach now that he'd moved the ladder.

"Thank you." Harry said sarcastically and climbed down to move the ladder back to it's original spot.

"Any time." smirked Draco. "So, how come you still don't have a girlfriend, Potty? If it isn't your face ..."

"Maybe I don't want one." Harry hissed through clenched teeth while scrubbing furiously with an already sore hand.

"Oh, now I see. It's because of Weasley, isn't it? Should have realised it before, the way you two always stick together." Draco drawled.


"Yep, that's definitely love. Just wait till I tell everybody that Potty's a girl." Draco teased. "Or is Weasley the girl?"

Harry was almost grateful when Snape arrived to tell him that he still wasn't satisfied with the look of the floor and that desk in the third row. At least now that he had Snape to talk to, Draco lost his interest in teasing Harry.

Despite Harry's as usual disappointing lack of reaction to his taunts Draco decided that it had been a great day. He could hardly believe that he'd been so upset about something as insignificant as Quiddich the day before. And things got even better the next morning after breakfast.
Harry was still sore from all his scrubbing the day before and the fact that double Potions would be their first class today did nothing to improve his mood as he trudged down to breakfast with his two best friends.

"And all we found was five generations of Snapes and before that nothing!" Ron attempted to vent his frustration about their still fruitless search for the relationship between Malfoy and Snape. Apparently he and Hermione had found the Snapes' family tree while he'd been serving his detention, but they'd still not discovered any links between the two families.

"Can you believe Hermione actually suggested we should give up our search?" Ron ranted on.

Hermione looked up from Harry's Potions essay which he'd quickly thrown together after he'd finally returned from his detention. "There is obviously no close relationship there, Ron. Harry was probably right with his theory, that Snape's just an old family friend Draco has known since early childhood. Researching any further now would be a waste of time that we should be using to study. We've got our OWLs at the end of this year."

"Hermione, the year's just beginning and I just know that there's something important to find in those family trees. The Snapes and Malfoys are connected. I just know it." Ron insisted, but Hermione had gone back to checking Harry's essay.

"Harry, that's just wrong," she scolded her friend. "Your work is almost as sloppy as your handwriting looks. Some of these sentences aren't even grammatically correct and I think the third paragraph is taken from a text about a completely different potion."

"Well, I was tired, Hermione." Harry defended himself. "And all I had to work with were the books I could borrow from our housemates. It was pure luck that Neville hadn't returned those two big potions books to the library already."

"If you'd written your essay sooner, you would have had ample time to research in the library." Hermione went on unimpressed. "But if you're going to wait for the very last minute, of course, then something like a detention might come up and the library will be closed by the time you get back. You could have had that essay done before you even started your detention, if even Neville had. I bet it would have been a good move to arrive for your detention with your finished essay in hand."

"Snape wouldn't have cared about that." Ron defended his best friend.

"You can't know that for sure." Hermione argued. "But what we do know for sure is that Snape disapproves of sloppy handwriting and incorrect grammar. Even if the essay's contents were absolutely perfect, this would make Snape mad, Harry. You can't possibly hand it in like this."

"I have to." Harry said miserably. "There isn't enough time to write a new one and he'll never give me an extension. He never gives extensions, not even to the Slytherins. You know that, Hermione."

"Well, you could at least try to copy it down more nicely and correct the grammar mistakes." Hermione suggested.

"Not enough time." moaned Harry.

After that none of the three had much of an appetite. Potions in the morning did that sort of thing to you.

They left breakfast early, Hermione to try to get some book she wanted from the library and Harry...
and Ron just to go back to Gryffindor tower to get their and Hermione's bookbags and meet their friend in the dungeons.

The two boys didn't get very far, though. On their way out of the great hall they almost collided with Draco Malfoy whose grey eyes took on an evil gleam as he saw the two Gryffindors.

"Why, if it isn't Potty and his little Weasel girl." Draco drawled in greeting. "Leaving breakfast so soon?"

"Oh, shut up, Malfoy." hissed Harry who really wasn't in the mood for Draco's little games.

"Ah, off to find an abandoned classroom to have a little romp before class?" Draco asked pleasantly.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Ron who hadn't heard Draco's newest jibe yet growled in confusion.

"Personally, I'd choose a girlfriend who's a little better looking or at least intelligent, though, Potter." Draco continued unperturbed. "What will you two do, if she fails Potions and has to quit Hogwarts? Will you follow her in blind love and live as a muggle?"

"I'm not failing Potions!" Ron roared amidst the snickers of the Slytherins nearby.

It took him a second to realise why a group of Ravenclaws that had been watching the encounter burst into laughter as well and why the Slytherins and Draco looked so triumphant.

"There, you finally admit you're Potter's girl." Draco smirked. "I knew it."

That was too much for Ron. Before Harry could grab his robes to pull him back he threw himself straight at Draco actually managing to knock him down.

Luckily Crabbe and Goyle weren't with Draco at the moment. Harry had seen them sitting at the Slytherin table earlier and he knew from experience that they always found it hard to tear themselves away from food. With a little luck Ron would finish off Draco before they could get involved.

That was how far Harry's thoughts had gotten when Draco rammed his knee into Ron's midsection. Ron yelled in pain and pulled back far enough to give Draco room to swing a fist into his face.

Ron was so surprised that he hesitated just long enough for Draco to push him over and kneel on top of him. Ron struggled hard to try and buck him off, but Draco hardly seemed to notice it any more than the split lip he'd suffered in Ron's initial attack.

Ron kicked out futilely, but soon realised that the only way he could reach Draco where he was sitting was with his left arm as his right one was pinned underneath him and all attempts to shift his position remained futile.

He did manage, to tear his hand out of Draco's grip a few times, but Draco used only his right hand to fend the attacks off, while he kept punching Ron with his left.

The fight didn't last very long, though. It had attracted a crowd of spectators, which in turn attracted the interest of the teachers. Snape and Dumbledore hadn't come to breakfast that day so it was McGonagall and Filch who turned up to break up the fight.

McGonagall immediately grabbed Draco and pulled him off Ron. "Mr. Malfoy!"
"He attacked me first, Professor." Draco declared immediately. "I was only defending myself." He looked around on the floor worriedly. "Hugin?"

Estella, who happened to be in the crowd of spectators, picked up the little nest box that Draco had dropped when Ron had jumped him and peered inside. An angry-baby-bird protest answered her.

"He looks okay." she told Draco as she handed over the box. "With all the soft fabric in there he probably hardly felt the impact. He's lucky he didn't fall out, though."

Draco quickly checked the little raven for himself and found that he did indeed seem unharmed. He absently nodded his thanks to Estella while he calmed Hugin by rubbing a finger over his back.

"Well, bird or no bird." Minerva decided. "I've had enough of you two constantly getting into fights. I'm taking you to see the headmaster."

She grabbed Ron and Draco each by an arm and pulled them out the door and up the stairs.

"It's our first fight this year." Draco pointed out to McGonagall, but she didn't seem to be interested in such technicalities.

"Can't I go to the hospital wing first?" Ron begged. "My leg's hurt."

He was indeed limping badly, but Minerva decided to ignore both boys' injuries right now. They couldn't be life-threatening and were their own fault for getting into a fight after all.

"Chocolate Frog." she told the gargoyle once they reached it and pushed the boys onto the stairs before her.

They reached the top much too soon for Draco's taste, but at least Hugin had calmed down by now and gone back to sleep. He really hoped the little bird hadn't suffered any serious harm in his fall.

'I guess I probably shouldn't taunt the Gryffindors when I'm carrying him.' he thought as he pulled the cloth back over Hugin to keep him warm again.

McGonagall opened the door to the headmaster's office to find him drinking tea and eating cake with Professor Snape. Draco smiled in relief when he saw his head of house.

Dumbledore might not believe a Slytherin when he said that a Gryffindor attacked him first, but Uncle Severus definitely would. And he would also know if Hugin was okay.

"I don't believe it." McGonagall groaned. "You two are skipping breakfast while the students are killing each other in the great hall."

Dumbledore twinkled a little at the news. "Aren't you exaggerating a little, Minerva? Piece of cake?"

"No, thank you Albus." McGonagall declined glaring a little as she heard the boys' suppressed laughter at the scene. "I might be exaggerating about the students killing each other, but these two were fighting in the great hall. Your Mr. Malfoy attacked one of my students again, Severus."

"That's a lie." Draco stated loud and clearly.

"Why you little ..." McGonagall started, but Severus silenced her with a glare.

"Just a moment, Minerva." he interrupted her calmly. "Did you see Draco attack Mr. Weasley?"
"I saw him kneeling on top of him and punching him in the face." McGonagall declared. "If that isn't proof enough."

"Just because Draco had the upper hand when you caught them, doesn't mean that he started the fight." Snape informed her glaring at Ron.

"He attacked me first." Draco repeated his earlier statement. "And I protest the again as well. That's the first time I've gotten into a fight this year." A quick look at Dumbledore revealed that the injured pride act hadn't convinced him entirely. Well, he could still try for pity. "I'd never start a fight while carrying Hugin. Weasley's attack caused me to drop him. Do you think he's okay?" he asked Snape holding the box out to him.

Severus gently took the box and dug out the little raven. Hugin complained loudly about being woken up once again, but calmed down when Snape rubbed him gently and snuggled down into his warm palm. "He seems just fine to me, but you might want to ask Madame Pomfrey to check him for any internal injuries, just to be safe."

"Did you attack Mr. Malfoy first, Mr. Weasley?" Dumbledore turned to Ron once he saw that Severus had the raven situation under control.

Ron nodded slightly embarrassed. "He called me a girl, Sir."

"No," smirked Draco. "You called yourself a girl. I just confirmed your own words for you."

"Why you!" Ron lounged at Draco again and Minerva had to hold him back by force.

"Mr. Weasley!" she yelled at him. "Please calm down."

"See." said Draco calmly. "He's dangerous. Can't control his primitive aggressive instincts."

Ron, who had almost calmed down jumped forward again at that and once again had to be restrained by McGonagall.

"Draco." Severus said gently. "That's enough."

Draco nodded and leaned against the comfortable armchair Severus was sitting in.

Dumbledore's eyes wandered thoughtfully from the two smug Slytherins to the struggling Gryffindors and back. Yes, Severus was close with his Slytherins, maybe even closer than Sprout was with the Hufflepuffs, but he'd never before seen one lean towards him like this. He had to ask Severus about that sometime.

"Very well, I believe five points off each of you two will be sufficient punishment." He announced finally. "Minerva, please take Mr. Weasley to see Poppy. He appears to be limping a little, which can't be comfortable. Severus, if you could please take Mr. Malfoy somewhere else for the moment. I don't think it'd be a good idea for them to be in the same room together at the moment. What are your first classes today, boys?"

"Potions." Draco, Ron and Severus answered at once.

"Oh." was all Dumbledore could think of to say to that.

He looked to Severus who looked back at him calm as ever.

"Double Potions." the Potions Master elaborated. "All morning."
For a moment headmaster and Potions teacher just looked at each other and Draco wondered whether they were having some sort of telepathic conversation.

"Well, thank you for breakfast Albus." Severus finally broke the silence. "But I think under the circumstances we'd better finish our conversation some other time. Come on, Draco, I think, I've got just the potion to heal your lip, and we'd better feed Hugin as well."

Once they were all gone Albus leaned back into his chair and sighed. Now he had to find some way to catch Severus alone again sometime before he left to meet with his spies today and he wasn't even sure, if Snape was going to stay around for lunch.

He'd deliberately arranged Severus' schedule so he'd have all of Wednesday afternoon free for his spy work, but that meant that he had to inform him of any messages he wanted him to take back to the spies before his first class on Wednesday morning. He couldn't possibly risk owling him that information. He didn't even like the idea of writing it down, but it looked like that was the only solution now.

Why hadn't he thought to tell Minerva not to call on him on Wednesday mornings? And why hadn't he thought to give Severus a less volatile class to teach before he had to head off and risk his life? Severus' tension before his mission would make this a particularly hard lesson for the fifth year Gryffindors and the tensions between the Gryffindors and Slytherins would make it hard for Severus to keep control of the class, which meant that he'd be quite exhausted before he even left the castle.

'I should have given him the Ravenclaw/Hufflepuff second years. Those are completely docile and he can teach second year Potions in his sleep.'

It was too late for that now, though.

Indeed it turned out to be a very bad morning for most of the Gryffindors.

Harry Potter dragged his two best friends' book bags down into the dungeons along with his own and found Hermione already in the class when he arrived, but no trace of Ron. That was particularly worrying as he had as usual been just barely in time before the start of the lesson and Draco Malfoy was there with no trace left of his split lip.

He managed to exchange a few worried looks with Hermione, but there was no time to explain what had happened to Ron. He considered whispering the story to her once they started their practical work, but Snape began the lesson by taking twenty points each off Lavender and Parvati for talking in class.

No, better not risk it today.

When Harry handed in his essay, Snape opened it right away.

"This looks even worse than the one you wrote on muggle paper, Potter." Snape informed him to the amusement of the Slytherins.

A little later once they'd started brewing their new assignment, Snape took out the essays again.

"It might interest you, Potter, that your essay isn't even remotely correct. Please remind me, which potion exactly is this about?"
"The antidote potion." Harry said hastily. What had it been called again? He just couldn't remember.

"Which antidote potion exactly?" Snape glared.

"Er... The one you taught us about on Monday."

Snape kept glaring.

"I'm not sure which one it was. I... er... I mean..."

"So, you are not sure." Snape almost purred, "I guess that must be the truth since your essay isn't sure which potion it is about either."

Harry winced. "I did my best, Sir."

"Ah, do you think you are any less talented at Potions than Mr. Longbottom here is?" Snape asked silkily just as Ron finally entered.

Harry sagged back into his chair in relief. Now Snape would be busy taking points off his best friend and forget about torturing him.

"Ah, Mr. Weasley." Snape indeed turned his attention towards Ron. "How long does it take to cure a minor bruise to your leg?"

"Madame Pomfrey was busy with a first year who'd sprained her wrist and wouldn't stop crying." Ron explained. "She told me I could wait that long."

"Oh, so you thought you could afford to miss that much of my class?" Snape continued mercilessly. "A class you happen to currently be the bottom student in. Well, your assignment is on the blackboard. You will have to try to finish it before the end of this class or get another failing mark."

Ron blushed deeply, but didn't argue. Instead he just grabbed his cauldron and set to work.

"Well, Mr. Potter?" Snape asked unexpectedly.

"Sir?" Harry looked up nervously. What did Snape want now?

"Before Mr. Weasley interrupted us, I asked you a question, Potter." Snape prodded. "A question which you still haven't answered. Do you think that you're any less talented than Mr. Longbottom, Potter?"

"No, Sir. I mean, not to insult Neville or anything, but I'm better in Potions than he is."

"Ah, so you think that you're better at Potions than Mr. Longbottom." Snape repeated. "Lets see then. You did not manage to complete your assignment on Monday, while Mr. Longbottom did, just barely, but he did while you were nowhere close. I assigned both of you the same essay to improve your grade on that potion. Mr. Longbottom handed his in early. It was detailed and correct, if inexact about some details. Still, it was well written and showed clearly that Mr. Longbottom had made an effort to do well. Adding that to the fact that his potion was almost completely correct as well I have graded his first assignment this year a 2."

A little squeal of joy from Neville caused another outbreak of laughter from the Slytherins and a whispered "Congratulations, Neville." from Seamus Finnigan, which Snape uncharacteristically let slide with only a mild glare at Seamus.
"Famous Harry Potter, however, who unlike Mr. Longbottom had a failing grade to start with hands in a short, scrawled ... well parchment, that he calls an essay. It looks more like research notes to me. The first part appears to be a general treatise on the brewing of antidotes, then he skims the topic of sleeping potions and the end might be about antidotes again, but it is vague enough that it might also be about hair growth potions or maybe insect repellent potions." Snape continued mercilessly. "I'm afraid I will have to award this 'essay' a failing mark and adding a failing mark to a failing mark, I'm afraid it appears you have failed the assignment that Mr. Longbottom got a 2 on, Potter. So which one of you, I wonder, is better at Potions?"

Harry slunk as far down as he could and tried to ignore Snape. He had to stop sometime. Right?

A knock on the door saved him again and this time Dumbledore walked in with what looked suspiciously like a muggle paperback book in his hand. A small piece of parchment served as a bookmark and proof that the headmaster or at least somebody was actually reading it.

"Ah Severus, I just came to check if there were any further problems with Mr. Malfoy and Mr. Weasley." Dumbledore said walking over to Snape's desk and playing absent-mindedly with the pages of the book. "Oh, is that ground unicorn horn?" he bent over the desk to pick up one of the jars on it. "I had no idea that you already use it in fifth year."

"I believe I told you that there are several first year potions that require it." Snape stated calmly.

"Ah well, can't blame an old man like me for being forgetful." Dumbledore set the jar back down and picked up his book again. "Well, have a nice day, Severus."

Nobody noticed that the little bookmark was gone.

Severus glared at Harry once more than sat down to take a look at the other essays. He quickly set the jar of ground unicorn horn right, then picked up Lavender Brown's essay.

"Well, you have half an hour left to finish your potions." he reminded his students.

Nobody saw him pick up and pocket a small piece of folded up parchment that lay on top of Lavender's essay.

A/N: What's going on between David and Filch? Will the trio give up their search? And will Estella ever find out who the mysterious Pettigrew is?

In the next chapter: Draco gets an invitation, the first Hogsmeade weekend of the year and an unexpected visitor in the great hall.
Chapter Summary

Oh well, I didn't manage to put everything I wanted to into this chapter, but we're still nearing the end of the second part of the fic.

Chapter 40: Hogsmeade

The first Hogsmeade weekend was in early October. By then Hugin had grown some feathers, though he still looked rather odd with some naked parts and lots of little white spikes sticking out of his skin. The first of those had worried Draco, but he'd soon learned that they were actually just feathers surrounded by a protective covering that fell off as the feather developed.

The little raven was also much bigger and more active and Professor McGonagall wasn't the only teacher who glared at him from time to time. Potions and Herbology were the only subjects where Hugin was welcome. Severus had no problem keeping his students under control while Draco fed the bird and Professor Sprout openly approved of Draco hand raising his pet.

"It will teach him patience and responsibility, Minerva." she tried to explain to her less enthusiastic friend. "Have't you noticed how much the boy has matured this year? It is much the same as caring for plants. You have to devote a lot of time and love to it and that's something many students have a hard time trying to understand. Especially the Slytherins often seem completely unable to understand love, though the Gryffindors aren't much better. They're impatient and rough with my poor plants. It's hard for them to see that they're hurting them, though, because very few plants have the ability to express their pain. It's much easier to learn these things from an animal."

"That's why we're offering Care for Magical Creatures, though, isn't it?" Minerva reminded her.

"But that's an elective. Not every child takes it and the animals Hagrid prefers to show the children in class are hardly the delicate type." Sprout told her.

"So you think every student should be given their own raven?" McGonagall asked incredulously.

"Ah yes, wouldn't that be nice?" the headmaster remarked dreamily.

"Albus, raising a raven isn't easy." Severus reminded him at once. "I doubt most students would be up to it. Draco really wanted that raven and I'm giving him as much assistance as I can. I can't possibly do that for every student and most of them don't even care properly for the pets they have."

"He's right Albus." Madame Pomfrey confirmed. "You wouldn't believe how often I have to take in neglected and abused cats. The owls are better off, because they're cared for by the house elves in the owlery and toads don't require much care besides feeding, and they don't even eat much. The poor cats however ..."

"And a raven isn't a proper familiar anyway." Minerva claimed.

Severus glared at her. "Not a proper familiar?" he repeated.
"An owl can carry a letter just as well." Minerva challenged.

"But can that owl deliver it without being seen? Can she bring you a specific object you ask for? Recite potions recipes?" Snape hissed.

"Recite potions recipes, Severus?" Minerva repeated. "Now you're exaggerating."

"I assure you that Munin can give you the correct answer to every question on the quiz I gave the third years last week." Severus told her calmly.

"He can't possibly know what words he repeats." Minerva insisted.

"I actually have more intelligent conversations with my raven than with some of my colleagues." Snape informed her.

At this point Dumbledore decided to intervene to avoid bloodshed right in front of the students. "So how are the Quidditch teams doing?" he asked brightly. "Can we expect a good season?"

Draco meanwhile was planning his visit to Hogsmeade. He had to find a way to disappear unnoticed and stop his classmates from asking questions that Professor Snape wouldn't want him to answer. After all Billy's safety depended on secrecy.

Unfortunately, even though they were beginning to show more signs of independence Gregory and Vincent seemed to believe that Draco needed them to stay close during the trip and keep him company. They kept suggesting places the three of them could go and asking Draco what he wanted to do.

"Look guys," Draco finally decided to tell them frankly. "I've already got plans for the weekend."

"Okay, we'll come with you." Vincent announced at once.

"Sorry, but you can't." Draco tried.

"Why not?" whined Gregory. "I thought we're your friends."

"You are, Gregory," Draco assured him. "But I've got a date. I just can't show up with the two of you in tow."

"A date?" Vincent asked. "With who? Pansy?" He sounded doubtful and Draco couldn't blame him. Pansy was still demonstratively cold towards him. Not that it mattered.

"No, not Pansy." he told his friends. "We're over. Don't know why I ever dated her at all. Pansy's dead boring."

"But who then?" Vincent pushed.

Draco let himself drop back onto his bed and pulled his Rakers cap down to hide his eyes grinning mysteriously.

"Millicent?" Gregory asked with a slight sigh.

Draco's grin turned into a smirk. "What's that? Are you in love Gregory?"

"Well, she's very beautiful." Gregory said uncharacteristically softly.
"Millicent!" Vincent exclaimed incredulously. "Beautiful?"

"You do like her." Draco diagnosed while fishing around behind his head with one hand to locate Cuddly the teddy bear. "Our Gregory has a crush."

Gregory blushed. "Well, it's not like we're a couple or something." he tried to explain. "I just think she's attractive, that's all."

"Oh, you can have her." Draco had finally found his teddy and pulled him over. "I'm not interested. She'd suit you well, though."

"You really think so?" Gregory asked hopefully.

"Sure." said Draco. "Why don't you try and ask her out? Then you'll know if she likes you too."

"I don't think she's dating anyone at the moment." Vincent agreed. "You'd better make a move on her now, before somebody else takes advantage."

A smile spread slowly on Gregory's face. "Yes, I could invite her to go to the three broomsticks on the weekend."

"So both of you'll be out with your girlfriends." Vincent stated with a touch of sadness.

"You could ask someone out as well." Draco suggested, but Vincent shook his head.

"I don't like any of the girls." he shrugged. "Guess I haven't found the right one yet. Who're you dating, though, Draco? Estella maybe? She hangs around you a lot."

"Estella?" Draco sounded so surprised that Vincent gave up the idea immediately. Had he even noticed that Estella was a girl at all? "No, not Estella."

"Mandy Bocklehurst?" Vincent tried another girl, that he didn't know to have a boyfriend at the moment.

"No."

"Susan Bones?"

"The Hufflepuff? Never." Draco protested. Susan was okay looking, but even more dull than Millicent when you talked to her.

"You're not dating a Gryffindor, are you?" Vincent said alarmed.

Draco began to feel a little sorry for him so he relented. "Her name's Cathy."

"Cathy?" Vincent searched his memory and drew a blank. He knew a Catherine who'd graduated last year, had a distant cousin named Katharina who had a friend called Kathrin and went to Beauxbatons and then there were several Cassandras, but the only one currently at Hogwarts was a second year. There might have been another Catherine at the sorting this year, but first years were much too young for dating.

"Wasn't that a Gryffindor chaser?" Gregory interrupted to his friends' surprise. They'd thought he was still dreaming of his beloved Millicent and hadn't heard a thing.

"Well, what house is she in, then?" Vincent tried.

"None." Draco smirked at them.

"You've got an older girlfriend?" Gregory gaped.

"No, she's in our year." Draco watched their confused faces for a moment. "She goes to a public school. That's why you've never heard of her. I met her over the summer."

"So what's she like? Who are her family? Is she a rich heiress?" his friends kept pestering him with questions for the rest of the day, but Draco didn't say any more. They knew enough to have a good reason to leave him alone in Hogsmeade and that was all he'd wanted.

The trip into town was on a beautiful autumn day. The sun was shining even though the weather had gotten colder since the start of the term and Draco had decided to wear his jumper under his robes. He had a feeling that playing Soccer in robes wasn't all that comfortable and it was definitely too cold to play in a t-shirt.

McGonagall glared at him sharply as he arrived in the entrance hall. "Where is your hat, Mr. Malfoy?"

Draco smirked. He'd decided to wear his cap today. After all, he needed to demonstrate his allegiance when walking through West Hogsmeade. With a school hat on his head he would be a target for every crook in the park. With the cap, he was one of them and only a Shark might touch him.

"In the laundry." he told McGonagall even though he'd actually left it lying next to his bed. "Want me to go dig it out?"

"Why would you want to put your hat in the laundry?" McGonagall asked mystified.

"Because it needed cleaning. A Gryffindor touched it." Draco told her haughtily and slipped out the door while McGonagall was still gasping at the insult.

He walked down the path to Hogsmeade in the crowd of happily chatting students barely noticed by anybody. After all everybody was going to Hogsmeade today, so of course Draco Malfoy was expected to be there as well. A few Gryffindors decided to slow down or speed up their steps to get some distance from him, but the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs didn't spare him a second glance. He'd been less aggressive towards them this year and they hadn't had as much trouble with him as the Gryffindors even before then. To them Draco Malfoy was just another Slytherin. Unpleasant to talk to, but no problem if just passing by.

Draco stayed with the group until they had almost reached the main street, but then turned down a side street that would take him to the bridge into West Hogsmeade much faster.

"Hey, where's Malfoy going there?" Ron Weasley who'd been only a few metres behind him asked his two best friends.

"Who cares." Harry shrugged. "At least he won't spoil our day for us now."

"Won't spoil our day? What if he's just run off to set a trap for us?" Ron argued.

"How would he do that, if he doesn't even know where we're going?" Hermione asked him
reasonably. "Honest Ron, all you're talking about this year is Malfoy. You're obsessed. Try to forget him and study instead. You've already wasted a whole month and we've got OWLs this year."

"Well, if I'm obsessed with Malfoy, you're obsessed with those stupid OWLs." countered Ron. "And you'll regret it when Malfoy betrays us all to the dark lord."

Harry sighed. Here he'd hoped to have some fun today. Hermione was indeed spending almost all her time studying and after they had finally given up the search for a family connection between Malfoy and Snape Ron had practically taken up residence in the library as well continuing the hopeless search on his own. Between Quiddich and homework life was rather boring without his best friend to keep him company, though it had helped him a little that he spent more time on his homework now. He'd even managed to raise his Potions grade back to 4 while Ron was still failing despite all Hermione's efforts to tutor him.

Neville continued to surprise everybody this year. His current overall Potions grade was a good 3 and he very rarely needed Hermione's help anymore. Considering Ron's problems that was probably a very good thing since it gave her the time to keep an eye on his cauldron instead.

Wednesday was the worst day of the week this year. Not only did they have Snape all morning, he was also even nastier than normal and then the afternoon classes started with Divination. Harry was seriously beginning to wonder if Arithmancy would really have been such a bad choice. Then again it was said to be very hard work and he wouldn't have had Ron to keep him company in that class.

The Hogsmeade weekend had been supposed to give the three friends a chance to have some fun together once again, but it looked like Hermione and Ron were just going to argue all day. Would they notice if he sneaked off and tried to find Cho? Maybe she'd want to go for a butterbeer and talk a little.

Meanwhile Draco had reached the sweets shop near the market. He looked around for a bit wondering what to buy. He hadn't had any of his favourite sweets in a long time, but all the strange muggle candy was tempting as well. The lemon drop Mike had given him once on a market day had tasted great and the muggle stuff was cheaper than the magical sweets.

In the end Draco bought a variety of small amounts of muggle sweets to try and stuffed them into his robe pocket. The Rakers were his friends, yes, but after not getting any sweets for so long he wasn't going to share his treasures with anyone.

As soon as they were safely stored away Draco hurried on to Merlin Park. Would his friends even be there? What if they weren't? Should he go try to see if Mike was at home? What if he rang the doorbell of Mike's flat and nobody opened? Would Sarah be angry with him, if he went to see Billy instead? Professor Snape was probably using the Hogsmeade weekend to visit his family. Unless he'd had to stay behind to guard the first and second years. Draco hoped Dumbledore had kept McGonagall behind for that instead. McGonagall deserved to have to work today for the way she treated Draco and the other Slytherins and she didn't have a family either.

All his worries proved to be unfounded however when he reached the park and found the whole gang on the Soccer lawn. Susie the Dancemouse saw him first and came running at him with a happy squeal. The rest of the gang soon followed.

"Dragon!" Susie reached him first and threw her arms around him in a tight totally undignified hug.

"Hi Susie." was all he managed to answer before Sammie reached him and hugged him as well.
Luckily the others showed a little more restraint and didn't make any attempts to knock him over or squeeze him to death. A hug from Bloody Mary might be seriously dangerous, Draco thought, but luckily she reserved her hugs for Larry who seemed to be able to withstand them just fine.

"So, how's it going up at Hogwarts?" Mike asked once Draco had managed to peel off Susie and Sammie.

"Yes, how's your friend Gregory?" Larry added eagerly.

"Did you find anyone to play Soccer with, yet?" demanded Susie.

"Are your teachers very strict?" Sammie wanted to know.

"Did you bring your raven? How big is he now?" That was Beth's voice somewhere behind him. Draco made an attempt to turn and greet her, but the questions didn't stop.

"How're things going with Pansy?" Cathy asked.

"Do you have a new girlfriend or are you still with the old one?" Charlie added at once.

"How's your uncle?" Mary asked. "Does he have some time off sometime? I really need some Potions tutoring."

Draco sent a pleading look towards Jack who'd assumed his 'I've got nothing to do with them, I just happen to stand here' pose again and didn't seem inclined to stop the inquisition at all. All he got in response was a little smirk. It looked like Jack had been practising that.

"Hey," Draco finally shouted. "I wrote you at least once a week. You ought to know all that."

He did have to show them Hugin and repeatedly tell Cathy Cat that he had broken up with Pansy and didn't have another girlfriend, though. Finally satisfied with his answers Cathy slipped an arm around him and leaned against his side until Jack finally demanded they return to their game.

Draco slipped out of his robe and replaced Beth as the keeper of the second team. He was a little nervous about how he'd perform after not having played at all for a little over a month, but once the game started it all came back to him quite naturally and he felt right at home in his goal once again. It was as if he'd never left.

Suddenly the little wannabes appeared at the side of the field cheering him on. To Draco's surprise even Jack didn't seem to mind much. He only glared at them when Mely raced onto the field once after Draco had held a particularly well executed shot by Mike.

"Stay out!" he yelled at them the next time he ran past them. "You'll get in the way."

They did stay out from then on, but didn't stop cheering for Draco.

After the game they sat under their favourite tree, Cathy Cat once again cuddled up against Draco's side and talked. Draco put an arm around the girl and listened to all the news. Matt's annoying little sister was sick, but Aunt Sarah had brewed her a potion that seemed to be helping a lot. If it didn't cure her within a week, Matt's mother would have to take her to the hospital, though. Matt wasn't sure they had enough money.

Jack's Dad had a new girlfriend who'd moved into his flat with her two children. 'The idiotic blonde from London.' Jack called her. He'd been staying at his Mother's since.
Beth was unhappy in school, because she was the only Raker there and she didn't want to hang out with the wannabes anymore. Consequently she was lonely.

Sammie had found a stray cat and was hoping for permission to keep her. Larry and Mary were still together.

Well, that much had been obvious.

It seemed that Matt still hadn't told Charlie that he liked her, but at the moment that didn't matter much to Charlie. Her dance class was having a show in two weeks and she had one of the biggest parts.

"Please say you'll come and see me dance, Dragon." she begged. "I'd give you an invitation, if I'd known you'd come today, but since I didn't I've already given it to your Aunt. She promised she'd pass it on."

Draco sighed and snuggled a little closer to Cathy. "I don't know, if I can, Charlie. We're not allowed to leave the school grounds except on Hogsmeade weekends and there isn't one in two weeks. I'll have to ask permission from the headmaster and I've never heard of him granting anything like that before."

"Oh, but you have to come!" insisted Susie. "We're all going to see Charlie's big show."

"And I bet there'll be a lot of pretty girls there." added Sammie. "Since you don't have a girlfriend at the moment."

Draco felt Cathy stiffen. She glared at Sammie who gave her a confused look in return. "What?"

"You're an idiot, Sammie." Jack told him matter-of-factly.

Sammie looked even more confused after that. He glared at Jack for a moment, but didn't quite feel up to challenging the gang leader.

Draco considered visiting Sarah and Billy for a while, but when he mentioned the idea Mike told him that they weren't home anyway.

"They left a little before you arrived."

"Maybe they met Uncle Severus somewhere in town." Draco shrugged. Or maybe he'd missed them because of his detour to the sweets shop.

Even without the visit to Sarah and Billy it got much later than Draco had planned. Ups! If McGonagall was supervising the returns to the castle today he was in trouble.

Cathy offered to walk with him for a bit and Susie and Sammie immediately announced that they were coming along as well.

"No you're not." Jack ordered them back sharply. "You're staying right here or you'll be late for dinner."

Susie complied with a shrug and slight disappointment, but Sammie just stared at Jack for a moment before he remembered to sulk. Since when did Jack care about them being home for dinner? He usually didn't even care to tell his own parents where he would stay overnight, so why did he suddenly care about other peoples' parents?
Draco and Cathy walked slowly arm in arm and when they reached the bridge back into Hogsmeade itself Draco stopped and looked down at the river bank for a moment. "No dandelions left." he remarked.

"They'll be back next spring." Cathy didn't seem to mind at all. "Autumn leaves are pretty as well and once the snow starts to fall the flowers would just freeze to death anyway."

"Still, I'd hoped there'd be some left to pick for you."

"No need." Cathy smiled and kissed him gently on the cheek. "I'm not Pansy. I don't need any gifts to love you and you can always pick some in spring."

"I will." he promised softly.

"Now you'd better hurry or they mightn't let you come next time." Cathy told him. "Write soon!"

The rest of the way felt very lonely and Draco almost wished he could have stayed. Maybe if Aunt Sarah had been home she'd have let him spend the night in Merlin Park. He wondered how much Billy had grown in the time he'd been in school. He'd been gone over a month now and it'd be over a month until he'd get another chance to visit West Hogsmeade and maybe see Billy. Over two months. That was longer than he'd stayed with the Snapes. Would Billy still remember him after all that time? Probably not. Most likely he'd already forgotten him.

Luckily nobody caught him as he slipped back into the castle. Good, if McGonagall found him inside he could always claim he'd been back on time anyway and she'd just missed him. She couldn't have stood by the door all the time, so a student that arrived early could have slipped by unnoticed.

Of course there was still Uncle Severus to think of and he wasn't that easily deceived. But if he'd noticed that Draco wasn't back yet, he'd be standing right by the door or the stairway down to the dungeons and there was nobody there. The castle seemed completely empty. Shouldn't there at least be some students milling about?

A nervous glance at his watch explained everything however. Dinner had started over ten minutes ago. Damn, Uncle Severus must have noticed that he wasn't in the great hall by now. For a moment he considered continuing to the common room and eating his sweets for dinner. Then he could claim that he'd skipped the meal because he hadn't been hungry, but he knew that that wasn't a good excuse and if Vincent and Gregory got too worried they might go up to the head table and report that he was missing in front of Dumbledore. The last thing he wanted was to end up in the headmaster's office again. The best thing to say was probably, that he'd returned early and had been reading. He'd been so engrossed in his book that he hadn't noticed the time.

He quickly turned and hastened back towards the great hall. Professor McGonagall shot him an angry look as he burst in and he shrugged at her apologetically. Then his eyes fell on Severus Snape's empty chair. He blinked.

It wasn't unusual for one of the teachers to miss dinner and Severus often went home to visit his family when he didn't have 'dinner duty', but Draco hadn't expected him to be missing on a day that Sarah wasn't even home. Maybe they'd gone out after all?

Well, at least Severus couldn't have missed him, if he wasn't even here. No use going up to the head table to apologise now. It'd only make the other teachers suspicious. Slytherins didn't apologise for being late to anyone except their head of house unless they were asked to.
Instead Draco quietly slipped into his seat next to Crabbe and grabbed for the soup bowl.

"Where were you?" Vincent hissed at him at once.

"Taking a walk with my girlfriend." Draco hissed back as he filled his plate. Ups, no steam rising from the soup. That didn't look good. "You didn't report me missing, did you?"

"No, not yet." Vincent confirmed.

"Good, if anybody asks I was already back when you arrived and was still reading when you left for dinner." Draco instructed him.

"Then why didn't they remind you to come with them?" said a voice from across the table. "That's a rather weak excuse, you know."

"None of your business, Estella." Draco growled at her and she frowned and returned to her meal.

The soup was cold just like he'd expected and before he could get any of the main course Hugin woke up and demanded to be fed. By the time the raven was full the main course had turned cold as well and Draco decided to skip it and go right on to dessert so he'd at least get some of that before it vanished.

He hoped going to bed still hungry would be his only punishment for being late and indeed it seemed that McGonagall intended to let it slide. Maybe she feared another confrontation with Snape. Somebody else however didn't.

"So where did you slither off to today?" Ron Weasley demanded when they met on their way out of the hall.

"Why Weasel, you missed me? Did Potter break up with you? I'm afraid I already have a girlfriend." Draco smirked.

Harry managed to grab a hold of Ron and prevent him from launching himself at Draco. "We're not gay, Malfoy." he hissed. "And for your information, I'm dating Cho Chang."

"Well, that definitely clears up who the girl is." Draco grinned. "So poor Weasel girly lost her boyfriend to the Ravenclaw seeker. Too bad you're such a failure at Quidditch, Weasley."

Ron tried to punch Draco, but Harry was still holding on desperately and managed to prevent it.

"Don't you think the girl jokes are getting a little old, Malfoy?" Harry asked once Ron seemed to be under control again. "We've all heard them and nobody cares anymore."

Draco regarded Ron mock thoughtfully for a moment. "Are you sure Potty? Doesn't look like that to me, but since you're no longer dating, why don't you let the Weasel girl go. I'd like a good fight."

"You'd hit a girl, Malfoy?" Harry asked him innocently.

Unfortunately that didn't have quite the effect he'd desired. Ron punched him with an angry growl, but since they'd been standing so close together there wasn't enough strength behind the punch to harm Harry much. It just startled him enough to let go of Ron.

Draco smirked very pleased with himself. It looked like this time he'd actually managed to set the two Gryffindors up for detention while he'd go free.

But then a shout of glee that rang through the entire hall distracted all three: "Dako!"
Draco shot around to see a small form with a tear covered face racing towards him. "Billy!"

The baby raced on until he ran straight into Draco, slung his arms around his leg and covered his face in his robes. At that sight Ron and Harry completely forgot their fight. They just stood there and stared.

"Awww, what a cute baby!" cooed several voices from all over the hall and a large group of mostly girls started to form around Draco and Billy.

Billy's arms tightened even more around Draco's leg and a very tiny "Dako." was his only comment.

"Stop that!" Draco hissed at a girl that was reaching to stroke Billy's head. "Can't you see you're scaring him? Babies don't like being crowded."

The girls stopped to stare at Draco as well, but Draco ignored them. He pushed Hugin's nest into Gregory's hands, pried Billy loose from his leg gently and picked him up. Gregory stood there staring at the now quite big raven probably wondering whether Hugin was strong enough bite off his nose.

"That's not fair." One Gryffindor third year suddenly said. "I've got two little brothers. Why does Malfoy get to play with the baby?"

"Because he chose me." Draco told her calmly. "And I'm not playing. I'm protecting him. Come on, Billy, lets go."

"Wait!" Ron stepped into his way. "Where are you taking him?"

"Why, to Professor Snape of course." Draco smirked. "He can always cut him up for potion ingredients, if he doesn't want him."

"What! You can't do that!" Ron exclaimed horrified among the shrieks of terror from some of the younger students.

Draco calmly stepped around him and walked out the door followed by Gregory who was still carrying the raven.

"We have to stop him!" Ron realised after a moment of standing stock still. "We can't let Snape get that poor baby!"

"Ron, I think, he was just joking." Harry tried to stop his friend. "Or maybe trying to scare the first years. Even Snape wouldn't murder an innocent baby." He wasn't entirely sure Snape wouldn't harm the baby, though. Maybe they should try to take him to Professor Sprout or Madame Pomfrey instead. Those two were at least less scary than the Potions Master. But Snape was the head of Malfoy's house. It was only logical that the Slytherin would think of him first.

Ron took off after Draco and Harry raced after Ron. They soon caught up to the two Slytherins who were headed down the stairway into the dungeon at a slightly slower than normal pace since it was hard to see where you stepped with a baby in your arms.

Now that he was away from all the big strangers in the hall that had been trying to grab him and safe with his Dako Billy was smiling happily once again tears already forgotten. Draco smiled as well and even kissed him gently on the cheek once when Gregory wasn't looking.

"You can't do that Malfoy!" Ron yelled as soon as he caught sight of them.
Draco waited until he'd caught up then simply asked: "Why not?"

"That's murder!" yelled Ron. "You'll go to Azkaban for it."

"Oh really?" Draco had to fight hard to hide his amusement and keep his voice neutral. "Snape loves little children, you know."

"Snape's dark and tall. He'll scare the little guy." Harry argued, before Ron could yell any more. "Wouldn't it be better to take him to some motherly person. I'm sure he'd like Sprout."

"And I'm sure Snape will like him much more." Draco smirked as they walked past Filch's office.

"Oh Mr. Filch, did you see what they did to the entrance hall?" David Smith's voice could be heard through the half closed door. "It's all muddy and I think I even saw some grass stains."

"It's a Hogsmeade weekend, brat." Filch growled. "It always looks like a disaster area there after a Hogsmeade weekend. So where's your detention slip today?"

"Oh, I haven't got one. Didn't even see Professor Snape all day." David answered.

"Then what are you doing here?" Filch asked surprised.

"I just thought you need some help with the disaster in the entry hall and I was feeling a little bored. You're the only one in this school who actually likes me."

Filch stared for a moment. "Well, I guess we can count it as an advance on some other detention.
he finally decided.

David smiled. "Thanks, Mr. Filch. I'll get the buckets!"

Meanwhile Draco, Gregory, Harry and Ron had reached Snape's office. The two Gryffindors hesitated when Draco went straight to the open door and entered followed by Gregory. It was usually not a place they'd enter voluntarily, but maybe the baby would feel a little protected if they were there to take most of Snape's wrath? Though, they'd probably better knock first.

"Mummy!" a happy shout came from inside the office. "Dako!"

Harry and Ron cautiously peeked inside and indeed there was a very nice looking woman in there talking to Snape. Yes, she did look like a possible mother.

"Draco!" Sarah exclaimed surprised.

"I just came to return Billy." Draco grinned.

"Billy?" Sarah repeated. "Oh dear, I shouldn't have left the door open. Were did you find him?"

"I didn't. He found me." Draco corrected. "In the great hall."

"He walked all the way up to the great hall?" Severus repeated incredulously. Billy had never been there before and since he lived in a small flat wasn't used to wandering far.

"Well, I guess he's learned how to climb stairs." Draco remarked and handed Billy over to Sarah. The baby had definitely grown heavier over the last month.

Outside Ron and Harry exchanged nervous glances. The baby didn't seem to be in any danger anymore now that he was back with his mother and they suddenly realised what would happen to
them if Snape caught them eavesdropping. They had to get away from here, but how?

Harry hadn't brought his invisibility cloak to dinner and he'd have to sneak past the open door to get away. What if Snape looked in his direction just at the wrong moment?

"Come on, lets go." Ron mouthed at him from the safer side of the door.

Well, that was easy for him to say. Harry stepped back from the door quietly. The further back in the corridor he was the less suspicious he'd look.

As if a Gryffindor, this deep in the dungeons on a weekend wasn't suspicious enough for Snape to warrant a nasty detention.

"Did you wear that cap to dinner?" Snape asked inside.

"What? Oh right, I completely forgot I was wearing it." Draco answered. "So that's why McGonagall kept looking at me like that. And I already thought she was going to punish me for being late."

"You shouldn't be late for meals, boy!" Sarah scolded at once. "You're still growing and need the food."

"I'm fine, really. And I wasn't that late." Draco quickly assured her.

"And what was that Severus told me about your Transfiguration marks dropping?" Sarah continued sternly.

'She has to be some relative of Malfoy's.' Harry realised as he darted past the door as quietly as he could. 'Probably the one he's living with now.'

No shout from the inside. It seemed he'd been lucky for once. Harry and Ron took off at a run.

There they'd practically made it! They'd already reached Filch's office. All that was left to do was run past it and up the stairs and they'd be out of the dungeons.

Ron threw a quick glance back over his shoulder. No, they weren't being followed by an angry mob of Slytherins. They'd really gotten away.

The sudden look of fear on Harry's face was the only warning Ron got before he ran smack into somebody coming out of Filch's office. They both went down, something hard hitting against Ron's leg and then he was wet all over. For one horrible moment Ron thought he'd collided with Filch, then he realised that it was just a small Slytherin first or second year that was sitting on the floor beside him with a mop still in his hand and a spilled bucket rolling around behind him. That had to be the source of all the water.

Harry tried to stop, but was too close to Ron to manage to react before he stepped into the spilled cleaning water. The cleaning solution in there made it even more slippery than water on a blank stone floor was anyway and Harry slipped as well, both boys ending up in a heap on the floor.

Filch who'd been right behind David with his own mop and bucket glared down at them angrier than they'd ever seen him before. "Potter! Weasley! Detention! How often have you been told not to run in the halls?" He reached a hand out to David to help him up. "Are you alright?"

David nodded and smiled. "Fine, just a little startled. I'll start cleaning up the water."
"Oh no, you don't." Filch ordered. "Weasley, cast a drying charm on Mr. Smith, before he catches a cold because of you. Potter, pick up the mop and bucket."

"Sorry, Mr. Filch. We didn't mean to ..." Harry started while doing as he'd been told.

"Oh, shut up and start mopping up the water before anybody gets hurt!" Filch growled and quickly checked, if David was really dry again after Ron's quick charm. He seemed satisfied as he pressed his own mop into Ron's hands afterwards and told him to help Harry.

Once all the water was back in the bucket the two Gryffindors hoped to be let go, but David quickly reminded them that the floor still wasn't dry and therefore slippery. "Somebody will get hurt and then Madame Pomfrey will come after you." he threatened as Filch handed Harry a towel and sent Ron to clean the bucket and fetch fresh water.

Ten minutes later the floor was finally completely dry and David had stirred the correct amount of cleaning solution into the clean water.

"Can we go now?" Ron asked Filch as meekly as he could.

"No, you may have cleaned up the results of your misdeed, but you haven't been punished, yet." Filch informed him coldly. "Personally I'd prefer to chain you to a wall upside down for a couple of days, but unfortunately the headmaster won't let me, so you'll take these cleaning tools and clean the entrance hall instead. And you're not leaving until every last crack in the wall is sparkling."

"But Mr. Filch!" Ron whined. "We've still got homework to do. My Potions essay is due tomorrow and I haven't even started yet. And then there's a quiz in Divination ..."

"If you haven't started it yet, you'll never finish in time anyway." Filch told him calmly. "Now, take that bucket and get to work."

"Well, it could have been worse." Harry said a little later. "It could have been Snape that caught us."

Ron frowned at him. "And sent us to detention with Filch?"

"Or kept us for detention with himself." Harry corrected.

Ron shuddered and splashed some more water around with his mop.

"You're doing that all wrong." David Smith scolded him from his comfortable seat on the stairs next to Filch. "You have to squeeze the excess water out first."

"Weasleys can't clean." Filch told him. "But that just means that his detention will be longer and Potter's much better at it. They'll get the hall clean eventually."

David watched the two older boys some more. Mr. Filch was right. Potter did indeed work much more diligently and he wasn't complaining as much either.

"Mr. Filch?" he asked after a while.

"Yes, boy?"

"How does one become a caretaker?"

"Well, I answered an add in the Daily Prophet." Filch said. "Sent an owl to the headmaster with all my references and was invited for a job interview. He must have decided that he liked me, because
a few days later I got an owl saying I had the job."

"What grades were important to him?" David continued. "Didn't he test your magic?"

"A caretaker doesn't need to perform magic and grades didn't matter much either. It was much more interesting for him what my former employers thought about me." Filch looked a little uneasy about it, but David absolutely had to know more.

"So one can't just become a caretaker straight out of school?" he asked a little disappointedly.

"Of course you can. Your employer just won't know in advance how hard working you are or how well you get on with other people, but the same goes for any other job as well. That's why it's much harder to find a job the first time you try." Filch explained. "What's all this questioning about anyway?"

"Well, you see, my father absolutely wants me to work for the ministry after I finish school. He thinks with top grades from Hogwarts I could even become minister, but I don't really want to. I don't want to be like him, I want to live my own life. And even if I did want a job at the ministry, I don't think I could do it. I'll be lucky if I pass Potions at all, forget top grades and I'm doing terrible in Charms as well. I'm average in Transfigurations, I guess and doing reasonably well in Herbology and Astronomy, but you don't get a job at the ministry with average grades." David shrugged. "I like helping you, though, so I thought I might like to be a caretaker as well when I grow up."

"That isn't a very Slytherin goal in life." Filch remarked. He'd never before met somebody who actually wanted to be a caretaker. "Not the usual dream job of a young wizard either."

"Maybe not, but it's my choice." David declared firmly. "I'll show my father I'm not his little toy he can do with whatever he likes."

A/N: Were Harry and Ron really lucky to be caught by Filch instead of Snape? Will David Smith really grow up to be a Caretaker? And will Draco ever stop calling Ron a girl?

In the next chapter: Sevi asks Albus for permission to take Draco to the ballet, the first Quiddich match of the year and a snowball fight might have unexpected consequences.
"Your friend Charlie has invited us to a show of her ballet class." Severus commented to Draco when he arrived early for his Potions class the next day.

"Yes, she mentioned that, but from what she said it isn't a Hogsmeade weekend." Draco dumped his backpack on his desk and came up to the front so they could talk better.

"It starts after dinner anyway, so that doesn't matter." Severus stated with a slight shrug. "Do you want to go?"

"Of course I do!" Draco answered at once. "Everybody will be there. They all said I absolutely have to come."

Severus nodded. "I'll talk to the headmaster then."

"Do you think he'll allow it? I don't think I ever heard that he did anything like that."

"We'll see. It might help if you're especially good until then." Severus said sternly.

"Good?"

"Just stay away from Weasley." Severus advised.

"Which one?" Draco smirked.

"The one that always gets you in trouble, I suggest." Severus smiled. "How's Hugin? Has he shown any indication of wanting to fly, yet."

Draco looked down at his scruffy looking raven "Don't you think it's a bit early for that? He's still partially naked."

"I don't mean he'd be able to fly already." Severus explained. "But he should be starting to strengthen his wings soon. And those last naked spots will disappear before you know it. He'll be flying soon."

Somehow Draco felt a little sad at that. He'd gotten used to carrying his raven about and caring for him. At least it was something to concentrate on whenever he got tired of studying and started missing his broom again. Autumn wasn't a good time to play Quiddich, because of the wind and cold, but the Slytherin Quiddich team was still training a lot and Gryffindor was just as bad.

The Weasley twins had actually challenged the Slytherins to an out of season 'friendly' game in November and the overeager Slytherins had accepted without even asking their head of house first.

"It's a matter of honour, that we play now." they'd told Professor Snape when he'd heard about it and confronted them at lunch a few days later.

"Does McGonagall know about it?" he'd asked them.

"Yes, and we already cleared it with Professor Hootch."
"Lets just hope that it doesn't snow before then." Severus had sighed.

Since then the Quiddich team had been training like mad and Draco had had to see them almost every day. It was still hard to accept that he might never get to play again, but Draco hardly cried about it anymore. He had Hugin, after all and he could always borrow a school broom to fly a little. The only thing he couldn't do was actually play Quiddich.

Then again he now might have a chance to go out to see the ballet while everybody else had to stay in school. That ought to irk a few people.

Draco smirked at Ron Weasley when the Gryffindors arrived, but remembering Severus' advice he didn't say anything. He'd have his fun today anyway. Weasley had botched up another potion last week and had an essay due to try and make up for it today. Unless Granger had helped him Severus would find good reason to humiliate him in class once again.

Unfortunately Potter hadn't given many such opportunities since the big show in the first week, however, but then the little biting remarks Severus always shot at him were good entertainment as well.

And this time the Slytherins got lucky too. Harry had for once miscalculated the time and arrived three minutes late for class. Or had Severus simply started the lesson a little early? After all clocks were almost always a little off.

"Mr. Potter!" Severus snapped the moment the door opened and the unsuspecting boy walked in. "So nice of you to join us after all. May I ask where you have been?"

"I ... according to my watch I'm right on time, Sir." Harry defended himself.

"Then your watch is obviously slow. I've already given your classmates your assignment and I'm not going to repeat it, because famous Mr. Potter can't be bothered to make sure he arrives on time." Snape declared calmly.

"I'm sorry, Sir, but how should I have known my watch was slow?"

"Maybe because you arranged for it." Snape suggested. "Twenty points off Gryffindor for being late Potter."

"How should I be on time if my watch's slow?" Harry tried again. "It could have happened to anyone."

"Your watch is maybe two minutes behind." Snape declared calmly. "The rest of the class was here almost five minutes before the start of my lesson to make sure they wouldn't be late. If any of them would have arrived two minutes later than normal, they would still have been here on time. Maybe you ought to consider taking up the same habit as your classmates and arriving a little early. Now, get to work before you waste any more of your classmates' time. Some people in this class actually apply time and concentration to brewing their potions correctly. Not everyone is as careless as you and Weasley."

Harry glared, but went to his usual seat and asked Ron and Hermione for the assignment.

"Stop distracting your classmates, Potter and get to work." Snape hissed as he walked past. "Make sure to use only one unicorn hair, Mr. Longbottom. Two will partially neutralise the potion and more will upset it's balance completely."

Neville quickly re-checked that he had really picked up only one hair from the jar before he added
it to his cauldron. Yes, only one. Everything was still fine with the potion. At least it was bubbling just the way everybody else's did.

Hermione pushed her open Potions book over so Harry could see it. Unfortunately both pages showed a complete potion recipe. Even worse both potions were cures for burns. One was meant for use on amphibians while the other was for plants. Both included one unicorn hair.

"Sir, it changed colour!" Goyle squealed suddenly.

"What changed colour, Mr. Goyle?" Snape asked patiently.

He was obviously in a good mood after his chance to put him down, thought Harry.

"My potion." Goyle answered.

Snape walked over to take a look at the problem. "What was the last thing you did to it?"

"I stirred in the eucalyptus leaves, Sir."

Malfoy sniggered and Hermione too seemed to be fighting laughter.

"It's supposed to do that, Mr. Goyle." Snape told the Slytherin.

'If it had been a Gryffindor, he'd probably take points for not knowing.' Harry thought as he opened his own book and started to search both potion recipes for eucalyptus leaves. Again he found them in both. The two potions were really very similar and there were no further clues forthcoming. Well, maybe if he just started the water boiling, he'd get one later.

Harry set up his cauldron and stared at the recipes again. Both started out with two shrivelfigs and the unicorn hair, then one required fish skin, while the other asked for a chip of bark from a young oak tree. Oh, why hadn't he watched what Neville had added after the unicorn hair?

He glanced over to the other boy again, but he was currently adding the eucalyptus leaves and to Harry's surprise seemed to know exactly what he was doing. Maybe some of the other students hadn't gotten that far, yet?

He glanced around hoping to see some fish skin or tree bark lying around on one of the tables, but no luck. Most of them were at the same stage Neville was, some like Goyle a little further than that and Malfoy and Hermione were almost done shooting quick glances at each other to see who'd be first. They'd developed quite a rivalry for the top position even though Malfoy still was the only one who got awarded points for finishing first.

This was certainly a bad moment to distract Hermione, so Harry turned to Ron. He might currently be bottom of the class in Potions, but he would know which potion they were brewing today.

"Ron?" he whispered. "Pst, Ron!"

"Ten points off Gryffindor for repeatedly talking in class, Mr. Potter."

Why did Snape have to hover behind him all the time?

Harry started setting out the other ingredients as far as he knew which ones he'd need.

"I'm done, Professor!"

Aha, the perfect opportunity!
"Very good, Mr. Malfoy."

"Ron, which p..."

"Another ten points, Mr. Potter. Next time I'll make it twenty." Snape announced. "And ten points to Slytherin for being first to finish."

Several more minutes passed and Harry was starting to panic. If Malfoy and Hermione were already done, could he still catch up to the rest of the class at all?

"Professor Snape, Sir?"

"Yes, Mr. Longbottom?"

"It says here that the potion has to cool down for at least a day before it can be bottled." Neville said a little nervously, but no longer stuttering in fear of the Potions Master. "That's correct."

"So it would take too long to brew it when it is already needed, which means it's meant to be stored." Neville continued.

Harry stared at the boy. When had Neville become so bright?

"Well, deducted, Mr. Longbottom. Two points to Gryffindor." Snape agreed. "It is also very rarely sold in shops, so wizards who might have need of it are well advised to always keep a sufficient supply on hand."

"So how long can it be stored until it loses its power?" Neville asked.

"It will work for almost a year after it's been bottled, but starts losing potency after three months. To be sure that it will work satisfactorily I would advise to replace it after six months at the latest. Three months would be best, though."

Pansy Parkinson yawned. "Who cares anyway?" she whispered to Millicent Bulstrode. "Who'd need that potion?"

"I could have used some last year when my toad accidentally pushed over a candle and burned his side. Madame Pomfrey only had potions meant for humans or cats available and those didn't work well on Trevor at all. He hurt for weeks. If I'd known this potion back then, I could have helped him within a day."

Toad? That meant they were talking about the potion for amphibians! Where was that fish skin? Harry started working frantically.

"Indeed," Snape sounded almost pleased. "Those of you who own toads or might own them someday, would be well advised to remember this potion. The burn potions used for humans will also work on most other mammals, though not as efficiently as the ones specifically brewed for them. We will also brew a burn potion for owls, which can be used on other birds as well, but none of them will work on a toad. Or a snake for that matter." He raised his voice only slightly, but suddenly had the attention of all Slytherins.

"But, Sir," protested Hermione. "Snakes aren't amphibians, they're reptiles."

"True, but in cases of emergency potions for amphibians will work better on reptiles than potions
for mammals, since both amphibians and reptiles are cold blooded." Snape agreed. "A burn potion for reptiles is much more difficult to brew and should not be attempted until seventh year."

The Slytherins looked terribly disappointed at that, but Harry didn't care. He was much too busy throwing the unicorn hair and eucalyptus leaves into his cauldron.

"Potter!" Snape shouted. "Don't put different ingredients in at the same time unless the recipe specifically states so!"

Harry looked back at him in confusion. Snape never shouted like that.

As if on cue his cauldron emitted a sound like a stuttering car motor and boiled over.

"You were supposed to stir the eucalyptus leaves in one by one after adding the unicorn hair and fish skin separately." Snape informed him after dousing the fire. "What you have now, is a variation of vanishing ink." he continued when he saw Hermione's horrified look at the sight of her potions book turning blue after getting in touch with the foam that was still spilling out of Harry's cauldron. "Of course there are faster and less messy ways to brew that." Snape sneered. "What am I going to do with you, Potter? That was a mistake only the most stupid first years make."

"Er ... I'll start over?" Harry suggested.

"With exactly four minutes of class time left?" Snape sneered even more. "You failed this assignment, Potter. Now clean up."

Harry sighed and picked up his still wet cauldron his hands turning blue immediately.

"No, wait." Snape suddenly stopped him. "Just clean the outside and put the cauldron on my desk. The Weasley twins might want it for their Potions project."

"Potions project?" Ron repeated incredulously sliding one unfortunately blue stained hand through his hair and leaving a blue stain behind.

"They're working on developing a standard procedure for analysing prank potions." Snape explained. "Mr. Potter's otherwise completely worthless product will serve as the object for a first test. The unusual ingredients will be impossible to guess, but since I know how it was made, I'll be able to check the twins' results." 

"How long will it take for the potion to wear off." Hermione asked still staring at her discoloured Potions book. "I can't study like this. It's hardly legible."

"About half an hour." Snape sneered. "I do hope you'll be able to survive."

To Severus' surprise Neville Longbottom approached him after class. "Sir?"

"Longbottom?" he remembered not to sneer and actually managed to sound neutral.

"Could ... Well, just if you don't mind, could I have a bottle of the burn potion for my toad?"

"Neville asked nervously. "I mean since we brewed so much and there aren't that many toads in this castle. Madame Pomfrey won't need it all and I wouldn't have to bother her, if Trevor has another accident."

"Come back tomorrow after your last class and help me bottle it and I'll let you take some." Was he actually starting to like that boy?
"Thank you, Sir." Neville actually smiled at him. A weak little smile, but a smile nevertheless.

Severus looked after the boy as he walked out. He was beginning to like him! He could only hope that Minerva didn't find out.

"Oh, and Albus," Severus said after their breakfast meeting that Wednesday morning. "I'm not sure you're aware that West Hogsmeade Wizarding School has a ballet class, but I am invited to a show of theirs Saturday in two weeks, so I'll have to take that evening off."

Albus twinkled. "I didn't know you liked the ballet, Severus."

"It's got noting to do with that. It's one of the girls from the neighbourhood having her big day and she's invited us to see it. I can't well disappoint a poor little squib, can I?" That ought to do it. Albus always encouraged him to be more social, nicer to children and definitely to be kind to squibs.

"Well, of course, Severus. I take it Sarah is going as well?" More twinkling.

"Yes, and Mr. Malfoy told me he'd also like to come."

"Mr. Malfoy?"

"Yes, he met the girl during the summer and she invited him as well." Severus explained. "You realise that a friendship with a squib would most likely do the boy some good after the way Lucius raised him, of course, and an evening at the ballet will also take his mind off the tragic loss of his mother."

"I can't just let one of the students leave the castle unsupervised." Albus pointed out.

"He wouldn't be unsupervised, he'd be there with me." Severus had expected that argument. "I'm his head of house, Albus. Theoretically I could take the whole of Slytherin on a field trip, if I wanted to."

"It would set a precedent, though." Albus said. "If we allow Mr. Malfoy to go to the ballet, other students will start asking to go to the theatre, the opera, the circus ..."

"It's a school event." Severus reminded him. "We barely ever acknowledge the existence of the other schools. It's time we showed that we aren't too snobbish to give our students a chance to meet theirs. West Hogsmeade is our closest neighbour and most of our students don't even know it exists. Especially the Slytherins would profit from the contact with other schools."

"A school full of kids from poor families and squibs, Severus?" Albus asked. "Most Slytherins despise them and those kids are often aggressive as well."

"I've seen Mr. Malfoy interact with them during the summer and was quite surprised." Severus reported with a slight smile. "The gangs of Merlin Park act a lot like Slytherins, actually and getting to really meet squibs has changed Draco's opinion of them a lot. I believe other Slytherins could also profit, but we are only talking about Draco visiting West Hogsmeade here. I don't see any danger he should be in from these kids."

"Just how did Draco end up meeting West Hogsmeade kids, Severus?" Albus asked raising one eyebrow.

"I found him crying in Diagon Alley after his mother's death. He understandably refused to return
to Malfoy Manor so I took him home overnight."

"Oh, I see. You should have kept him away from the gangs, though. Don't you realise how
dangerous they are? And what about your family? What if Draco tells somebody about Billy?"

"He did fine with the kids and he won't tell anyone. Voldemort wouldn't have him anyway. Too
suspicious now that his father got caught." Severus explained.

"Well, under those circumstances maybe you should offer all the Slytherins the chance to visit
West Hogsmeade." twinkled Albus.

Severus sent him a mild glare. Then he couldn't go with Sarah. The Slytherins would certainly be
intrigued, if he showed up with a date and more than one of them had death eater parents. "Only
Draco, Sarah and I are invited, Albus. I might be able to talk to some people about the school play
however."

"School play?" Albus repeated.

"West Hogsmeade also has a theatre group, which puts on a play for fellow students and parents
twice a year. That might appeal more to our kids than the ballet anyway." Severus explained.

"Ah yes, maybe we could have an inter school Quiddich game as well." Albus suggested.

"I'm afraid you'll have to take that idea to London or Wales. West Hogsmeade doesn't have a
Quiddich team." When Severus saw Albus' confused look he decided to elaborate: "Due to lack of
brooms. The school doesn't own enough for two teams and very few of the kids can afford them.
There is a chess club however and most of the kids play Soccer."

Albus thought that over for a moment. "Well, I doubt any of our kids play Soccer, but I suppose we
could think about a chess tournament. Chess players are usually calm and controlled as well."

"Oh, I'd think most of the muggle born students know how to play Soccer, though they might not
be up to the level of the Merlin Park kids. They had an excellent game in the park this summer and
I saw several quite impressive players. Of course Draco held his own as well, so I suppose we
could give it a try."

"We don't even have a team, Severus." Albus reminded him. "Let's just think about the theatre
group and the chess club for now. Starting a chess club shouldn't be too hard. I just need a teacher
willing to do it. Too bad Professor Lockhart isn't around anymore. He was one of the worst
teachers I've ever met, but he was so easy to volunteer for extra work."

"So can I tell Draco that he has your permission to see the ballet performance?"

"Yes, but you'll have to deal with any similar requests from other students that pop up once they
find out." Albus tried to look stern.

"No problem. I'll just tell them to find a teacher who'll take them." Severus answered calmly.
"Because I won't and if they think that's unfair, it'll be nothing new from me."

Albus just shook his head at his friend, but he had to admit that his method usually worked.

Draco of course didn't care much about how Severus had arranged for his permission to go to
Hogsmeade that day. He was just happy he was allowed to.
They left Hogwarts just before dinner, which of course attracted some attention from Draco's house mates.

"I'm taking Mr. Malfoy to see the ballet." Severus to Draco's surprise told them honestly.

"Hey, that's not fair." several mostly female sounding voices protested. "I want to go too!"

"Unfortunately only Mr. Malfoy and I have invitations. I will try to talk to the organisers about possibly reserving a few seats for Hogwarts next year." Severus promised.

There was still a little grumbling mainly among the seventh year girls, but that couldn't be helped. Severus admonished them to be good tonight and go to bed when Professor Flitwick told them to. He was quite convinced that they wouldn't go without loud protests and maybe a few minor fights, but at least Flitwick wouldn't end up as desperate as Trellawney had a few years ago. Of course Flitwick was a lot better prepared to deal with rebellious students than Trellawney too.

They met both Sarah and the Rakers in the market place, which looked strangely deserted despite all the people there to see the show. It wasn't nearly as full as it was on market day as Draco had seen it most often. Of course there had been those other times that he'd gone there, but still it had never looked this big and empty to him.

Those thoughts were soon forgotten however as he was greeted and dragged inside by his friends. Even the little wannabes had come, though most of them under the stern eyes of their slightly bored looking mothers. Other women had come alone or in the company of more or less excited wizards.

"Oh, I'm so excited." Draco heard one of them chatter. "My little Betty was so nervous she kept practising her steps all day. I could barely convince her to eat some lunch and she completely refused dinner."

The first act was rather boring after what Draco had seen on the market days during the summer. A group of small girls, probably first years or even younger, hopped around the stage rather clumsily, but looking cute in their little white skirts.

"There she is!" the woman from before told her unfortunate victim now. "The third on the left. That's my Betty. Isn't she cute in her little tutu? Oh, such great dancers they are."

Draco had to stifle a giggle and Jack grinned at him. Obviously he'd heard her too. Cathy however seemed totally oblivious. She was leaning against Draco's shoulder with her eyes half closed. That alone was worth coming to see the show, Draco decided.

The dancing soon got better as well as the more advanced students came out. Half way through there was a short break and most of the watchers crowded the buffet at the entrance as girls in white swarmed into the room squealing: "Did you see me Mummy? Did I do well?"

Draco and the Rakers eyed the buffet hungrily wondering just how expensive the food was. It was impossible to even see the price list through the crowd. Was it worth trying to fight your way through to the counter, if you had only one Knut in your pocket? Probably not.

'I should have made another bet with Estella.' Draco thought miserably as he watched Jack count his money looking just as doubtful.

The only one who seemed confident that he could buy something was Clever Mike who started to head for the buffet calling: "Come on, lets get something to eat. I'm starving."

Sarah stopped him however. "Don't waste your money, Mike. I bet that food's expensive and
terribly salty. It'll only make you thirsty so you have to buy their overpriced drinks. Come here and get a sandwich instead."

Sarah had made sandwiches? Draco's mood improved instantly. If she had made a sandwich for Mike, she must have one for him as well.

As it turned out Sarah had brought sandwiches for all the Rakers. She'd even made one for Charlie who they still hadn't seen. When it became obvious that she wouldn't come out, she finally agreed to give the sandwich to Mary who shared it with Larry and Beth.

"I wonder why Charlie didn't come to greet us." Matt mumbled disappointedly as they returned to their seats.

"She isn't with her Mum either, though." Sammie pointed out. "Maybe she has to be on stage right after the break."

As it turned out Charlie was in the very last group to dance and she really did have the biggest solo. Draco happily cheered and applauded her together with the rest of the gang and almost forgot that he'd have to return to Hogwarts afterwards instead of going home to Merlin Park with his friends.

Charlie finally joined them together with her mother on the way out and among all the laughter and chatting he didn't even realise where they were going until they reached the first group of bushes of Merlin Park.

"Uncle Severus, shouldn't we head back to Hogwarts now?" he asked finally.

"Head back?" Sarah asked. "I thought you were staying overnight?"

"We are, but we'll have to get up early. I'm on breakfast duty tomorrow so we can't be late." Severus explained.

"Breakfast duty?" Draco wondered. What was that now?

"That means I'm supposed to keep the students in line during breakfast tomorrow morning." Severus answered. "There are two teachers on duty during every meal at Hogwarts. For the rest of the staff attendance is optional, but the on duty teachers have to be there for the whole time until the last student has left the great hall. That guarantees that someone is around to supervise the meal."

Loud barking greeted them as they walked up the stairs. 'That Dog' obviously recognised the steps of his master. When they reached the door they could also hear a woman's voice scolding him.

"Oh, shut up you little monster. You'll wake up the baby." was the first thing Draco managed to understand clearly. "You'll wake up the entire house. Oh, stupid dog!"

'That Dog' remained completely unimpressed and continued to bark madly. The moment Sarah opened the door a crack he shot out and threw himself at Severus laughing and wagging all over, then raced once around all three of them, jumping up at Draco's legs once before returning to Severus.

His master was home! His boy was home! His little dog world couldn't get any better than this.

A rather helpless looking round little witch with huge round glasses that made her look like an owl followed him to the door. "Oh, I'm so sorry, Sarah. I guess I'm just no good with dogs. I'm sorry, I just don't know how to shut him up. Oh, I hope he didn't wake Billy."
A loud cry from the bedroom answered that last sentence and she went right into another round of "sorries".

"That's all right, he never obeys properly." Sarah told her kindly while Severus hurried into the bedroom to pick up Billy. "Now where is that dog?" She quickly grabbed his collar and pulled him inside. "Quick, Draco, close the door! Don't let him get away again.

Draco obligingly stepped into the flat and pulled the door closed behind him. For a moment he and the strange witch just stood there staring at each other then she suddenly smiled and held out her hand to him. "Hi, Draco. I'm your Aunt Sabrina."

What? She was who? What would an aunt of his do baby-sitting Billy and 'That Dog'? Confused Draco took her hand and shook it with a week smile. "Uh .. hello, Aunt Sabrina."

And then he finally recognised the name. Of course! She wasn't really his aunt after all. She was Sarah's sister and just meant for him to call her aunt just like he did Sarah.

"Draco? Could you lend me a hand with your bed, please?" That was Sarah calling from the lab. Right. The couch had to be turned into a bed once again.

"Sorry, got to go." he told Sabrina and dashed off into the lab.

He didn't get much chance to talk to her afterwards either as she left to return to her own flat soon after. It was good to have 'his' bed on the couch back, though, if only for one night. Too bad he had to leave again right away in the morning. It would have been great to spend some time with Sarah, Billy or his friends again.

Harry glared when Draco and Severus arrived a little late and wearing travelling cloaks at breakfast the next morning. Where the hell had those two been?

"I heard Snape invited the Slytherins to go see the ballet." Colin Creevey supplied eagerly.

"So why are only he and Malfoy late, then?" asked Ginny. "And where can you see the ballet before seven in the morning?"

"Actually Malfoy and Snape got the tickets from some friend." Neville informed them. "And they probably spent the night in London."

"Then they wouldn't be back, yet." Hermione pointed out glancing up from her Arithmancy book for just a moment.

"Maybe they flooed down to the Three Broomsticks." Ginny suggested.

"They could have done that yesterday evening as well." Hermione argued. "My guess is they took the night train from London, though it must have been a little late."

"Who would invite Malfoy to the ballet in the first place?" Ron wanted to know, but the others just shrugged. "I want to go to the ballet too."

Hermione glared at him. "Since when?"

"Since Malfoy got to." Ron pouted.

"Ron, that's men in tights and girls in white skirts hopping around to classical music." Harry tried to
explain. "It's dead boring. Even my cousin Dudley would rather do homework than watch the ballet on TV."

"But don't you see Harry?" Ron almost shouted. "Malfoy got to go out to London and we had to stay here. It's not fair!"

"Actually Mr. Weasley," Professor McGonagall's voice interrupted them. "The ballet Mr. Malfoy went to see with Professor Snape was a school performance in Hogsmeade. Nobody got to go to London at all."

"Then where did they spend the night?" Hermione asked surprised.

McGonagall shrugged. "I don't know, but I'm sure Professor Snape had a good reason not to return to the castle in the middle of the night."

"Oh well, I guess so." Hermione went back to her seemingly much more interesting Arithmancy book and continued to read.

The conversation soon shifted to other topics and they'd almost completely forgotten about it when Hermione suddenly sat up straight. "Wait a minute! What school other than Hogwarts would have a performance in Hogsmeade?"

The soon to be held Quidditch game soon pushed all thoughts of Draco Malfoy and the ballet from most students' minds. Only Ron Weasley was still feeling slighted and brought the incident up from time to time and Hermione Granger had shown up with a book titled 'A History of Wizarding Schools in England' in the Gryffindor common room a few times, by the time the day of the game arrived.

They both went to see the game, of course, though Hermione insisted on bringing a book along.

"The Education of Squibs?" Ron read out the title. "Why really Hermione. Even you won't find anything in there that could be useful in the OWLs."

"No, but did you know that there's a school that ...

Ron covered his ears with his hands. "Hermione!"

Draco almost laughed as he walked past them on his way to the stands. He didn't really feel like laughing, though. Maybe he shouldn't have come to the game at all. It would hurt to see the Slytherin Quidditch team play without him.

Hugin cawed softly into his ear. The raven wasn't really flying, yet, but Draco had discovered that he could sit and walk just fine and now tended to carry him around on his shoulder. It gave Hugin a better view of the world and Draco had his hands free.

"Look Hugin, that's the Quidditch field. We're here to see people fly. That should be very educational for you." he informed the bird.

"Caw?" So far that was all Hugin ever said, but somehow Draco thought that it sounded a lot more sophisticated than 'Hoot?'.

Draco found a place in the Slytherin stands a little away from everybody else. He didn't want to be surrounded by people in case he started to cry again. If he was alone he had a better chance at
slipping away unnoticed.

Of course Gregory and Vincent didn't see it that way. They suddenly appeared right next to him only a few minutes before the game was to start. Gregory even dragged Millicent along. The poor girl had lost some status in the girls' hierarchy thanks to her new boyfriend being friends with Draco Malfoy, while Pansy Parkinson was now dating Blaise and accordingly had set the girls against Draco, but Millicent was so happy to finally have found somebody who liked her that she didn't care much. She didn't even mind that Gregory was bottom of their class in almost all subjects. He did manage to beat Neville Longbottom in Charms and Ron Weasley in Potions, though and he was actually doing well in History of Magic. Gregory might be stupid, but he did learn things by heart well and that was what Binns' class required the most.

As the two teams shot out into the cold grey sky Estella joined the group uninvited as well. Millicent frowned at her, but Estella ignored it. She'd never considered herself part of Pansy's clique and therefore didn't care about Millicent or her social status much.

Draco tried to keep his attention on the beginning game. The chasers were throwing the ball around rather clumsily with frozen fingers and too many layers of clothing hampering them. Professor Snape's fears had proven correct. It had indeed snowed and was even beginning to snow again right now.

Draco could see Harry Potter blowing on his hands in an attempt to unfreeze them. Unlike the other players the seekers couldn't wear full fingered gloves in the game. Without the ability to feel the Snitch in their hands they had very little chance to capture and hold on to it.

The chasers' thin gloves weren't much help either and the Slytherin keeper yelped when his frozen hand connected hard with the Quaffle in a parade. Draco hoped that it was more an exclamation of surprise than of pain. If the keeper had hurt his hand there was nothing to stop the Gryffindors from scoring.

Nothing except for the beaters who wore the thickest gloves they had been able to find, which gave them a chance to stay warm, but weakened their grips on the clubs. These were no conditions for playing Quiddich.

Still the game continued with neither team able to score.

"This is boring." Gregory commented. "I wish something would finally happen."

Draco gave up watching the clumsy chasers and started looking for the Snitch. Against the bright snow and with bigger and bigger snowflakes falling the golden ball would be nearly invisible, but it would clearly decide this game.

Nothing.

If only he could be up there flying. Then he could search the other side of the field as well.

A crown of snow had formed on Potter's head. Draco saw the boy reach out and try to brush it off. That wouldn't help the condition of his fingers any.

A sudden shout of triumph from the new Slytherin seeker tore Draco's attention away from his old rival. While Potter had been busy with his hair the little third year had grabbed the Snitch.

For a moment everybody just stared. The boy hadn't even changed his position since Draco had last looked his way. The Snitch must have flown right at him.
Cheers rose from the Slytherin side of the field and for a bit Draco celebrated along with everybody else, but then he realised what had just happened. His successor had done what he'd never managed. He'd beaten Potter. Now it would be almost impossible to get his position back once he got a new broom.

As everybody else raced to congratulate the team, Draco slipped away into the dungeons. Severus wasn't in his office, but he'd left the door to his classroom open and when Draco entered he found Munin there.

"Caw! Draco! Caw!" the raven greeted him happily.

"Caw! " Hugin clearly found that much more exciting than Quiddich.

Draco held up his arm for the baby raven to step on and gently lowered him to the teacher's desk where he could meet Munin. It was fascinating to watch the two together. Munin was always gentle with Hugin and both were fascinated with each other.

Maybe Draco ought to ask Severus if he could borrow Munin to teach Hugin to fly?

When Severus returned about half an hour later Draco told him about his idea, but Severus didn't seem to like it.

"It's better, if you train him yourself. You don't want him to transfer his loyalty to Munin, after all." the Potions Master advised him. "Try borrowing a school broom and take him flying on the Quiddich field. It is natural for a raven to want to fly and Hugin has been strengthening his wings for a while now. I think he will fly when he is ready."

Thus Draco took up the habit of going flying whenever he had some free time during daylight hours. He didn't dare to take Hugin out in the dark. Munin might do okay flying at night, but as far as Draco knew it wasn't normal behaviour for ravens and probably a bit too much to ask of a baby just learning to fly.

Saturday two weeks after the game they were in the air above the Quiddich field again. Hugin trying his wings at wide turns while Draco was sweeping up and down just enjoying the ride.

Hugin still expected him to fly as well whenever he practised, but was no longer insisting on being shown what manoeuvre to perform giving Draco a chance to just enjoy himself.

A sudden commotion on the ground attracted his attention. A bunch of Gryffindors had arrived to enjoy the sunny weather as well. Draco frowned when he recognised some of them as fifth years, but didn't want to leave yet.

The Gryffindors rose into the air on their brooms laughing and shouting. At first Draco was going to ignore them, but then several snowballs hit him in the back in rapid succession. He turned and saw a group of three Gryffindors dive back for more snow.

"Attack me from behind, will you?" he shouted out to them not really angry, but slightly annoyed. "I'll show you."

The main attacker had probably been Ron Weasley, but Draco felt more like going after Potter. He dove down to a position right beside the roof of a small turret scraping off some snow as he flew past it.

His snowball hit Harry's shoulder and prompted some angry shouts from the Gryffindors.
Ginny, Harry and Ron retaliated with a fast barrage that Draco just barely managed to dodge. Three on one wasn't fair. He almost wished he'd brought Vincent and Gregory.

He kept attacking and dodging as best he could until another of Harry's snowballs soared past him and hit the metal roof with a loud "Ping! ".

Draco froze. That hadn't been a simple snowball. Only a hard object like a stone or a piece of ice would produce that sound when hitting metal. Potter had loaded his snowball!

With a shout of fury Draco dove down under the roof to break off a chunk of an icicle. He smashed it hard against the roof on his way back up to shorten it, then packed some snow around it tightly. This snowball would teach Potter.

But if it hit him this high in the air and he fell off his broom? At the very last moment Draco changed his mind and threw the ball at the empty air beside Potter. Maybe not a great revenge, but at least this was safe.

Draco felt angry with himself the moment he felt the ball leave his hand. Harry hadn't had any qualms about hitting him with that loaded ball either. Why should he worry about him?

The ball shot far past Harry who laughed. Great now he'd get taunted for missing so badly.

Another figure behind Harry gave a little frightened yelp as he saw the snowball coming straight for him. Draco was too far away to hear the sound as the ball hit, but he did hear the heavy 'thunk' with which Neville Longbottom hit the ground after sliding off his broom.

For a second the world seemed to stop as all four students stared down at the unmoving body on the ground in horror. Neville hadn't even cried out as the ball had hit him. It must have knocked him unconscious.

A/N: Will Neville be alright? Who should be punished? Nobody, because they didn't mean to hurt anyone? Draco for hurting Neville? Draco and Harry for using loaded snowballs? Draco, Harry, Ron and Ginny for having a snowball fight in the air? Or maybe Neville for flying so close to them (if he's still alive to be punished)?

In the next chapter: The kids check on Neville and take him to the hospital wing, they worry about possibly being expelled and Dumbledore has to make a decision on how and whom to punish.
Consequences

Chapter 42: Consequences

Draco pointed his broom down and descended as quickly as he could. He landed too fast and fell and rolled head over heels in the snow, but he hardly noticed. There was a red stain forming in the snow beside Neville's head.

"Longbottom! Longbottom, are you alright!" Draco shouted even though he knew it was a stupid question. Of course he couldn't be all right after such a fall. "Neville? Please say something."

But Neville didn't move.

"Don't touch him! It might hurt him even more." Potter was suddenly beside him. "Ginny, run get a teacher!"

"Is he... Is he..." stuttered Ron Weasley somewhere behind them.

Draco didn't want to think about what he might be trying to say. He had a feeling that it would be better if he didn't know. Instead he kept staring at the blood on Neville's forehead and listening to the footsteps that were running towards them. Could Ginny have been that fast? No, no that was Professor Sprout, he recognised when she bent down to check Neville's pulse. She must have seen Neville fall from one of the greenhouses.

"I'm sorry." Draco sobbed surprising even himself. "I didn't mean to hit anyone. I didn't even see him."

"Is he going to be alright?" Harry asked hoarsely.

"He's alive." Sprout answered as she levitated him onto a stretcher she'd conjured. "That's all I can tell you. I'm not a mediwitch."

Pale-faced and trembling all over the children followed Professor Sprout and the stretcher on their way to the hospital wing. None of them felt like talking and Draco didn't even notice when Hugin swooped down and executed a perfect landing on his shoulder. What if Neville wasn't going to get well again?

Madame Pomfrey already stood waiting when they reached the hospital wing. Somebody must have run ahead to alert her, probably one of the other Gryffindors for Ginny had returned when she'd seen Professor Sprout come running and Harry and Ron hadn't left Neville's side any more than Draco had.

"Stay out!" she ordered the children curtly and they stopped just outside the door waiting.

Only a few seconds later Professor Sprout came out again as well, but she just shook her head when they looked at her pleadingly. "Madame Pomfrey said to wait outside while she works on him. She didn't look happy, though."

"That doesn't mean anything." Harry said. "Madame Pomfrey never looks happy when somebody's hurt."
"Well, who would?" Ron asked weakly.

"I have to inform the headmaster." Professor Sprout said suddenly.

"D ... do you think he's going to expel us?" Ginny whispered.

"For having a snowball fight under risky circumstances?" Sprout said. "I doubt it. I've seen others do it before and I'm sure so has he. He can't expel you, if he never did anything about those other fights."

"But Malfoy used a loaded ball." Ron hissed. "He ought to be expelled for sure."

"Potter did so first." Draco squeaked. "And he nearly hit me. I shot the ball past him on purpose, because I didn't want him to get hurt."

"Oh sure, like you'd care about my safety."

"Is that true Mr. Potter?" Draco had never heard Sprout sound this stern before. "Did you shoot a loaded ball at Mr Malfoy first?"

Harry stared intently at the floor. "Yes, I didn't mean any harm. I didn't think it could hurt him that bad. It was just supposed to make the ball fly better, honest, I... I mean. It isn't different from the Bludgers in Quiddich?" he looked up pleading for confirmation from Professor Sprout.

"I will have to talk to the headmaster about it. The decision is up to him." was all Sprout gave him, though. "You Miss Weasley certainly won't be expelled, if all you did was throw normal snowballs."

Ginny nodded still looking miserable, "I still wish I hadn't. Poor Neville."

Draco's knees suddenly felt weak. He was surprised he could still stand and quickly leaned against the wall for safety. What if he got expelled now? He had nowhere to go!

They waited for almost an hour, but the door of the hospital wing still didn't open. Instead Professor McGonagall arrived to take Draco and Harry to the Headmaster's office. They walked in tense silence McGonagall glaring at Draco all the way.

Draco felt terribly sick with fear. This wasn't his fault. He hadn't meant to do it. Potter had. It was all Potter's fault, but what if all those Gryffindors in there wouldn't believe it?

The gargoyle jumped aside and they walked up the stairs. Professors Snape and Sprout were already in the headmaster's office. Dumbledore looked grave. Well, as grave as he could without stopping to twinkle.

Draco quickly ducked out of McGonagall's grip on his arm and close to his head of house.

Snape to everyone's surprise put a hand on the boy's shoulder and gave McGonagall his very best glare when she tried to grab hold of him again.

"It's not my fault, Sir." Harry declared immediately. "It was Malfoy that hurt Neville."

"Is Longbottom alright, Sir?" escaped Draco as Dumbledore turned to look at him.

"Mr. Longbottom is very badly hurt." the headmaster informed them. "He will most likely survive, but it isn't assured, yet."
Draco swallowed hard. He hadn't meant for that to happen. He didn't like Longbottom, but he'd never meant him harm. Of all the Gryffindors he was the least annoying.

"It will take him several weeks to recover and only then will we know if he will heal completely." Dumbledore continued. "Now Professor Sprout tells me that Mr. Longbottom was hit in the head with a loaded snowball while participating in an air snowball fight."

"That can't be." McGonagall interrupted him. "Mr. Longbottom is a very careful flyer. I have never seen him let go of his broom with one hand as he would have to to throw a snowball."

"Longbottom wasn't participating." Draco agreed. "Only Potter and the two youngest Weasleys attacked me. Longbottom and a few others just happened to be flying nearby."

"And Malfoy hit him in the face." Harry added.

"I didn't." Draco hissed. "That's I wasn't aiming for him. Potter had thrown a loaded snowball at me and I was going to do the same to him, but then I realised that I might seriously hurt Potter, if I hit him and shot the ball past him. Longbottom just happened to fly in the way. I didn't mean to hit anyone. It was Potter who was trying to hit me."

"I didn't mean for it to hurt anyone. I was just trying to make it fly better." Harry defended himself.

"Nevertheless you admit to throwing a loaded snowball with the intention to hit Mr. Malfoy." Snape stated coldly. "Even though he had only attacked you with normal snowballs up until then despite being alone against three attackers?"

Harry stared at the floor again.

"Harry?" prompted Dumbledore.

"Yes," Harry finally admitted. "But I didn't hurt Neville."

"But you could have hurt Mr. Malfoy just as badly and unlike Mr. Malfoy you claim to have wanted that." Snape said.

"Albus, you can't really believe that that lying little Slytherin was shooting to miss?" McGonagall interrupted. "I might believe that he wasn't aiming for Mr. Longbottom. He's always preferred to attack Mr. Potter or Mr. Weasley. It is however obvious that he meant to hit Mr. Potter."

"As Potter meant to hit him." Snape shot angrily.

"I did not mean to hit anyone. Not at the moment I threw that ball." Draco insisted.

"Both boys are guilty of endangering other students by throwing loaded snowballs." Dumbledore decided. "As we are still unable to determine the exact consequences of their actions for Mr. Longbottom, it is hard to make a final decision at this time. Therefore my decision is to suspend both boys until after the Christmas holidays. I will decide what to do with them then."

"But, Sir!" both boys protested.

"That decision stands." Dumbledore declared sternly. "You will return home this evening."

"But I promised the Dursleys they wouldn't have to see me until the summer." Harry said. "I can't just come back now. They probably won't even let me in."

"I will inform your aunt and uncle of your time of arrival. I'm sure they will be at the Station on
"time." Dumbledore told him calmly.

"But what about me, Sir?" Draco asked. "Where do you expect me to go?"

"Well, to your family. Whoever takes you during the summer." Dumbledore answered.

"But..." Draco started, but Snape pushed him to the door.

"Come on, Draco. Let's go." the Potions Master said as they walked out.

Harry looked to Dumbledore pleadingly. "Can't I at least try to contact Sirius instead? The Dursleys will never let me come back."

That was the last Draco heard before the door of the headmaster's office closed behind him and Severus.

"Start packing, I'll write a letter to Sarah." was all Severus said.

"Can't you ... uh ... stay with me for a bit?" Draco asked uneasily. Right now he needed some consolation and he doubted that Cuddly would be enough.

"Not if you want that letter to be there before you are and I doubt you want to be the one to explain to Sarah."

Draco gulped. "She'll kill me."

"I doubt it." Severus said without even giving it much thought. "She's used to kids that attack others with knives. A kid injured by a loaded snowball is most likely just a curiosity in Merlin Park. I doubt they'd even have suspended you at West Hogsmeade." he suddenly stopped, thought for a moment, then almost smiled. "Ah yes, I think I will write to the headmaster as well."

"Dumbledore? But we were just in his office. Couldn't you have just told him?"

"Not that headmaster." If Draco wasn't completely mistaken Severus was almost smiling again. "The one in West Hogsmeade. If you get expelled from Hogwarts, you'll have to switch schools anyway and even if you don't, it'll be better than just studying at home."

Suddenly Draco felt a lot better. He could go to school in West Hogsmeade! With Cathy and Mike and all his other friends!

The only problem was Sarah. She wouldn't be happy to see him at all. No matter what Uncle Severus thought about it, Draco doubted Sarah would take the news without at least attempting to bite his head off for endangering his fellow students. Still he supposed she wouldn't kill him and he'd see Billy again.

Several students looked up as he entered the common room, silence fell as he walked through without a word.

"Did you really use the killing curse on Longbottom?" Gregory Goyle finally asked when Draco started to climb the stairs.

"What?" Draco shot around. "Killing Curse? I didn't even pull my wand. Potter was throwing loaded snowballs at me and I accidentally hit Neville instead of him when I returned the favour."

"And killed him?" a small second year girl gasped.
"No, he's alive. He just hurt himself pretty badly when he fell off his broom." Draco told her very clearly. Hopefully that would stop the rumour. "Now excuse me, I've got to go pack." He turned and continued his way up the stairs.

"Pack?" he heard Vincent repeat somewhere behind him. "Just a moment Draco, wait up!"

Vincent and Gregory thundered up the stairs behind him, but Draco simply continued on his way. They caught up easily before he reached the dorm.

"What do you mean by pack?" Vincent demanded. "They expelled you?"

"No, for now I'm only suspended." Draco answered surprised at his own calm tone. "And Potter with me. Do you really think they'll expel Potter?"

Gregory and Vincent exchanged a confused look.

"Well, I doubt it very much." Draco informed them. "He's the big hero who defeated Voldemort and expelling him could mean that he'll just switch to muggle school and forget about the wizarding world. He is muggle raised after all."

"And what will you do, if you get expelled?" Gregory asked worriedly.

"Go to public school with my girlfriend?" Draco suggested. "And other friends." he added after a moment. "Professor Snape once told me that the school in Hogsmeade is really good and I already know several kids that go there."

Gregory and Vincent exchanged another look. This time not a confused one at all, though.

"We'll miss you." Vincent said finally.

"I'll be back after Christmas." Draco said slipping out of his uniform robe and into his jeans. The dragon t-shirt and blue jumper followed. Then he put on his cap.

Vincent and Gregory stared.

"What?" Draco asked while folding his robe into his trunk.

"You look like a muggle." Gregory informed him.

"Well, it's easier to play Soccer like this, you know." he told them hiding his grin. "And you can walk through a whole train station full of muggles without getting a second glance."

"Oh, of course!" Vincent exclaimed. It seemed that explanation made some sort of sense to him, so Draco decided to leave it alone.

"Sock - er?" Gregory wondered, but his friends both ignored it.

"Well unless you have a raven sitting on your shoulder." he added as he saw Hugin who was walking around on his bed looking curiously at all the objects Draco had thrown on there to pack. "But Professor Snape told me that some muggles keep ravens for pets too, so it's actually less problematic to explain away a raven than an owl. Get off that book, Hugin!"

"Caw?"

Draco pulled his Astronomy book out from under the raven's foot by force causing some cawing and fluttering. The book actually should have gone into the trunk along with the rest of his school
books, but somehow he must have missed it. Oh well, he just threw it in on top of the uniform robes and continued packing clothes.

There, now what else did he have to pack? Hugin would ride his shoulder as usual, his quill and parchment were already inside. The ink would be safer to keep in the backpack where he had enspelled a small side bag to prevent any leaking out in case a bottle broke or opened accidentally. Cuddly would go into the backpack as well. His hairbrush! Hugin's food and toys.

What else was in here? The books he'd borrowed from the library. No, those belonged to the school. He couldn't take them with him.

"Could you two take those back to the library for me?" he asked Vincent and Gregory.

They nodded solemnly.

"Oh, come on!" Draco almost laughed. "There are only four weeks of school left until the holidays and I'll be back afterwards. Don't tell me you can't survive without me for four weeks."

"We'll miss you." insisted Gregory.

Severus entered their dorm before Draco could tell him how ridiculous that sounded.

"Munin's on his way with both letters." he informed Draco.

"I'm almost done packing." Draco answered in the same casual tone.

Severus watched as he stuffed the rest of his belongings into his backpack putting Cuddly on top.

"I can't take you home, I'm afraid." he said once the boy was done. "I couldn't find anyone to take over dinner duty and watch the house for me on short notice."

Draco felt deeply disappointed. He'd somehow thought that Severus would naturally lead him back to Merlin Park even though he could find the way easily on his own. Still he tried not to show it. What would Gregory and Vincent think of him, if he was devastated just because Snape couldn't take him home?

"I bet Trellawney would do it." he joked instead.

"You mean not do it." Severus corrected him. "I do need to leave somebody in charge who's at least halfway capable of maintaining order."

"Trellawney and one of the prefects?" Draco suggested.

"The headmaster won't let me." Severus admitted. "And what prefect would voluntarily work with Trellawney?"

"Who said they had to work together?" Draco grinned back at him.

Severus did walk with Draco until they reached the entrance hall.

"Severus?" that was McGonagall's voice.

Draco turned and saw her coming down the stairs. Was she coming from Gryffindor tower or her own office?

"Poppy told me that you had problems finding someone to take your house for the evening." she
continued. "I'm taking Mr. Potter to the train right after dinner. If you want, Mr. Malfoy could come with us."

Draco glared at her. He'd much rather go alone than with the stupid Gryffindors.

"Thank you, Minerva, but that won't be necessary." Severus answered her coldly. "Mr. Malfoy isn't going to London and I believe he'll find the way to Hogsmeade on his own."

"Sending him home by floo powder, Severus?" McGonagall asked sounding slightly surprised.

"No, he'll be staying with friends in Hogsmeade. That way he can go to school there and won't miss as much of the classwork."

"You'd send a Malfoy to West Hogsmeade?" McGonagall gasped. "Severus, that's dangerous."

"He has friends there that will keep him safe."

"Do you have any idea what sort of families some of the students there come from? They've got criminals and drunkards for parents." McGonagall argued.

Draco wondered, if she'd ever met any of those kids. She obviously had no idea what the people of Merlin Park were like.

"I know those families, Minerva." Severus cut her off sharply. "They aren't any worse than those of some of our kids."

"Such families couldn't even afford sending their kids to Hogwarts, if they cared enough to want to." McGonagall shot back.

"How well do you know ... the Parkinsons for example?" Severus asked her almost conversationally.

"Hardly at all, but that's better than I want to." Minerva answered slightly confused by the sudden change in topic. "They're in with the death eaters and possibly muggle drug dealers as well, if you ask me."

"Indeed. I know them much better than you then, and I don't think I have ever seen Mrs Parkinson sober." Severus continued. "And there are enough other examples. At least West Hogsmeade has very few actual death eaters. There's no money to be made by serving Voldemort and that's what the West Hogsmeade criminals are after."

"I suppose those are the kind of elements you have to deal with in Slytherin." McGonagall allowed. "Gryffindors would never stoop so low."

"Peter Pettigrew?" was all Severus said to that.

"Pettigrew was a mistake. He never really fit into Gryffindor and he may be a criminal and death eater, but not a drunkard." Minerva declared.

"He might not be, but others are. You ought to hang out at the bar of the Leaky Cauldron a little more often. You'd be surprised who you meet there." Severus advised her.

Minerva shot him an haughty look that Draco interpreted as meaning that she wouldn't even consider doing something so improper.

Five minutes later he was on his way home. He felt rather light and happy until he passed the place
were there were still large red stains visible in the white snow. Poor Longbottom. He hadn't deserved that at all.

"I should have just thrown it at Potter." Draco told his raven. "It wouldn't be nearly as bad, if he were the one lying in the hospital wing right now."

"Caw?" was Hugin's only response.

Well, how should a raven help a situation like this? Most likely even Munin who understood so much more wouldn't have given him any better advice.

At least Longbottom was still alive and would probably get better soon. It could have been worse.

It would be nice to get back to Merlin Park and he'd finally get to see the TV and that overhead-projector thing his friends had tried to explain to him. He'd see Cathy Cat every day, play Soccer with his friends and get to cuddle Billy as much as he wanted to.

He just hoped Longbottom would get better soon.

Sarah would probably hate him now. Would she welcome him with her usual scolding? Punishment? Or ignore him right out?

He should have asked Dumbledore if Longbottom was in much pain from his injuries.

What if Sarah didn't let him in at all? He could have killed Longbottom. What if she wanted nothing to do with a murderer? Or at least almost murderer. Longbottom might still die even if Madame Pomfrey thought that he most likely wouldn't. He was a big boy, but nowhere near as tough as Gregory or Vincent.

For a moment Draco wondered what had happened to Longbottom's toad. Such a ridiculous pet, but Longbottom clearly cared for it as his interest in that burn potion had shown.

It only proved the difference between Longbottom and Gregory. If Greg had a toad he'd probably let it die from neglect. He definitely wouldn't brew potions to be prepared in case it got hurt or waste most of his free time looking for it whenever it got lost.

Only a few little wannabes were in the park when Draco arrived. Most of the kids had probably already gone home for dinner. Mely was the only one on the Soccer field practising with a tin can again, just like the very first time Draco had seen her. On another day Draco might have stopped to talk to her, but today he just trudged on. He'd have to face Sarah in a few minutes.

Mely almost didn't notice him, but when she did, she immediately dropped her can and raced after him.

"Dragon? Hey Dragon, what are you doing home today?"

Draco sighed and turned to face her. "I hurt another student. It was just an accident, but he almost died and they sent me home as punishment."

Mely looked up at his unhappy face. "But I thought you liked it here? You can be with your family again."

"Uncle Severus is still there." Draco reminded her. "And it's not the punishment, really. I didn't even get to see the boy I hurt, before I left. All I know is that he's still in the hospital wing and will have to stay there for weeks. I don't even know exactly where he's hurt or how much pain he's in."
"Is he of your gang?" Mely asked more gently.

"My gang?" Whatever did she mean by that? The Rakers were his gang and she knew exactly that none of them went to Hogwarts. "No, he's a Gryffindor."

"But that's your rival gang, isn't it?" Mely sounded confused.

Of course! That was what she'd meant before. She considered the houses gangs. "Yes, I guess you could call them that."

"Then why aren't you happy about this? You managed to hurt your rival gang."

"Because it's Longbottom I hurt. He's ... he's ..." How to put this into gang language so Mely would understand? "Well, Longbottom is in my year, but he isn't a worthy opponent. It's like I'd beaten up Marvin or Lyddie." Mely still didn't seem to understand. "Well, how would you feel, if you'd just won a fight against a kid that's no bigger than Linda. Even if that kid were a Shark, it wouldn't be right. I should have hurt Harry Potter instead. He was the one that started it and he's a good fighter too. Longbottom's just a clumsy boy who keeps tripping over his own feet."

"He isn't worth worrying about then either." Mely decided with a shrug and a smile. "Do you want to play with me? The can's much more difficult to catch than a ball."

For a moment Draco smiled as well. "No thanks, Mely. Some other time perhaps, but right now I've got to go and face Aunt Sarah. She'll probably ground me for what I did."

Mely looked a little disappointed, but wished him luck anyway.

Draco sighed. Sarah couldn't ground him until after Christmas, could she? Then again maybe if she was angry enough. After all he'd not only hurt another boy, he'd also cost the Snapes a lot of school money which might have been wasted, if Dumbledore expelled him.

Well, even if he got grounded, he'd at least have Billy to play with. It could be worse.

He pushed the door open and walked into the familiar dark corridor. A quick push on the glowing light button and everything lit up. It wouldn't really have been absolutely necessary as there was still enough light coming in from outside to allow Draco to see the stairs just fine, but it felt more cheery and he hadn't seen electric light for a while now. He'd missed it.

Of course now he could also see all the dirt and occasional graffiti and the bodies of dead flies inside the lamp that looked like black smudges much better. For a moment he wondered how much brighter the light would be if somebody would clean the lamps every once in a while.

"I'm going to find that out when I'm an electrician." he assured one of the lamps even though it flickered on disinterestedly.

When he reached the broken lamp on the third floor he considered pulling out his wand and casting lumos like the adults usually did. He was allowed to use magic during the school year, after all. But then again he wasn't going to school right now. Hogwarts had suspended him and he wasn't yet accepted at West Hogsmeade. What if doing magic now would get him expelled for sure? Would West Hogsmeade take him at all, if he had two offences committed in only one day standing against him?

The light was unnecessary anyway and Draco decided not to take any risks.

The lights went out automatically just before he reached the Snapes' door and after a moment of
hesitation Draco pushed another light button to relight them. The corridor had only one window and was consequently much darker than the stairs and it would be much easier to find the door bell with the lights on.

Right in front of the door he hesitated again. How would Sarah react? What if she hated him now? Maybe he deserved being hated for what he'd done to poor clumsy Neville Longbottom. Was being grounded even fair punishment for almost killing somebody?

What if Neville did die after all? Madame Pomfrey hadn't been absolutely sure that he'd live. Would that make Draco a murderer?

The lights went out again. Damn! Had he been standing here this long?

Okay, now he could go back to push the light button again or he could ring the doorbell in the dark and face the music. If he went back, he'd still have to ring the doorbell and face the music afterwards.

Draco rang the doorbell.

'That Dog' shot out to greet him with lots of tail wagging and barking the moment the door opened wide enough to let him through.

"Ah, there you are." Sarah ignored 'That Dog' and gestured for Draco to come in. "I was getting worried you'd run away."

Draco stepped inside feeling the relief wash over him. Worried Sarah was much better than angry Sarah. "I had to pack everything, McGonagall stopped us in the hall and then I ran into Mely down in the park." He didn't want to mention that he'd stood around in front of the door for so long. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be late. I didn't mean to hurt Longbottom!" he burst out suddenly.

"Of course you didn't, Draco." Sarah said surprisingly gently. "I'm sure it will be alright, though. Madame Pomfrey is a very good healer. Little Neville will be fine."

She pulled Draco into a tight hug while he was still wondering how she knew that Longbottom's first name was Neville. Maybe Uncle Severus had mentioned it in his letter?

"Come on now," Sarah said once she let go of him. "I've already made your bed for you and dinner's ready as well. Take your trunk to your room and wash your hands, before it gets cold."

At that Draco could almost smile again. Sarah didn't hate him! Neville would be okay and he was back home! Now if only Neville weren't hurt because of him and he weren't suspended. And Uncle Severus were home.

"And you," he heard Sarah scold behind him as he carried his trunk and backpack into his room. "Get back in here right now, or you can spend the night on the doormat!"

"Woof?" came the answer from somewhere in the corridor.

"Inside! Now!"

Draco heard the door close only moments later and when he returned to the living room 'That Dog' was there hopping around Sarah hoping to get a bit of sausage.

He was out of luck today, though. Sarah had made spaghetti for dinner and Draco knew from experience that 'That Dog' hated noodles. He could sometimes be convinced to take a small piece
of cheese and had once eaten a potato along with his piece of sausage, but eggs, noodles and vegetables just earned whoever offered them a disgusted dog-sneer. Of course it never stopped 'That Dog' from continuing his begging.

An owl arrived halfway through dinner. Draco got up to open the window and let the slightly odd looking bird in. For a moment he wondered what it was that seemed so strange about the animal, but when he turned and spread his wings to land in front of Sarah it became obvious. The tip of his left wing was white.

It sometimes happened that owls bred in captivity were a little off in their colouring, but it was generally considered a fault and Lucius Malfoy wouldn't have wanted to be caught dead with an animal like that. Especially white spots were unpopular, because they made the owl a better target for other birds of prey and attracted the attention of muggles.

Then again it was often pretty and such owls were probably very cheap. This owl most likely hadn't flown very far, Draco concluded. It was the kind of familiar a West Hogsmeade resident would own.

Sarah quickly read over the note the bird delivered and smiled. "Ah, a note from headmaster Donalds. You are welcome to start classes at nine tomorrow morning. All your classes will be 5A for now."

"5A?" Draco repeated slightly confused. "What does he mean by 5A?"

"Oh, 5 means that it's a fifth year class and A is the most advanced group. As a Hogwarts student you're expected to be able to handle that level." Sarah explained.

"Why would they need different levels?" Draco asked even more confused. "At Hogwarts everybody has the same classes."

"But Hogwarts chooses it's students." Sarah pointed out. "West Hogsmeade has a lot of squibs. How do you expect Charlie to pass the same Charms class you do? She can't even perform any charms."

"So the squibs would be class 5B?"

"In those subjects that require the performance of magic the squibs are usually in D. They have French instead of Transfiguration and Charms is called Magical Theory for them. It covers theoretical knowledge about all forms of magic, but no practical exercises. In the subjects they can participate in normally, they are in different groups according to their performance, of course."

"So there are four groups in every year, just like there are four houses at Hogwarts?"

"It depends on the subject. In Potions, for example, there are fewer students per class, so there are more groups, while there are fewer students altogether in the electives, so they would have only one or two groups there." Sarah explained. "At Hogwarts a Slytherin is a Slytherin in all classes. At West Hogsmeade a student might be group A in Potions, C in Transfigurations, B in Charms and A again in Arithmancy. That system also allows the teachers to slow down their pace for the weaker students without boring the more talented ones with repeated explanations of the basics. A 5C Charms class might still be working on fourth year charms while the 5A class might try sixth year charms."

Draco thought that over. Sixth year charms? Was he really up to that challenge? Maybe, but what about sixth year Transfigurations?
"What if I can't manage? We've just had normal fifth year classes at Hogwarts."

"Then the teacher will grade you down to 5B after a while. It shouldn't be a problem as they often switch students around during the year."

That made Draco realise another problem. "But then how do they organise the lesson plans? If for example 5A had Charms at the same time as 5B has Transfigurations they can't put a 5A Charms student in 5B Transfigurations."

"All classes of the same year have the same subject at the same time." Sarah said simply.

"How many teachers have they got?" Draco exclaimed incredulously.

"Usually two for each subject, but only one for the less popular electives."

"But how can two teachers teach four classes at the same time?" That just didn't make sense.

"Magic." Sarah laughed at Draco's dumbfounded look. "I'm not sure whether they use time-turners or magical twins, but it works just fine. Just don't get a shock if you see a teacher meeting himself in the halls."

"Isn't it quite exhausting to time travel this much?"

"That's why I suspect them of using magical twins. The spell is much more difficult to perform, but the result is that you're split up so you can be in two places at once rather than live the time period twice," Sarah told him. "The two versions of you reunite after a predetermined amount of time and the only trouble is to sort out the memories of both and not mix them up."

Draco nodded slowly. West Hogsmeade was getting more and more fascinating. "Does it say anything about school books? Most of mine are different from the other Rakers'."

Sarah nodded. That was indeed a problem. They couldn't afford to buy Draco another set of books especially if he'd only need them for a little over three weeks before he returned to Hogwarts.

"Didn't you say Mike still has all of his fifth year books?" she asked suddenly.

"Well, the ones he didn't lend me for the year." Draco amended.

"Good. Why don't you run over and ask him if he can lend you the rest for a few weeks as well?" Sarah suggested.

Run over to Mike's flat? Draco jumped up immediately. That way he could tell his friend that he was back too!

"Draco!" Sarah called him back just in time before he raced out the door. "Take the equipment list with you!"

"The equipment list?" Draco took the piece of parchment she held out to him.

"Just to make sure that they're all the right books. They could be using a new book this year that we'd have to buy."

Draco didn't like Sarah's frown when she said the last part at all. He'd already cost the Snapes so much money and now he might need even more school books.
"Draco?" Mike was quite surprised when he opened the door and saw who their unexpected visitor was.

"Hi, Mike." Draco grinned. "I'm home for Christmas early."

"Really? Why? Did the castle burn down or something?" Mike obviously wouldn't believe that Hogwarts' Christmas holidays started in November.

"I'm suspended until after the holidays." he said no longer grinning. "Uncle Severus arranged for me to go to school here, though and Aunt Sarah sends me to ask, if you could help me out with some school books. I don't think she wants to buy more books."

"Sure, no problem. Come on in and we'll see what you need." Mike invited him.

Draco followed him through the living room, where he shouted a quick greeting at Mike's surprised parents, and into his room.

Mike's cat gave them an annoyed look when Mike started pulling down the books from the top shelf and decided to retreat out of the room. You never knew when boys started lifting heavy objects. Those things made terrible noises when they fell and they just might end up dropping onto an unsuspecting cat's head or tail. Not to mention all the noise boys usually made as soon as they had company!

Mike however completely ignored the cat as he stacked up the books on his bed.

"So why did you get suspended?" Mike asked once they were both sitting on the bed with the books between them.

"For throwing loaded snowballs." Draco sighed. Would he have to explain that to everybody he knew?

"For throwing loaded snowballs." Mike repeated drawing each word out as if trying to make sense of it.

Draco wasn't entirely sure what Mike found wrong with that answer, but decided an explanation was in order. "It wasn't my fault. Potter started it and got suspended too."

"I still don't see why that should warrant a suspension." Mike said.

"Well, I accidentally hit Neville Longbottom and he might die." Draco admitted. "I didn't mean it. Didn't even see him until he screamed and the ball hit."

"He might die from being hit by an ordinary loaded snowball? What kind of wimp is that Neville?"

"The biggest I ever met. A near squib, too. I'm surprised he's in Gryffindor at all. He's such a coward, he should have been in Hufflepuff." Somehow Draco felt like crying, but he bit back the tears. "Keeps forgetting everything, can't do anything right. He's so scared of Uncle Severus he starts trembling whenever he just looks at him. But he was getting better at Potions this year. Managed to complete every assignment and Uncle Severus said his essays are really good. He just doesn't have enough magic."

"Still, a little stone in a snowball shouldn't be able to kill anyone. Wizard or squib." Mike declared. "It might knock someone out for a while, even take an eye out, but I can't see how it would kill him."
"I don't think it was the injury from the snowball's impact that was that dangerous. And I was only using ice, no stone, anyway." Draco corrected. "It knocked him off his broom, you see. Neville is a very bad flyer and never played Quiddich. He just isn't as used to dodging Bludgers as Potter and I. Potter might have been able to dodge, or at least would have remained on his broom after a hit. Neville either fainted up there or just let go. I don't know exactly how, but he fell pretty far."

"Oh, well maybe you really shouldn't have thrown snowballs that high."

"Potter and his friends started it all. I was just up there watching Hugin learn to fly and they started throwing snowballs at me." Draco defended himself. "I didn't mean to hit anyone."

"He lives with his grandmother." he added after staring at the floor for a moment. "I think his parents were killed by death eaters or something like that. Always keeps losing his pet toad. Uncle Severus once threatened to cut the stupid animal up for potion ingredients if he ever interrupted his class again and Neville went all white and started to cry. I heard he didn't dare let go of the toad for the rest of the day, absolutely refused to even take off one hand to pick up his wand or quill."

"He's still a Gryffindor, though, your enemy." Mike pointed out.

"Yes, but he's even less threatening than Pretty Ricky. Pathetic really." More staring at the floor.

"So what do you need?" Mike tried to steer his friend's thoughts back to school books and indeed they were soon too busy picking out school books to think about Neville Longbottom much.

"Okay, that's all the books." Draco said a little later. "Aunt Sarah will be happy to hear that she won't need to buy any."

"What else is on that list?" Mike asked him to continue. "Maybe there's something else I can lend you."

"A quill, ink pot and parchment." Draco read out. "I've got all that. A cauldron and basic potions kit. No problem, we needed more than that at Hogwarts and I live in a potions lab. If I run out of an ingredient, I'm sure Aunt Sarah can lend me some. Gloves and uniform robes and hat." Draco stopped. "I can't wear my Hogwarts uniform, can I?"

"I don't think so. Even if the school would allow it, the other students would mistake you for a rich kid." Mike frowned. "You don't need the hat unless you join the school choir. We usually just wear our caps to school."

"But where can I get new robes overnight? I have to be in class tomorrow at nine." Draco didn't want to look like a rich kid on his first day at West Hogsmeade. He'd much rather look like a Merlin Park kid. Then the other kids would be afraid of him and treat him with the proper respect.

"Maybe you could wear my spares." Mike suggested. "Try them on."

Draco quickly slipped into the nice green robe Mike handed him, but even over his muggle clothes it was obvious that it was much too big. Mike was after all about a head taller than him.

"That won't do." Mike decided at once. "It makes you look even smaller than you are. People are going to pick on you, if you show up looking like that."

"I guess you don't have any old school robes left, do you?" Draco asked hopefully.

"No, no little siblings to keep them for." Mike shook his head. Then suddenly his face brightened. "Mary!"
"What?"

"Mary probably kept her old robes for Beth and Beth isn't old enough to use them yet." Mike grinned.

"But Mary is even bigger than you are." Draco reminded him.

"She wasn't in her first year." Mike continued to grin. "Her first or second year robes ought to fit you. Come on, lets ask her."

"We're going to Mary's." Mike informed his parents simply as they walked through the living room again on their way out.

They raced down the stairs and Mike who was as usual faster than Draco rang the bell at Mary's flat. Beth opened the door and blinked at the sight of the two out of breath boys.

"Hi, Beth." panted Mike. "We need to talk to Mary."

Beth blinked once more, then smiled. "Sure, come in."

Mary was sitting in the living room apparently doing homework.

"Dragon's coming to school with us for a while." Mike announced. "Do you have any old uniform robes that might fit him?"

Beth sighed. Obviously she still wasn't over the fact that she couldn't go to school with the rest of the gang, yet. Now they'd all be together. All except her.

Mary however looked perfectly happy at the news. "Really? For how long?"

"Until Christmas for now. Then I'll most likely go back to Hogwarts." Draco answered. Now she'd ask him why and he'd have to tell her about Neville Longbottom in front of her whole family.

"What classes will you be in?"

Well, that was a much better question. "Aunt Sarah said 5A for now. What she told me about it sounds really difficult, though."

"They say that Hogwarts is a lot harder." Mike threw in. "And you can always switch into B, if it doesn't work out."

"Can't I visit for a few weeks as well?" Beth asked suddenly.

Mary looked exasperated. "No, you're too young. How often do I have to tell you that?"

"What about the robes?" Mike interrupted quickly before the sisters got into a fight over it. "I think something from second year would probably do."

"Down in the basement." Mary said. "Mum, can I have the keys?"

"Don't give away your robes for free, Mary." her mother admonished her as she handed her the keys. "Beth could well use them in two or three years and they're worth good money."

"Remember when Beth was so sick a few years ago?" Mary asked her almost challengingly. "Dragon's aunt never asked us for anything in return for the potion that saved her. And he'll only borrow them until Christmas anyway. Beth won't need them that soon."
"We could still use some cleaning potion for the furniture." Mary's stepfather threw in.

"I'll see what I can do." Draco promised. "Uncle Severus is at Hogwarts at the moment, though and Aunt Sarah's speciality are healing potions. I don't know how good her cleaning potions are." Then he remembered the time he'd come home all covered in garbage. "I think they're pretty good, though."

Mary's mother nodded her agreement and they took off into the basement. The light bulb in Mary's 'cage' didn't flicker the way that the Snapes' did, but they still had to light their wands to be able to see in the back corner. Luckily all the boxes were labelled and Mary remembered quite well where her old robes were stored.

The robes were a little wide, but had about the right length.

"I'm sure your aunt will be able to fix the shoulders with a quick sewing charm." Mike decided.

"Just remind her not to cut away any of the material." Beth warned them. "I don't want to have to wear skin tight twingy robes all through my second year."

"Don't worry, I'll tell her they're yours." Draco assured her.

Sarah was indeed able to fix the robes very quickly and Draco thought he looked great in Mary's old green school robes. He liked them much better than the boring old Hogwarts uniform. Now all that was left to do was pack his backpack for tomorrow's classes.

"Didn't the headmaster include a schedule?" Draco asked Sarah after having gone over the letter twice.

"No, he probably wrote that at home and didn't have one around. He wouldn't know it by heart, you know."

Right, since West Hogsmeade wasn't a boarding school the teachers and headmaster would go home after the last classes every day instead of staying there like the ones at Hogwarts. Dumbledore had only been in the school when he'd summoned Draco and Potter after the accident, because he lived there. The West Hogsmeade staff would all have been long gone by the time Uncle Severus had written his letter.

"Do you know the fifth years' schedule, Mike?" How was he supposed to pack his backpack, if he didn't know what classes he'd have?

"No, but Cathy's in fifth year. You could just run up and ask her."

"Right! She doesn't even know I'm back yet!" Draco shouted and dashed out.

Mike grinned at Sarah. "Guess he won't be back for a while."

A/N: So, what do you think of Dumbledore's reaction? Will he let Draco return to Hogwarts after Christmas? And how will Draco fit in at the new school?

In the next chapter: Draco's first day at West Hogsmeade Wizarding School, the Transfiguration teacher calls the headmaster about Draco and Grindelwald's childhood.
Chapter 43: West Hogsmeade Wizarding School

Mike came to get Draco right after breakfast the next morning. There was a short delay when Sarah insisted that he had to leave Hugin behind.

"He's flying now, so it's only good for him that he learns to look after himself a little more." she declared. "And he wouldn't like it at school anyway."

"He always went to class with me at Hogwarts," Draco protested, but it was no use. The raven had to stay at home.

Instead Sarah handed him a few coins. "Here's your lunch money. Now go before you're late on your first day."

Hugin cawed desperately when the door closed behind Draco separating them. Draco could hear his pleading calls through the door until 'That Dog' started barking. Was he protesting Draco's departure as well, or just complaining about Hugin's noise? Draco had no way to tell.

"So, are you nervous?" Mike teased as they walked down the stairs to where they'd meet Cathy and Mary.

"Why? Should I be?" Draco laughed. He wasn't nervous at all, just a little excited. After all Cathy Cat would be in most of his classes. What could go wrong, if he just followed her?

Cathy didn't take either of his electives, but that wasn't a problem since Charlie was in those classes. The only time he'd be alone would be in 5A Potions since Cathy was in 5B and Charlie 5F due to her lack of magic.

Squibs, Cathy had explained, could brew some potions that didn't necessarily require magic and they also learned a little muggle Chemistry in their Potions classes, but other potions, even some actually very simple ones, they could only understand theoretically. Charlie would also join them in History of Magic and Herbology, she'd promised, though.

That still left Draco alone in Potions. Cathy hadn't been entirely sure who took 5A Potions, but none of the Rakers were in that class.

"The Shark twins are in 5C, I think and Pat and Belinda are in 5B with me, but I'm not sure about Bianca. She could be in 5A. Oh, and so could Sunny Sonja and Evil Eric." she'd told him.

It had taken him a moment to remember that Pat and Bianca were members of the Lions, but who were Sunny Sonja, Evil Eric and Belinda? Surely Cathy couldn't mean little Linda of the Raker wannabes?
Cathy had laughed when he'd suggested that. "Oh no, they're in Angel Anna's gang."

Oh right, the Black Ring. He'd always been so distracted by Anna's beautiful long dark legs that he'd never paid much attention to the rest of her gang. They were still at peace with the Rakers, though, so there shouldn't be any problems, Draco hoped. The fact that the twins were in his year was a lot more worrying.

"What years are the rest of the Sharks in anyway?" He asked Mike while they waited. Where were the girls? "Cathy said the twins are fifth years, but she didn't mention the others."

"Ricky and Chris are sixth years, Mark and Robin seventh." he stopped for a moment. "I'm not sure about Amber. Either third or fourth year, I think. Lyddie is in fourth and Marvin and Bobby both second."

So he'd only have to deal with the twins. That was at least one bit of good news there. The twins were probably the most dangerous of the Sharks.

Then again Mark and Chris weren't that harmless either.

"Do you get a lot of trouble from Chris in school?" he asked Mike. No reason to worry about Pretty Ricky. Susie the Dancemouse would probably be able to scare him off, if she had to.

"Not much." Mike grinned. "He might, if he had some backup, but Larry scares him a little, I think. He knows Ricky well enough to know he'd be alone against both of us."

Cathy bounced down the stairs wearing her dazzling smile and greeted Draco with a hug and a kiss on the cheek and a minute or so later Mary and Beth arrived at a run.

"Sorry we're late." Mary panted. "Little sister misplaced her homework."

Beth frowned. "It's not my fault you put your Transfigurations book on top of my scroll. It won't even roll up properly anymore."

"Then your teacher will have an easier time reading it." Mary shrugged.

"She'll lower the grade for bad presentation." Beth argued.

The others ignored them, so Draco decided to do the same. The rest of the gang was already waiting in the park and Jack was probably going to greet them with a tirade about being late, but just clapped his mouth shut again without a sound when he saw Draco.

"Hi, I'm visiting until Christmas." Draco told him with an impish grin.

"Really?" "Why didn't you tell us sooner?" "And you're coming to school with us?"

"I'm suspended for hurting another student." That didn't seem to interest them all that much. Obviously it was more important what year he'd be in, what classes he took and next to whom he'd sit for lunch.

They had to hurry, though, which stopped them from swarming Draco with too many questions. Beth left them to walk off into a side street just before they reached the market place. Ah, so that was why he'd never seen the primary school before. The market had always been the bigger attraction.

The school building looked just the same as it had back in the summer only that now the doors
were wide open and chatting groups of students were standing in front of it or just walking in.

The noise level dropped quite suddenly when the Rakers arrived, though and several students turned to stare at Draco.

"Hey, who's that?" "I don't think I've ever seen that guy before." "Well, he's obviously a Raker." Draco could hear them whisper to each other.

"Oh no!" groaned somebody right in front of the door.

All eyes turned to the speaker.

"Morning Fishie." Draco greeted Mark the Shark. "Something wrong?"

"You aren't still scared of Dragon, are you?" Jack added loud enough for everyone to hear.

'Well, thank you for the great entrance, Mark.' Draco thought as he walked past the Sharks' leader and into the school. That ought to keep any possible challengers in his own year at a distance.

The entrance hall was smaller and a lot shabbier than the one at Hogwarts, but much wider than the stairway at the house in Merlin Park. The staircase they walked up to get to their classes was wide, but simply practical without all the decorations Draco was used to from the castle. There were dents in the stone steps from all the use, he noticed as he walked.

On the first floor they split up rather hurriedly since it was almost nine. Susie disappeared into the first classroom on the left.

Draco caught a quick glance inside and saw Luke sitting in there next to Jerry and there also was a redheaded little boy who seemed somehow familiar. Some yellow peeked out at the neck of his school robes. An Avengers t-shirt maybe?

Sammie and Jack took the corridor to the right, while Mike and Larry went left. Draco looked to Cathy and Charlie quizzically.

"Up to the second floor." Charlie said. "You've got Transfigurations, I've got French."

Draco wrinkled his nose at that.

"Hey, French isn't that bad." Charlie argued misunderstanding his reaction. "At least it's quite useful at the ballet. They love to talk French there."

Draco just sighed and resigned himself to his fate. He'd start off by making a bad impression. Couldn't his first class at the new school have been Potions?

Ah, but then he wouldn't have had Cathy in there with him.

They climbed up to the second floor and then went right. Charlie left them at a door with a picture of the Eiffel Tower stuck to it with spellotape. Well, no doubt that that was the French class.

The next door just wore a piece of parchment flashing the inscription 'Transfigurations C' at them as they passed it while 'Transfigurations B' had been formed out of little drawings of letter shaped objects or animals. Draco really liked the little snakes that formed the Ss, but there was no time to take a closer look.

The Transfigurations A door looked comparatively boring with the letters simply transfigured into the wood. Then again Draco knew how difficult that was to do, so he probably should appreciate it
"Ready?" Cathy asked as she laid a hand on he door knob.

Draco nodded. "As ready as I'll ever be to start my first day with my weakest subject."

"Don't worry. I'm sure Professor Winter will understand. He's really nice, you know." Cathy promised as she opened the door and let him walk in first.

Draco immediately recognised Pat staring at him from the second row and there was one Shark twin sitting on a desk right next to the door with his back to Draco. He was a little surprised that the twins had apparently been separated in Transfigurations. Were their results really that different?

Or had Professor Winter just separated them so he wouldn't confuse them all the time?

Well, maybe the other one simply was sick and had had to stay home today.

Two girls in the first row looked familiar as well, probably Sunny Sonja and Belinda as they wore the Black Ring's colours. Draco was glad that he'd remembered to wear his cap as almost everybody in the class was wearing some kind of gang colours.

The classroom itself looked strange to Draco which served to distract him from the curious stares he was getting from his classmates. The walls were white and bare except for a few ink stains and graffiti scrawled onto them mostly next to the desks.

The desks themselves were plain wood with what appeared to be metal feet and to Draco's surprise they were completely flat and horizontal, unlike the slightly tilted ones with holes for ink pots they had in most classrooms at Hogwarts. Each desk had room for two students and a hook at each side to hang up a satchel or backpack on.

There were nine of them arranged in three rows of three desks and the teachers desk which looked little different except that it was a little wider than the students' desks and had some drawers. The teacher's desk stood slightly to the right to allow the students a good view of the blackboard.

If that even was a blackboard! Maybe it would be called a whiteboard? It was all white and shiny and Draco wondered how chalk was expected to stick to such a smooth surface, but then he didn't even see any chalk around either.

An old cupboard stood behind the door looking slightly out of place thanks to its dark brown, almost black colour.

The most curious piece of furniture however was a... well, a thing that stood on the left side of the teacher's desk. It was a little cart with a strange black box on top of it. The box had a long neck and, well, a sort of head that faced the white blackboard with a face that looked a little like a light bulb. Draco would probably have shrugged it off as the unfortunate product of an unsuccessful transfiguration, if it hadn't also had a cable that could be plugged in. Everything electric still fascinated him, however and he walked over to inspect it more closely.

The top of the box was made out of a glass plate which he couldn't see through because of the weird circle pattern on it.

"That's the overhead projector." Cathy told him. "We told you about it back in summer, remember?"

"Oh right. It projects pictures out of light onto the walls, you said?" Draco remembered their
hopeless attempts to describe it. Now he finally understood why it had been so hard.

"Yes, I'm sure you'll see it sometime this week, but Professor Winter doesn't make much use of it, so it probably won't happen in this lesson. Come on, we can sit over there."

Draco gave the projector one last longing look and followed Cathy to the desk right behind the Shark twin. There was no way for him to tell whether it was Alex or Andy.

"Sorry, Pat." Cathy said as they passed the Lion girl. "I'll be sitting with my boyfriend today."

Draco blushed slightly, Pat looked disappointed and several boys sighed devastatedly.

Even though there was room for eighteen students there were only eleven kids there, if you counted Draco. The last row remained empty. He wondered whether that was due to the fact that it was an advanced class or whether all classes at West Hogsmeade were this small. Hogwarts usually had about twenty to twenty-two students in each class. This looked like it was just one house alone.

The sudden ringing of a bell made Draco jump. "What's that?"

"The bell?" Cathy asked mystified.

Draco nodded.

"It signals the start and end of classes." Cathy explained. "Don't they have one at Hogwarts?"

"No, the Professors decide when to start and end their classes." Draco answered equally surprised. Why ever would anyone want a bell to order them about?"

"Oh, here they do too, but the bell is a reminder to them when it's time to stop and to us when we're late for class."

Draco was just about to comment that he hated the sound when Professor Winter entered and the class fell silent and stood at their desks most leaning against them rather lazily.

"Good morning, class!" Professor Winter greeted them cheerfully.

"Morning." the students answered much less enthusiastically as they sat down.

"Bubbles, put that gum away." the Professor ordered one of the two boys wearing orange scarves that were sitting at the window desk in the second row.

"Bubbles?" Draco mouthed at Cathy.

She nodded. "Bubblegum." she whispered. "Cause he chews all the time."

Bubbles rolled his eyes, but dug a paper handkerchief out of his backpack and spit his gum into it.

"Two, four, six... eleven." Professor Winter mumbled to himself as he quickly counted his students. "Eleven? What's that? I'm used to having too few students occasionally, but I think this is the first time I've ever had too many."

The class laughed at his little confused act.

"Okay, what to do now?" he made a big show of looking through both rows until he reached Draco.
"Aha! An unfamiliar face!" he declared triumphantly. "Who are you and how did you end up in my class?"

Draco decided to get up as he did at Hogwarts when asked to answer a question. "My name's Dragon and I'm supposed to be here." Professor Winter raised his eyebrows so Draco decided to explain a little more: "My aunt has a letter from the headmaster saying I am to attend the 5A classes at this school from today until the Christmas holidays."

"A letter from our headmaster? Ah well, then he ought to be able to clear this up." Professor Winter with a simple flick of his wand transfigured the white blackboard into a fireplace, then pulled something out of his pocket, tapped his wand against it and threw it into the new fireplace. "Ralph?"

Draco blinked. That had been fast. No matter how much he played the clown, Professor Winter was obviously good. Would McGonagall have been able to conjure up a working fireplace this quickly?

A head appeared in the fire. "Yes, Walter, what's the problem?"

"There's a student I've never seen before in my 5A class saying he's got your permission to be here until Christmas." Professor Winter reported.

"Favour to Professor Snape of Hogwarts." headmaster Ralph Donalds explained. "The boy's his nephew or something like that. Dumbledore suspended him, so he's here now. Just add him to your catalogue and continue as usual."

Walter Winter pulled a muggle looking booklet out of his other pocket. "Yes?"


"No, thank you, that's all I wanted to know. You could have told me that yesterday, though."

"I would, if I'd known yesterday." the headmaster grumbled just before he disappeared presumably to answer his door.

Who'd call on the headmaster at this time? A teacher? Or a student who'd been caught at some misdeed? This early it wasn't likely unless West Hogsmeade teachers were in the habit of sending students to the headmaster for being late, Draco supposed.

Another flick of Winter's wand and the white blackboard was back. "Alright class. Take out a roll of parchment and try to transfigure it into a rat."

Draco almost sighed in relief. Parchment to rat shouldn't be that difficult. They'd done pieces of wood to rats at Hogwarts two weeks ago. This shouldn't be any harder.

Indeed he managed to be the third student to complete the transfiguration. Gently stroking his rat's soft fur he watched his classmates at work until everyone of them held a perfect grey rat.

Not a single West Hogsmeade student seemed in any way too disgusted to touch a rat, Draco noted with secret triumph. Back at Hogwarts Pansy had immediately protested the assignment and been unable to go anywhere near one of the rats and he'd heard that Lavender Brown of Gryffindor had jumped onto McGonagall's desk shrieking and that a Hufflepuff boy had almost fainted at the sight of his friend's rat. Both Lavender and the Hufflepuff were said to have been unable to perform the Transfiguration at all.
Professor Winter inspected each of the rats, obviously no more bothered by them than his students. He even lifted their little paws to check if their nails had formed correctly.

An angry squeak from the desk in front of Draco and Cathy was the first thing that Draco saw him lose his smile over. "Andy, what the hell are you doing?" he demanded angrily. "Don't you know that one mustn't pick up a rat by the tail? You're hurting the poor thing."

Well, that cleared up the question which twin it was.

Andy frowned as if to say 'Who the hell cares.', but did lift his other hand to support the rat's body.

"Very good, class." Professor Winter declared once he'd checked all the rats. "Now turn them back."

Draco blinked. Had he heard that right? Turn them back? McGonagall had always just collected the transfigured items after class.

Still, it couldn't be that hard. It was just the opposite transfiguration. Rat into parchment. Seeing that Cathy, Pat and Bubbles' neighbour had already completed the task he picked up his wand again and pointed it at the rat.

He managed, but it took him three attempts and he was the last to finish.

"Did you have a problem with that, Dragon?" Professor Winter asked kindly.

"Well, I've never transfigured anything back before." he admitted a little nervously. "And Transfigurations isn't exactly my best subject. I'm much better at Potions."

The teacher picked up Draco's parchment and inspected it quickly. "It looks fine to me." he diagnosed just as the bell rang again. "I suggest you practise this Transfiguration at home a few times then tell me if you're still having difficulties after the weekend. The rest of you, don't forget that your essays are due on Friday and for our next lesson we'll each need a glass object. A glass, vial or even a broken bottle will do, but make sure that it's really glass. No plastic Coca Cola bottles will be tolerated in this classroom!" he threatened playfully.

"That guy's crazy." Draco diagnosed once he was sure they were out of Professor Winter's hearing distance.

"Yes, but he's a good show and almost never gets angry." Cathy answered.

"He did snap at Andy." Draco pointed out.

"Well, he really disapproves of cruelty to animals and Andy was hurting his rat. The only other thing that will cause him to react like that is vandalism."

"Where to now?" Draco asked her since they'd reached the stairs once again.

"First the ground floor to get my History book from the locker, then first floor for the class." Cathy replied. "You can put your books in my locker."

"Thanks. They are a bit heavy to carry around all the time. Actually they're Mike's, though." Draco told her while they picked their way through the crowds of students on the stairs.

Luckily most of the others were headed down to the lockers as well. When they reached the entrance hall Cathy showed him a side door he hadn't even noticed before.
"Through there's the wardrobe. If you bring house shoes you can change your shoes in there and hang up your cloak." she explained. "Sometimes something gets stolen, though and you can bet there'll be at least one prank played on your clothes every term. Shoes thrown out the window, frogs in your pockets, that sort of thing."

"Don't any of the gang use it?" Draco asked remembering that they'd all walked straight up the stairs this morning.

"Sure we do. There just wasn't much time left this morning." Cathy shrugged. "There's always a big crowd in there in the morning and it takes a while to fight your way through. We'd probably have been late."

Cathy's locker was a very long and thin cupboard in a long row of others that looked exactly like it. Draco was surprised to see that she'd somehow managed to squeeze in her cauldron even though he was convinced that it was wider than the locker. He'd have to find a way to drag his own cauldron about since it would never fit in alongside Cathy's and Uncle Severus insisted that repeated shrinking and enlarging would damage it. And it was Uncle Severus' cauldron after all, even if he'd lent it to Draco.

They had to move some of Cathy's books aside to fit Draco's in and had to hurry back upstairs as soon as they were done. It was much easier to run up the stairs with only one heavy book in the backpack.

The History of Magic classrooms were on the right corridor on the first floor. Draco remembered Sammie and Jack heading this way for their first lesson and wondered whether either of them might have had History.

The doors were decorated with photographs of famous wizards and witches, all of them figures of rather recent history, probably since wizards had only been using photography for a little over sixty years and actual portraits were much too expensive. Draco frowned at the happily waving picture of Cornelius Fudge that decorated History of Magic B.

"There was a petition to the teachers to have that picture replaced with one of a decent wizard once." Cathy remarked when she saw his look. "Unfortunately there's some ministry law that requires the school to have a picture of the current minister displayed where everyone can see it. The headmaster decreed that this was the least annoying place for him to hang."

"There wasn't one at Hogwarts." Draco said a little surprised.

Cathy shrugged. "Well, maybe the law doesn't include private schools, or maybe it's just cleverly hidden between some of the portraits. Who'd notice a single picture in all that chaos you've got on those castle walls?"

History of Magic A had a very happy looking picture of Dumbledore which Draco would probably have liked much better than Fudge, if it hadn't reminded him of the last time he'd seen the Hogwarts headmaster and the events that had led up to that meeting.

Inside the classroom looked much the same as the Transfigurations one except that there were some more photos on the walls which made it look a little more welcoming. This time all nine desks were needed, though and Draco was beginning to suspect that it was the big number of students in the French class that had caused the Transfigurations class to be so small. There still weren't as many students as in Binns' class at Hogwarts, but then it would have gotten very tight, if there had been any more desks in here.
Charlie waved at them from the back of the room where she'd saved them two seats. They had to wind their way through the groups of chatting students to get to her and Charlie quickly scooted over to the left and indicated for Draco to take the middle chair.

"Where were you? I had a really hard time defending the additional seat for this long." Charlie frowned at the pretty blonde girl that was now sitting next to her as she said that.

The blonde just shrugged and turned away.

"At my locker." Cathy said. "We had to rearrange some things to fit Dragon's books in."

"How was French?" Draco asked to distract Charlie.

"Oh, the usual. Mostly discussions about forgotten homework and a little reading from the book." Charlie answered. "I bet you Transfigurations was a lot more interesting."

The bell rang in the middle of Cathy's description of Professor Winter flooing the headmaster and Draco started once again.

"I hate that sound." he commented.

"Well, it's much more pleasant at the end of a lesson." Cathy declared.

"So what did Donalds say?" Charlie pressed.

Obviously the teachers didn't floo the headmaster during class time everyday.

The History of Magic teacher arrived almost ten minutes late for class and by that time the noise level in the room had gotten so high it took her another three minutes to get herself noticed and bring the class to order.

Draco felt a little disappointed once she finally managed. He'd enjoyed the view of the little witch yelling and waving a roll of parchment in the air.

"Sit down and shut up!" she finally ordered once the noise had died down.

Then she rolled up her parchment and began to take attendance. Draco was beginning to suspect that they wouldn't get any work done.

Just like Professor Winter she called the students by their first names and some even by nicknames, but unlike him didn't comment on Bubbles' gum. Bubbles' friend who'd done so well in Transfigurations was apparently named Keith and the blond girl Charlie had argued with answered to Svenja.

"Malfoy, Dra ... Drake?" the teacher read out a moment later.

Draco winced. "That's Draco," he corrected her sharply. "Draco or Dragon, but definitely not Drake." Well, at least the headmaster seemed to have remembered to add him to the class lists after Professor Winter had called him.

"Oh, okay. Sorry about that, Dragon." She apparently didn't dare to try to pronounce the Latin name again.

Draco wondered how she managed to teach the names of Goblin leaders, if she couldn't handle simple Latin. And how did she perform spells? Most of them had Latin names after all.
As he watched her read out the rest of the names it suddenly dawned on him. She didn't carry a wand! The History of Magic teacher was a squib!

At first the realisation came as a shock, but then he almost laughed at himself. Why should a History teacher have to have magical powers? The subject was entirely theoretical. You didn't need magic to know and teach historical facts.

"All right, it looks like everybody's here, so let's get to work." the to Draco still nameless teacher stated. "Uh ... Where were we?"

Draco almost groaned. At least Binns despite his inability to remember his students' names always knew where he'd left off in his droning. Or maybe he didn't, but he always found a place to drone on from on his own.

"Belinda?" the teacher picked out of the lazily raised hands.

The three Black Ring members were sitting together right in front of the teacher.

"You were telling us about Grindelwald, Professor." Belinda reported.

"Ah yes, Grindelwald." the teacher smiled. "Now where are my notes?"

Draco took the time to take a look at Evil Eric. Belinda and Sonja had seemed familiar even though he hadn't known their names before, but Eric looked like a total stranger. How could he have overlooked him so completely? Or was it just that all he could see was his back and occasionally profile when he turned his head to look at Belinda?

"Ah yes, here they are." the teacher finally announced pulling forth a muggle folder from her desk. She opened it and continued. "Grindelwald was originally born in a small town in Germany, but his family lost their castle after his father was sentenced to ten years imprisonment for repeatedly performing magic in front of muggles. For a while Mrs. Grindelwald and her three children stayed with her great grandfather in Berlin, but after the old wizard died they soon ran out of money again and had to sell the house. There were several rich muggles interested in buying the nice villa, but due to the many magical objects inside the ministry forbade the Grindelwalds to sell it to muggles and finally ended up buying it itself for much less money than it was worth. Meanwhile Mr. Grindelwald, the father of our Grindelwald, had died in prison and since back then it was almost impossible for witches to find well paid work in Germany unless they were truly unusually skilled and the children were all still in school the family was forced to move into a tiny flat in a rather bad part of he city." she paused to see if there were any questions, but found no raised hands.

A father in prison, a corrupt ministry and an unemployed mother? The story sounded far too familiar to West Hogsmeade residents to raise any questions.

"Mrs Grindelwald remarried two years later and even though her new husband wasn't rich things improved a lot for the family. The two younger children were adopted by their stepfather, but Grindelwald refused to give up his real father's name. It is generally assumed that his father's imprisonment and death and the ministry's refusal to let the Grindelwalds sell their villa to muggles led to Grindelwalds turn towards the dark arts. It is noteworthy that, though definitely no fan of muggles and never considerate of anyone muggle or wizard, Grindelwald's main intention was always to overthrow the government and unlike his successor Voldemort he never engaged in actual anti-muggle campaigns."

That was interesting indeed and this time several hands shot into the air. The teacher stopped, considered for a moment, then nodded towards a girl in the second row.
"Yes, Lisa?"

"What about his great muggle massacre? You know, the one where he levelled half the city and they almost couldn't cover it up?"

"Ah yes, that looks like an attack on the muggles at first glance, but actually it was Grindelwald's first attempt at destroying the ministry. Many muggles were simply unlucky enough to happen to be in the way of his extremely powerful explosion spell and were killed in the original attack while many more died when the ministry's protection spells deflected the attack and it was instead unleashed into a densely populated part of the city. Seeing that his most powerful weapon had failed Grindelwald followed his first attack up with a series of fireballs in the hope that the protection was weakened enough to collapse under several smaller spells. The shield however held and most of his fireballs were dispersed into more harmless sparks just as the shield had been designed to do. Again muggles that in their panic ran into Grindelwald's way were killed however and several fires broke out from the sparks. The ministry wizards were too busy trying to strengthen their shields to have the time to cast fire extinguishing spells on the muggle buildings as well and the muggle fire brigade simply couldn't get through the chaos in time to save the muggles caught inside. It is exaggerated however to say that Grindelwald levelled half the city. He left several blocks in ruins, maybe even half a district, but not half the city."

Now Draco raised his hand as well. He'd never asked a question in History of Magic before, but since most of his classmates were obviously rather eager to do so it didn't seem odd at all.

The teacher wanting to get to know her new student called on him at once.

"If the shielding spells were designed to disperse attacks and did so with the fireballs, then why didn't they do the same with the explosion spell?" he asked. "Deflecting it into the muggle city and a densely populated area at that sounds rather risky."

"Actually they did." the teacher answered to his surprise. "Only the spell was so powerful that instead of becoming harmless its destructive power was simply spread over a wider area. Grindelwald must have seriously overdosed the explosive power of his attack and it was almost a miracle that the shields held against such a powerful spell at all."

"So how did they manage to cover up such big destruction?" a boy called Noel asked next. "That many dead muggles have to attract attention."

"Yes, under normal circumstances it would have been impossible to cover up, but the muggles just happened to be at war at the time. It was simply blamed on enemy planes bombing the city and the destruction left behind fit in well with that story. I think it wasn't even the ministry that came up with the idea, but the muggles themselves who saw the result and made the assumption."

The muggles had been at war? Muggles had wars? But how could they cast attack spells? How did they move their armies?

Draco raised his hand again, but unfortunately the bell announced that they had already run out of class time.

"For homework write an essay about Grindelwald's youth and the German wizarding society of that time." the teacher shouted while the students were already packing up.

"Do you think there are books about muggle wars in the school library?" Draco asked his friends as they rushed out along with the other students.
"Of course." answered Charlie without hesitation. "In the Muggle Studies section."

"Why?" asked Cathy. "Do you want to include his first attack in your essay? I don't think that's what she meant by, 'write about his youth.'"

"No, I just want to know what that war was about." Draco told them. "So where do we eat lunch?"

"In the lunch-room on the ground floor." Cathy told him. "But I want to take my stuff back to the locker first."

This time it seemed like the entire school was headed down the stairs. There was lots of shouting and shoving, but until they reached the entrance hall again it wasn't really a problem.

Down there however everybody seemed to be heading in a different direction and Draco kept getting pushed into the wrong direction. He almost lost Cathy, but luckily he remembered where her locker was and once he managed to get into the right corridor he caught sight of her again.

Still it wasn't easy to catch up again. There were only two directions you could go in the corridor, but there were masses of students moving both ways. Draco was shoved roughly into Steve, the leader of the Lions, as a tall fat girl and her even bigger and almost equally wide boyfriend pushed their way through, but when he turned back to tell the older boy that he was sorry Steve just shrugged at him.

"You get used to it after a while." he told him and moved on.

Draco was relieved that Steve didn't think it was his fault, but still missed the wide corridors and many staircases and passages of Hogwarts. The only time every student in the castle had to get through one and the same corridor at the same time was when they'd just arrived from the station on the first day of term and even then it didn't get as tight as this.

He finally caught up with Cathy at her locker and somehow they managed to squeeze both their backpacks in. It was a little easier to squeeze through the masses without the backpack on, but still hard enough.

Cathy led him past the stairs again and through a wide door.

The school's lunch-room didn't look like the great hall at Hogwarts at all. It was more a cafeteria than a dining hall. The tables, though long were much shorter than the house tables with white plastic plates and metal feet.

There obviously weren't any house elves as they had to get in line to buy their food at the front of the room where three cooks hustled about two handing out the food, one functioning as the cashier. Now Draco finally understood why Sarah had given him 'lunch money' before he'd left in the morning.

The food itself was the same kind of cheap food Sarah usually cooked. It couldn't be compared to the delicious meals prepared by the house elves at Hogwarts, but Draco decided that he didn't mind. He'd eaten Sarah's cooking all through the holidays and quite enjoyed it and he'd get to eat it with his friends.

Jack and Mary were already at the table Cathy led Draco to and the rest of the Rakers soon joined them.

"We always eat at this table." Charlie explained once she'd finished her meal. "This is our corner. The other gangs know and respect that."
Draco looked over the huge rooms and the many groups sitting together each apparently claiming an end of a table for itself.

"Do all the students here belong to a gang? What about the transfers from London?" Draco asked remembering what Mike had told him about the other wizarding schools in Britain.

"Most of the outsiders form their own groups." Jack said with a shrug. "Not proper gangs usually, since they don't wear gang colours, but they're similar. You can usually recognise those groups pretty easily, since all the members are about the same age. They group together by years, not by living areas like we do. Some outsiders join up with a real gang, though and some idiots remain alone."

Draco watched the groups some more trying to determine which ones were the outsiders. It was really easy to recognise the Merlin Park gangs as real gangs since they all had members ranging from at least about Sammie's size to almost Jack's. Then there were some others that fit the same description, but Draco didn't know.

Some, like the Avengers, didn't seem to have any older members, but did range from middle size to very small. Maybe those were younger gangs that had only been founded a few years ago.

Luke was hanging out with a group of other kids his age, but Draco suspected that that group didn't qualify as outsiders. Many of them were probably wannabes who, similarly to Luke, hadn't been accepted by their gangs yet.

The group Svenja and two other girls from the History class were sitting with stood out, though. There were eight of them, all about the same size and all girls. On the other end of their table were four boys of most likely the same age, though Draco didn't remember seeing them in either of his classes. There had been three other groups in both subjects, though, he reminded himself, and the Transfigurations class had been very small.

"Are those the outsiders of our year?" he asked Cathy with a slight nod towards them.

She nodded. "They're an alright bunch, though. The two groups will stand up for each other if necessary, which gives them the strength of an actual gang, so don't think they're pushovers. They know better than to challenge us, of course, but they can and will defend themselves if challenged."

Draco was about to pick out another similar group when he saw a group of four girls walk in wearing pink lacy hats.

"Whatever are those?" escaped Draco in shock.


"Angels." Draco repeated still shocked.

"They're an all girl gang that has it's territory north of the market." Jack elaborated.

"Their favourite pastime is listening to Gringolf Glizzard's music and discussing his love life." Matt added with a slight smirk at Draco.

Draco groaned. "I bet he and Lockhart would just love them, if they ever met."

"Maybe they already have. I'm sure at least some of them have been to his concerts." Mike commented. "They live around the market, where people can afford such things every once in a while."
Draco watched the lacy hatted Angels assemble at one of the tables in the centre of the room. That area seemed to be less popular among the other gangs and thus the Angels' neighbours were mostly smaller groups of outsiders and younger children. Was it because of the Angels or was it just that the gangs preferred to have a wall at their backs, so nobody could get behind them?

"Well, I can see why no boys would want to join that gang, but what happened to the boys in their area?" he asked his friends.

"They have another gang there, the Lords of the Market." Mike answered. "Actually they used to be one big gang that really did dominate the market place, but then there was some disagreement about ten years or so ago and the Lords kicked out all the girls. They lost almost all of their territory and were pushed north, just like the Angels. So the Lords soon started accepting girls again, and regained some of their lost ground over the years. They've still got clearly more boys than girls, though, since some girls still prefer to join the Angels."

"So which group are the Lords of the Market?" Draco asked nodding towards the other tables.

"They already left." Sammie reported. "Seemed to be in a hurry today."

"Remember Bubbles and Keith?" Cathy asked.

"Sure. A guy with a name like Bubbles is hard to forget and Keith seemed to be best in Transfigurations."

"That's them. They're Lords." Cathy told him.

"Ah, orange scarves." Draco stated. "Well, it is better than pink lacy hats."

"They wear pink cloaks with those hats, you know." Charlie informed him.

Draco looked over to the group of Angels again. By now there were six of them, one almost as small as Susie. There hadn't been any of them in their Transfigurations class. He wondered how they might have reacted to the rats.

"Are there any Angels in our year?" he asked Charlie and Cathy. Maybe he wouldn't have to put up with them in any of his classes.

"Only Martha." Charlie answered. "I've got Ancient Runes with her. She's terrible."

"Oh no!" groaned Draco. "I take Runes as well and I was hoping to be in your class."

"There's only one Runes class in our year anyway." Charlie told him. "I'm afraid we have to live with Martha."

"Uh ... What are our chances of getting seats in the first row so we don't have to see her all the time?"

"We can try. I usually sit in the first row with Svenja, but I doubt she's angry enough with me to give up her seat." Charlie considered. "Maybe, if we arrive early enough Karen won't claim a seat that's already taken."


"She's one of the Railrats. Her boyfriend Noel was in our History class." Charlie explained.

"The one that asked how Grindelwald's attack was covered up?" Draco tried to remember the boy's
gang insignia, but couldn't come up with anything.

"Maybe. I don't remember who asked that." Charlie said after a moment.

"Yes, it was Noel." Cathy confirmed for her.

"So who are the Railrats?" Draco wanted to know.

"The gang that has its territory around the train station." Matt said. "You can recognise them by their purple wristbands unless of course they're covered by their sleeves."

That explained why he hadn't seen any insignia on Noel then, but it would also make it hard to recognise Karen.

Mike finally suggested that they spend the rest of the lunch break in the library to get started on their homework. Jack frowned a little, but agreed, while Sammie and Larry simply disappeared somewhere on the way. Mary looked around for them for a while, but finally let Matt convince her that finishing their Astronomy charts was more important than snogging with her boyfriend.

Draco, Charlie and Cathy picked out a few books on Grindelwald and started on their History essays. The tale of Grindelwald's childhood was easy enough to find, but the German wizarding society proved more difficult. Draco finally found a few paragraphs on it in a chapter about Grindelwald's mother. Apparently witches had been, and still were to an extent, considered inferior to wizards not only in physical strength, but also in their magical energy and especially their intelligence.

Those old German wizards obviously had never met Hermione Granger, Draco thought.

Witches had been expected to stay at home and been taught at different schools than wizards. Few of them had gotten a complete magical education and even those had been taught less than the boys, the book explained. That was the reason why it had been so hard for Mrs Grindelwald to support her family after her husband's death. Only when the muggles had had to resort to letting women work, once too many of their men had been conscripted during the war, had their view of the sexes begun to change and with it the opinions of the wizards.

Draco stopped there. The change had come out of the muggle society? And it seemed to have crossed over into wizarding culture pretty quickly. Just how strong had the influence of muggle views on wizarding society been at that time? Draco quickly scribbled down a few dates from his essay on an extra piece of parchment and raced over into the Muggle Studies section. Maybe he'd find more on this in a book on muggle history.

It took him some time to find anything, though. Muggle history used completely different names for its time periods than he was used to from History of Magic. It was only logical, but still came as a surprise that they didn't orient themselves by Goblin rebellions and wizarding councils.

Comparing the dates on his notes with a time-line from one of the muggle books he finally figured out that Grindelwald's early childhood and first years of school fell into the time of 'the First World War', generally referred to as World War I, and his youth into a period called rather unimaginatively 'The Time Between the Wars'. His first attack and the subsequent Grindelwald War would then be about the same time period that was called World War II by the muggles.

Unfortunately they had to go back to class before he could start actually researching those times.
A/N: So, how do you like Draco's new school? Will he manage in Transfigurations? And will Dumbledore let him come back after Christmas?

In the next chapter: We meet the Herbology teacher, watch TV and Draco is tested by Old Connelly.
Their first afternoon class was Herbology for which they usually met in the school gardens as Cathy and Charlie explained. Draco was shocked to see all the students there when they arrived and very disappointed to see that the school only owned a number of flowerbeds outside and a single glasshouse.

"How do they expect to fit a class this large in there?" he asked his friends.

To his surprise they both laughed. "That isn't the class, Dragon." Charlie said finally. "That's the whole year. Professor Azalea will split the classes up when she gets here."

"Oh." Draco took a look around at all the students gathered.

So this was the entire fifth year? It looked like the whole house of Slytherin assembled. Except for the different colour of their robes and the lesser variation in sizes. All of these students were of the same age, after all, while the Slytherins ranged from first to seventh years.

There were about ten Slytherins in every year which meant about seventy students altogether. If he hadn't misjudged the number of West Hogsmeade fifth years and it was about average that meant seventy students in each year which meant that there were a little over two hundred more students at West Hogsmeade than at Hogwarts.

And the people at Hogwarts acted as if the school didn't even exist!

A group of four students wearing sunglasses were throwing pebbles at Lisa and the boy who'd sat beside her in History of Magic. The two tried to retaliate, but couldn't quite manage against the attackers' larger number.

"Who are the kids wearing sunglasses?" he asked the girls.

"The Demons." Cathy answered. "They live near the river. The Black Ring are between us and their territory, though and just like us they're not big enough to challenge Angel Anna."

"There seem to be quite a lot of them." Draco commented while watching Lisa's friend lunge at the nearest Demon.

"Only in our year." Charlie corrected. "Their oldest member is their only sixth year and they don't have any fourth years. There's one in third year and a new girl in first year, I think."

"Curt's really in trouble now." Cathy commented as the largest of the Demons held back Lisa while the other three were beating on the boy who'd dared to attack one of them.

The arrival of a very small Asian looking woman saved Curt and Lisa just in time.

"Good afternoon, children!" she shouted to attract everyone's attention and the Demons immediately let go of their victims and looked innocent.

Draco wondered what would have happened, if Professor Azalea were a little taller and could have seen them over the other students around them.
"Class 5D to the greenhouse, please, 5C stays in the garden with me, 5B to Herbology classroom 2 for a surprise quiz and 5A gets to watch a film on African magical plants in Herbology 1." Professor Azalea announced.

There was some cheering and groaning along with some long faces as the students picked up their backpacks and book bags and walked off in different directions.

Draco, still unsure who else was in his class, stayed close to Cathy and Charlie who had to know the way. The Herbology classrooms turned out to be the two very last rooms on the right corridor on the ground floor. The doors were decorated with pictures of flowers painted directly onto the wood. The pictures didn't move, but Draco still liked them.

There was some pushing around until 5A and 5B had separated and Draco could finally make his way into the classroom. It was full of pictures of all sorts of plants with potted plants at the windows and on the teacher's desk. The students' desks had been pushed against the walls and the chairs formed a half circle of two rows facing what Draco now recognised from his Muggle Studies classes as a TV and Professor Azalea.

He was going to see an actual TV in action! He should have realised that when the other version of Professor Azalea had said the word film, he supposed, but he'd probably been too distracted with wondering about the Demons and where their class would be held.

"Good morning, class." Professor Azalea greeted them. "Please take your seats quickly so we'll have time to watch the whole film."

Draco eagerly sat down in the first chair he found and Cathy and Charlie predictably chose the seats beside him.

There was a little commotion on the other end of the half circle as the Shark twins apparently wanted the same chair Keith was already sitting in.

Professor Azalea regarded her class for a moment. "Alex, Andy, sit down! Keith, move over a bit so the twins can sit together."

Keith frowned, but complied and the Shark twins sat with triumphant grins on their faces.

"Oh, take off those glasses. I don't want to see them in my class." the teacher continued.

"But Professor!" a boy in the second row exclaimed clutching his thick glasses with one hand. "I can't see a thing without them!"

"Not your optical glasses, Clarence, darling." Professor Azalea specified. "I'm talking about sunglasses. You don't need them inside the school."

The three Demons looked murderous and only one actually removed his glasses. The other two's looks darkened even more at the sight.

"Thank you, Nico." Professor Azalea said. "Lenny, Amanda? We're waiting."

No reaction.

"Do I really have to confis ..." the teacher started very slowly and broke off the moment the two took their glasses off. "Very good. Now, there's supposed to be a new student in this class. Where is he?"
"Here." Draco raised his hand and the teacher nodded.

"Good. Your name?"

"Dragon." he chose. The first two teachers had picked the nickname, so the rest of them could stick with it as well.

"Good, that'll be easy enough to remember." Professor Azalea commented. "Now, I suggest you all watch this film very closely, because you'll be writing an essay about it as homework and there's very little information about these plants in the library."

She bent down to the smaller box under the TV and pressed a button. According to the pictures Draco had seen in Muggle Studies this was either a CD-Player or a video recorder. Both were electrical and required plugs and that was all the teacher had said about them. Draco wished he knew what they did. Then maybe he could have figured out which this one was.

In his fascination with the video recorder he unfortunately missed seeing Professor Azalea use the remote control, which he would have been deeply disappointed about, if he'd known.

The TV suddenly showed a picture much like a fast moving painting. A map of the African continent. A disembodied voice told them about some national park and a little arrow appeared on the screen to point out where in Africa that was. The TV zoomed in closer on that spot and suddenly the painting was replaced by dense jungle that looked more like it was seen through a window than like a painting.

The disembodied voice continued by explaining why the muggles thought the area worth protecting, then pointed out various birds and other animals that jumped, hopped or flew into view obligingly as soon as they were mentioned.

When the voice started to remind them that they were here to see plants however, most of the other students dug into their bags for parchment and ink to take notes. Draco quickly followed their example while trying to miss as little of the film as possible. He was forced to set his ink pot down on the floor and bend down every time his quill ran out of ink, though.

After a while of growing more and more frustrated with this inconvenience he finally tore his eyes away from the screen for a little longer and checked how the other students were coping.

Ah, the Shark twins had solved the problem by working together. They would only need one set of notes anyway, so one was holding the ink pot while his brother was writing. Clarence with the thick glasses was holding his ink pot open in the same hand he used to hold his parchment. He'd already left some black blotches on his hand and most likely on the parchment as well, but since they were only notes and he wouldn't have to hand them in, he probably didn't mind so much.

Amanda, Lenny and Nico simply weren't taking any notes at all, Cathy was using the same method as Draco. And then Draco's eyes fell on Charlie and he almost gasped. Charlie was happily scribbling away with a muggle pen on muggle paper completely unbothered by such things as ink pots and quills. Was that even allowed?

Another look around however proved that Charlie wasn't the only one doing it. Keith was even using a muggle pen to write on parchment, while two other kids, that Draco didn't know by name, yet were using simple pencils on muggle paper.

Draco watched them in fascination for a moment. He absolutely had to get a muggle pen. Right now, though, none of the solutions were available to him. He'd have to continue with his ink pot on
the floor.

The disembodied voice was now explaining the particular needs the jungle plants had when grown in a glass house and Draco quickly returned his attention to the film. If he didn't catch these facts, he'd never be able to write a decent essay and the plants seemed to be picky indeed.

As if to confirm that thought the disembodied voice stated that it was very difficult to grow these plants in an artificial environment. They could be bought ready for use, but were rather expensive here in Britain. As an alternative it suggested apparating to Africa and buying them at a local wizarding market.

"Most of the plants are still considered expensive, by local standards, but as the region is extremely poor any European witch or wizard can easily afford them." the disembodied voice continued.

"Yeah, if you can afford the apparition lessons first." somebody commented somewhere behind Draco.

"We aren't interested in your sarcastic comments, Nora." Professor Azalea admonished the girl. Draco peeked over his shoulder for a moment. No, he didn't think he'd seen Nora before. She was a small girl with lots of freckles, that reminded him a little of Ginny Weasley except for her dark blond hair. Her gang insignia weren't visible, but he couldn't remember seeing her with Svenja during lunch and her comment indicated that she was of a rather poor family, which led Draco to assume that she was a local. Maybe another Railrat?

The film continued some more about how the plants were harvested and prepared and Draco did his best to write down everything. The primitive methods the native African wizards employed were fascinating. They all seemed to be ancient traditions that had been passed down from generation to generation since long before there were such things as ministries or wizarding schools in Europe.

Just before the end there were a few more pictures of one of the local markets and the plants being sold in little sacks or bundles. Draco smiled as he saw them. It didn't quite look like West Hogsmeade market, but it had that very same atmosphere. Would he get to go to the market on Monday?

"All right class, I want at least 200 words about what you learned from this film from each of you, no later than Tuesday." Professor Azalea announced just before the bell rang.

"We're off to Arithmancy right now." Cathy told Draco as they packed up their parchments and ink pots. "Do you think you'll be okay on your own for an hour?"

"Sure." Draco almost laughed. "I'll just go back to the library and work on my History essay. I found some pretty interesting things I want to research some more."

"You'll find your way?" Charlie asked a little worried. "You've only been there once."

"I can find my way around Hogwarts." Draco pointed out. "That's a lot bigger and more complicated."

Cathy nodded. "Okay then, just meet me at my locker after the class. We'd better not be late for Charms."

As Draco looked up from his backpack he saw Amanda take off her robes in the middle of the classroom. He had to swallow hard at the sight. Luckily Amanda wasn't naked underneath and her figure wasn't nearly as great as Cathy's, but still the tight leggings and t-shirt she was wearing left
very little to the imagination.

Amanda didn't seem to care that all the boys still in the room were staring at her. She fished a black jumper out of her bag and pulled it over the t-shirt, then put her glasses back on. Bag in hand and robes over her arm she walked out of the room. One of the other girls had taken off her robe as well by now, but the muggle clothes she wore underneath were much wider than Amanda's and didn't invite any stares.

"What?" was all Draco managed.

"They've got Sports next and the changing rooms are dreadfully cold in winter." Charlie explained with a grin.

Cathy just looked angry.

'Ups, should try to avoid staring at other girls.' Draco realised.

Charlie helped him out, though. "Oh, come on Cat! Dragon was staring at her in disapproval, not in appreciation. It must have looked like she was going to put on a strip show to him."

Cathy frowned even more. "And she really could wear some decent Sports clothes, if she's going to change in front of everybody. That Amanda is such a whore."

"Why? What's wrong with her clothes?" Clarence asked as he passed them. "I like them."

"Oh Clarence, get yourself a girlfriend." Charlie answered him.

Cathy giggled. "Don't tell me you like Clarence, Charlie."

"That owl-eyed idiot?" Charlie snapped. "Never!"

Draco thought she'd blushed a little, though. Maybe he should give Matt a little push after all. Just in case he didn't get his courage up before Clarence did. Somehow Draco suspected Charlie would be so excited at being asked out by a boy that she'd accept no matter who he was.

Then again he wasn't really supposed to know that Matt liked Charlie. Or was he? Maybe he should just talk to Sammie about it.

There were a lot of fifth years in the library, when Draco arrived, but almost all of them were boys. Were all of the girls either in Arithmancy or in Sports class?

He found the History books he'd been working with during lunch break quite easily again, but once he'd picked them up and started looking for a place to sit he realised that there weren't any empty tables left.

He hesitated for a moment. Did each gang claim a table at the library as they did in the lunch-room? No, over there a smaller girl wearing the Railrat's purple wristbands was sitting at a table with two fifth year outsiders and Curt was even whispering with Nico at a table to Draco's right.

It seemed to be okay to join members of another gang then.

Draco took another look at the tables to consider his options. Curt, Nico and Lenny were already a mixed group, but, if they were working together, Draco's presence might disturb them. The outsiders' group didn't have much room left and sitting with the Shark twins sounded like a really bad idea.
Instead Draco started looking for a quiet group that didn't have an enmity towards the Rakers.

Maybe not too close to the Demons either. Draco just didn't like them. They probably were no
different from any of the other gangs, but what he'd seen of them so far wasn't exactly endearing.

The Lords of the Market, though, didn't seem troublesome at all. Draco walked over to Bubbles and
Keith.

"Mind if I sit here?" he asked them.

Bubbles looked up surprised. It seemed he had been so caught up in his work, that he hadn't even
noticed Draco approach.

"Course not." he said and went back to work.

"You take Muggle Studies?" Keith asked when he saw the books Draco put down as he sat.

"Yes, but these are for my History essay." Draco explained. "It seems there are some parallels
between wizarding and muggle society of that time and I wanted to put that in."

"If you're going to Hogwarts you have to be pretty powerful, don't you?" Keith continued.

"Well, they don't teach squibs, but they have very weak students there as well." Draco answered
with a shrug. "I don't think there's much of a difference in the student's ability here and there from
what I have seen so far."

"You've got strong magic, though." Keith insisted. "I watched you in Transfigurations and you
claimed you weren't any good at the subject."

"You were a lot better than me." Draco pointed out. "And we already transfigured wood into rats at
Hogwarts. That gave me an advantage."

"You're still a powerful wizard, so why do you take Muggle Studies?" Keith insisted. "It's a subject
for squibs."

"No, it's not." Draco insisted with a slight glare. "They wouldn't offer it at Hogwarts if it were and
anyway I want to go to muggle university after I graduate and then I'll have to fit in with the
muggle students."

"Muggle university?" Keith asked. "Whatever for? What wizard would ever go there?"

"My aunt and uncle, for example. They both learned Chemistry there. It's a forgotten form of
Alchemy that only the muggles still understand." Draco said.

"I thought your uncle was a Potions Master?" Bubbles had finally stopped writing to enter the
conversation.

"He is, but he's also an Alchemist." Draco shrugged. "It's more of a hobby, I think, but I've watched
him and Aunt Sarah sometimes and it looks really fascinating."

"Why do you go to Hogwarts, if you're a Raker anyway?" Keith asked now.

"Because his uncle teaches there of course." Bubbles assumed at once. "That much is obvious.
Why does a Potions Master work as an ordinary school teacher, though?"

This one was difficult. He couldn't admit that Uncle Severus was really a spy and he didn't want to
tell them about his time in Azkaban either.

"I'm not sure." he tried to pretend he didn't know. "He's pretty close friends with Dumbledore, though, so maybe he's doing it as a favour to him. They do need a Slytherin teacher to function as head of the house and from what Uncle Severus tells me, there aren't many left that are trustworthy and willing to take such a job. I think he likes it, too. He definitely is the best head of house, they've got, always there if you need him, always willing to help. He understands a lot of things the others don't."

"Well, you're his nephew." Bubbles said. "He has to like you."

"I'm not." Draco said. Suddenly it felt great to tell them that. "He just took me in after I lost my parents and none of my real relatives wanted to have me. I just call him uncle, because he told me to."

All in all Bubbles and Keith weren't that bad, Draco decided later. They'd been very curious, but that was probably, because he was the new kid and had made a rather unusual entrance in the middle of the school year.

Despite the interruption he got most of his essay done before the bell rang and he had to run off to meet Cathy. The books about World War I weren't overly helpful since they mostly gave facts about battles and weapons used, but The Time Between the Wars was full of the problems of the German muggles and their society. Times had been hard, the lost war had cost them and the economy had been down. It wasn't just the witches that had had trouble finding jobs. A lot of muggle men had been unemployed and discontent as well. A lot of families had struggled just like the Grindelwalds had.

These discoveries provided more than enough material for his essay. Draco even added a note that there might well have been many others that felt like Grindelwald and the only reason they hadn't turned to the Dark Arts as well, was probably that most of them were muggles who couldn't learn them.

He was a little disappointed when he heard the bell and knew he had to stop, but he was also convinced that he could finish the rest of his essay at home now.

He returned his books to their shelf, said good bye to Bubbles and Keith and waded out into the masses of students going down the stairs.

This time he reached Cathy's locker before her and that left him time to just stand around and think. His next lesson was Charms. Charms with Old Connelly. Considering what his first meeting with the witch had been like and how afraid of her his friends were he wasn't exactly looking forward to the lesson.

Would she recognise him? Was what he'd learned in Flitwick's class good enough for 5A Charms? Did 5B maybe have a different teacher? He knew that 5D Magical Theory didn't have her from Charlie and that usually there were two teachers for each subject from Sarah, but how did they distribute the classes between those two teachers? Would Old Connelly have 5A and 5B and the other teacher 5C and 5D, or would she have 5A and 5C and the other 5B and 5D?

What exactly would one have to do to get switched down on one's first day?

Cathy didn't look very happy either when she arrived.

"How was Arithmancy?" he asked her in an attempt to figure out what was wrong.
"Boring as usual. " Cathy answered. "It's a useful class, but the teacher's like a bottle of sleeping draught. Charlie and I actually did all the homework during class time, because she kept repeating herself like a broken record. I think some of the others even fell asleep."

"I'm a bit nervous about Charms.\" he admitted.

"Just try to make yourself small and not be noticed.\" Cathy advised. "It's what Connelly's used to from everybody. Never volunteer and always obey her immediately. I think it shouldn't be too much of a problem since she only started explaining the theory of summoning charms in the last lesson, so she can't really expect anyone to know them, yet."

"Summoning charms?\" Draco asked surprised. "Like Accio?\"

"Yes, I think she mentioned that one.\" Cathy said. "Why?"

"We learned those last year. I thought this was supposed to be an advanced class?\" Draco felt a little confused.

Could West Hogsmeade really be that far behind Hogwarts in Charms? They were about at the same point in Transfigurations and about one or two lessons behind Binns' droning, not to mention the better quality of their History lessons.

"Last year?\" Cathy was really surprised. "The other groups are nowhere near there, yet. Are our other classes that far behind as well?"

Draco shook his head. "Not at all. Herbology is very different, since Hogwarts has several glasshouses and we always worked with the plants there, but in the other subjects so far we did almost the same as in Hogwarts."

"Strange.\" said Cathy. "I always thought we were going rather fast in Charms."

Could Flitwick have been that far ahead? But it had never seemed like he was hurrying new Charms. He'd even stopped and gone back to explain something again, when he'd seen that Gregory hadn't mastered it, yet.

Charms was held on the third floor, though, as Cathy added, some people said that it was a mistake to have Old Connelly high up enough that jumping out of a window in their fear might kill students.

Magical Theory was drawn out of pictures of wands and Charms C flashed at them in all rainbow colours, but Charms B and A were totally bare except for the inscription on the plaques beside the doors. Those last two doors also were locked, the students milling about in the hallway.

Well, that answered which classes were taught by Old Connelly.

"Can't we just walk into Charms C and pretend we belong in there?\" Draco nervously suggested to Cathy.

"I think they'd notice. They haven't even got a single seat free in that class, because everybody wants to be downgraded.\" Cathy whispered back.

That much for his idea of just failing so badly, that Connelly had to switch him out of her class.

"Maybe she isn't even here?\" he said after another look at the closed doors.

"Connelly's always here.\" said Pat who'd been standing behind them. "They say she uses a time
turner to prevent her from having any sick days."

"Then why are the doors locked?" Draco asked her.

Pat shrugged. "They always are until she arrives."

The two Old Connellys appeared in the corridor the moment the bell rang. They glared sternly at
the students and everybody fell silent and stood up straight. Draco decided he'd rather be back in
Transfigurations. Maybe even with Professor McGonagall.

The Connellys separated each to one door without even a look at each other. They pulled out two
identical looking keys at precisely the same time and unlocked the doors, then held them wide
open letting the students pass them.

Once the last student was inside Charms A Connelly number one walked in closing the door
behind her. The classroom looked even more bare than the Transfigurations one. It had exactly the
same equipment with the single exception of the cupboard. Old Connelly obviously didn't even
need that.

Another difference was that there were even less students in here, only eight if you counted Draco,
and they were all sitting as far back as they could. The first row remained entirely empty and only
the window side was taken in the second row.

Draco and Cathy had managed to claim the middle desk in the last row, though the window desk
would probably have been better since they'd have been able to duck behind the two unfortunate
ones who'd landed in the second row.

Everybody was still standing straight at their desks when Connelly finally accioed a roll of
parchment and began to take attendance.

"Ms. Allan, Anya." Connelly read out.

"Here, Sir." answered the girl that had managed to get the very best seat right in the back corner by
the window.

Connelly nodded and Anya sat down. "Mr. Carter, James."

"Here, Sir." answered a boy Draco would later find out was usually called Jim and not James.

Draco felt a little confused about the Sir, but obviously it was what Connelly expected.

"Ms. Dormer, Patricia."

"Here, Sir." Hey, that was Pat!

"Mr. Harper, Keith."

"Here, Sir." Keith sat down on Draco's other side.

At least he was surrounded by familiar faces.

"Mr. Malfoy, Draco." Old Connelly frowned.

Well, only one thing he could do. "Here, Sir." he tried to keep a straight face.

"What kind of a name is Draco, Mr. Malfoy?" Old Connelly demanded with distaste.
Draco shrugged. "The kind my father liked, I suppose. I never really asked him that."

"You may sit." Connelly granted him. Maybe that had been the right answer then?

"Ms. McDougall, Catherine."

"Here, Sir."

Draco wished he could have asked Cathy about the Sir, but in the complete silence that hung over the classroom between Connelly's calls he just barely dared to breathe.

"Mr. Parker, Eric."

"Here, Sir."

"And Ms. Rayleigh, Elisabeth."

"Here, Sir." answered Lisa and sat down with a look of relief.

She'd managed to get that nice spot between Cathy and Anya and right behind Evil Eric which gave her some cover now that she finally had permission to sit.

"Mr. Malfoy!" Connelly called the moment she was done with the attendance list. "Come out here."

Draco didn't like the look in her eyes at all, but there was no way out. He got up and walked to the front of the class. Oh yes, he was sure that Connelly remembered him now.

"Well, Mr. Malfoy, I've been told that you're from the great Hogwarts School for Witches and Wizards." Connelly said almost condescendingly. "Now, they claim to be the absolutely best there, I hear, but personally I have my doubts. This is a very advanced class, Mr. Malfoy and I seriously doubt you'll be able to keep up with it since you haven't had the privilege to be taught by me, but the headmaster insists that I give you the chance to prove yourself, so if Hogwarts is really that great, I'm sure you'll be able to summon that book Ms. Allen is reading right now."

Draco had to fight down a gulp. Which one of the girls was Ms. Allen? If she'd only given him a first name to go with.

'All right, Draco, don't panic. There are only four girls in the class and you know Cathy's name is McDougal, so it can be only Pat, Lisa or that outsider girl in the corner. Anya, her name was Anya.' Draco's eyes flashed from girl to girl. Connelly had read the names out by alphabet and Lisa had been last, so her name couldn't be Allen.

Anya! Anya had been the first one called and she was also holding a book in her hand and looking slightly nervous.


The girl's face went ash white and she ducked down shivering. Not good. He probably shouldn't let Connelly see exactly what Anya had been reading, but she was holding out her hand demandingly. There was no way out now. Nervously he handed it over.


Everybody in the class ducked. Draco wished he were at least still sitting at his desk.
"I ... it's a library book, Sir." Anya stuttered weakly. "I need it for my Herbology homework. The bookmark fell out and I was looking for the p ..."

"Silence!" Connelly thundered. "I will not tolerate your weak excuses to steal any of our class time." She quickly checked the book over. "As it does appear to be a library book, I will not confiscate it. More deserving students might be robbed of the chance to read it, if I did. You will report to the headmaster for detention right after this class, Ms. Allen. Mr. Malfoy, you may sit down and return that book to Ms. Allen."

Draco knew she meant for him to carry the book back. He also knew that showing off probably was a mistake, but he really wanted to take Old Connelly down a notch so he cast a quick banishing charm on the book and it flew back onto Anya's desk right out of Connelly's hand.

The whole class stared at him as he returned to his seat.

"That was quite impressive, Mr. Malfoy." Connelly said sharply stopping him halfway there. "Who is your Charms teacher at Hogwarts?"

"Professor Flitwick, Sir." Draco answered outwardly humbly. Internally he was smirking, though.

"And Professor Flitwick already taught summoning and banishing charms this year?" Connelly asked.

"I don't know. He taught them to my class around this time in fourth year." he said honestly, but almost lost control of his features when he heard Keith's gasp.

"You mean to say that Hogwarts is a whole year ahead of this school?" Connelly almost screeched.

"Only in Charms, from what I've seen so far. You're only about two weeks behind in Transfigurations, about at the same point in History of Magic at the moment and what we learned in Herbology today was all new to me." Draco reported obligingly. "I haven't had any other subjects, yet, but until now all the teachers seemed to be really good."

Connelly fumed and launched herself into her class work. "Ms. McDougal, summarise the last lesson for us!"

Cathy jumped up and gave a hasty description of what summoning charms were and what they were used for.

"There are three types of summoning charms." Connelly continued Cathy's explanation hardly giving the students time to ready their quills and parchment. "Charms to summon objects into your hand, as Mr. Malfoy demonstrated for us, are the most frequently used. The most efficient is Accio. Then there are charms to summon an object to a particular place other than in your hand, such as Apero, but generally levitation charms are more practical and lastly there are charms to summon ghosts or creatures, such as Voco. For obvious reasons we will not perform those in class. We'll return to them once the weather is better and will allow us to practise outside."

She hardly left them time to catch their breath before she continued with a more detailed explanation of Accio. The class scribbled furiously trying to keep up.

"For homework I expect you to write an essay on the Accio charm and by the end of the next lesson, I expect every student in this class to be able to perform it." Connelly closed her lesson almost five minutes after the bell had announced its end.

The students escaped out the door as quickly as they could. Only Anya trudged after them more
slowly as she wasn't in any particular hurry to meet the headmaster.

"And I always thought Connelly couldn't get any worse!" Pat exclaimed as they reached the stairs.

"I wonder what's gotten into her to drive us like this." Lisa said more softly. "Usually she gives us two lessons time until we have to be able to perform a new charm."

Draco stared at the girl for a moment. He couldn't remember Flitwick ever setting any deadline other than the end of the year exams for the learning of a new charm.

"Dragon implied that Winter's better than her." Keith grinned. "That's what's gotten into her. She might have grudgingly accepted that the Hogwarts teacher is better and may be able to live with Dragon respecting Tempore or Azalea more than her, but being compared to Winter was an unacceptable insult."

"Why?" Draco asked surprised. "I didn't think that much of Tempore, if that's the History teacher's name, but the way Winter just transfigured himself a working floo was quite impressive."

"She just can't accept his personality, I think." Cathy remarked. "They're complete opposites."

"So your History teacher's better than Tempore?" Lisa asked.

Draco was glad that they didn't seem to think him a traitor for bringing Connelly's wrath down on Anya and causing the teacher to push them even more than she usually did.

"No, but it doesn't take much to outdo Binns. He doesn't even notice that everybody sleeps through all his classes. It's more interesting to read the History book than to listen to his droning," he shrugged. "Tempore's okay, I guess, just a little disorganised at the beginning of her class."

"Oh, she's fine once she finds her folder." Keith assured him. "It's some sort of psychological crutch for her, I think."

The gang was waiting for them in the entrance hall and Jack frowned when Cathy announced that they had to run back to the locker once more.

"It's not our fault Connelly went completely overtime today." Cathy said. "At least Dragon didn't mean to humiliate her in front of the whole class."

"Humiliate her?" Jack repeated. "Whatever did you do?"

"I just told her she's a year behind Hogwarts and that Winter impressed me." Draco shrugged. "How should I have known she'd react like that?"

"She actually believed you?" Mike asked surprised.

"Well, I did show her a summoning and a banishing charm." Draco said. "So she has to accept that we already learned them. Whether or not she believed that we learned them a year ago, is up to her, I guess."

"And is it true?" Jack asked rather sharply.

"Of course it is. Why should I lie about that?" Draco smirked.

"Think they might move you up a year?" Mike asked hopefully.

"I don't see how they could. You can't have Charms at the same time, we do, so I'd miss some
"So you're not that far ahead of us in all subjects?" Jack asked a little less forcefully.

"No, the other classes are just right so far." Draco grinned. "It's just Connelly that can't keep up, I guess."

"Did you have Potions, yet?" Sammie asked excitedly.

"No, tomorrow afternoon." Cathy answered. "And I won't even get to see it."

"What's so important about Potions?" Draco asked them surprised.

"Well, Uncle Severus always says that Professor Funnel is an excellent teacher." Mike grinned. "We just want to see how the two compare."

"Be back here for Soccer in half an hour." Jack ordered when they separated at the Soccer lawn.

Draco practically ran up the stairs. All he had to do was change into his muggle clothes and grab Hugin and then he'd play Soccer again!

"So, how was your first day?" Sarah greeted him the moment she opened the door.

"Dako!" shouted Billy and threw himself against Draco's legs.

"Home! Caw!" Hugin proclaimed and in his excitement overshot Draco's shoulder and flopped ungraciously into his arms.

It didn't really matter to Draco at that moment, though.

"He's talking!" he exclaimed excitedly. "Yes, Hugin! I'm home!"

He hugged the bird for a moment then placed him on his shoulder. "He's actually talking."

"Well, he missed you." Sarah said. "That's probably why."

"Dako, Dako, Dako!" Billy pulled on his robes to get attention.

"Hugin's talking, Billy!" Draco announced as he picked up the baby and swung him around.

Hugin protested the wild movements loudly, but was ignored.

"Oh, come on in, boy and sit down." Sarah said. "Tell me about your day."

"I can't just now. I've got to get back to the park to meet the gang." Draco shouted, sat down Billy and dashed into the lab. "I'll tell you everything when I come back for dinner."

"Don't you have any homework to do?" Sarah shouted through the closed door. "And don't forget to write a letter to your Uncle. Severus must be worried."

"I can do the rest of my homework after dinner." Draco shouted back. "And write that letter, too."

Less than five minutes later he was on his way back down the stairs with a still very unsettled raven on his shoulder. Hugin wasn't used to such quick changes of clothes or this much running around. 'That Dog' on the other hand bounced down the stairs even more eagerly than Draco. He hadn't had a chance to go play Soccer in a long time.
All three of them were a lot calmer when they came back and sat down for dinner. Billy to Draco's surprise was now able to feed himself, though it was a rather messy business. Either the spoon was too long and big, or Billy wasn't entirely sure where his mouth was just yet, Draco thought with a smile.

Still Sarah wouldn't let him feed the baby, claiming that he could only learn by trying until he got it right.

She was happy to hear how well Draco had done in school that day and once again urged him to write to Severus to tell him as well.

"I haven't even had Potions, yet." Draco reminded her, but he did write a long letter right after he finally finished his History of Magic essay. It felt good to write it all down like that.

Then he dug out his Herbology notes and did his best to turn those into an acceptable essay as well. There wasn't enough time left to finish his Charms homework and he felt a little sorry for Cathy for whom the Accio charm was completely new. How long would it take her to do all her homework? She might have been able to finish Arithmancy in class, but he'd used that time on History, which she still had to finish as well.

Instead of starting on Charms he pulled out a piece of parchment and practised turning it into a rat and back a few times. That reminded him of something else.

"Aunt Sarah?"

Sarah looked up from her book. "Yes?"

"I need a glass object for Transfigurations on Friday. Professor Winter said it could be broken, though."

Sarah nodded. "No problem at all."

She walked into the lab and soon returned with a cracked jar. "Here, the cat must have knocked this over. I was going to perform Reparo on it, but the pixie dust has gotten into the crack and won't wash out and we can't afford it possibly contaminating valuable ingredients put inside by mistake. To leave it standing around only invites such errors."

Draco nodded and packed the jar into his backpack right away. He'd just put it into Cathy's locker tomorrow. After a quick check of his schedule he also put three books inside, then went back into the living room to find Sarah.

"What's Sports class. Aunt Sarah?" he asked her. He remembered Amanda changing after Herbology, but still didn't really understand what it was about.

"Oh, that's where you get some physical exercise, like you did in Flying at Hogwarts." Sarah explained. "West Hogsmeade hasn't enough brooms, so a Flying class can never have more than twelve students and since there isn't enough time to let all students Fly an hour a week, the classes have to take turns doing something else instead. I guess you'd better wear your muggle clothes for it." she advised.

Draco sighed. How should he get all he needed into his backpack?

In the end he stuffed his jumper into the backpack on top of the books and potions kit and left his cauldron outside to carry in his hand. He wasn't even sure that he had Sports tomorrow. According to Cathy it might just as well be on Friday.
Well, he'd just have to figure that out tomorrow.

A/N: Will Draco like Sports class? How will he do in his other classes? And how will he get along with Connelly after this?

In the next chapter: Draco's second day at West Hogsmeade, he finds that there's another subject besides Transfigurations that might cause problems and makes some new friends.
Chapter 45: Full DADA or Half DADA?

This time they weren't as late as they had been the day before and Draco got to see the wardrobe, or rather the crowd inside. It was impossible to see much of the room in the chaos of pushing and shoving kids. His cauldron proved to be an additional hindrance and he almost wished that he’d shrunk it after all.

He hesitated to leave his cloak unguarded, but really didn't want to drag it around in addition to the cauldron. A few guarding spells on it and the hook he hung it on should keep it reasonably safe, he decided.

After another trip to Cathy's locker they climbed up the stairs to the third floor where the DADA classrooms were right next to the Charms ones.

Draco saw Sammie in the group waiting outside Charms B and sent him an encouraging smile for which he got a nervous wave in return.

"You take full DADA, I suppose?" Charlie asked as they neared the classrooms.

"Full DADA?" Draco repeated. 'As opposed to what? Empty DADA? Half DADA?"

"Well, how many DADA lessons a week did you have at Hogwarts?" Cathy asked. "Two or three?"

"Three." Draco answered still a little confused. Every fifth year at Hogwarts had three. Why would some people have only two?

"That's full DADA." Cathy explained. "Squibs have only two, but have to add an additional elective in place of the third lesson. That means they have to either take Psychology or have one more lesson a week than the rest of us. Wizards and witches who take Psychology only have two DADA lessons as well."

"Does that mean that Charlie isn't in our class this lesson?" Draco asked once that had sunk in.

"I'm afraid so." Charlie confirmed. "I take Psychology, so I'm in DADA C."

"So we'll see you in Latin, then?" Draco suggested hopefully.

Charlie shook her head sadly. "I don't take Latin. It's an elective for squibs."

"We'll meet you at lunch, then and, if Dragon doesn't have Sports we have an hour to study together after that." Cathy stated.

The DADA doors were decorated with artfully drawn sketches of wizards fighting dark creatures. DADA D had the wizard standing over a defeated hinkipunk, while DADA B showed him just about to drive his stake into a vampire's heart and on the door of DADA A he was still sizing up the approaching werewolf wand ready in his hand, but not yet raised to fight.

Only DADA C was different. It showed a muggle picture of a man with a beard. Draco stopped to stare at it for a moment. No, it didn't move and there was no hint of anything dark either.
"That's Sigmund Freud." Charlie explained when she realised what had captured Draco's attention. "A famous muggle psychologist. The classroom is used for Psychology as well."

For a moment Draco felt tempted to ask, if he could join the class for the lesson to find out what Psychology was like, but then he noticed that Charlie was carrying a DADA book, so she probably didn't even have Psychology today.

After a quick see you later to Charlie, he followed Cathy into DADA A. A first look around revealed surprisingly few familiar faces. Bubbles sent him a little smile from his place in the second row. Draco recognised his neighbour as Lisa's friend who'd gotten into trouble with the demons before Herbology, Curt, if he remembered correctly.

Two of the Demons were present as well, though surprisingly not sitting together. Amanda was sitting next to a girl who was busy painting her fingernails black and only looked up from time to time to scowl at everybody passing by her. Draco quickly noted the fact that everybody seemed to give that desk a wide berth. 'Better stay away from that one.'

The more agreeable Nico was sitting next to a lively blond boy Draco didn't know either, but at least he didn't look dangerous with his radiating smile.

"The Professor doesn't allow kids from the same gang to sit together." Cathy said suddenly. "She thinks that discourages talking in class. I usually sit with Cindy." she added with a slight nod at a tall brown haired girl.

"Dragon can sit with me." a small dark skinned boy with wild black curls suddenly said.

Draco didn't particularly like the idea of sitting in the first row, but the kid seemed nice enough and he didn't notice any tendency to avoid the front in this class. Maybe the teacher wasn't that bad.

"Thanks." he said as he sat down next to the boy.

"I'm Curly." the kid introduced himself. "At least that's what everybody calls me. My real name's almost impossible to pronounce."

'Impossible to pronounce?' Draco thought. That was strange. Why would anyone give their child a name one couldn't pronounce?

Curly grinned when he saw the confusion on Draco's face. "My mother's from Kenya. She insisted on naming me after my grandfather there."

"Oh, do you speak Kenyan then?" Draco asked fascinated. He remembered the strange sound of the language spoken by the wizards in the African market in the film they'd seen in Herbology.

Curly laughed. "Oh no. My Mum speaks some strange tribal language and Swahili, but since there's nobody else here that understands them, she wanted me to grow up speaking English. She says it's good to live in a country where everybody speaks the same language. In Africa every tribe has its own and you need a translator to talk to people from another tribe. Even people who live in the same city sometimes have different languages."

"So there's no actual Kenyan language?" Draco asked even more fascinated.

"Well, most people in Kenya speak at least a little Swahili." Curly answered. "But in the small country villages they sometimes still know only their own tribal language."

Draco wished he could have asked more, but at that moment the teacher entered and even though
he didn't remember hearing the bell the whole class got up to greet her. It probably wouldn't have been polite to dig into Curly like that anyway. After all he'd only just met the boy.

The teacher was a tall witch with long blond hair that made her look almost like a veela. Somehow she had none of a veela's attractiveness however. She seemed distant and cold.

They stood until it was absolutely silent in the class.

"Bubbles, put that gum away!" the teacher ordered. She continued to say something more, but her voice was drowned out by the bell.

So she made them wait until Bubbes was standing properly again.

"Vio, what is that nail polish doing on your desk? Is it a new weapon against vampires I haven't heard of yet?" the teacher continued.

"I'm almost finished doing my nails." Amanda's neighbour answered with a glare.

"Not during my lesson, Vio." the teacher insisted sternly. "Put it away."

The girl sitting on his other side seemed somehow familiar to Draco. He thought she might have been in his Herbology class, but didn't remember her name.

"We're all waiting for you, Vio." the teacher was still staring down the rebellious girl. "Put it in your bag. Now. Or else ..." She didn't finish her threat, but it wasn't necessary either.

Vio grabbed her book bag, slammed it onto her desk with enough force that Draco felt the vibration through the floor, threw the nail polish inside and slammed it back onto the ground beside her desk.

"I just hope you have a very good anti breaking charm on that bottle." the teacher commented.

Another glance through the room.

"You may sit down ... Quietly!"

As they sat Draco saw the sleeves of the girl next to him slip up to reveal the purple wristbands underneath. Now he remembered her. It was Nora who'd made the comment about apparition lessons.

He didn't get time to think about the discovery, though as the teacher was walking right up to him now. What had he done wrong?

"So, you're the new kid." she commented after an intense look. "They tell me you're called Dragon."

"Yes, Professor." Draco confirmed. Maybe he hadn't done anything after all.

"And you went to Hogwarts until now?"

"Yes, Professor." Hadn't the headmaster already told her all that? What did she want from him?

"Who was your Defence teacher there?"

"This year Professor Fletcher." Draco answered beginning to understand. She was just trying to figure out his advance knowledge.
"Fletcher? The artist Fletcher?" she asked a little alarmed.

"Yes, Professor. He's surprisingly good at it, though. I think he was an auror during the Voldemort war." Draco defended his teacher. Fletcher was a little strange as was probably normal for artists, but he did know his stuff and had managed to capture his students' attention.

"This year, you say. And who before then?" the witch demanded.

"Well, Professor Quirrel in first year. He was so afraid of his own subject that he couldn't even talk normally. Then Professor Lockhart in second year. He was simply incompetent. Didn't even know how to hold his wand properly, but he gave us a lot of fashion tips that the girls really liked." Draco smirked when he saw the teacher raise an eyebrow. "Professor Lupin in third year was really good, but unfortunately a werewolf and in fourth year we thought we had Professor Moody, but he turned out to be a death eater who'd escaped from Azkaban instead. Lupin was the only one who ever made it through the entire year, so we actually had exams in third year."

"Have you learned about vampires yet?" the teacher demanded. "And I don't mean the quick overview you got in third year. I'm talking about more detailed lessons this year."

"We never got around to the vampires in third year." Draco admitted rather sheepishly. "Professor Lupin had to catch up with everything Professor Lockhart had left out and that means the entire second year curriculum. He managed to get us through that and about halfway through the third year curriculum, but the false Moody never picked it up from there. He lectured us about the unforgivables instead and Professor Fletcher has been teaching us about the other dark curses all year, probably trying to clean up after Moody, the way Professor Lupin did after Lockhart."

The teacher sighed. "That is a problem. I will ask my colleague, but I doubt even DADA D are that far behind. You don't know anything about vampires at all?"

"Only what I've read about them."

She sighed again. "I'll see what I can do. For now just listen and try to take notes of whatever you understand."

"Don't worry." Curly whispered. "She won't really put you with the squibs."

"Curly!"

"Sorry, Professor. I was just telling Dagon, that I'd help him, if he had any questions I could easily answer."

The stern teacher almost smiled. "As long as you don't miss anything over it."

"Of course. Professor."

Draco smiled. He liked Curly. If he'd gone to Hogwarts he'd almost certainly have been a Slytherin.

The class wasn't as hard to understand as the professor's words had led Draco to fear. He'd probably have been able to join in just fine, if they'd only just started on a new topic, but the fact that they'd been talking about vampires for two weeks already gave him slight problems. Still he thought he'd be able to handle the assigned homework, an essay about determining the age of vampires.

Getting a book about vampires from the library might also help with his other problems in this
class, he decided, and he'd have time to read it over the weekend.

Curly stuck with Draco and Cathy on the way to Latin class and Draco soon noticed that Curt was trailing them, though he didn't seem sure whether he was welcome and stayed silent.

"What have you got against squibs?" Draco asked Curly as they walked. Of course a lot of people at Hogwarts didn't like squibs, but he wasn't used to it from the West Hogsmade people and Curly was wearing gang colours, though Draco didn't know who had light green headbands, yet.

"Nothing." Curly hasted to say. "I just wouldn't like to be one. It must be odd not to have any magic. I'm never sure how to act around them, what might be insulting or when I'm supposed to help them."

It took Draco a minute to understand that Curly obviously didn't know any squibs that well and saw them as disabled. He'd gotten so used to being around Charlie and Matt, that it had become natural for him and he didn't even remember most of the time.

DADA A had finished a little early, so they were the first ones to arrive at the Latin classrooms. They were empty even though the bell had only just rung.

"There's no Latin class at nine today." Cathy explained when Draco mentioned it.

With only the eighteen students from DADA A around Draco had a free view of the Roman emperors whose faces had been drawn onto the doors of the classrooms. He was a little disappointed to see that Latin A had been decorated with Caligula instead of Caesar who had looked sternly at them when they'd passed Latin C.

Then again, it could have been worse. Latin B had been given Nero. Not that one madman was much better than another, but at least Caligula hadn't entertained himself by watching his own empire burn away.

There were only the four of them in the class for now and Draco had time to look at all the pictures on the walls. Obviously the Latin teacher disliked bare walls and had accordingly covered them with diagrams of declinations and conjugations as well as all sorts of pictures.

There were photos of ruins, pictures of emperors, sketches of generals and poets, drawings of buildings and a huge map of the world as the Romans had known it.

"Pst, there's Karen." Cathy's voice finally drew Draco away from the pictures.

Draco had been very curious to see the girl Charlie had mentioned the day before. Karen was a moderately pretty girl, dark haired with long eyelashes, but she didn't have Cathy's charm. Reminded of the people around him Draco looked around the class and noticed Curt now talking to Lisa and Keith with a girl wearing the orange scarf of the Lords of the market as well.

"Who's Keith's friend?" he asked Curly with a slight nod towards her.

"Hester." Curly told him. "A rather quiet type unless she runs into one of the Angels. She can get more violent than Vio herself then."

"Small wonder." Draco decided. "I've seen the Angels." Then he realised something else Curly had said. "Vio's short for violent?"

"Actually her name's Violet." Cathy explained. "But the difference is marginal and the nickname stands for both."
Draco tried to match the picture of the scowling girl with black nails with the name Violet, but it was just too odd. He noticed Bianca had sat down beside Curly, but she wasn't even looking at him at all. Karen was talking to a dark blond girl with her hair in a bun that reminded him of McGonagall and Clarence was sitting alone staring expectantly at the door.

There were eleven students all in all in the class when the bell finally rang. The teacher arrived about two minutes later wearing muggle clothes and with a black briefcase in his hand.

He looked like an elderly muggle on his way to the office, Draco thought remembering some pictures from Muggle Studies at Hogwarts.

He greeted the class with a smile and a happy "Good morning, kids."

"Morning, Professor Magnus." the class chorused and sat down unasked.

"I have brought you another letter by Cicero today." the teacher announced to slight groans from the class. "Yes, I have noticed you don't like the man. I'm not overly fond of him either, but unfortunately he was very productive in his writing. I promise to bring you something more fun next week. Maybe a few of Catullus' poems? How does that sound?"

The class agreed to that and Professor Mangus pulled what looked like see through paper out of his briefcase and put it on the overhead projector. He bent down to switch it on when suddenly the door burst open and one of the outsider girls hastened in.

"So sorry, Professor." she panted. "I overslept."

"That would be the ... what? ... third? time this month that you told me that, Elly." Professor Magnus said standing up again with a sigh. "And considering that that's only a little over two weeks and that I only have your class twice a week in the second lesson of the day I'm beginning to think I should take some sort of action. What classes do you keep missing?"

"Oh, only DADA on Thursdays and Sports on Tuesdays." Elly told him with a shrug. "Totally unimportant."

"Knowing how to defend yourself against dark creatures and curses is very important, Elly." Professor Magnus said patiently after turning around and leaning against the overhead projector.

"Duh, I'm a squib. I can't defend myself, so what?" Elly shrugged. "I'm here now and I have even finished my homework for Tuesday already. Do you want it now or then?"

"Elly," Professor Magnus started. "Elly," He broke off again, turned and switched on the overhead projector.

Draco stared at the white rectangle of light that appeared next to the blackboard in fascination. Little green splotches in it slowly swam into focus and turned out to be words.

"Start copying the text, class, while I have a little talk with Elly." Professor Magnus ordered.

While Draco got out his parchment, ink pot and quill Professor Magnus pulled his chair over to where Elly was sitting next to Clarence.

"Now Elly, what makes you think that a squib can't defend herself?" he asked her patiently. "You may not be able to cast counter spells, I admit, but DADA also teaches how to recognise dangers and avoid them and then there are so many ways to fight without using magic."
"I can't fight magic, if I have none of my own." Elly insisted.

"I wonder what Charlie thinks about that." Draco whispered to Cathy.

"Not much." Cathy answered with a hint of a shrug. "She doesn't think much of Elly herself either. Elly is a very bright girl, if you ask me, but she's always late and doesn't care about her grades at all. If you talk to her about it, all you get is the 'I'm a squib, so what do you expect' routine. Makes you wonder why girls like Svenja or Sally bother being friends with her at all."

Once they had all copied the text, the rest of the class went much like Draco was used to from Hogwarts. Professor Magnus started at one end of the class and each student had to translate one sentence. What was different from Hogwarts though was that Professor Magnus could point out particular words or structures on the projected text on the wall and that he used a big muggle pen to write the translation on the blackboard.

So that was why there wasn't any chalk and why the blackboard was white. The blue muggle pen would probably have been invisible against a black background.

When he came to Draco Professor Magnus was a little startled at first, but then he remembered that he had a new student and just asked Draco's name.

"Do you take Care for Magical Creatures?" Curly asked Draco on their way out.

"No, why?" Draco asked surprised.

"Because, then you've got Sports with us." Curly grinned.

"Not necessarily." Cathy pointed out. "He might just as well have it tomorrow during Arithmancy."

Curly shook his head. "Our class's the smallest of our year. Dragon must have been assigned to us. Anything else would be illogical."

"Well, I guess that means I don't get to see much of Charlie today at all then." Draco concluded resigned. "At least I'll finally find out what Sports is."

"You mean you don't have Sports at Hogwarts? It's the best subject of all. Meet me in the lunch hall after lunch and I'll show you the way to the gym." Curly promised.

"You'd better leave everything in the locker." Cathy advised him once they'd fought their way down and to her locker. "The changing rooms aren't locked."

"My cauldron won't fit in there with everything else." Draco told her once he'd stuffed his backpack inside.

"Then shrink it." Cathy shrugged.

"Can't. Uncle Severus says that'll ruin it and it's his cauldron."

Cathy thought that over for a moment. "All right. I'll take it with me to the library for you."

Getting to lunch was easier today since they were rather late and very few people were headed in the opposite direction now, but the line for the food was much longer as well. When they finally got their food Draco realised that there would be no time left to visit the library today. Either he had to find a book on vampires at home, or he'd have to get it tomorrow. He'd have a whole hour to
Curly sat with a small group of only six kids somewhere in the back of the room. Draco should probably have guessed that he belonged to a small gang, if there were no squibs in it. He also noticed that when it got time to go Curly didn't come over to their table. He just walked to the door and waited there patiently until Draco got up and said his good byes to his friends.

Was that because he was afraid of the Rakers or was it part of normal gang etiquette? There was still so much Draco didn't know about these things. He knew how the gangs interacted at home in their own territory, but their behaviour at school where so many gangs were mixed together in every class was still mysterious. It was obviously okay to sit with members of another gang in the library, but not in the lunch hall and now Curly wouldn't approach the Rakers' table end.

He didn't mention his thoughts to Curly, though. It was probably better not to let the other gangs know how much he didn't know.

Curly led him to the end of the corridor where Cathy had her locker. There were two doors there at about the same height where the Herbology classrooms were at the other end of the school. One was marked with a little picture of a girl, the other with that of a boy.

Draco originally thought that they must be bathrooms, but when Curly opened the door with the boy, it revealed a line of hooks, many of them broken or torn half out, similar to the one in the wardrobe and Clarence who was just pulling a muggle t-shirt over his head.

Clarence blinked stupidly at them as they entered. "Who's there?"

"Just us." Curly told him.

"Who's us?" Clarence continued to blink.

"Your classmates, stupid!" Lenny hissed from right beside the door.

"Just put on your glasses, Clarence." Evil Eric advised him a little more kindly. "Then you'll see."

To his surprise Draco found nobody in this class that he didn't know. There was Clarence, who was now feeling around for his glasses, Eric who finally gave in and pushed them into his hands, Lenny and Nico talking in their hiding spot behind the door, Jim whom Draco remembered from Charms class, Noel from Transfigurations and the lively blond boy who'd sat with Nico in DADA.

Considering what Sarah had told him about Sports class eight was a really small number indeed, Draco thought. Or were there some girls in the other changing room? The very high laughter they heard through the thin wall didn't quite seem to fit in with that idea. It sounded more like a bunch of first or second years, than fifteen year olds.

Draco quickly slipped out of his robes and seeing what all the others were wearing quickly pulled on his jumper over the muggle t-shirt he'd been wearing under his robes all day.

"This is boring." the blond boy from DADA class said suddenly. "Lets go inside and warm up a little."

"The bell hasn't even rung, yet." Clarence pouted. "Lets wait for the teacher."

"Oh, come on Clarence!" Jim grabbed his arm. "You don't even have to do anything except walk into the gym. You can just sit down against the wall and watch us play."
The blond boy was just about to open the second door in the small room when the first one opened again and the Shark twins came in.

"Oh, and here I thought this class was going to be fun." escaped Draco at the sight.

Alex and Andy didn't look too happy either.

"What's wrong with them?" Lenny asked Draco with a slight frown.

"They're Sharks." Draco answered then added with a smirk. "They told the aurors on us, the little traitors."

The twins winced as all eyes turned to them.

"Hey, that wasn't us." one twin argued.

"Yes, it was Robin's bright idea." confirmed his brother.

"Yeah, and Mark decided to do it." added the first one.

"And it was Chris who went to the aurors." said the second.

"We had nothing really to do with that." both said together.

"Chris?" Draco repeated with a glare. "I should have known. I'm going to kill him."

"Won't Chris be happy to know about this." the first twin whispered to his brother.

The second twin gulped. "You aren't going to tell him that I told on him, are you?"

"And let you tell him that I told on the boss?"

By then the rest of the class had lost interest in the twins however and when the blond boy opened the door to the gym Draco followed the others inside.

The gym turned out to be a very empty looking room with a linoleum covered floor and wooden ladders of different sizes on the walls. There also were Soccer goals pushed against the walls and Basketball hoops, but Draco didn't know what those were used for. He had only a very vague idea what Basketball was, thanks to a description Sammie had given him once.

Clarence did indeed slump against the wall as soon as Jim had dragged him through the door, but the blond boy, climbed up a ladder backwards and announced: "Okay people, I know what we're going to do. We're going to play Tag!"

"Oh come on, Sparks." Lenny shouted up at him. "Tag's for children!"

"So what?" Sparks laughed back at him. "It's fun. Hey, Curly!" he shouted jumping off the ladder and hitting Curly on the back. "You're it! Catch me, if you can!"

Seeing that Curly did indeed take off after Sparks the rest of the class minus Clarence, who was still sitting on the floor by the door, and the twins, who were still changing, took off as well.

Draco had watched the little wannabes play Tag a few times and therefore had an idea what he was supposed to do. He just hoped there weren't any less obvious rules to the game.

By the time the twins finally arrived in the gym, everybody was laughing. Even Clarence seemed
to have fun just watching.

"What's going on?" one of the twins asked Clarence.

"Tag." Clarence reported. "I think Noel's it right now."

Considering that Noel was currently chasing after a screaming Nico with his hand stretched out reaching for his victim, the twins didn't find it very hard to determine whether the information was correct and soon joined in.

Draco was surprised how much fun Tag turned out to be. It was such a simple primitive game, but still they all enjoyed themselves immensely.

It took a sharp whistle to alert them to the fact that the teacher had arrived.

Draco froze expecting to at the very least get detention, but his classmates just ran over to the teacher still laughing. It didn't seem like they were expecting punishment at all.

The teacher was a young wizard, or maybe squib, with short dark hair. He was wearing practical muggle clothes and a silver whistle on a chain around his neck.

"Ah, I see you're already warmed up." he commented with a smile. "Excellent." Then he turned to Draco. "You must be the new student, right?"

Draco nodded. "My name's Dragon."

"Ah yes, so I've heard." the teacher was still smiling. "You've been going to Hogwarts until now?"

"Yes, Professor." Another one. Well, at least he'd only ever had one Flying teacher so it wouldn't take that long to explain this time.

"They only have Flying lessons at Hogwarts, don't they?" the teacher continued.

"Yes, Professor." Where was this leading to?

"So what is your favourite Sport, Dragon?" the teacher said with a slight twinkle in his eyes.

"Soccer." Draco said without having to think about it. Quiddich was all very fine, but he'd had more success in Soccer.

"Ah, stupid question to ask a Raker, of course." the teacher's smile grew even wider. "So what position do you play?"

"Keeper." Draco declared proudly.

The teacher nodded. "All right then, lets play Soccer today."

Most of the students cheered. Only Clarence looked very unhappy. Poor kid, he really reminded Draco of Neville Longbottom. Was he as clumsy as poor Neville as well?

"Do you know all your classmates' names, Dragon?" the teacher asked.

Draco nodded. "I think so."

"Good, then you'll pick the first team and..." he took a quick look at all the suddenly raised hands in the class. "Lenny, you pick the other. Who do you want on your team, Dragon?"
"Curly." Draco chose at once.

Lenny frowned a little, then shrugged it off. "Nico," he chose predictably.

Draco looked over the rest of the class. He'd never seen any of them play Soccer before. "Eric." he finally decided. At least he knew the boy was from Merlin Park and he had shown that he could run when they'd been playing Tag.

"Noel." picked Lenny.

Draco watched the rest of the boys closely. He definitely didn't want either Shark on his team. "Sparks." He didn't even know the kid, but he'd definitely bring a lot of energy into the team.

Lenny's deep frown told him that he'd chosen well this time.

"Andy," Lenny finally decided.

Had he been trying to make up his mind between the twins? If so he was probably expecting Draco to take Alex now.

With a smirk Draco decided to surprise him. "Clarence."

"What?" yelped Sparks while Eric groaned and Curly just stared at Draco in confusion.

Clarence stood absolutely still for a moment until the meaning of Draco's choice slowly sank in. Then his eyes widened, he gaped at Draco and then suddenly beamed. He'd obviously never been picked before.

Draco smiled at him.

"Alex." Lenny said hastily, even though it was the last pick anyway.

Now only Jim was left and he trudged over to Draco's team looking a bit disappointed.

"Why the hell did you do that?" Sparks demanded. "Clarence can't even shoot straight. Isn't it obvious that he's the worst player in class?"

"I picked a worst player once before." Draco told him calmly. "And she won me the game that day. Anyway, we'd have gotten the last player either way and I was almost sure Lenny would pick Alex. And if he had picked Clarence, his team would only have picked on him all the time. I've got a use for him."

"A use?" Curly repeated.

"Yes, I've got a plan, you see." Draco explained. "But you'll have to help me out a little, because I don't know you that well. Which two of you are the best attackers?"

"Attackers?" Sparks asked confused.

"The ones who score the most goals usually?" Draco tried to define.

"Curly and me." Sparks grinned. "Nico, Lenny and the twins are good, too, though."

"Okay," Draco was smirking again. Curly and Sparks, you stay in their half the entire game. Your only function is to score. I don't want to see you in our half after the game starts. Once the ball is over here stop and wait till you get it back. Eric and Jim, that's your job. You can move in both
halves, but don't get too close to either goal. You're only meant to pass the ball to the attackers, not score."

Eric, who'd seen the game against the Lions nodded. "Like Charlie and Sammie."

"Exactly." Draco grinned. "You might not see it at once, but that's a vital part of our strategy. You Clarence, are our only defender. You stick close to our goal and try to get in the way whenever the other team attacks."

Clarence stared at him uncomprehending.

"That way you're helping me to stop them from scoring." Draco explained. "If you're standing in their way they can't shoot easily."

It seemed Clarence understood now. At least he was nodding eagerly.

"Hey, team one!" the teacher called out to them. "We could use a little help here."

Draco looked up. The teacher and Lenny's team were busy pulling the goals away from the wall. They'd already set up one of them, but it appeared that the other one refused to move as easily.

"Sorry, just a little strategy meeting!" he called over. "We're coming." "Strategy meeting?" the teacher repeated to himself. Then he remembered the way the other Rakers played Soccer these days. Little Larry hadn't changed his ways much, but Sammie and Matt had been trying to talk their classmates into using teamwork manoeuvres and Jack the Ripper was actually leading his team whenever he played. Clever Mike hadn't changed any more than Larry had. He'd always been a great team captain. What was then to be expected of this Dragon? This game could get interesting indeed, he decided.

Together they managed to move the goal easily enough. It was mounted on little wheels, it turned out, but one of those refused to turn and that was the cause of the problem. They had to drag that side of the goal along by force.

A/N: Will Draco's team win the game? Will he be okay without his gang mates in Potions? And will he have serious problems in DADA?

In the next chapter: The Soccer game, of course! Then we go on to his first Potions class and search Sevi's bookshelf for vampires.
Once the goal was in position the teacher walked around it quickly arresting each wheel with a quick step.

"There. Ready to go?" he asked once that was done. "Then take your positions."

He didn't say which team should take which half, so Draco simply stepped into the goal and after a moment Noel took the other one.

The rest of the players raced towards the centre line where they faced off.

"Clarence!" Draco called out to the one player left without an opponent.

Clarence looked back at him uncertainly and Draco waved him over.

"Stay here." he told the boy once he was sure the other team wouldn't overhear them. "A defender has no business being in the centre of the field. Else the attackers might get behind you and have a free path to the goal."

It was a wise decision. The moment the teacher's whistle started the game all four of their opponents rushed towards the goal. One of the twins had managed to get the ball and was pushing it forward with what Draco considered small clumsy kicks. Even Luke could probably have taken it away, but Jim and Eric obviously weren't quite sure how to go about it.

Curly just stood there right on the centre line not knowing what to do and Sparks was simply chasing after the ball.

"Sparks!" Draco yelled out angrily. "Get back!"

"Get deeper into their field!" Eric was shouting at the two attackers. At least one person had understood Draco's strategy.

Curly finally moved. He was still unsure about it, because everybody else was moving in the opposite direction and so was the ball he needed to score, but Draco had said he couldn't cross that line and Eric's orders at least didn't go against Draco's.

Noel watched him come looking just as confused as Curly was feeling.

On the other side of the gym the twin with the ball was going to shoot, but Clarence was in his way.

'Stupid, clumsy Clarence isn't even trying to play, but still getting in the way.' he thought as he stopped and stared at the goal. 'What now?'

It only lasted for a moment, though, then he decided to just go around Clarence. He turned and kicked the ball to the side, ran after it, turned again and there stood Clarence looking defiant.

'What the?' he tried a few more times, then finally giving up kicked the ball to his brother who stopped it, took measure and shot.
Draco almost yawned. He caught the ball easily. If the twins always waited that long before they shot, he wasn't going to get challenged at all in this game. Still the team needed motivation.

"Good work Clarence. That's exactly what I want from you."

He quickly checked the positions of the rest of his team. Sparks was still in the wrong half, Eric a little too far in the other one still trying to reassure Curly.

"Eric, Sparks! If you want to switch positions, you've got to tell us so." he yelled out to them.

That brought Eric running back, but Sparks still didn't seem to understand. Time for a demonstration. Draco threw the ball out to Jim. "To Curly, ignore Sparks!"

Fortunately Jim could clearly see the wisdom of that at the moment. He took off towards Curly as soon as he had the ball under control.

The twins, it turned out, were faster than Jim, but he had a head start and once Curly saw him coming, he knew what to do. Noel was so surprised that he reacted much too late and the ball went in.

"Great work, team!" Draco called out seeing that Eric was now talking to Sparks.

The teacher closed his mouth again without having said a word. Clearly Dragon didn't need him to tell his team what they'd done right. Their captain's approval would motivate them better than anything he could say anyway. Instead he turned to the other team. "Good playing passing the ball to your twin." he told the first twin. "It could have worked. Keep it up."

The next attack came from Lenny himself and looked a little less clumsy to Draco, though Lenny clearly wasn't as fast as the twins. Eric made a good effort at taking the ball off him, but didn't succeed. If he'd tried this against the twin in the first attack, it could have worked, though.

Clarence bravely stepped into Lenny's way, but the Demon clearly wasn't entirely surprised. He made only one attempt at going around Clarence then passed to Nico.

Nico shot a lot faster than the twin had, but still aimed right at Draco. Draco caught the ball again this time throwing it out to Eric without even a moment's pause. All his players were in position now and the faster he acted the less time that left for the other team to react.

Unfortunately Noel held Sparks' shot this time. Well, the game was young and they were in the lead. Draco allowed himself a satisfied grin.

Despite his repeated praise of Clarence the teacher was beginning to doubt Draco's need of him about halfway through the game. Noel did okay as a keeper, he knew, but he still had let eight balls through by now, while this Dragon had been attacked just as often as Noel and had caught every ball with ease. He was beginning to compare him to Steve, the first keeper of the school team.

'Well Pit,' he thought to himself. 'Looks like you've got a real keeper here and no attacker in sight.'

In normal classes Steve was a problem for him, because the only one in his year who could get past him was Jack, but their schedules made it almost impossible to put them in the same class. If Dragon really was as good, he had an even bigger problem now. None of the boys in his year were on the school team except for Zach, a reserve defender whose schedule didn't allow putting him into this group at all. Nor could he add Dragon to a class of already thirteen students even if his schedule should permit it.
When Sparks scored the ninth goal he was almost tempted to stop the game entirely, but the boys were still having fun. Clarence was even beginning to enjoy himself, which was an absolute first in Sports class. Clarence didn't even enjoy aerobics, even though that was his favourite activity in Sports.

Maybe he could start the game over with a slightly different distribution of players? But the teams were evenly matched except for Dragon whom he couldn't balance out no matter what he did.

He could switch Jim to the other team as Dragon's side had the advantage in numbers, but that wouldn't change much. Maybe if he switched Curly instead? But Curly had been Dragon's first pick. There was no reason to define him as the extra player.

Maybe he should play himself to even out the numbers. He was eager to know how good Dragon really was and the best way to find that out was to kick a few balls at him himself.

In the end he let the game run its course and called the kids over to him after announcing the 12:0 end result.

"What you just experienced was the advantage of team work over just rushing into the game." he told them. "You picked only good players Lenny, while Dragon had a few weaker ones, but he knew how to use each one to his advantage and take some strain off the others. That way his team could walk all over yours. You were all going after the ball at all times, putting all your resources into every move you made and concentrating your forces in one corner of the field while your opponents were all over the field at all times always able to send somebody in wherever the ball ended up."

"Clarence kept getting in the way." one of he twins complained.

"Yes," his brother confirmed. "That clumsy oaf kept stopping the game by standing at the wrong place at the wrong time."

"Uh, boys." the teacher said as gently as he could. "I think that wasn't an accident. He was defending the goal that way."

"Defending the goal?" the twins clearly hadn't heard of that concept before, but the rest of their team seemed to know well enough.

"It helps keep some strain off the keeper to stop the direct attack at the first approach." the teacher explained patiently. "He has more time to prepare himself for the actual shot and can be sure that he won't be attacked from the side the defender's on."

"Okay, before you go get dressed again," he continued when there weren't any more questions. "Dragon, do you feel up to a few more minutes in the goal?"

Draco shrugged. This hadn't exactly been exhausting so far. "Sure."

"Good." the teacher said. "The rest of you, push back the other goal and then sit down on the side."

Draco walked back into his goal wondering what the teacher was up to. He'd sent all the others away, so what should Draco do in the goal?

He had only a few seconds to contemplate that, though, before he found the teacher himself racing at him from the side. 'No way even Matt could have separated him from the ball.' flashed through Draco’s head just before the teacher shot.
Unlike the students the teacher had aimed for a corner and Draco had to throw himself to the side to catch the ball. He was too late for that though and he just barely managed to push it away with the tips of his fingers.

The teacher went right after the ball and tried again, this time in the other corner.

His third attempt went through, but just barely. No, Dragon definitely hadn't needed Clarence.

"I always thought Little Larry couldn't be the Rakers' first keeper." he told Draco after a moment to catch his breath.

"Larry? Larry much prefers the attack. He just stands in as keeper during practise sometimes. The gang needs a second keeper while I'm at Hogwarts." answered Draco climbing back to his feet.

"Who'd be the other keeper then?" the teacher asked surprised.

"Bloody Mary." Draco answered. Why hadn't the teacher thought of her himself?

"Ah, one of the girls. I should have guessed." When he saw Draco's still confused look he added: "I only teach the boys, so I don't know Mary at all."

When the boys were already about to leave the teacher suddenly called out to him once more.

"If you'd like to try out for the school team, we'll need a new keeper next year. That'd be the first team's keeper, too."

Draco smiled. "I'm not sure, if I won't have to go back to Hogwarts, yet, but if I stay, I'll be sure to try out."

Being on the school team had to be exciting, Draco thought while he quickly slipped out of his sweaty t-shirt and pulled his robes back on. Too bad the changing rooms didn't have a shower installed and he also wished he didn't have to keep his jeans on, but he'd only worn the outer robes over them so he wouldn't be too hot and he'd get cold without them.

There also wouldn't have been enough time left for a shower, he realised as they walked out. Most students were already hastening towards their classes and Cathy and Charlie were waiting impatiently in front of the door.

"What took you so long?" Cathy greeted him. "We've been waiting for almost ten minutes."

"We were playing Soccer." Draco told her indignantly.

"Did you win at least?" Charlie asked.

"Did we win?" Sparks mocked her. "Of course we won. Gloriously, too. You should have seen it."

"We brought you your stuff." Cathy told Draco with a slight shrug at Sparks' antics. "Ignore him. He always acts like he's had too much coffee."

Draco shrugged off that last remark and just thanked her as he took his backpack and cauldron back from her. So maybe Sparks was a little hyperactive. He still liked the boy. Maybe it was because they'd won together or maybe just because they'd been on the same team, but he felt a lot closer to his team-mates now.

"Are any of you in Potions A?" he asked them while they hastened down the corridor towards the stairs.
"I am." he got from three sides.

Sparks, Nico and Eric.

"I'm already partnered with Sonja, though." Eric added.

"And I with Amanda." said Nico.

Well, Draco wouldn't have chosen the Demon as his partner anyway.

"I usually work with Curt." Sparks said.

Eric suddenly stopped short. "Anya's the only one who doesn't have a Potions partner."

"Anya?" Draco stopped as well. "Not Anya Allan from Charms?"

"Yes, exactly that Anya." Eric nodded. "I don't think she blames you for her detention, but she can't be fond of you."

"Why?" Sparks asked surprised. "Anya's a nice girl. I don't see why she wouldn't want to work with Dragon. They should get along fine."

"I got her sent to the headmaster yesterday." Draco admitted.

"Old Connelly made him summon her book and it turned out to be a Herbology text." Jim added from behind them. "And she was still furious during lunch today. I could hear her telling the girls even from our end of the table."

"Great." groaned Draco.

"Alright." said Sparks. "I'll work with you then. Anya can't have a grudge against Curt, too."

Draco smiled again. "Thanks Sparks. You're a real friend."

"Don't thank him too soon." commented Eric. "He's also a real disaster in Potions."

"Hey, I made it into A." Sparks protested. "I just have some little accidents sometimes."

"Like?" Draco asked getting a little nervous.

"Pushing over the cauldron, misplacing ingredients or just throwing them in too fast." Eric grinned.

Sparks shrugged a little apologetically. "Just little accidents. I know how it's done right."

"I think, I'll let you do all the cutting and see to the brewing myself." Draco decided with a grin. "That ought to prevent most accidents."

The Potions classrooms were on the third floor. Actually they took up the entire left corridor there. Each door was decorated with a bubbling cauldron from which smoke rose to form the words Potions F, or E, or D... each in a different colour.

Potions A was neon orange. Draco was sure the Lords of the Market appreciated it a lot.

When the four boys rushed in, there was only one Lord inside, though. The girl, Hester, if Draco remembered correctly. He'd only seen her that one time in Latin class, after all.

She was sitting right at the first table by the door together with Bianca, but neither girl was looking
at them. They seemed to be busy arguing about something, but from the few words he heard, Draco couldn't make out what it was.

The worktables for Potions were wider than the normal students' desks and thus only two had been put into each row. Sonja was already sitting at the second table in the first row and Eric slipped in beside her.

Right behind Bianca and Hester sat two girls Draco couldn't remember seeing before. They watched him curiously, so maybe they hadn't seen him before either.

Draco smiled at them then turned around to see that Sparks had already shooed Curt away from the other table. Curt looked a little disappointed.

"Sorry." he told the boy when he slipped past him on his way to Anya in the third row. "I just really don't think Anya wants to work with the idiot that got her in trouble with Connelly."

Curt glared at him for a moment and walked on.

Well, it didn't look like he was going to get along too well with Curt either, Draco decided.

Amanda and Nico sat in the third row while one last worktable had been pushed against the back wall next to the storage cupboard to make more room. If it had been in use as well there would probably have been no room to move left at all, Draco thought, but maybe some years had so many students that every last bit of space had to be used.

Professor Funnel arrived only moments after Draco had sat down. He looked almost as old as Dumbledore, Draco thought, but wasn't quite as agile anymore. He didn't bother to take attendance, probably since the fact that every available seat was taken made it quite obvious that nobody was missing.

His eyes quickly swept over the room and stopped as he found Draco.

"You don't look much like your uncle." he commented after an intense look.

"We're not really related by blood." Draco answered a little unwillingly. "But he's still my favourite relative."

"Professor Winter says you claim to be good at Potions." Professor Funnel stated next.

Did this teacher turn every question into a statement? Or maybe make every statement seem like a question?

"Yes, Sir. It's my best subject."

Frank Funnel nodded to himself, regarded Draco a moment longer, looked once over the whole class, then back at Draco again. "Have you brewed Merlin's dye yet?"

"No, Sir. We had a different Potions book at Hogwarts which puts that further back in the year. We've had several antidotes, burn potions and last brewed a few different healing potions for plants." Draco reported.

"You know what Merlin's dye is, though?" the Professor asked curiously. Apparently that was unusual for a student that hadn't brewed it yet.

"Yes, Sir. My uncle mentioned it when we were working in his lab together this summer." Draco
smiled in fond memory.

"So what do you know about it then?" Professor Funnel pushed.

Obviously he knew how to ask questions after all.

"Well, it was invented by Merlin, hence it's name, and is used to dye hair red. It was frequently used by witches trying to escape the medieval witch hunts and that led to the common superstition among muggles that all witches have red hair." Draco hoped that was good enough. It was definitely all he remembered.

"Excellent." Professor Funnel declared obviously satisfied with the information. "For homework I want all of you to read the chapter on dye potions and especially the part on Merlin's dye and write a short summary. Now we'll just brew the potion. You'll find the recipe in your books somewhere between pages 30 and 40."

Draco almost laughed at that information, but soon discovered the reason why Professor Funnel had been so vague. He found the recipe on page 36 while Sparks' book had it on page 39. Different editions.

"Dolly, please remember there are no bat parts of any kind in this potion." the teacher admonished one of the two girls Draco didn't know when she got up to get the ingredients she and her partner would need.

The girl blushed and the class giggled. Draco wondered what might have happened to her that included 'bat parts', while he wrote out a list of ingredients they'd need leaving out all those that he had with him and setting them up on the table.

"Tanja?" Dolly called from the back of the class seconds later. "Do we need bat's liver?"

"No bat parts, Dolly." the class chorused.

Dolly blushed again and returned the jar to the shelf.

Draco held his finished list out to Sparks. "You get these. I'll set up the cauldron."

"Don't drop anything expensive, Sparks." Professor Funnel advised this time.

Draco wondered for a moment whether it might have been wiser to let Sparks set up the cauldron and get the ingredients himself. A little water on the linoleum floor shouldn't be that much trouble, if Sparks had a little accident with the cauldron now.

But it was too late for that and after all this couldn't be the first time Sparks had had to get ingredients from the storage cupboard.

Even though Sparks bounced back to the table excitedly with the jars in his arms nothing bad happened and Draco almost laughed at his earlier worries.

He quickly set up the jars in the correct order while Sparks watched surprised and Funnel appreciatively.

Sparks soon discovered that working with Dragon wasn't as easy as playing Soccer with him. Draco kept reprimanding him for sloppy slicing of ingredients and not putting the jars back in the right place in the line.
"So what?" Sparks finally asked impatiently. "We're brewing a potion, not participating in an arts contest. The potion won't mind if the pieces are a bit irregular."

"They won't mix in as well and the potion won't be as strong." Draco explained while stirring carefully. "Also the more concentration you apply during the work the stronger the potion."

Sparks frowned. "Did you learn that from your uncle?"

"Yes, and believe me, he knows what he's talking about."

"Still it's just holding us up." Sparks insisted. "None of the others are doing it and all that setting up the jars in a strict order has let us fall behind the others already."

"Really?" Draco asked with a slight smile. "How far ahead of us are they?"

Sparks peered over to Curt and Anya's worktable.

"Beetle legs," he heard Curt mumble as they searched frantically through their ingredients. "Where are the beetle legs?"

Sparks decided that they were the wrong group to watch. Draco had added the beetle legs five minutes ago. Maybe it was because Curt and Anya weren't used to working together? He turned his attention towards Dolly and Tanja's table. that was the next best in sight from where he was slicing up dandelion roots.

Tanja was just holding a jar out to Dolly and what Dolly took out of it looked suspiciously like beetle legs. Well, Dolly was terribly forgetful. Maybe she'd had to look up the recipe a few times too often today?

But Bianca and Hester turned out to be even further behind arguing on whether to put in the oak leaves one at a time or all at once. He couldn't make out what Sonja and Eric were doing, but Nico and Amanda had just added the oak leaves. Sparks blinked surprised. They were five minutes ahead of the class? When and how had that happened?

Draco was smiling a little more now. "My method is faster in the long run, you know. I learned it from an expert."

Sparks looked over to Professor Funnel and to his surprise noticed that he'd been watching him all this time. "You're getting a demonstration of how the professionals work here, Sparks." the teacher informed him matter-of-factly. "Dragon's aunt is quite a brewer herself, you know, even though she doesn't have a master's degree."

Draco grinned. "She's the Chemistry expert, though. Spent the time Uncle Severus used for that on the muggles' brewing arts instead."

"Ah yes, Chemistry." Professor Funnel said almost wistfully. "The muggles' version of Potions. It would do our squibs good to have a teacher more versed in that. Your Aunt isn't possibly thinking of becoming a teacher herself someday, Dragon?"

"I don't think so, Sir." Draco answered after a moment of consideration. "I think she's hoping to return to working at the hospital once Billy is a little older. She enjoys brewing medical potions more than teaching, I think, but you'd have to ask her herself to be sure, of course."

"And the medicines are just as needed, maybe even more." Funnel agreed. "Well, I still have a few years left to find my successor. I'm not old enough to retire just yet."
"But you'd want him to be an Alchemist rather than a normal brewer?" Draco dared to ask.

"As I said, it would be good for the squibs and they are this school's speciality. We're proud of the good education we provide for these children and always looking for ways to improve on it."

"Uncle Severus says that teaching Alchemy would be important, but nobody's hiring Alchemists." Draco remarked more softly. The whole class didn't need to hear this.

"You think we might be able to snag Hogwarts' Potions Master away from them?" Professor Funnel asked just as softly. "Dumbledore would be a fool to let him go. He might not need an Alchemist, but I know of no other school that can boast having a Potions Master on staff."

"And Uncle Severus respects Dumbledore too much to leave him." Draco agreed. "He'd be glad to hear that you agree with him on the need of teaching Alchemy, though."

After they'd finished their potion Professor Funnel let them start their homework while they waited for the rest of the class. There was no Neville Longbottom in Potions A. The weakest student appeared to be Dolly who kept forgetting the recipe, but wasn't clumsy at all. According to Sparks she was excellent at predicting the results of combining two ingredients and rarely caused any accidents.

"She sometimes gets a completely different potion in the end, but she never combines anything that might explode." Sparks assured Draco. "Sometimes I think she confuses ingredients on purpose, just to see what will happen."

"Uncle Severus would hate her." Draco decided. "He doesn't like experimenting in class at all."

"You have smaller Potions classes at Hogwarts, though, don't you?" Sparks asked to Draco's surprise.

"Smaller? About twenty students in each class."

"Twenty!" Sparks exclaimed incredulously.

"Sparks! No talking in class." Professor Funnel admonished him almost gently.

Draco smirked. Uncle Severus would already have given Sparks at least one detention long before he'd shouted.

"But Professor, Dragon says there are twenty students in his Potions class." Sparks protested.

"Twenty students in Potions? That is quite a lot." Professor Funnel confirmed.

Draco shrugged. "That's average. The second year Hufflepuff/Gryffindor class is currently the biggest Uncle Severus has at twenty-five students."

"Twenty-five in one class and that at Hogwarts." Professor Funnel shook his head sadly. "Fourteen is the largest number I can fit into each class and if I could make that choice I'd never have more than ten students at the same time. How does your uncle manage?"

"Where's the problem with that number?" Draco asked back.

"Brewing potions is dangerous." Professor Funnel explained. "But children, especially the younger ones, tend to forget or ignore that. Some don't even want to understand that they have to be careful or they might end up blowing themselves up, others just don't have the talent for it. The more
students in a class, the more cauldrons you have to keep an eye on."

"Uncle Severus is very strict." Draco told the teacher. "Most students are too afraid of him to try anything and he knows which ones are most accident prone."

Professor Funnel nodded. "Still I wouldn't want to have to work with twenty students in one class and I couldn't imagine doing it in every lesson."

To Draco's relief they didn't have to try out their dye potion. He'd have hated to have to go home looking like Ron Weasley. Of course Aunt Sarah probably knew how to brew an antidote, but he'd still be seen by all his friends and enemies on the way home.

"So, how do you like Funnel?" was the first thing Cathy said when they met in the corridor after class.

"Fine, so far." Draco answered a little unsure. After all he still hardly knew the teacher. "I think he likes me."

"Did you learn anything?" Charlie asked with a grin.

"Oh yes," Draco started, but Sparks didn't let him say any more.

"Yes, that Dragon here can make you work at a snail's pace for purely aesthetic reasons and you'll still end up finishing first." Sparks said a little accusingly.

"They're not purely aesthetic reasons." Draco told him once again. "They're more efficient ways to work."

"They're booooring." Sparks insisted.

Draco just shrugged. "They work for the Potions Masters."

Once again they had to squeeze through the masses walking down the stairs and it turned out that going to the wardrobe at the end of the day was even harder than just getting out the door. At least when you were heading out the front door, nobody was trying to get in at the same time. The wardrobe unfortunately had only one door, though and there were just as many students on their way out as on their way in.

The fat girl from the day before once again ploughed her path through, several smaller kids that happened to be heading in the same direction trailing behind her.

Draco glared after her after she shoved him roughly out of the way and into the people standing behind him. Fortunately it was just the Lords of the Market from his own year. Draco didn't like the idea of being shoved into the Demons or a group of Sharks like that at all.

"How was Potions?" was the first thing Mike asked him when they met up with the rest of the gang in the entrance hall.

"Great. We brewed Merlin's dye." Was everybody going to ask him about that today? "Where's Jack?"

"Care for Magical Creatures." Sammie answered him with a shrug. "The higher years all have one elective this late and for the seventh years it's Creatures."

Draco tried to remember his own schedule. "What subject do we have that late?"
Cathy frowned. "Conjuring, the worst of them all."

"Even worse than Charms with Connelly?" Charlie teased her.

"Yes, at least I can perform charms. Almost everything in Conjuring is about incantations and I just can't sing. All I'm succeeding in is making the teacher despair every time I open my mouth." Cathy sighed. "It's a miracle she hasn't failed me yet."

"Why did you choose the subject in the first place?" Draco asked. "There are a lot of other interesting electives. You could have taken Runes or Muggle Studies for example."

"Ah, because those are your classes?" Cathy grinned. "I thought it would be interesting and Jack claimed that it was fun. I had no idea that girls had a different teacher or just how little musical talent I have. I suppose she realises that I do try, though. She doesn't really pick on me or anything, just doesn't know what to do with a student so untalented."

It was somehow consoling to know that Cathy wasn't perfect in every subject, Draco thought. After all she'd witnessed his embarrassing moments in Transfigurations and DADA.

Jack's absence didn't mean that there was no Soccer game that day, as Draco found out and once again there wasn't enough time left for all his homework. He did the Potions assignment first, because it was the most interesting, then finally started the Charms one.

It was easier for him, because he'd done it before and remembered much of what Flitwick had told them back then. Still he had to look up the details and he didn't dare to do sloppy work for Old Connelly's class. He might be able to perform all the Charms she was likely to teach this term, but she still didn't like him and was mean enough that he'd feel it, if he gave her any chance.

By the time he was done with the essay there was little time left for DADA, but he decided to at least search the lab for a suitable book. Uncle Severus had claimed that his moderated wolfs-bane potion was intended for both werewolves and vampires, so he had to have some texts around for reference.

After searching the whole bookshelf he had to realise, though, that Severus had most likely taken everything he needed for his pet project with him to Hogwarts. All Draco could come up with was a thick tome titled 'Hunters in the Dark' that had a big chapter dedicated to vampires and a lot of general information, though that more often than not dealt mostly with were-creatures.

Deciding that that probably wasn't enough he went to ask Sarah if she had any additional literature in the bedroom or maybe the basement.

"Severus has a very good book called 'An Encyclopaedia of Vampires'." Sarah told him at once. "It ought to be in the lab."

Draco shook his head sadly. "I already checked there. I suppose he's taken it with him as a reference for his wolfs-bane experiments. All I found is this." He held up 'Hunters in he Dark' for her to see.

Sarah frowned. "I wouldn't use that, if I were you. It does include some very interesting facts, but isn't reliable."

"It isn't?" Draco asked disappointedly.

"It's a rather old text written by a catholic priest." Sarah explained. "It's full of religious prejudice and unfounded superstition. Look here," she said taking the book from his hand and flipping
through the pages. "It states that vampires fear the cross and daylight kills them. ... Or this here.
Over forty pages on were-cats"

"Were-cats? What are those? I've never even heard of them." Draco asked curiously.

"Precisely. That's because there are no were-cats." Sarah told him. "There is a race called catar, that
is often referred to as were-cats, but they aren't even dark creatures. They are guardians of the
natural balance, similar to the druids. A very friendly race originally, but the church's persecution
has driven them to the edge of extinction. I'd rather you'd stay away from such biased books.
They're no better than the lies your father told you about muggles."

"Then why does Uncle Severus keep it in the lab? And what am I to use for my DADA essay?"

"Like I said, it has some very interesting facts and Severus knows not to rely on it. Why do you
think he left it here when he took everything else he had on vampires to school with him? I think he
mostly uses it as a reference on church prejudice." Sarah smiled, but put the book on her own
bookshelf in the bedroom instead of handing it back to Draco. It seemed she'd decided to keep an
eye on it while Draco was here. "I'm sure you'll find something more appropriate at the school
library and Severus will be home tomorrow evening. He can tell you everything you want to know
about vampires."

"Uncle Severus is coming home!" Draco exclaimed. "Why didn't you tell me sooner? Will he stay
the whole weekend?"

"I'm afraid he has to be back at school Saturday evening, but we've got him for one day and that
should be enough to help you with your DADA homework."

"It's not just the homework." Draco admitted. "I think we're about two years behind in DADA at
Hogwarts. One year for Lockhart and one for the false Moody. It's really embarrassing, you know."

"I thought you said the subjects were about the same as at Hogwarts?" Sarah asked sounding
slightly worried.

"Well, most of them are. Transfigurations and History are at almost the same spot, Herbology is
very different, but doesn't seem difficult at all. Old Connelly is so far behind Flitwick that I
probably wouldn't have a problem with her sixth year classes, we were reading something
completely different in Latin, but I had no problem adapting and Potions is a very sudden change of
topic as well, but still feels easy to me." Draco shrugged. "With all the brewing I've done with
Uncle Severus over the summer, I'm a little ahead of the rest of the class no matter what they do, I
guess. DADA could be a problem."

Sarah thought about it for a moment. "I think you should tell Severus about that. Headmaster
Dumbledore should probably know."

"You think he doesn't?" Draco asked surprised. "I thought Professor Fletcher would have told him
and Lupin must have mentioned it as well. The first thing he told us when he took over was that we
were far behind."

"Maybe so, but I wonder if Albus is aware just how far behind you really are. He is the one who
keeps talking about a new war coming and everybody having to be prepared. I'd think preparing his
own students should be his first action." Sarah answered. "Fletcher and Lupin never taught before.
They had no other students to compare you to. An experienced DADA teacher's opinion probably
will have a lot more weight."
"You think he'd come and talk to the West Hogsmeade teachers about it?"

Sarah sighed. "Probably not. Those Hogwarts snobs barely recognise West Hogsmeade's existence, but they should talk to them. They'll need to know the other schools' standards in order to judge the quality of their own work. It's time they stopped just assuming that they're the best, because they're the most expensive."

"They've got Uncle Severus." Draco pointed out. "And Professor Flitwick." he added. "Connelly thinks she's so sharp, but Flitwick beats her without even trying."

"Yes, but you said yourself that DADA isn't anywhere near West Hogsmeade's standard." Sarah pointed out.

Draco had to agree. "And then there's Professor Winter. McGonagall may be an animaga and all, but Winter's good, really good. Binns could take some lessons in keeping a class awake from Tempore, even though she isn't that impressive." he grinned. "And I wonder if Hootch can shoot a ball the way the Sports teacher can."

"Professor Funnel is one of he best as well." Sarah added. "And Professor Magnus taught at muggle university for a while. West Hogsmeade's Muggle Studies classes are the best in the whole UK and the main attraction of the school are the special classes they offer for squibs. Hogwarts doesn't even try in that department."

"Professor Funnel also said that they're considering teaching Alchemy and are even doing it to a point in the squibs' Potions classes."

"That's all concentrated towards the squibs, though and they'd have to do a lot more to teach real Alchemy." Sarah pointed out.

"Maybe so, but they're at least trying. Funnel even asked me, if you'd be interested in teaching."

"He did?" Sarah seemed speechless for a moment.

Was she actually considering it? But then she shook her head.

"It sounds nice enough, but I'm needed at the hospital. They've already owled twice asking when I'll be back. Apparently my replacement can only brew the more simple healing potions and they have to buy everything a little more complicated from the suppliers of St. Mungo's. St. Mungo's isn't happy about the competition and it's raising the prices, which are already too high for our little hospital anyway."

Draco nodded remembering how small the Hogsmeade hospital really was. It was little more than a medical centre with only a few beds. It did have its own dentist and children's doctor, three more mediwizards and a few nurses, but they rarely performed actual surgery. All the more serious cases had to be sent on to St. Mungo's for treatment.

Yes, Sarah was probably really needed back there, but didn't the students at West Hogsmeade Wizarding School need her as well? Then again, patients might die from lack of medicine, students wouldn't die from lack of Alchemy lessons.

"I guess so." Draco said a little disappointedly and returned to his books. If he couldn't do any DADA today, he at least had a chance to try some Math problems.
A/N: Will Anya and Curt continue to hate Draco? How will he do in Muggle Studies? And will Sevi be able to help him with his homework?

In the next chapter: We meet a professor with a speech problem. Draco meets Curt in the library and has both of his electives for the first time at West Hogsmeade.
Chapter Notes

A/N: Sorry that I've gotten some of the information about the British muggle schools wrong. Please just try to assume that the wizards, or maybe just the student stating it, are in error. They haven't gone to a British muggle school any more than I have.

Chapter 47: She Eclipshe

Friday morning started out with Transfigurations once again. It was nice to know where he was going and what teacher to expect for once, Draco thought, especially since he knew that it wouldn't last. All his other classes today would be new to him again.

Last time he'd been in this class he'd been glad to recognise just a few faces and remember some names. Now he realised with a start that there was only one kid there that he didn't know by name yet. Andy's once unknown neighbour was Noel and the strange kid's neighbour Sparks.

Good, Draco thought. If he didn't find out the kid's name during class, he could always ask Sparks later.

He put the cracked potion ingredient jar on his desk and looked around to see what the others had brought.

Cathy had a plain glass, which her mother had probably nicked from the pub where she worked. Bubbles and Keith had brought empty beer bottles, both of the same brand. Draco wondered whether they'd been supplied by the same parent as well. Sparks had an empty marmalade glass, completely undamaged probably to make sure that he didn't cut himself while playing around with it. Andy on the other hand had a big shard which looked like it had once been part of a window. Draco had to suppress a shudder when he realised that it was probably even sharper than Andy's knife. Noel and Pat had small cola bottles and Sonja and Belinda each half of a broken jar.

Draco decided that his own jar looked rather noble compared to what the others had brought.

Professor Winter breezed in a moment before the bell rang and greeted them with a happy "Good morning, class."

This time he wasn't at all surprised to arrive at eleven when counting them and just sent Bubbles to get rid of his gum before starting right in on the lesson.

"All right, class, does everyone know what a snake looks like?" he asked raising his eyebrows quizically.

"Yes, Professor!" several students shouted.

"Okay then, Sonja, what does a snake look like?" Professor Winter continued undaunted.

"Well, they're long." Sonja started sounding a little unsure. How do you describe a snake? "With
flat heads and a split tongue that's always flicking about. They've got cold and slimy skin."

"Stop!" Professor Winter shouted. "I'm afraid that's not quite correct." he continued more softly. "Who knows what snakes really look like?"

Draco raised his hand, but Professor Winter had already picked his next victim.

"Theo?"

Ah, so that was the name of Sparks' neighbour.

"They're usually brown and scaly and not cold at all." Theo answered.

Professor Winter sighed dramatically. "Most importantly they are not slimy." he declared.

"Look." A quick flip of his wand and a small green snake lay on his desk where there'd been a black muggle pen only moments ago. "This is a snake." He picked the surprised animal up and held it out to Sonja. "Please take a very good look at him then pass him on to the rest of the class. Don't worry, he isn't poisonous."

Sonja accepted the snake with trembling hands and quickly dropped him onto her desk.

"Please," Professor Winter admonished her. "Be gentle. He's a living creature, able to feel pain and fear."

Sonja mumbled an insincere "Sorry." and Belinda picked up the snake and let him curl around her wrist. Keith found it surprisingly difficult to pry him loose again when Belinda came over to pass him on.

Pat didn't look too happy about having to touch him either, but Sparks soon saved her, eager for his turn.

"Don't shake him about too much. Sparks." Professor Winter warned him even before he took the animal out of Pat's hand.

The snake was passed on from Sparks to Theo, to Noel, to Andy who flung him onto Draco and Cathy's desk.

"I said to be gentle, Andy." Professor Winter repeated a hint of anger in his voice. "One more action like that and we'll have to talk about additional homework."

Andy glared, but didn't say anything.

Draco gently picked up the snake. His body wasn't really warm, but the rough surface felt nice and the flicking tongue was kind of cute.

The snake hissed at him, but it didn't sound threatening. Maybe he was just complaining about the rough handling by Andy. For a moment Draco wished that he could understand him, but of course that talent had to be wasted on Harry Potter instead.

Once they'd all seen and held the snake Professor Winter turned him back into a pen and put him/it on his desk. "Now, do you all know what a snake looks and feels like?"

"Yes, Professor."

"Good. Try to turn your glass objects into snakes, then." the teacher ordered. "No poisonous
snakes, please, and try not to make them too big if you can avoid it. A hungry boa constrictor on your desk can get rather troublesome."

Turn the jar into a snake? Just like that? Without even a demonstration of the proper wand movements or an explanation of the words? But then Professor Winter hadn't given much of an explanation about the rats either, not even what they looked like.

Draco noticed that his classmates were all grabbing for their books and followed their example. Ah, so they were supposed to find the instructions themselves, just like Uncle Severus had made him do with the potions he'd brewed back in the summer! Well, he should be able to do that.

Indeed he soon found the right page in his book, but to actually perform the transfiguration turned out to be much more difficult. After the third unsuccessful attempt Draco took a moment to check the class' progress.

Keith was already playing with his snake, Bubbles just laying down his wand and bending down to inspect his. Theo was still searching the book, Sparks reading. Belinda had already accomplished the task as well while Sonja was looking at her broken jar a little hesitantly.

Draco watched as Pat transfigured her cola bottle then sat back to watch her snake from a distance. Noel had obviously made some mistake somewhere. He was currently poking the little glass snake on his desk with his wand, to check whether it was alive or just reshaped. Cathy put down her book and picked up her wand.

SNAP! A terrarium suddenly appeared around Andy's half formed snake.

"Cobras are poisonous, Andy." Professor Winter calmly informed the surprised student. "I said no poisonous snakes, but I'll assume this time that you really didn't know and let it go. Please bring a short essay about a non poisonous snake for our next lesson, so I'll be sure that you've read up on the subject and will not repeat this mistake."

Andy groaned and Draco wondered whether the teacher really thought it had been a mistake or this was his unique way of punishment.

When Professor Winter went on to check out Noel's mishap Draco returned to his own jar. He pointed his wand at it, imagined the little snake the teacher had shown them and said the words while performing the wand movement described in his book.

Nothing.

He tried again, and again.

Still nothing.

A flicking tongue distracted him momentarily as Cathy's snake while exploring his surroundings had discovered his wand. Cathy gently pulled him back so Draco could work in peace.

He tried again.

"You're saying it wrong." Professor Winter's voice came from behind him. "Try stressing the last syllable a little more."

Draco blushed a little embarrassed to realise that he was the only one that hadn't finished the task yet, but tried and indeed the jar slowly melted into the form of a small green snake.
"Ssss?" the poor animal looked a little confused at his sudden materialisation on a desk.

Draco scooped him up and hugged him lightly.

"Ah, a perfect copy." Professor Winter smiled. "You really did take a good look at the demo version I showed you, didn't you, Dragon?"

"Well, I liked him." Draco admitted. "The snake is the Slytherin house animal and green the house colour."

"I see." Professor Winter nodded. "Now, if you'd just hand him over to me for a moment so I can check his eyes."

Draco reluctantly surrendered his snake.

"Very good." Professor Winter declared after staring into the animal's eyes for almost a minute. "Most of you missed the eyes, though. You should have studied the example more closely. And Sonja and Pat, you both forgot the texture of the snake's skin. Please feel your classmates' snakes again to be reminded. We will repeat this exercise next week, so don't forget to bring the glass objects again. You may turn them back now."

Draco sighed softly, stroked his snake good bye one last time then once again picked up his wand to turn him back. It went much faster now than it had when he'd first tried with the rat. Turning an object back into its original form was a lot easier than turning it into something else. Obviously something within the object remembered what it had once been and wanted to return there.

One last quizzical hiss and the snake was gone. Draco looked at the still cracked jar a little sadly. He had preferred it as a snake.

To his surprise they didn't climb up to the top of the school for Astronomy. The class was held on the second floor instead. How could they see the stars from there? Or even more importantly, how could they see the stars in bright daylight?

At Hogwarts Astronomy had always been held on the Astronomy tower in the middle of the night. Here it appeared to be a morning class in bright daylight.

The doors were predictably decorated with star constellations and looked rather pretty glowing slightly in the dim corridor.

Charlie waved at them as she walked past and into Astronomy B.

Draco frowned. "Isn't Charlie in our class?"

"No, not in Astronomy, I'm afraid." Cathy answered with a slight sigh. "This is the most unpleasant class as far as the combination of students is concerned."

Draco was going to ask her what she meant, but at that moment they entered the class and Draco just closed his mouth again. There was no need to ask. It was obvious. Both the Shark twins and all four of the Demons were sitting in the third row and as an additional bonus just for Draco Anya Allan was there as well. She and Svenja had claimed the center desk so there was very little chance of getting a seat away from both her and the Shark-Demon alliance.

At least there were some good news as well. The Lords of the Market were there, currently gathered at the front desk in the window row. Draco assumed that Hester was actually sitting at the desk right behind that with Cindy, Cathy's neighbour from DADA, though. Sparks and Jim, the
outsider boy from Charms had claimed the last desk in the second row leaving Cathy and Draco the choice between sitting right in front of Anya and Svenja or right by the door.

"Lets sit by the door." Draco suggested.

Cathy hesitated. "The middle row's better."

"Please? Anya's still mad at me."

Cathy shot a quick glance at the outsider girl and indeed Anya was glaring daggers at Draco. "All right." she conceded. "But you sit by the wall."

Draco didn't mind that. The wall was decorated with moving star charts which looked like they were fun to watch, at least for a while.

Curly arrived a minute or so later and dumped his backpack on the last empty desk then came over to greet them. Here he didn't seem to have a problem approaching their table at all. Draco decided that he'd have to ask Cathy about that later.

"So how're you doing with your DADA homework?" Curly asked him. "Anything I can help you with?"

Draco sighed. "Not yet. I didn't have a chance to go to the library yesterday and Aunt Sarah won't let me read the only book on vampires I found at home. She claims it's too biased and unreliable. Uncle Severus is coming home today, though and he'll be able to help me for sure. He's been working on a potion for vampires, so he's got to have read everything about them."

Just as the bell rang a big fat boy came puffing in looking like he'd just run up all the way from the entrance hall. Then again maybe he was just out of shape.

"Hey, Marty!" Curly greeted him a little hesitantly. "You're sitting with me today."


"Because there's no desk left to sit alone at?" Curly suggested. "Come on, it won't be that bad."

Marty frowned. "But we're seventeen in this class, an uneven number."

"Not anymore." Lenny grinned at him evilly. "Now we're eighteen." he pointed at Draco. "Tough luck, Fatty."

"Oh, shut up before I let the sunlight in, Vampire." Marty told him, but did take the chair next to Curly.

"What's the problem?" Draco asked Cathy seeing how hesitant both boys were. "Don't they get along?"

"Marty's just used to sitting alone in this class," Cathy whispered back. "He likes to put his bag on the other chair and spread his parchment all over the desk. And Curly's nervous, because Marty's a squib."

"He isn't afraid of Lenny, though," Draco remarked.

"Who, Curly or Marty?" Cathy grinned.

"Both actually, but I was referring to Marty," Draco answered.
"Why should they be?" Cathy shrugged it off. "Lenny's just a bully. Annoying, yes, but still a coward at heart."

"But he's got magic and Marty doesn't." Draco pointed out.

"You're confusing Marty with Elly, I think." Cathy joked. "You wouldn't expect Charlie or Matt to be afraid of Lenny, would you? Marty's no different. He's even got a bit of a mean streak himself, so don't you worry about him."

Draco nodded. "What's with the vampire reference?"

Another shrug. "He wears sunglasses indoors, he's got to be able to take some teasing about it."

"He doesn't really have vampire blood, though, does he?"

"Not that I know." Cathy answered. "It isn't impossible, of course, but not very likely either."

Draco grinned. "You're right. He'd probably be in DADA A if he really were a vampire."

The teacher arrived five minutes late dragging a TV in behind her.

"Shorry, I had to lend out our TV for the last lesson and I'm not sure what levitating won't harm it." she explained.

Draco wondered whether her hair colour was natural. It was a very pale orange, that made her small face look even paler than it was anyway. It was cut very short on the sides and a little longer on the top of her head. All in all she made Draco think of a long carrot that had gotten too little light. A carrot with a serious pronunciation problem.

The class ignored her almost completely while she dragged the TV into place and plugged it in.

"Shhh, shhh, shhh!" she attempted to silence them.

Or was she just doing pronunciation exercises?

A few students' eyes wandered over to the TV, but since there was nothing on they went right back to their various conversations.

"Shhh please!" the teacher said. "You're about to see a film about a total eclipse."

The class didn't seem to hear her at all, but after a few more "Shhh, shhh, shhh"s the teacher turned on the TV and the noise level in the class reduced as the students turned at least part of their attention to the screen.

It was never entirely quiet in the room, though and from time to time the teacher added a few more "Shhh, shhh, shhh"s to the background noise.

The film was interesting enough to capture Draco's attention, but afterwards the professor started talking. Her voice was so soft that it was hard to hear and her words so boring that Draco was reminded of Binns.

"Shhh, shhh, shhh!"

Draco woke up with a start. Had he missed something important?

The teacher started to tell the whole thing from the beginning once again. And again, and again.
Draco was almost bored to death by the time the bell finally saved them. Nobody hurried out of this class, they were all still waking up.

"Come on. Dragon!" Cathy tried to speed him up. "It's lunchtime. You've got to be hungry."

Draco blinked a few times, then grabbed his stuff and followed Cathy out of Astronomy A. "Is that witch always this boring?"

"Sharter? Oh yes, she's really clever, but can't teach at all. Probably should have gone into research instead." Cathy shrugged. "The other one hasn't got much of an idea of the subject, though, so she gets to keep the A classes."

"Sharter?" Draco repeated.

"Well, that's what it sounds like when she introduces herself." Cathy admitted. "Knowing her it might be Sarter or Tharter or even Carter. You're safest just calling her Professor."

Draco burst out laughing which also served to finally restore his energies.

"You get ushed to it." Cathy commented, but didn't manage to keep a straight face either.

"What are you two giggling about?" Jack asked when they arrived at the lunch table.

"Sharter." Cathy told him between laughs.

That set Susie off as well.

"She taught us about she eclipshe today." Draco added and soon the whole table was laughing.

The Sharks gave them weary looks from their own table, but weren't close enough to hear what was going on. They'd probably have been a lot less nervous, if they'd been closer this time, Draco thought.

It was almost impossible to eat while laughing, but Draco didn't mind. He didn't have a class after lunch today, so there was more than enough time left.

Unfortunately all the other Rakers had to leave for class and he made his way up to the library alone. There he found Sparks, Curly and Curt already working on their DADA homework.

Curly and Sparks waved for him to come join them, but Curt glared.

Draco quickly looked around hoping to see Bubbles and Keith again, but they weren't there.

Working with his classmates would probably help him catch up, but did he really want to confront Curt? Did he have to confront Curt?

Curly and Sparks were his friends, though and maybe Curt would accept him once he got to know him better. He decided to risk it and walked over to drop his backpack off at their table.

"I'll be with you in a moment. I just want to get a book first." he told them.

While he searched through the DADA section he could see Curt argue with his friends out of the corner of his eye. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea.

To his surprise the Encyclopaedia of Vampires stood right there on the shelf. Draco quickly grabbed it and went to check it out at the librarian's desk. The librarian was an old witch who
glared at him for interrupting her knitting, but signed out the book without hesitation. She didn't even ask him for any identification even though she couldn't possibly know him yet.

By the time he returned to the table Curt and the others seemed to have worked out the problem and Curt accepted his presence even though he avoided talking to him as much as he could.

"Do you take Ancient Runes?" he asked the boys when the bell rang to announce the end of Arithmancy class.

"We do, but Curt doesn't." Sparks answered starting to pack up.

"So you've got two hours off on Fridays?" Draco asked Curt. "That's got to be boring."

Curt shrugged, still unwilling to talk to him.

"He's got more time to study that way, though." Sparks grinned. "You're coming with us to Runes, then?"

"I'm not sure. I should probably wait for Charlie. She'll be looking for me."

"Arithmancy's right next to Runes." Curly told him. "We should be able to catch her on the way, if we hurry."

"Okay, race you!" Sparks called out and took off.

The librarian only sighed as he dashed past her.

Draco and Curly grabbed their bags and followed him, but it was impossible to catch up.

Sparks dove through the crowds of students coming down the stairs like the thieves on market day. Maybe he was one of them, Draco thought.

He even ran on when he passed Charlie and soon was out of sight.

"Hey, where are you two going to in such a hurry?" Charlie asked as they stopped in front of her.

"After Sparks." answered Curly.

"He was supposed to wait when he met you, though." Draco added. "Where's Cathy? Wasn't she with you?"

"Yes, but she left before me. Arithmancy was her last class today."

"You mean she gets to leave two hours early every Friday?" Draco asked with a touch of jealousy.

"Yes, but she's also got to stay an hour longer Monday and Tuesday for Conjuring and she hates that class." Charlie pointed out. "Runes and Muggle Studies aren't that bad."

The Runes class was on the second floor. Actually there were two classrooms decorated with rune inscriptions, but only one of them was needed for the fifth years.

"So, who's our teacher?" Draco asked as they walked in.

"Professor Magnus." Charlie answered while glancing quickly through the room. They were in luck it seemed. Karen wasn't there yet.
"The Latin teacher?" Draco asked surprised. He'd have thought that teaching fourteen Latin classes was quite enough to keep one teacher busy.

"No, his wife." Curly corrected. "She's a lot like him, though."

This classroom had one row of desks more than Draco was used to from most of his other classes at West Hogsmeade.

"How many students are there in this class?" he asked his friends.


"So why are there so many desks here?"

Charlie looked confused for a moment, then laughed. "Actually most classrooms are this size. Only the A classes in the mandatory subjects aren't allowed to have more than eighteen students, so they're smaller than the rest."

"Hi, Dragon." whispered someone right into his ear.

Draco shot around and saw pink lace.

"I'm Martha." the lacy horror informed him unnecessarily and batted her eyelashes. "Got any plans for this evening yet?"

"Yes, and they certainly don't include you." Draco tried his best glare on her.

"Oh? What are you doing?" Martha continued undaunted.

"None of your business." Draco hissed, but to no avail.

"Oh, come on, you can tell me." more coy eyelash fluttering. Her eyelids were pink as well. Very pink.

"Let me translate this into a language you understand Martha." Charlie came to his rescue. "Get lost!"

Martha pouted, but after a slight shove from Charlie took the hint.

"See you later, Dragon!" she winked at him before finally walking away.

"What did I do?" Draco asked nobody in particular.

"You're as blond as Gringolf Glizzard." Charlie informed him calmly. "And maybe she noticed even more family resemblance there."

"Actually, I've got my hair colour from the Malfoy side of the family." Draco pointed out.

"Well, it's still blond. The Angels love blond boys." Charlie obviously thought this mess was great fun.

"Oh really?" Draco grumbled. "Then why isn't she after him?" He pointed at a tall blond boy who was talking to Sparks in the second row. With the exception of a dark haired girl sitting next to Anya he was the only kid in the class Draco couldn't name. Did he really know almost his entire year already?
"Lars?" Charlie grinned. "He already broke up with her in third year. I think the relationship lasted almost two weeks, which is quite a lot for Martha."

Karen frowned slightly when she realised that her usual seat was taken, but didn't seem to be really angry. She just looked around the class to find somewhere else to sit. Unfortunately the only one without a neighbour turned out to be Martha.

Karen's frown deepened as she probably realised that she should have come right over after Arithmancy. Then she'd have had more choices even if Dragon had already had taken her chair then as well. With a quick decision she walked into the empty last row and took the middle desk. Better to sit alone than to be stuck with Martha the whole lesson.

Draco had ended up sitting next to Cindy whom he'd never talked to before, but since Cathy apparently liked her well enough to sit with her in DADA she was probably a good choice. Svenja seemed to have forgotten all about the quarrel she'd had with Charlie on Wednesday and had asked her to compare their homework the moment she'd arrived. When Charlie hadn't wanted to leave Draco and just given her the scroll she'd taken it over to the first desk on the door side, where the other outsider girls sat.

Interestingly Jim and Clarence who sat right behind them didn't join into the homework comparison session. It reminded him of the fact that the outsiders sat in two separate groups at the same table at lunch. So they only worked together when threatened by the bigger gangs, but were separate gangs most of the time.

Draco tried to listen in to the girls' conversation for a moment, but the noise level in the room made it impossible to make out any words.

Professor Magnus did look similar to her husband insofar as she too wore muggle clothes and carried a briefcase, but she soon turned out to be less lenient. Draco wondered how she would have handled Elly, but then Elly quite obviously didn't take Ancient Runes.

Unlike her husband this Professor Magnus did take attendance, though she hurried through it rather quickly. It brought the fact that the Shark twins were here to Draco's attention, though. He hadn't been surprised to see all of the Lords of the Market, but what were Sharks doing in a class like this?

Unlike Care for Magical Creatures or Conjuring from what he'd heard about it, Runes required a lot of studying. Runes texts weren't just written in a different alphabet, they were a different language with its own phrases and grammatical structures.

Maybe Andy and Alex couldn't sing any more than Cathy? Or maybe they'd been kicked out of Creatures class for mistreating the animals?

Or maybe Draco's opinion of the twins was too biased by their gang affiliations. Maybe the twins did have a genuine interest in their schoolwork, or at least in some of their subjects. After all one of them had made it into Transfigurations A and they were both in Herbology A, which didn't quite fit in with Draco's opinion of them either. Maybe they really weren't as bad as Mark or Chris.

"Alright class," Professor Magnus ordered. "Let's compare your homework."

'Compare homework?' Draco thought confused. Homework was something teachers wanted handed in, not compared.

Just like her husband, Professor Magnus projected the homework text on the wall, while all the students brought out their scrolls. Draco wondered what he was supposed to do in the meantime.
He didn't have any homework of course, but then Professor Magnus had barely acknowledged his existence during attendance. Was it possible that she didn't even recognise him as a new student?

"Sally, you start." Professor Magnus ordered.

Anya's neighbour started to read out her homework occasionally corrected by the teacher and Draco watched fascinated as Cindy marked her own homework. Once the girl noticed she pulled it away, though.

"Sorry." Draco whispered to her indicating his empty desk with a shrug. "Bored."

Cindy smiled slightly to show that she forgave him, but didn't take her eyes off her work for long.

In the meantime the Professor had called on Anya to continue, then Svenja and soon Charlie. Now Draco was getting worried. He was the next in line. What if she called on him now? If she really hadn't noticed that he was new, he'd be in trouble.

"Karen, do you have your homework?" Professor Magnus asked suddenly.

"Yes, professor." Karen started. "Do you want me to continue?"

"Then why are you sitting back there?"

"My seat was already taken." Karen pointed out.

"I see, but why didn't you sit with Martha then? I'd rather not have to shout this much to be heard, so please come more to the front."

Karen looked around desperately. "I can hear you just fine from here, honest. I just can't stand Martha's perfume. It makes me dizzy and I can't concentrate."

"Very well." Professor Magnus gave in. "Dragon, could you sit with Martha, please?"

"No!" escaped Draco. "I'll sit with anyone, but her."

Martha sighed dreamily. "Oh please Dragon. We're going to have a great time. There's so much you don't know about me. We can get to know each other better."

"No talking in class, Martha." Professor Magnus said sternly. "You're here to learn something, not socialise. No wonder Dragon and Karen don't want to sit near you, if you won't let them work. Cindy, would you be okay sitting with Martha?"

"No, sorry Professor, but I'm sure I can work much better sitting here." Cindy answered at once. Professor Magnus looked through the room. "Hester?"

"No!" both girls shrieked horrified.

"Rival gangs. Professor." Lars reminded her dryly. "You know how it is."

"I see. How about you, Lars?"

"Uh, she's my ex. Rather violent break-up." Lars shrugged. "I'm not sure we're past that, yet."

Professor Magnus looked through the whole room once again. "Anyone?"
At first nobody reacted. Professor Magnus looked at the class with a slightly lost expression as if she weren't sure what to do now and maybe even wishing she'd never brought it up.

Then when nobody expected a reaction anymore Clarence slowly raised his hand.

"Clarence?" Professor Magnus asked clearly expecting him to do something like ask permission to go to the bathroom.

"I could give it a try." Clarence said hesitantly.

"Oh, thank you Clarence." Professor Magnus smiled at him gratefully. "Karen, will you be able to work sitting next to Jim?"

"Yes, Professor, that'd be okay."

"Fine, then you sit here and Clarence, you move over to Martha." Then the teacher remembered Clarence's glasses. "You will be able to see, from there, won't you?" she asked a little worriedly.

"Yes Professor, I think I'll be okay." Clarence answered obediently as he picked up his things to make room for Karen.

"All right then, lets start with today's text." Professor Magnus announced once both children were sitting again. She whisked the odd see through parchment off the projector and put another one in its place.

"But Professor, we weren't done comparing the homework yet!" protested somebody in the last row. Draco suspected that it had been one of the twins, but since he'd been looking at the projection of the new text and didn't know their voices that well, he couldn't be sure.

"We weren't?" Professor Magnus asked surprised. "Then where were we?"

"Just about to start with the last paragraph, Professor." Sally said eagerly.

Either this girl absolutely loved Ancient Runes class or she was another Hermione Granger, Draco thought, while Professor Magnus once again exchanged the texts.

"All right, then whose turn is it?" the teacher asked.

"Professor, the text's wrong side up." Sparks remarked.

Without looking Professor Magnus turned the sheet on the projector around.

"Now it's upside down and wrong side up." Curly reported with a slight grin.

Professor Magnus glared at him.

"I'm just stating that, because we can't read it that way." Curly pointed out.

It took the teacher a minute to figure out how to turn the text so it showed up right.

"There now, whose turn was it?" she demanded again when she was finally done.

"Cindy's." Karen lied fluently.

"No, Dragon comes first." Anya insisted.
"Dragon wasn't here last lesson. He doesn't have any homework to compare." Charlie answered her, before Draco even had time to panic.

"Then Karen should go instead of Dragon." suggested Bubbles.

"No, Karen's turn is after Jim and he comes after Cindy." said Lars.

"But that's Clarence's place." argued Keith.

"Can we please just get on with the work?" Sally almost yelled. "I'll read it."

"You can't, you already had your turn today." Hester informed her.

It went on like that for almost five minutes until Professor Magnus finally decided to just call on Cindy to finish reading out the homework, no matter whose turn it was.

Unfortunately Cindy had several mistakes that needed correcting and it took another ten minutes until Professor Magnus could finally exchange the sheets once again.

"Well class, lets get started on the new text, then. This is..." and that was as far as the teacher got.

RRRRIIIINNNNG!

All around the classroom students started packing up. For many this was their last class of the week and they wanted to get out.

"Well, since we didn't get to copy any of the text, please translate the text about King Arthur from your books for homework!" Professor Magnus shouted over the noise.

Draco wondered how many of the students had heard her. A quick look around proved that at least the Lords and the twins were already gone. Clarence was running for the door shouting something about a train he didn't want to miss back to Jim. Martha and Hester must have collided on the way to the door and were now yelling at each other. Hester even tried to hit Martha over the head with her Runes book, but Martha managed to duck in time and fled under a desk and out the other side and towards the door. Hester yelled some insults after her, but didn't pursue.

By the time the noise settled down there were only eight of them left and they all walked out more slowly. Those kids were probably all taking Muggle Studies as well, Draco assumed. He'd expected Svenja and Karen to stay as he'd figured out that they both were squibs by now.

Then there were Sally, Anya and Lars and to Draco's surprise Sparks as well. He knew for sure that neither Anya nor Sparks were squibs, so maybe it wasn't all that unusual for magical children to take Muggle Studies, after all.

The Muggle Studies classroom was already swarming with other kids when they arrived and this time both classrooms were in use. No, with such a big number of students it was absolutely impossible that all of them were squibs.

Draco saw the three Black Ring members walk into Muggle Studies B, but Charlie led him straight to Muggle Studies A, which was decorated with a fascinating picture of a muggle shopping center. He'd have loved to stop and admire it, but Charlie pulled him on to clear the door for the other students behind them.

"Oh no, not you again!" Marty groaned when he caught sight of Draco. "There are only nine desks in here."
Indeed the last row of desks had been pushed against the wall and was used to display all sorts of muggle objects. Some were familiar to Draco, but others looked completely strange.

Draco just shrugged at Marty and walked over to read the labels.

Purse (carried by muggle women). Batteries (used to store electricity). Microphone (replaces Sonorus spell). Police Helmet (worn on the head by muggle aurors), ...

Unfortunately he didn't get much time before the teacher arrived. She was a very young looking women with glasses and to Draco's surprise wore light blue robes.

Somehow Draco had expected a Muggle Studies teacher to wear muggle clothes, even though the one at Hogwarts didn't either.

She said a quick greeting and took attendance, which gave Draco a chance to look around at the other students present.

There were eighteen kids, exactly as many as could fit into the room, without dragging some more chairs in and disturbing the display by taking away one of the desks.

Lenny and Nico were sitting at the window side desk in the last row chatting away and almost completely ignoring the teacher. Amanda wasn't anywhere around and the fourth Demon had ended up sitting next to Marty at the middle desk, which was the quietest desk in the room, because the two were just glaring at each other sulkily.

Draco and Charlie themselves had had to take the wall side desk in the last row, but at least they had a very good view of the classroom.

In front of them Sparks and Lars were laughing about who knew what. The two girls to their left were complete strangers to Draco. Probably squibs, he supposed, that weren't in any of his other classes. Then there were Nora and Karen on the window side and the front row was mostly claimed by outsider girls, Sally and Svenja by the window, then Anya and one the teacher addressed as Mona in the middle. The last two girls were strangers to Draco as well.

It wasn't until the teacher had finished attendance that Draco noticed that he'd been skipped. Had she been using a different class list than the one the headmaster had given her? Or was he supposed to be in Muggle Studies B?

Draco slowly raised his hand to ask.

"Ah yes, you must be Dragon." the teacher smiled at him. "You've been taking Muggle Studies at Hogwarts?"

"Yes, but I only started the subject this year." Draco answered slightly embarrassed. "I was supposed to take the third year exam at the end of the first semester and then continue on with the fourth years for the rest of the year."

"Why did you start a new subject this late?" the teacher asked surprised. "Is that common practise at Hogwarts?"

"No, it isn't common." Draco answered even more embarrassed now. "They only made an exception, because the headmaster knew that my father wouldn't have allowed me to take the subject."

"Your father is ... um ..." Now the teacher looked embarrassed.
"He's old pureblood and wants nothing to do with muggles." Draco explained. "But he's in Azkaban now, so he couldn't stop me from switching electives."

"I see." the teacher said hastily, obviously not daring to dig deeper into Draco's family situation. "But why did you choose to take such a step? Wouldn't it have been easier to just stick with the subjects you already had since third year?"

"Ah, but I'm very curious about muggles. My father never let me near any muggle things, but I saw so many fascinating gadgets at my Uncle's flat and I decided I want to know all about them. I want to go to muggle university after I take my NEWTs and I can't do that, if I don't know how to behave like a muggle."

"Muggle university." the teacher smiled. "Ah yes, have we spoken about the muggle school system, yet?" she asked the class.

Several kids raised their hands, but the teacher picked out the Demon girl who was still engaged in her glaring match with Marty. "Carry?"

Carry started. "Professor? I ... I ... uh."

"You weren't paying attention. Yes, I'd noticed that." the teacher said disapprovingly, but didn't take any measures. "I asked whether we'd already talked about muggle schools."

"Uh ... er ... Yes, Professor. I believe we had primary and secondary schools sometime last year." Carry stuttered. "They ... they start school at age ... six and learn reading, writing and counting."

The teacher decided to let her off the hook. "Ah, so we had primary and secondary schools, in other words the schools before university. Who knows what other subjects are important in muggle education, besides reading and writing, better known as English? Yes, Dragon, you already learned about that at Hogwarts?"

"No, but Uncle Severus told me Math was terribly important for most other subjects and that they also learn Physics and Chemistry." Draco answered proudly.

"Yes, Math, short for Mathematics." the teacher said and wrote that and English on the white blackboard with a blue felt pen. "What about Physics and Chemistry, though?"

This time very few hands went up.

"Tessa?" the teacher picked a very small girl Draco didn't know.

"They are one subject called Science in most muggle schools." Tessa answered dutifully.

The teacher nodded and added Science to the list. "What else is part of Science, Lenny?"

"Huh? What?" Lenny looked up from his conversation with Nico obviously having no idea what he'd just been asked. His eyes fell on the list on the board. "Geography?" he suggested.

"No Lenny, I'm afraid Geography is a subject of its own." the teacher said, but added it to the list anyhow. "Please pay attention. Delia?"

"Biology is part of Science." the girl who was sitting right by the door answered.

"Exactly." the teacher nodded. "What other subjects do muggle students have?"

More hands went up this time.
"Debby?"

"They have History and Sports, just like us." the tall girl next to Tessa stated.

The teacher wrote down History, then stopped. "Sports isn't quite the correct word. What do they call Sports at the muggle schools?"

Silence. Then Svenja hesitantly raised her hand.

"It was something that sounded a lot like Physics. Physics Education or something like that." she said when the teacher nodded at her.

"Almost, but not quite. It's not Physics, but..." the teacher looked around, but only got blank looks. "Come on, didn't at least one of you go to muggle primary school?"

"I did." Sally admitted. "But only for half a year and I can't remember the word. Jim would know. He's muggle born." She looked terribly unhappy about it.

"It's Physical Education." the teacher answered her own question and wrote it down. "Any other subjects? What about you, Nico? I hardly ever hear from you."

"Uh... Driving?" suggested Nico.

"No Nico, muggle students do not learn how to drive in school." the teacher almost hissed. Obviously she didn't like Nico. Maybe he was always this uninterested in class.

"Charlie?" the teacher asked next.

"French." Charlie suggested.

"Yes, a second language," the teacher corrected slightly. "It's usually, but not necessarily French. Anything else? Marty, perhaps?"

"Music." Marty answered with a slight scowl.

"Excellent." the teacher said. "Why do you never raise your hand, if you always know the answer?"

Marty just shrugged and the teacher left him alone.

"What about you. Sparks? Do you know any muggle subjects?" she asked.

"English and Math." Sparks smiled innocently.

"Ones that we haven't heard already?"

"Uh..."

"Arts." whispered Lars.

"Arts." repeated Sparks gratefully.

"Arts." said the teacher and wrote it down. "Thank you, Lars. Anything else you can think of?"

There was another silence in the classroom, then Delia's neighbour raised her hand.

"Yes, Lucy?"
"They've got Muggle Religion." Lucy reported.

Draco blinked. What was that about? Of course muggles had muggle religions, but what did that have to do with school?

"Yes, they learn Religion in school, but please remember not to add the word muggle to it. It's just normal religion to them." the teacher reminded Lucy. "All right enough with the subjects. What about exams? Which ones do the muggles have to pass before they can go to university?"

Draco didn't stop writing until the end of the lesson. Everything he'd learned in Muggle Studies until now had been interesting, but now they were for the first time talking about things he'd really need. What documents he'd have to bring to get into university, where there were universities, what an auditorium looked like, how the universities were organised ...

He was almost disappointed when the bell rang and class ended.

A/N: Will Draco really go to muggle university? Will Clarence continue to sit next to Martha in Ancient Runes? And would Minerva teach her students to turn something into snakes?

In the next chapter: Sevi's home for the weekend, or at least part of it. Draco and Sammie discuss Clarence and Sarah gives Draco some advice.
When Draco arrived home that day Professor Snape opened the door for him a raven on each shoulder.

"Uncle Severus!" Draco greeted him with a hug which Hugin used to hop over onto his boy's shoulder. "You're home."

"Yes, I'm home." Severus smiled. "Didn't Sarah tell you I was coming?"

"She did, but I didn't think you'd be here before me." Draco grinned. "I missed you."

"So how did your first few days at West Hogsmeade School go?" Severus asked as he closed the door. "Any problems?"

"DADA." Draco answered immediately. "We appear to be two years behind West Hogsmeade at Hogwarts thanks to Lockhart and Moody."

"I thought Lupin caught up rather well." Severus remarked.

"He never reached the vampires and that's what they're talking about at West Hogsmeade right now. They're going into details and I don't even know the basics." Draco explained.

"I remember seeing some of the Gryffindors' homework essays about vampires when I had to stand in for Lupin during a full moon."

Draco pouted. "You never stood in for him in our class."

"I had a seventh year Potions class at the time you had DADA." Severus defended himself. "I couldn't just leave them alone that often so close to their NEWT exams. Who did teach your class during full moons that year?"

Draco glared. "Trellawney watched us. I wouldn't call it teaching, though. She just sat there going on about her inner eye and sometimes the Grimm and her crystal ball. It was a good time to do homework, if you could tune her out well enough to concentrate. Sometimes it wasn't that bad to listen to her predict Potter's death either."

"I see." Severus said curtly and Draco wondered if he'd take that information back to Dumbledore or just confront Trellawney himself. "What about your other subjects? Are you keeping up with Charms?"

"Keeping up? Connelly is so far behind Flitwick, they don't even have a chance to catch up anytime this year. They've only just started on summoning charms. Transfiguration is the only possible problem I see so far." Draco shrugged. "I'm behind in Muggle Studies as well, of course, but I think the teacher likes me and I already told her why. What we learned today was really fascinating."

Severus smiled. "I'm sure it was, but what's that about Transfiguration? Don't tell me they're faster than Minerva, too."

"Oh no, they're at exactly the same point, but I don't think I could keep up with Transfiguration A
"In the long run, I probably belong in B, I guess." Draco said. "Nothing to worry about, though."

"They're not up to Minerva's standard then?"

"I didn't say that." Draco corrected quickly. "Professor Winter is good. No animagus as far as I know, but he transfigured a blackboard into a working floo with a casual flick of his wand. I'm not sure McGonagall could have done it that easily. She isn't behind him, though and that's what counts."

Severus nodded. "Good, what about the rest?"

"The History teacher's not great, but much more interesting than Binns."

"Not a particularly difficult feat." Severus pointed out.

"No, but it's a nice change." Draco agreed. "Herbology is a lot more theoretical I suspect, but I've had only one lesson so far and we saw a film then. TV's cool. You can see all those plants even though the school doesn't have room in the glass house to grow them."

"How was Potions?" Severus interrupted Draco before he went off into singing the praises of television.

"Great. We brewed Merlin's dye and Professor Funnel told me he'd like to have an Alchemist as his successor. He even asked, if Aunt Sarah would like to teach."

"He's teaching dye potions right now, then?"

"Yes, they haven't had the healing potions, yet, though. And he couldn't believe how many students there are in Hogwarts' Potion classes. He never has more than fourteen in one class and thinks that's four too many." Draco continued excitedly.

"It's all a matter of discipline." Severus said. "Actually Potions should probably be taught one on one like it was in the old days before they invented wizarding schools. Back then every wizard had an apprentice or sometimes two. They were students and assistants to their masters and the masters had time to teach them. Nobody set schedules or held exams."

"But if you had a bad master you didn't learn much." Draco pointed out.

"Yes, but one bad master couldn't cause as much damage as one bad teacher does today. The number of apprentices a wizard had in his whole life was usually lower than the number of students in one class at Hogwarts." Severus answered. "But we were talking about your new school."

"Oh yes. Having Astronomy during the day is strange and the teacher is weird, but she showed us a film too. Sports was great as well. We even played Soccer. The teacher is a great player. I bet Madame Hootch couldn't play Soccer like that."

"Most unlikely." agreed Severus. "She's a good Quiddich player, though."

"And then they have all kinds of strange subjects: French and Psychology and Conjuring and Magical Theory." Draco continued.

"West Hogsmeade used to be a school for squibs." Severus reminded him. "They adopted the normal schedules of magical schools much later and some of the more muggle style subjects still remain. Conjuring is a different matter, though. There once were Conjuring classes at Hogwarts, too, but the school budget only allows a certain number of teachers so when they added Muggle
Studies they had to drop another subject. The choice was between Conjuring and Divination, I believe."

"So West Hogsmeade chose to keep Conjuring and Hogwarts Divination?" Draco asked.

"It's not quite that simple. West Hogsmeade always did offer Muggle Studies, for example. It was one of their original squib subjects. Also Diviners are rare which makes it hard to find a teacher for the subject. There have been several times when Hogwarts didn't have a Divination teacher and Conjuring was taught instead and I suppose there were also times when West Hogsmeade offered Divination."

"So why don't the schools share teachers?" Draco suggested. "Hogwarts' Divination classes are so small they could easily have just one class a year and Trellawney could teach another fourteen hours at West Hogsmeade. West Hogsmeade has two Conjuring teachers, one for boys, one for girls, while they have just one teacher for the other electives. They can't be at full capacity."

"They might be working part time." Severus suggested. "But the idea is worth mentioning to the headmaster. A partnership between the schools would certainly improve their relations."

"What relations? Hogwarts doesn't even admit that West Hogsmeade exists."

"Precisely. They couldn't do that, if they were sharing teachers or maybe even holding mixed classes."

"Mixed classes? How could that work?"

Severus smiled. "Via portkey. We could have the class members from one school meet in their school, then be ported to the other. With an appropriately long portkey, like a piece of string for example, it would be easy enough to port an entire class in one go. That would also give Hogwarts students a chance to participate in ballet lessons or play Soccer, or join the West Hogsmeade Chess Club."

"The West Hogsmeade students still couldn't play Quidditch, though." Draco pointed out. "They don't have the brooms. What would Hogwarts offer in return?"

Severus shrugged. "Maybe they could start a duelling club again, or offer some new activities. I think there was a school choir once and art classes."

"How's Neville?" Draco asked suddenly remembering the reason he was going to West Hogsmeade.

"He'll live." Severus answered more solemnly. "They still aren't sure, if his right arm and leg will heal completely. He must have tried to break his fall and land on his hands and feet."

"Is he in much pain still?"

"I don't know. He was in pain when I last saw him, but that was Wednesday morning. When I asked after him again at lunch Madame Pomfrey said that his grandmother had already taken him home, which means that she must have been sure that he'd be fine there. She wouldn't have let him go, if she'd had any doubt that it was good for him."

"And you haven't heard anything since?" Draco asked rather pleadingly.

"No, but in this case no news are good news. It means that Neville at least hasn't gotten any worse."
"Was his grandmother very angry?"

"She wasn't happy." Severus said seriously. "But that is to be expected. After all she had to be very worried about her grandson. She even threatened to take him out of the school, but Albus didn't think she really meant it. Neville's education is very important to her and she can't afford having him home-schooled. The only thing she can really do is send him to a different school and she'll think twice about doing that."

"Did you tell her that I'm sorry, that I didn't mean to hurt him?"

"I didn't see her, Draco. I was in class at the time."

"Can I write him a letter?" Draco asked softly.

"Of course you can. It sounds like a really good idea, actually."

"I'll need to borrow Munin to send it." Draco reminded Severus. "And I'm not sure what to write right now."

"I'll leave him here for you when I return to Hogwarts, just tell him to go to Hogwarts after he comes back."

"Thanks." Draco said very softly. He really needed to contact Neville, but at the same time he was afraid to. How did you tell someone you were sorry for almost killing them in a letter?

It wasn't until after dinner that Severus and Draco finally got around to studying vampires. Sarah had been urging Severus to go over the bookshelf in the lab and remove all books that might be unsuitable for Draco all through dinner, but Severus had simply refused.

"Such books exist everywhere and Draco will encounter them often enough in his life. He'll learn better how to handle them, if he gets the chance to get to know them now." he told Sarah before taking 'Hunters in the Dark' back into the lab and telling Draco to get out ink and parchment.

"I brought a book Aunt Sarah recommended from the school library." Draco told him when he realised that Severus had put 'Hunters in the Dark' on the table instead of returning it to its shelf. "We could use that."

Severus took a quick look at the 'Encyclopaedia of Vampires', then handed it back to Draco. "You can read that one on your own. It's completely harmless and easy enough to understand that you won't need my help with it. Right now I think it's more important that I teach you how to read books like this one." he lifted 'Hunters in the Dark'.

"Aunt Sarah said not to touch it." Draco remarked a little doubtfully.

"And I say not to trust what it says." Severus told him calmly. "It is a very interesting book as it contains a lot of common superstitions that can be just as important to know as the actual facts."

"How that?" Draco asked. "If it isn't true, how can it be of any use at all?"

"Because you are likely to run into people who believe it whenever you have to deal with the subject. Knowing what the common errors are, will for example enable you to tell if a report of a vampire attack is false or at least has been exaggerated. If someone tells you that a vampire was scared off by the fact that its intended victim wore a necklace with a cross, or spontaneously combusted when forced out into the daylight, you should probably doubt that there ever was an attack. Then sometimes people will try to give you advice on the grounds of such misconceptions"
or strange actions like people hiding in the church all night will only be understandable, if you
know their superstitions."

"And that's why you keep this book?"

Severus nodded. "It's also often fun to know how such superstitions started. The vampires
supposed fear of the cross for example," he said pointing at the section of the book that described
the relationship of vampires and the church. "Was started by a muggle nun who encountered a
vampire that had been a priest before he'd been bitten. The vampire had a deep respect for the nun's
crucifix and couldn't bring himself to harm a fellow believer. The poor man was deeply troubled by
his change. He saw himself as tainted by irredeemable evil and unworthy to touch the crucifix, so
he fled and the nun told everybody of how her Lord Jesus had saved her through the blessed
presence of his image on the cross."

"But that's all about crucifixes." Draco argued. "The actual superstition is that the cross will ward
off the vampire even on its own."

"You actually hear both versions." Severus agreed. "The original belief is that only the crucifix
will scare the vampire, but word of mouth reports are prone to embellishments and someone
obviously dropped that little detail on the way."

They went through almost twenty pages of 'Hunters in the Dark' with Severus always explaining
what was fact and what superstition, often adding little anecdotes to the superstitions.

Sarah came in once and shook her head at them. "To use something like that as teaching material."

"It's actually quite good for that purpose." Severus told her. "It contains almost everything you
should point out to students as wrong."

Sarah just shook her head some more and walked out again mumbling something about Severus
being the professional teacher and having to know what he was doing. Draco was glad that for
once she didn't scold. He found the lesson quite fascinating and didn't want it to get interrupted.

They continued their work Saturday morning this time with Billy and the cat joining in along with
the two ravens. The cat and Munin weren't a problem as they knew how to listen like diligent
students. One perched on Severus' shoulder only occasionally shifting his weight while the other
curled up on the desk next to the book and only commented with an occasional purr or yawn.
Obviously he'd heard some of the stories before.

Hugin and Billy however were much less mature and completely lacked the others' patience. Hugin
sat on Draco's shoulder for a while while Billy was happily sitting on the boy's lap, but after a
while the raven grew bored and jumped down onto the table to explore Draco's writing utensils.
That attracted Billy's attention as well and Draco had to rescue his quill when each of the two
grabbed one end and refused to let go. The poor goose feather quill looked quite ruffled afterwards,
but to Draco's surprise still wrote properly. It seemed Mike had really given him good advice when
he'd recommended to buy goose.

Of course the loss of their toy didn't stop the baby wizard and baby raven from their game as they
simply grabbed for a piece of parchment instead. Draco decided to let them keep it, as it was a
blank one, but then Hugin hopped onto the book.

Severus pushed him off several times, but that only encouraged him and they ended up kicking him
out of the lab so they could work in peace.
"You need to learn some discipline." Severus informed the baby raven as he pushed him out the door.

"CAW!" Hugin protested through the closed door, but it was no use. He'd been separated from his wizard once again.

He gave up his protests after a while and Severus and Draco could continue their work now only interrupted by Billy who was in a rather talkative mood and had to comment on almost everything Severus said. Those 'amprees' really were a fascinating subject after all.

About ten minutes later the cawing from the living room started up again this time accompanied by barking. It seemed Hugin had found a new playmate. Severus sighed, put a sound proofing charm on the door and continued with his lesson. That Dog' truly was more disruptive than a whole class of first year Gryffindors and he wasn't even in the room.

Draco was very disappointed when Severus had to return to Hogwarts. He promised that he'd be home the whole Sunday the next week, but Draco really wished that he could have stayed longer right now. At least his departure gave him a chance to spend some time with his friends who'd already asked him to come out several times.

Jack told Draco off when he finally arrived at the garden shed, but Draco just shrugged it off. "Uncle Severus was only home for a short time and I needed some help with DADA."

"Did you ask him about my Potions tutoring?" Mary asked eagerly. "I really need help. I just failed another test this week."

"He won't be home much until Christmas, but he might be willing to teach you during the holidays." Draco told her. "You'll have to ask him yourself, though."

"The holidays are too late." Mary whined. "I have an exam the week before that and I just have to pass."

"Maybe you could ask Aunt Sarah for help." Mike suggested. "She's never taught before as far as I know, but I bet she's getting bored of being home all day and a little additional money's always welcome."

"Oh no, I had a tutoring lesson from her once." Mary shook her head. "She kept going on about Chemistry and how it compared to Potions. I didn't understand a thing. She's much too complicated for me."

"I'll tutor you, if you want." Draco offered.

"You aren't a Potions teacher." Mary sneered.

"I'm the best Potions student in fifth year." Draco sneered back. "Both at Hogwarts and West Hogsmeade. I most certainly know enough to tutor a failing fourth year."

Mary glared. "Well, I'm definitely not paying you more than half of what I'd pay your uncle."

Pay? Right, Mike had mentioned money as well, but Draco was still surprised by the offer. At Hogwarts students sometimes asked older friends to tutor them, but generally the only payment the tutors got were loyalty and an occasional gift of sweets. Sometimes a ride on the other student's broom was offered and even doing the tutor's homework for another subject, if the two were in the same year.
"Okay." Draco agreed. It might be useful to have a little income of his own, even if it probably wasn't much.

"Monday fourth lesson?" Mary asked.

Draco thought for a moment then shook his head. "That's Muggle Studies."

"Skip it." Sammie suggested.

"No way. It's one of my favourites." Draco insisted.

"Fifth lesson, then?" Mary tried again.

"Herbology." Cathy stated. "I wouldn't advise skipping that."

"During lunch break then." Mary decided. "If we hurry with lunch, we have almost an hour and we can use the DADA B classroom, so I won't have to run to class afterwards."

"What do we have after lunch on Mondays?" Draco asked Cathy and Charlie.

"History." Cathy responded at once.

"Tempore's usually a little late." Charlie added. "But you're going to have to run the moment the bell rings."

Draco nodded. "Okay, Monday during lunch break in DADA B and don't forget your Potions book."

"I'll take your backpack after DADA and bring it to History, so you can run to lunch right away." Cathy promised Draco.

Playing Soccer in the snow was rather difficult and so they only played for a few minutes before heading over to a group of benches. Somehow Draco ended up sharing a bench with only Sammie for a while which gave them the perfect chance to discuss Matt and Charlie.

"Do you know Clarence?" Draco asked Sammie casually.

"Who?"

"Clarence." Draco repeated. "Fifth year outsider, thick classes, a little clumsy. A very unremarkable kid, probably gets teased a lot."

"No, what about him?" Sammie sounded slightly annoyed.

"I think Charlie likes him." Draco remarked. "If he asks her out before Matt does, Matt might have lost his chance."

"I thought you said he was unremarkable and clumsy." Sammie said finally interested. "Why would Charlie like someone like that?"

"He's a nice kid." Draco shrugged. "I've got Sports with him. He reminds me of Neville a bit. Hates Sports but does his best. I guess a girl might find that kind of sweet and maybe feel protective. And Charlie's lonely. She wants somebody to ask her out and convince her she isn't overlooked by everybody. If Clarence is the one to do that, she'll probably go with him, if it's Matt, she'll choose Matt."
"So you think we ought to tell Charlie that Matt likes her?" Sammie asked.

"I don't know. It depends on how he'd react." Draco answered leaning back to watch the clouds. "He's your best friend, so I thought you'd know what best to do about him."

Sammie shrugged even though Draco wasn't looking at him. "Couldn't we ask Charlie to ask him out?"

Draco snorted. "Oh sure, she'd feel so appreciated, if she has to woo her boyfriend first."

"It was just a thought." Sammie defended himself. "I can try telling him about Terence, though. Maybe that'll get him to do something."

"Clarence."

"What?"

"His name's Clarence, not Terence."

"Whatever." Sammie shrugged again. "Show him to me in school on Monday and I'll point at him and tell Matt that's the guy Charlie likes."

"Are you sure about this?" Draco asked suddenly looking at him again. "It might scare him off."

"No, but have you got a better idea?" Sammie asked back. "It's time we did something. At least then we can say we tried."

"We'll feel guilty, if it discourages him." Draco remarked.

"And just as guilty, if we do nothing and Charlie starts dating whatever his name is." argued Sammie.

"I guess so." Draco answered staring at the clouds again. "Just try to make it clear that there's nothing actually going on between them, yet."

"Sure." Pause. "So who are the black and blond kid you've been hanging out with?"

"Who?" Draco asked momentarily confused by the sudden change of topic. "Oh, Curly and Sparks. They're in my Sports class as well. Curly's mother's from Kenia and he doesn't know any squibs that well. He's a little afraid of them. He wears gang colours, but I don't know what gang."

"What colours?" Matt asked as he sat down beside them.

So that was why Sammie had changed topics. He must have seen Matt coming.

"Light green headband. Nothing you can miss easily." Draco said more to Sammie than to Matt.

"Wolf Pack, then." Matt diagnosed. "Small gang from the other end of town. They're in between the Riverrats and Railrats, I think, but not at war with either gang at the moment. There was a rumour a little while ago that they had a sort of alliance with the Riverrats against the Demons."

"I knew he was a Wolf." Sammie insisted. "I just wanted to know why you're hanging out with him."

"I like him." Draco answered openly. "He's nice and funny and he promised to help me with DADA. And he's probably the best Soccer player in my Sports class, which doesn't mean he's as
good as any of ours, but at least he isn't hopeless."

"Ah, and the other one?" Sammie asked. "The blond."

"Sparks is my Potions partner. He's completely hyper, but kind of fun and helpful. I have no idea what gang he is either, though." Draco admitted. "I didn't even notice any colours on him, but he isn't with the outsiders."

"Mercenaries." Matt answered promptly.

Sammie gave him a look.

"What?" Matt asked him. "I know Sparks. I'm surprised you don't actually. He's hard to overlook, causes a commotion wherever he goes."

"What are the Mercenaries' colours then?" asked Draco.

"I'm not sure you could call it colours. Insignia probably fits them better." Matt mused. "They wear a metal chain with a plaque that says Mercenaries around their necks. It's nothing too obvious. Their territory's somewhere between the Avengers and the Lords of the Market."

"Yeah, watch your pockets around them. They're a bunch of thieves." Sammie added.

Draco gave Sammie a side-ward glance. In his opinion Sammie was the last person who should talk about thieves.

"Dragon says there's a kid in his Sports class that likes Charlie." Sammie quickly told Matt probably trying to distract them.

"Really?" Matt nearly squeaked.

"No." Draco said decidedly. "I got the impression that Charlie likes him, or at least wouldn't say no, if he asked her out. I don't know anything about how he thinks about her."

Matt stared at the ground between his feet as if the flattened snow were interesting. "Who?"

"Clarence." Draco answered trying not to sound as uneasy as he was feeling. This wasn't going as he'd hoped. "He's an outsider. A shy boy with thick classes. I think the others pick on him quite a lot, but he's a nice kid."

"What's Charlie doing in your Sports class?" Matt tried to sound casual.

"Nothing. Clarence is in our Herbology class, though." Draco answered. "And in Ancient Runes, too. I've also got Latin with him, but Charlie doesn't take that. I don't know if they have any other classes together."

"Is he a squib?" Matt asked.

Draco thought about it. He couldn't quite remember, if Clarence carried a wand. He wasn't in any classes with Draco that were for magical kids only either.

"I don't know." he said finally. "It didn't seem important, so I didn't ask."

"We could just ask Charlie. She's got to know." suggested Sammie and got up, probably intending to do just that.
"No!" exclaimed Matt in horror and dragged him back down. "You can't let her know we're discussing her love life."

"Why not?" asked Sammie. "And we aren't really. We're discussing Dragon's friends."

"Sure. We've just got to know what kids in Dragon's Sports class are squibs." Matt said sarcastically. "You're going to leave Charlie out of this. We can ask Cathy later, if we want to."

"We could ask her now." Sammie suggested.

"Then Charlie'd know." Matt argued.

"Oh, why don't you just go over there and ask her out already?" Sammie sighed.

"I can't. I wouldn't know where to take her in the middle of winter and it's no use anyway, if she likes that Clarence guy." Matt sighed. "And did you have to say that in front of Dragon?"

Sammie rolled his eyes at Matt. "Dragon knows anyway. Everybody knows. The only one who still hasn't noticed is Charlie."

"It's not like she's all head over heels for Clarence, Matt." Draco tried to console his friend. "I just got the impression that she was considering him as possible boyfriend material."

It didn't help any, though. Matt was now more determined than ever not to tell Charlie that he liked her and Draco returned home feeling guilty and a little depressed. Now Matt would never ask Charlie out and she'd sooner or later start dating somebody else and break his heart. And Draco still had homework to do. With a deep sigh he got out the 'Encyclopaedia of Vampires' to start his DADA essay. Then he'd have to do the Runes translation, Transfiguration and Astronomy.

At least Transfiguration was short and Astronomy wouldn't take long either. He just had to remember to write eclipse instead of eclipshe.

He sighed again.

To his surprise Sarah turned down the stove a little and left her pot to sit down beside him.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Of course there's something. I can see it." Sarah insisted. "Is it your homework? Are you still having problems with the vampires?"

"No, no, everything's fine. I just have to write down that stupid essay and then do the other subjects."

"Is it Cathy, then?" Sarah continued.

"No." Draco sighed again. "No, it's Matt."

"Matt?" Sarah seemed surprised. "What's wrong with Matt? His little sister was fine again last time I heard."

"It's got nothing to do with his sister." Draco agreed. "It's Matt himself. He's in love with Charlie, but he's too shy about it to let her know and she's completely blind to it. Charlie's really desperate to have somebody, though and in school I got the impression that she might like a boy called..."
Clarence. So I told Sammie about it and asked him, if we should tell Matt about it, before Clarence asks Charlie out. I'm pretty sure she'll accept, if either of them asks her. So Sammie told Matt about Clarence and now Matt thinks he hasn't got a chance with Charlie and won't ask her out and it's all my fault."

"Would Matt have asked Charlie out, if you hadn't told him?" Sarah asked calmly.

"Probably not, but now he isn't going to do it for sure."

"So how can it be your fault, if Charlie dates another boy, if Matt wouldn't have asked her either way?" Sarah said. "You didn't change the situation at all, so you have no reason to feel guilty."

"But Matt will still lose his only chance with Charlie and I really wish I could help him." Draco tried to explain.

"How do you know it's his only chance? Or even his best?" Sarah asked. 

Did she understand at all? "Because then Charlie will already have a boyfriend."

"Who was the first girl you ever went out with, Draco?" Sarah asked apparently out of the blue.

"What's that got to do with anything?" Now Draco felt really confused.

"Just tell me her name." Sarah smiled. "You'll see soon."

"Melina. You don't know her. She's the daughter of one of my father's foreign friends who visited us the summer after my third year at Hogwarts."

"Did you love her?"

Draco shrugged. "I guess I did at the time. Or at least thought I did."

"Did you kiss?"

"Of course not. We were only thirteen. Father would probably have had a heart attack, if we had."

"Who was the first girl you kissed, then?" Sarah continued still smiling.

"Pansy. She's in my year at Hogwarts and our parents expected us to marry someday."

"Are you going to marry her?"

"Of course not. She hates me now that I can't give her expensive presents anymore."

"Then are you going to marry Melina?"

"I haven't even heard from her since she went back home."

"But she was your first girlfriend?"

"Yes, she was."

"And wasn't Pansy your girlfriend, too?"

"Yes, she was my second."

"Did you love Pansy?"
"Sometimes." Draco decided after hesitating for just a moment.

"So who is your girlfriend now?" Sarah went on unperturbed by Draco's confused expression.

"Cathy, of course. I thought you knew that."

"So who are you going to marry someday?"

Draco stopped. This question wasn't as easy as all the others had been. He didn't feel anything for Melina or Pansy anymore, but somehow he couldn't imagine himself marrying Cathy either. Actually he couldn't imagine himself marrying at all.

"I don't know, yet." he finally said after a long moment.

"Ah, so you've had three girlfriends so far and you think there might be at least one more in the future?"

"I guess it could be." Draco allowed.

"How about Cathy then? Are you her first boyfriend?" Sarah went on.

"No, she dated Jack first. You were actually the first person who told me so."

"And was Jack her first boyfriend?"

Draco stopped again. "I don't know."

"Well, I know she dated Mike for a short time, before she hooked up with Jack, but I don't know, if he was her first either." Sarah said. "What about Pansy? Were you her first?"

"No, she dated a boy called Joshua for a year. He's a sixth year now and left her for a Ravenclaw named Lucinda."

"And what's Pansy doing now?"

"Oh, she threw herself at Blaise right after we split up."

"So you've had three girlfriends, Cathy has had at least three boyfriends. Pansy has had at least three, Joshua at least two and none of you know who they're going to marry yet, right?"

Draco nodded though reluctantly. He wasn't entirely sure if Pansy wasn't quite convinced that she'd marry Blaise in the end.

"So why do you expect Charlie of all people to have only one boyfriend all her life?" Sarah said finally. "Personally I think that the first boyfriend is the one who has the least chances with the girl."

"So Matt's probably better off, if somebody else gets Charlie now and he asks her out after that guy breaks up with her?" Draco asked surprised at how logical it suddenly sounded.

"Who says that it's going to be the boy who breaks up with Charlie?"

"Charlie breaking up with her boy? But it's her biggest wish to have a boyfriend. Why should she break up with him once she finally has one?" Draco asked surprised at the completely new idea.

"It's her biggest wish now, because she's afraid that nobody likes her. Once she gets used to the
idea of being desired, she'll want more than just any boyfriend." Sarah stated. "She'll pick the boy that she likes best then."

"And what makes you so sure Matt will be that one?"

"Nothing. I'm not sure at all, but I do know that Matt's best chance will come once Charlie knows what she really wants out of her boyfriend." Sarah answered. "Of course there's still the question whether Matt will still be interested in Charlie by then. He might already have another girl when Charlie breaks up with her first boyfriend."

"Matt isn't interested in any other girls," Draco said with conviction.

"Matt is fourteen." Sarah pointed out. "Only a little older than you were when you went out with... what was her name again? ... Melina."

"But Charlie isn't Melina." Draco argued. "She doesn't live in another country and Matt sees her everyday."

"That doesn't make that big a difference." Sarah said. "At fourteen a boy knows even less about what girl he wants than a girl does and a fourteen year old girl doesn't really know anything about love. It takes time and experience to find out."

Draco thought about that for a while. Was he sure that Cathy was what he wanted? Or had he just picked her because she was cute and popular and he was finally free to choose whomever he liked?

"Do you think Cathy knows what she wants?" he finally asked Sarah, who'd already returned to cooking dinner.

"Maybe." Sarah answered thoughtfully. "She definitely knew that she wanted somebody less volatile than Jack when she broke up with him. She has a certain amount of experience, but fifteen is still young as well. Only time will tell, if your relationship will last."

"So how old do you have to be to be sure?"

Sarah laughed. "The older, the surer, I'd say, but in love nothing's ever one hundred percent sure. You'll never find the perfect partner and that is probably the most important lesson to learn. If you want a relationship to last, you have to work on it, to accept your partner's flaws and live with them, be understanding and supportive. The moment you stop working on it a relationship's over."

"But shouldn't the right partners just fit together?"

"People aren't made for each other, by some god or fate, Draco. It's natural for us to love and want to be close to others, but to get that we have to accept that those others don't have only good sides. We aren't perfect and neither are they."

"But you and Uncle Severus ..."

"Severus is a very hard person to get close to." Sarah sighed. "You know better than I what he's like at the school and he was much worse when he'd just got out of Azkaban. The school doesn't do him much good either. He's always so cold and distant again when he arrives home. It's hard to make him open up again after a whole week up there. Then again it always reminds me how much he needs us. He'll probably never be able to tell us himself."

"Us?"
"You, me, Billy, Munin, the dog, ... I'm not sure about the cat. I don't think they have much of a bond, but it's hard to tell with both of them being such reserved personalities." Sarah mused.

Draco laughed. "The cat and Uncle Severus have similar personalities?"

"Oh, the cat doesn't try to actively scare people away, but otherwise they have a lot in common." Sarah told him in a much lighter tone now.

Draco returned to his homework after that and found that now he could concentrate much better, even though Matt's situation hadn't changed at all. He even found the time to write the letter to Neville. Now all he could do was wait and hope that Neville forgave him.

A/N: So who will ask Charlie out? Will Draco manage in DADA now? And will he manage to save Mary's Potions grade?

In the next chapter: Connelly performs her Accio exam. Draco gives his first tutoring lesson and answers questions from on the banister.
A/N - Here I was wondering just how Draco could make some money to buy his friends Christmas presents and while I'm not looking he goes and finds himself the perfect job! ('Greenie, I bet you had something to do with this!' 'Sniff?' Greenie blinks his eyes mischievously. 'Why would I do anything like that?')

Chapter 49: Earning Money

Monday morning started out with Charms for the West Hogsmeade fifth years. Accordingly spirits were rather low and nobody was looking forward to the week much.

"At least I've got Muggle Studies today." Draco commented as they arrived in front of the locked classroom.

"What do you have to complain about?" Anya growled at him from where she was leaning against a wall. "You already can do those stupid summoning charms."

"That doesn't make me like Connelly any better." Draco growled back.

"But you know you won't get a five for failing to perform a summoning charm today." Lisa commented miserably. "I just know I can't do it."

"Is that so terrible?" Draco asked. "I mean she can't really let you fail as long as you're still in A, can she?"

"No, she can't fail anyone, because she doesn't teach C and you can't fail in A or B." Cathy explained. "The worst she can do is switch you down to B and from there to C, which means you're rid of her."

"She prefers to threaten and terrorise you, though." Keith added.

"And it's no better in B." Curly pointed out gesturing towards his miserable classmates from Charms B."

"I bet she didn't tell you you'd have to be able to perform a new Charm by the end of this lesson, though." complained Jim sitting down on the floor next to Anya.

"No." admitted Sparks. "But she did threaten to start on summoning charms today as well."

"I bet they don't go this fast at Hogwarts." said a boy Draco had never seen before.

"Actually, they're much further ahead, but Professor Flitwick never seems to hurry anything." Draco answered. "He always makes sure everybody can keep up and no, Hogwarts students aren't any brighter than other kids either. They perform just the same as you do in Transfigurations for example."
"So what's the reason for the difference then?" the boy demanded.

Draco shrugged. "Well, I suppose either Flitwick is some kind of genius, or Old Connelly just can't teach."

"Don't let her hear that." Eric hissed nervously. "She'll be even worse, if you remind her."

"Oh, come on!" the unfamiliar boy groaned.

"You weren't in class when she found out, Max." Anya told him. "She was furious, I tell you."

Max frowned at her. "Oh come on, she's just always a bitch and that's all there is to it."

"Let's just hope she doesn't think she has to speed up our class as well." Bubbles commented.

"Why do we call her Sir, anyway?" Draco asked after a few moments of silence.

"She thinks it's respectful." Cathy declared. "And she demands respect from her students."

"And if we're all scared of her, that's a big sign of respect." added Sparks.

"It sounds silly." Draco commented.

"What does?" Keith asked.

"Calling a witch Sir." Draco answered. "She should have stuck with Professor."

The others just shrugged, though.

"I don't care what we have to call her." Max decided. "She's still a bitch."

Old Connelly arrived twofold just like last time and let them in according to the same ritual. This time Draco and Cathy were forced to take the wall side desk and the attendance ritual included handing in your homework after saying 'Here, Sir.'

Once done with that Connelly put a stone on her desk and ordered Anya to summon it. Anya got five attempts, then it was Jim's turn.

Draco was the only one who managed to summon the stone in the first round. The others watched enviously as he banished it back onto Connelly's desk.

"Miss McDougall, your turn." was Connelly's only comment.

When the last student, Keith, had had his five attempts, Connelly just let Anya start over again. This time Lisa and Keith managed the spell as well and Connelly calmly informed them that they'd earned themselves a four for their success.

"Third and last chance with the stone." She announced then. "Miss Allen!"

Cathy, Jim and Eric managed. Pat and Anya didn't.

"Congratulations Miss Allen and Miss Dormer, you have failed today's lesson." Connelly said almost gleefully as she drew out her notebook. "More difficult now. Mr. Carter, summon this box."

"Accio, box! " Jim ordered and immediately two boxes, one red the other blue, hurtled towards him.
"Bring both of them back and for your second attempt, try to leave the other box on my desk." Old Connelly sneered.

"Accio, box!" Jim tried with his wand pointing at the blue box.

Again both boxes ended up in his hands. Couldn't Connelly just explain that he had to define which box when he said the charm?

Apparently she couldn't. It took Draco demonstrating "Accio, blue box!" to make the others realise how to do this and still Eric and Jim didn't manage to perform the charm correctly.

Then Connelly raised the stakes once again and made them summon their own Charms book. Lisa, who had to make the first attempt was pelted by nine Charms books, but did manage in her second attempt. She and Draco were the only ones who did, though.

Pat and Anya finally got another chance to try and summon the stone, but they were much too nervous by now to manage and Old Connelly got to end the lesson by declaring loudly what a disappointment this class was.

"None of you deserve to be in A." she ranted. "Yes, not even you." she informed Lisa. "A true Charms A student has to be able to summon their Charms book on their first try."

They fled from the classroom to meet an equally devastated group of students that was just coming out of Charms B.

"Connelly's gone completely mad." Curly told Draco as they walked towards DADA. "She expects us to be able to perform Accio next lesson."

"I know." Draco answered. "We've just gone through that."

"And?" Sparks asked hopefully.

"We are all unworthy, even Lisa, who managed to earn a two." Draco reported. "At least I guess I'm unworthy too, because I already learned the charm last year."

"How many failed completely?" Nico asked surprisingly meekly.

"Two." Draco decided not to give any names. Anya already hated him enough as it was.

"That's a quarter of the class." Curly pointed out when Nico looked relieved at the news. "And they're the very best of our year."

Nico's face went all green again.

As they walked into DADA A Draco saw that most of his classmates put their essays on the teacher's desk even though they weren't due yet. Was that a way to earn additional points in this class?

He quickly added his own essay to the untidy pile of rolls.

The DADA teacher arrived early again and a quick glance through the room as they got up to greet her revealed that one desk in the last row was still empty. Would the students be punished even though the bell hadn't rung yet?

"Bubbles, put that gum away!" the teacher commanded as expected. "Laura, Abby, no talking during class!"
The two girls that had been whispering in the second row blushed and shut up and there was complete silence in the class.

"You may sit." the teacher announced.

Chairs scraped over the floor and little whispers broke out all over the class. The teacher shot an angry look in the direction of the loudest whispers, but before she could say anything the door opened and two boys wearing yellow caps walked in.

"Ted and Herb, please sit down quietly." was the teacher's immediate reaction. Then she realised that there was only one desk free. "No, not next to each other. Josh, you move back to sit with Herb and Ted you sit with Leo."

"But Professor! " complained the boy apparently called Josh. "I can't see the blackboard from there. I've got to sit in the front because of my glasses."

"No arguing. Josh." the teacher said sternly. "Take your bag and move to the back."

Josh cast a last helpless look at Leo and obeyed. He and Herb both moved to sit as far from each other as anyhow possible.

'Rival gangs again?' Draco wondered, but right now was probably a bad time to ask and he had a more important question. Could he ask this in front of the whole class? But if he waited to ask after the lesson, he'd lose that time off lunch break.

He raised his hand.

"Yes, Dragon." the teacher acknowledged almost immediately. "Are you having problems with the homework?"

"Oh no, Professor." Draco answered hastily. "My Uncle helped me catch up a little over the weekend and I think I understand it all now. I was just going to ask, if you'd let us use the DADA B classroom for a tutoring lesson during lunch break."

"Why DADA B?" the teacher demanded.

"Because it's Bloody Mary's next class after lunch and she didn't want to risk being late for class. I can run much faster." he added with a grin.

"You're not tutoring DADA, though, I hope?"

"No, Potions." Draco told her. "I'm a lot better at that."

"Very well. I'll tell my other self to leave the door open for you." The teacher promised. "No practical lessons, though. You'd only burn down the school. Now, back to the subject. Kay, what do you remember from our last lesson?"

Draco was the first student to dash out of DADA A after the lesson ended. He'd packed his book and parchment away a minute before the bell and simply left his backpack on his desk for Cathy to collect.

The corridor was still empty and he encountered the first other students on the stairs, but wasn't slowed down much until he reached the ground floor where the masses divided into three different directions. It was still easier than usual to squeeze through, because he wasn't carrying his backpack and there were hardly any students coming out of the ground floor corridors as most
hadn't had time to reach their lockers yet.

He squeezed past a group of excited first or second years and into the lunch hall. A quick look around revealed that Mary wasn't there, yet, but Draco still hurried to get in line for his food. He'd seen how fast Mary could eat, if she was either hungry or in a hurry.

Most of the others were already there and Draco had almost finished his meal, though when Mary finally arrived carrying only a bowl of soup and a large sandwich.

"Old Connelly's finally lost her mind." she explained after she gulped down half of her soup drinking directly from the bowl. "She declared that we have to catch up to the fifth year." The rest of the soup quickly followed. "Come on Dragon, lets go! I can eat the sandwich on the way."

Draco left the last spoonful of pudding and hurried after Mary who didn't even look back to check if he was following her at all. She turned out to be good at making a path through the crowds, much like the fat girl who'd shoved Draco into people twice already. Following behind her, Draco had no problems walking against the stream of students at all.

DADA B was open as promised and also empty and quiet. The ideal place to work. Mary led him to her favourite desk and showed him her Potions book and notes.

"So what exactly was the main problem with your test?" Draco asked her. "Was it a practical or theoretical exam?"

"Theoretical." Mary explained. "A one page questionnaire. I seem to have gotten all the ingredients wrong. Here it is." She handed him a crumpled piece of parchment.

Reading through the text, Draco soon got a suspicion what Mary's problem really was. To test his theory he picked one of the jars out of her potions kit and keeping his fingers over the label held it up for her to see.

"What ingredient is this?" he asked casually.

"Uh... the round blue things." Mary tried. "They usually turn the potion blue as well and you mustn't mix them with the yellow powder without adding the little black things first, or the cauldron will boil over. They're used in sleeping potions because they have a calming effect and..."

"Their name, Mary." Draco insisted. "What's their name?"

Mary cocked her head trying to peer through Draco's fingers. "I don't know."

"You failed that test, because you confused all the ingredients' names." Draco told Mary calmly. "Take out some parchment, we're going to make a 'dictionary'."

"A dictionary?" Mary frowned at him.

"Yes, you call these the round blue things, but the test calls them by their real name." Draco explained. "So we're going to write them down like new words in Latin."

Mary sighed, but did take out her parchment and quill and scribbled 'round blue things'. "So what is their real name?"

"You'll remember better, if you look it up yourself. They're described in your book." Draco told her.
"You're just as bad as your uncle." Mary growled at him, but obediently started searching her potions book for the description. "Maybe this here: Wolfs-bane"

"No, Mary, you don't have wolfs-bane in your potions kit. It's highly poisonous and not given out to students. It also doesn't look anything like this. Read the whole description of the ingredient you suspect."

"Do you even know wolfs-bane?" Mary challenged.

"My uncle works with it for a private project." Draco told her. "He won't let me handle it unsupervised, though."

"I've got it! They're fairy knolls!" Mary exclaimed a few seconds later.

"Very good. Now, let's do the same with 'that yellow powder'." Draco ordered.

Mary glared, but obeyed.

While Mary looked up every ingredient in her potions kit, Draco wrote a quick list of every other ingredient mentioned in the Potions test and listed in her book.

"What are you doing?" Mary finally asked him.

"Preparing for our next lesson." Draco answered her. "In the meantime I'd like you to learn these like Latin words. When do you want us to meet again?"

"Tomorrow third lesson?" Mary suggested.

"No, that's my next Potions lesson. Fourth lesson?" Draco tried.

"That's my next Potions lesson." grinned Mary.

"Then we either have to use lunch break again, or you come up to the flat in the evening. There we'd even have all the ingredients we'll need." Draco told her.

"I've got a sixth lesson on Tuesdays." Mary remarked. "So it can't be right after school."

"After the game then? We could go up for dinner early."

Mary frowned but agreed. There were more and more fourth years coming in and staring and whispering at the sight of Draco making it impossible for Mary to concentrate any more and reminding Draco that History would start soon. He'd better get going.

"Wait!" Mary shouted as he got up to leave. "Your payment." She dug a gallon out of her pocket and handed it to Draco. "There, now hurry. Tempore won't like it at all, if you're late."

The bell rang just as Draco ran into History of Magic A still clutching his galleon in his hand. He hadn't expected to earn this much with his tutoring lesson. If Mary really paid Uncle Severus two galleons per lesson she had to be pretty desperate. Then again Uncle Severus was an actual Potions Master and professional teacher. Most Potions Masters would only laugh at the amount of money Hogwarts paid its teachers. Draco smiled to himself. A few more tutoring sessions and he'd be able to actually buy the Snapes a real Christmas present and maybe still have some money left over for sweets. Or maybe something nice for Cathy? He definitely needed to replace his quill, before he returned to Hogwarts.

Cathy and Charlie had saved him the same seat as last lesson and when he sat down Cathy even
told him "I put your homework essay on the desk with the rest. I hope that's okay with you."

"Sure, thanks." Draco mumbled still distracted by the money in his hand.

He soon had to put those thoughts aside, though, because Professor Tempore asked him to remind her of what she'd taught them last lesson. Could it be that she wasn't really unsure where they'd stopped at all? Was this her way of checking, if he'd been paying attention?

No problem, though. The lesson had been interesting after all and he remembered it quite well. The teacher seemed satisfied with his answer and continued talking about how young Grindelwald had begun his rebellion against the ministry. Sally soon raised her hand and stormed her with a flurry of questions.

Yes, Sally definitely was another Hermione Granger. A squib version of Hermione Granger.

On the way out of class Curt and Nico approached Draco. At first it made him a little nervous, but they wouldn't be stupid enough to attack him while he was with both Cathy and Charlie, would they? Nico hadn't even given any signs of disliking him so far.

"Hey, Dragon!" Curt called out. "Wait up! We gotta ask you something."

Draco exchanged a glance with his friends, but Cathy just shrugged. Apparently she had no idea what this might be about either. He stopped to wait for the two boys and felt the eyes of almost the whole class on him. Were they expecting a challenge?

"We heard you give tutoring lessons." Curt started glancing towards Nico for support, but the other boy just nodded for him to continue.

"I'm giving a friend Potions lessons, yes."

"Only Potions?" Nico said a little disappointedly. "No other subjects?"

"Potions is what I know best. I've got no reason to tutor anything else." Draco answered. What else could he teach anyone?

"Lisa says you do excellent summoning charms." Curt took over again.

"Old Connelly's a whole year behind Professor Flitwick from Hogwarts." Draco explained. "I already learned last year."

"But you could teach us?" Curt continued eagerly. "I'd pay you three sickles, for just one lesson, just so I don't completely embarrass myself on Wednesday, please?"

"We'll pay five, if you teach both of us." Sunny Sonja threw in.

Draco glanced over to where the Black Ring members were standing. Eric was in Charms A and had already had his chance with the summoning charm, so she was probably referring to herself and Belinda.

"Five, for just me." added Noel.

Draco looked from one to the other.

"Five and a bubblegum?" Bubbles asked him.

"Look guys, I've got to get to Muggle Studies right now and I need to think that over. I'll tell you all
before Herbology."

"You've got a chance to make a lot of money here." Charlie commented as they walked to class.

"Not really. Charms is on Wednesday and I've got only the fourth lesson tomorrow free in between." Draco answered. "So I can hold only one lesson."

"Not quite." Charlie smirked. "For one thing you've also got the sixth lesson. The school's still open for that, so you could use the library. Then Charms is in the fifth lesson on Wednesday and we've got Arithmancy just before that and who said you had to give singles lessons?"

"You think, I should just tell them to come to the library at those times?" Draco asked.

"I think you should put a list up on the notice board stating those three dates and your price and tell them to write up their names there. You can get the lists tomorrow during lunch break and will know what to expect."

"Notice board?" Draco asked.

"The one in the entrance hall." Charlie explained. "You usually have to ask the headmaster's permission to put up notices, but offers of tutoring lessons don't even require that."

Draco thought it over while the Muggle Studies teacher took attendance. He couldn't possibly charge a galleon for Charms lessons, especially not, if they were group lessons. The highest offer he'd gotten had been five sickles, which wasn't bad, but it had been meant for a singles lesson, or two students together. Would three sickles a student be appropriate for a group lesson?

But he soon forgot about all that once class really started.

Before Herbology was really the best time to make an announcement, he thought when he stepped outside the school with the other Muggle Studies students. The entire year was already gathered outside and he was immediately stormed by eager Charms B students. This time it wasn't just the ones from DADA A. Somehow word had gotten out to the rest of the class. This time it wasn't just the ones from DADA A. Somehow word had gotten out to the rest of the class.

"Silence!" he yelled and climbed onto the banister of the few steps that led up to the school's back door. "I'm going to put up a notice on the notice board, announcing the three times I can actually give tutoring lessons before our next Charms class. I'll make them group lessons for three sickles per student. So if you want to participate you'll have time until lunch break tomorrow to put your name on the list."

"What if I can't come at any of the listed times?" Herb shouted from the foot of the stairs.

Draco shrugged. "Sorry, I won't skip class for you in that case. Maybe Lisa could help you. Her summoning charms were very good in class. Or you could ask a sixth or seventh year."

"What if I want to add my name after lunch break tomorrow?" asked Sparks climbing up onto the banister beside Draco.

"Then you'll have to tell me personally." Draco decided, but then had a different idea. "Okay, I'll put up three lists and remove each an hour before the tutoring lesson." he amended.

"I need Potions tutoring!" shouted Marty to everyone's surprise. "Is there a list for that as well?"
"No, there isn't a list for Potions tutoring, but I might put one up after Wednesday." Draco answered. "I'm afraid it'll be only for magical kids, though. I'm not familiar with exactly what potions squibs can do and I know next to nothing about Chemistry. You could ask my uncle to tutor you during the holidays, though."

Professor Azalea's arrival ended the questioning rather abruptly even though she didn't comment on it, nor tell them to get off the banister. This time classes C and D were sent to the classrooms, while B went into the glasshouse.

"And we are going to plant invisible lilies today." Professor Azalea announced leading Herbology A to the flowerbeds.

"Uh... Professor." Curly reminded her gently. "It's the middle of winter."

"Invisible lilies are always planted in winter." Clarence reminded him. "It's in our Herbology book."

"Oh great, digging in the frozen ground." complained Sparks.

"Yes," Professor Azalea confirmed. "If the ground isn't frozen when they're planted, invisible lilies can't take root. Unfortunately the invisible lily seeds are also invisible, so the only way to know where they are is to feel them, which means that you can't wear gloves. Your fingers will get too cold to feel the seeds after a while and you will have to stop then. I suggest you use the rest of the class to take notes."

They were each given a handful of seeds, but had to share the gardening tools. An outsider boy called Bart and a gang kid named Arty immediately got into a fight over a shovel and Professor Azalea calmly ordered them to hand it over to Clarence and wait until everybody else had had their turn.

After seeing that Draco was careful to stay away from Vio and the tools she'd claimed for herself and got in line behind Curly instead.

The only ones who dared approach Vio were the Demons who actually managed to coax her into handing the tools she didn't need anymore over to Amanda, though not without use of lots of foul language, which Professor Azalea ignored as long as it wasn't shouted.

Draco worked with Curly and Charlie until he started having problems feeling the seeds. Then he decided that his duty was done and retreated to the steps to blow on his hands until he could write again.

Once his fingers were at least able to hold his quill again he took out a sheet of parchment and started writing his tutoring lists. After all Professor Azalea had only suggested that they should take notes, so she couldn't mind.

"Shouldn't you be taking notes?" Cathy asked him when she saw what he was doing.

"As soon as I'm done with this." Draco promised. "Right now I'm making money." He looked up for a moment and noticed that most of his classmates had gotten out their books and parchment by now and Arty and Bart had finally reached their turn. The only other person still in the flowerbeds was Vio.

"Doesn't Vio feel the cold?" he asked Cathy. "She was one of the first to start working. Shouldn't her fingers be completely frozen by now?"
"They probably are." shrugged Nico who was sitting on the step below them. "I think she's just digging for worms to kill."

"In a flowerbed?" Draco frowned. "How did she get into Herbology A?"

"She isn't stupid." Cathy commented. "And I think she studies a lot even though she doesn't appear to care much about her grades. She's just overly aggressive."

"You never know what's behind something like that." Charlie added. "Maybe her dad beats her too much. Kids like that need to hit something back to get rid of the aggression that causes."

"You've been studying too much for Psychology again, Charlie." Amanda informed her with a sneer.

"We've got a test this week." Clarence commented. "We have to study for that."

"It's a stupid subject for weaklings." Amanda sneered. "If you were a real wizard, you wouldn't even be taking it. DADA's much cooler."

Clarence lowered his head and stared at the ground in front of his feet.

"It's actually a nice easy subject." Charlie stated.

"Yeah well, it saves you an additional lesson." Amanda conceded. "I can understand that, but why a wizard would take it is a mystery to me."

"Well, some people think it's interesting." Charlie hissed. "Just like some people wear sunglasses at night."

"Sunglasses are cool." Amanda returned. "Psychology isn't."

"It's a form of defence as well, you know." Charlie went on. "If you can understand what a dark wizard's thinking, what his motives are, you can predict and even influence his actions."

"A powerful spell's much better, but of course you wouldn't understand that." Amanda sneered.

"Maybe you are the one who doesn't understand." Charlie suggested sweetly. "After all, you've never given it a try."

Amanda found no answer to that. She just stared at Charlie probably trying to figure out what she'd meant.

Clarence however finally looked up and gave Charlie a shy smile. Charlie smiled back at him for a moment, then returned to taking her notes. Unlike Draco she'd put on her gloves after she'd finished with the invisible seeds and was now having difficulty writing since her pen kept sliding out of her fingers.

The students who were wearing gloves and using quills were even worse off, though. They didn't only have problems holding the thin quills, but also kept getting them stuck to the fabric.

Then again, it wasn't easy to write with frozen fingers either. Draco blew on his hands once again and continued to write.

Cathy had to go to Conjuring class after Herbology, so Draco and Charlie went to the entrance hall alone, to hang up Draco's lists. Other students rushed past them on their way, only very few of them stopping to wait for friends.
"What's going on?" Draco asked Charlie. Even on Friday most kids hadn't been this eager to get away.

"Oh, they're just all in a hurry to get to the market." Charlie said. "Come on, let's post those lists and we can go too."

When Draco saw the huge message board in the entrance hall, he wondered how he could have missed it until now. It covered almost the entire right wall and there were parchments stuck to it all over. At first he was worried that his classmates wouldn't be able to find the lists in the chaos, but then Charlie led him to a section labelled 'tutors'.

There weren't quite as many notices here as in lost and found' or 'buying and selling' and not nearly as many as in 'miscellaneous'. Draco glanced at the other notes up there and found one by Mike offering Latin and Ancient Runes tutoring. Keith was offering Transfigurations and Cindy DADA. The rest of the names were unfamiliar, but confirmed that three sickles were an acceptable price.

Since neither of them carried any pins with them and they didn't want to go to the caretaker's office to borrow them, they spellotaped the lists to the board right next to Mike's notice.

"Okay, they're up." Charlie stated. "Come on now, I need to buy a new shawl. Somebody stole my old one from the wardrobe last week."

That reminded Draco that he'd wanted to get a new quill, or maybe ... "Do you know where I can get one of those muggle pens, Charlie? Are they expensive?"

"They sometimes have them at the bookshop, or you can try the muggle shop, but the bookshop's cheaper." Charlie answered.

"Good, then I need to go to the bookshop." Draco decided.

They walked out of the school and right into the market day crowd. Draco almost didn't see Sarah who had been waiting for him in front of the school because of all the people.

"I need you to take Billy and the dog." Sarah informed him. "I just can't get through to the bread stands with the buggy."

"But Aunt Sarah, we were going to the clothing stands and the bookshop." Draco complained. "We'll never be able to squeeze through like this."

"Well, if you don't take them, there will be no toast for your breakfast tomorrow." Sarah told him. "I'm sure there will be other chances for you to just hang out at the market."

Draco sighed and accepted the buggy with Billy and the bag into which Sarah had stuffed 'That Dog'.

"I'll meet you at the corner by the apothecary in about an hour." Sarah told him. "If you're late, I trust that you can find your way home on your own, but don't stay out too long. I don't want Billy to catch cold."

Draco nodded obediently and quickly checked the baby. No, he didn't appear to be cold, yet.

"You'll never be able to get the buggy to the clothing stands." Charlie decided after a calculating look at the surrounding crowds. "But the bookshop isn't that far away and you can go around the market to get there. I'll just go buy my shawl alone. See you tomorrow, Dragon!" and a second later she was gone.
Draco sighed. "Well Billy, I guess it's just the two of us then."

"Woof!"

"Okay, three. Hope you don't mind going to the bookshop. It's rather boring, if you can't read, but I really need some new writing tool." Draco informed 'That Dog.'

Apparently 'That Dog' didn't mind the bookshop. What he did mind was being stuck in a bag, but he already knew that he wouldn't get out until they got home, so he only complained when the bag was jostled about too much or the smell of delicious, but unattainable meat and sausages hit his nose.

It took Draco about fifteen to twenty minutes to get to the stands outside the bookshop without waking up Billy or letting 'That Dog' be squashed to death in the crowd. There he found himself faced with a new problem. There were several stands and they were all surrounded by so many people that it was impossible to see what was on them from here.

Billy's buggy would prove to be a great hindrance, if he tried to get close enough to each of them to check. If only he knew exactly where to look for muggle pens.

Maybe there was somebody here he could ask? Ah yes, News Nick was leaning against the wall reading another Soccer magazine.

"Hey, Nick!" Draco called out to him.

Nick looked up. "Oh, hi. Dragon."

"Do you know, if you have any muggle pens around here?" Draco asked quickly, before Nick could return to his magazine.

"Sure." Nick grinned. "They're inside, right next to the counter along with the cheaper quills."

"Thanks, can you watch Billy and the buggy for me while I'm inside?"

Nick eyed the baby doubtfully.

"He wont bother you." Draco promised. "Most likely he won't even wake up, but I can't well squeeze the buggy into the shop and I can't just leave him alone in this crowd. All you have to do is make sure nobody trips over him or takes off with the buggy."

"Alright." Nick agreed. "But you owe me a favour in return."

"Okay, no problem." Draco promised. He wasn't quite sure what kind of favour he might do for Nick, but he needed his help right now and after all it was the normal Merlin Park currency.

He tried to shake the brown slush the snow in the market place had turned into under the many feet of the shoppers off of his shoes and stepped into the dark shop. It took his eyes a moment to adapt to the bad lighting, but then he found the counter very easily.

He squeezed through between two witches who were perusing cookbooks and regarded the items on the table next to the counter. There were quills and ink-pots, muggle pens and ink cartridges, pencils and erasers and a whole box full of bookmarks. He wondered for a moment what the little balls and key chains were doing in a bookshop, but then turned to the muggle pens.

There were ones that required ink cartridges and others that were used until the ink inside ran out
and then replaced. Both types were available in several different colours. Draco bought a green pen with cartridges and another goose feather quill then hurried back out to collect Billy.

The baby was awake and greeted him with a happy "Dako!", but Draco noticed that the little hands that reached for him were getting red from the cold. It was time to take him home.

They met Sarah outside the apothecary a little early and she picked Billy out of the buggy and carried him back to Merlin Park.

"It's warmer for him like this." she explained.

At home she put the baby in bed right away with a hot water bottle to warm him. Billy didn't seem sleepy at first, but once he had his teddy cuddled tightly in his arm he changed his mind very quickly.

"He missed his nap today." Sarah explained. "Sleeping in the buggy with all the noise of the market just isn't the same."

They went back into the living room and put away their purchases and afterwards Draco got out his school books to do his Muggle Studies homework. Old Connelly hadn't had time to assign something new, Tempore's homework hadn't been due, yet any more than the DADA one and Professor Azalea apparently only assigned homework after theoretical lessons in one of the Herbology classrooms.

When he opened his backpack Sarah noticed the bag from the bookshop. "What's that?" she demanded sternly.

"Oh, Billy and Hugin played with my quill and it got a little damaged and I noticed that muggle pens are more practical for note taking if you don't have a desk to put an ink-pot on, so I bought myself a reserve quill and a muggle pen." Draco answered.

"The money I gave you was meant for lunch, Draco." Sarah scolded. "You're still growing and it's important that you eat lunch everyday."

"Oh, but I did." Draco assured her.

"Then where did you get the money for these?" Sarah demanded.

"I gave Mary a tutoring lesson in Potions and she paid me a galleon for it. She said that's half of what she pays Uncle Severus, because I'm no Potions Master. She's coming over for another lesson tomorrow evening, by the way. I didn't want to hurry lunch again and we don't have any free time together during the day either." Draco told her. "You don't mind, if we use the lab for an hour, do you."

"That depends on what you're going to brew. " Sarah stated sternly.

"Brew?" Draco repeated. "Nothing at all. I'm supposed to prepare her for a theoretical exam. I just need the ingredients, because she can't name them. We won't even open most of the jars."

Sarah smiled. "Severus is right, you know. You two really are a lot alike."

"What? I don't look a thing like Uncle Severus." Draco answered surprised. "Whatever gave you that idea?"

"You don't look alike, but you are alike." Sarah grinned. "Both of you Potions teachers, for
Draco laughed. "I'll never be a Potions teacher. If I ever teach anything, it'll be Physics."

"You're giving Potions lessons, though." Sarah pointed out.

"And Charms lessons as well." countered Draco. "Which reminds me. Do you have any objects I could borrow for Accio practise. I don't want to use books or quills, because there'll be lots of those in the library. I have to find things that are unlikely to be in school."

Sarah thought about it for a moment, then walked into the bedroom and returned with a pair of scissors and a pin-cushion and added a wooden spoon and a mug from the kitchen. "Will these do?"

"Oh yes, they're perfect." Draco said and just to make sure he really had enough items to practise on he decided to add Cuddly and two empty potions jars one with white, the other with dark glass before he went to school tomorrow.

A/N: Will Draco make a good tutor? What will Sevi say when he finds out? And will he give more Potions tutoring as well?

In the next chapter: We learn why one never summons books in a library, find out what some of the teachers do in their spare time and someone other than Elly skips class.
Chapter 50: A Mountain of Books

Cathy didn't walk to school with them on Tuesday morning. Their first class of the day was Ancient Runes allowing her to sleep in and take her time.

"Why don't we ever get a first lesson off?" Susie grumbled as they left Merlin Park.

"First years don't have electives." Jack pointed out to her. "And Cathy is the only one of us who's that lucky anyway.

"Yeah." confirmed Larry. "I think they try not to put electives in the first lesson on purpose."

"The part time teachers like to have the mornings off." Mike stated. "It allows them to pursue hobbies or a second part time job."

"Like what?" Draco asked suddenly curious. What did the teachers do with all their spare time? With the trick of holding two classes at once even the full time teachers didn't spend as much time in the school as the Hogwarts ones. "Teach at another school?"

"Professor Magnus gives tutoring lessons." Charlie said. "The Arithmancy teacher babysits and I heard the Creatures teacher works at his sister's pet shop in the mornings. I don't know about the rest."

"Sharter takes oration lessons." Mike added.

"Oration?" Draco had to shout to be heard over his friends' laughter.

"Don't worry, she doesn't give the lessons." Mike informed him between two laughing attacks.

When they reached the Runes classroom Draco pulled out his homework to put it on the teacher's desk like he'd done for all the other classes, but Charlie stopped him.

"Professor Magnus never collects homework." she told him. "We'll compare it and then, if we get around to it, we'll start on the new text."

"If we get around to it?" Draco repeated incredulously. "Do things like last lesson happen that often?"

"Yes." Charlie grinned. "We do it on purpose, you see. Svenja and Sally are the only ones who don't contribute to it."

"Hi, Dragon!" Martha's voice purred into his ear once again.

Draco jumped. "Martha! What part of 'I'm not interested, I already have a girlfriend.' don't you understand?"

"Why limit yourself to only one?" Martha fluttered her eyelashes.

"What?!" Draco exclaimed. "What do you take me for?"
"Another Gringolf Glizzard, perhaps." Charlie suggested.

"In that case, she ought to know that she has no chances at all." Draco growled.

"Oh, I might be too young for Grindi, but you're exactly my age." Martha almost sang.

"But I'm also a decent person and I love Cathy, so bye-bye Martha."

Martha pouted, but shuffled away under the laughter of Sparks, Charlie and the outsider girls.

"You sure know how to attract the girls." Sparks commented to Draco.

"Nonsense." Draco grinned. "I bet Martha's attracted to everybody."

"Ah, but Martha isn't the only one." Sparks said as Karen flopped into the chair beside Draco.

"See, here's another one."

"Karen isn't interested in me, Sparks." Draco corrected. "She just doesn't want to sit next to Martha. And talking about not sitting next to Martha, Curly just took your seat."

Indeed there was some competition over the seats in the class. The outsiders had arrived early enough to get their usual seats, but Cindy had been too late and Karen now had taken her seat.

Clarence had claimed his old chair next to Jim, Cindy had arrived only moments after Karen and sat down next to Hester causing Curly to take Sparks' usual place next to Lars with Andy and Alex behind them. Bubbles was next to Keith leaving only one seat free.

Sparks shot one look at Martha and trudged into the last row.

Professor Magnus walked in only seconds after the bell and took in the changed seating arrangements. "Sparks, could you..."

"No way." Sparks declared immediately. "Martha didn't leave Clarence alone either. Why do you think he went back to sitting with Jim? There's just no working next to Martha."

"If Martha promises not to disturb you, will you sit with her then?" Professor Magnus pleaded.

"She promised that to Clarence, too." Sparks reminded her. "You know I have concentration problems. Professor. I need a quiet neighbour."

"A quiet neighbour? Well, how about Sally?" suggested Professor Magnus.

"Hey, why should I sit with Martha, just because Sparks can't concentrate!" protested Anya. "I came extra early to get a first row seat."

"Svenja?" the teacher tried.

"No, maybe someone from the last row, would like to move into the second." Svenja glared at the teacher. "Nobody would give up a first row seat."

Professor Magnus gave up on the first row and turned to Jim.

"Clarence had to ask me to show him my homework after last class, because he missed so much of the lesson." Jim told the teacher calmly. "And you know Clarence never forgets to correct his homework."
Professor Magnus' eyes wandered over Keith, Bubbles, Hester and Cindy as she remembered the last lesson. "Curly?"

"No, if even Clarence won't do it, it must be really bad and you know my last test wasn't too good."

"Lars, maybe you're over that break-up after all?" Professor Magnus asked hopefully.

"No, sorry Professor." Lars said. "I don't think we can spend a whole hour this close without arguing."

"Andy or Alex?" She had to know that that was a lost cause.

"You can't do that to us. Professor!" one of the twins exclaimed.

"We've been together since before we were born." added the other.

"We could draw sticks." suggested Karen.

"Can't we just leave Sparks back there and get to work?" suggested Sally.

"We should force Martha to sit back there for being so annoying." suggested Hester.

"I'm willing to sit with anybody, you damn bitch!" shrieked Martha.

"Martha! Language!" scolded the teacher. "Really, I thought you were a young Lady."

"I am, but that... that... oh... Hester isn't!" Martha caught herself just in time.

"And I'm damn proud of that!" shouted Hester. "Wouldn't want to be anything like you."

"Silence!" demanded Professor Magnus. "Martha and Hester sit down. Everybody, take out your homework. Dragon, you start reading."

After this Professor Magnus didn't allow anything to distract her from her lesson anymore. Apparently she'd finally had enough.

The next class was Latin and so Draco found himself walking from Professor Magnus' class to Professor Magnus' class. The teacher had kept his promise and brought them two poems by Catullus and a funny Latin text, that had been written by a muggle Latin student and was full of intentional mistakes they had to find and correct.

They'd already finished translating the first poem when the door burst open and Elly dashed in.

"Sorry, Professor." she smiled innocently. "I overslept."

"Elly," the teacher started then sat down burying his head in his hands. "Elly, the next time you're late for my class I'm going to have to send you to the headmaster."

"I'm really, really sorry. Professor." Elly swore. "It'll never happen again, honest."

"Never probably being on Thursday." Iris, the girl with the McGonagal bun, whispered just loud enough that everybody heard.

"I really hope so, Elly." Professor Magnus said earnestly, before exchanging the poems on the
Draco had never had this much fun in a Latin class before. He might even have been sorry it was over, if it hadn't been the last class before lunch. The crowds on the way to lunch were much too dense for Draco to want to squeeze through to the message board, so he got his list on the way back out.

There were six names on the list, his friends Curly and Sparks, Noel and Nico from Sports class, Sunny Sonja and a girl called Julia. Draco stopped at the sight of that name. Julia? Who was Julia? Just when he'd thought that he knew everybody in his year he had to run into a new name once again.

When he met his gang in the over full library he asked Cathy and Charlie.

"Sure, I know Julia." Cathy answered immediately. "She's one of the top students in my Conjuring class. She's a great singer and has the necessary magical talent as well. Usually those that have the singing voice for Conjuring, don't have enough magic to make most of the spells work, but Julia's got it all."

"She's good in Charms as well then?" Draco asked.

Cathy shrugged. "She was in A for a while in third year, but didn't make it. Then again, a lot of students do badly on purpose just to get away from Connelly."

And Draco really couldn't blame the girl for that. After all he'd thought about doing the same before his first Charms class at West Hogsmeade.

Potions was a mostly theoretical lesson this time. Apparently Professor Funnel liked to leave the actual brewing for the double lessons which allowed for more time to prepare and clean up.

Dye potions turned out to be very interesting in Draco's opinion.

"A good indicator that you're looking at a dye potion recipe is, if the ingredient list includes ladybird wings." Professor Funnel told them just as the bell rang for the end of the lesson. "They're used in every dye potion, but not much elsewhere. For homework I'd like you to compare a few dye potions and try to make a list of what other ingredients are used in all, or at least most of them."

Sparks and Sonja followed Draco from the Potions classroom to the library where Curly and a girl, Draco assumed must be Julia were already waiting for them. Nico dashed in a moment later earning a long suffering look from the librarian.

Draco looked his 'class' over. "Does anyone know where Noel is? According to the list he was going to be here too."

Belinda and Julia exchanged a look and a shrug then looked to Curly.

"He was working with Theo in Potions. That's the last time I saw him." Curly told them.

"Okay, then, lets just assume that he'll join us later and get started without him." Draco decided. "You're Julia, I assume?" he asked turning to the girl he didn't know. "I don't think we have any classes together."

"No, we don't." Julia confirmed. "I don't have any special talents that would get me into A classes."
Draco smiled. "Oh? Cathy tells me you're quite a talent at Conjuring, though and that's supposed to take strong magic, I heard."

Julia blushed. "Well, maybe. I'm okay at most subjects, I guess."

Draco nodded. "Do any of you have particular problems with Charms?"

"Uh Dragon, according to Old Connelly every student in this school has particular problems with Charms." Sparks remarked. "At the very least we've all got particular problems with Connelly."

Draco sighed. He hadn't thought of that. With Connelly constantly putting them down none of the students probably had any idea of how good or bad they really were. "Point taken. Have any of you noticed that they've got more problems with charms, or certain types of charms than your classmates?"

"Well, I usually can't do them, if there's a lot of noise or activity around me." Sparks admitted. "It's my concentration problem, I think."

Draco nodded again. "Any other problems?"

Nobody answered. "Fine, then lets get started with these." he took out the objects he'd brought with him, but sat the two jars aside for the moment.

"The least you'll have to do in order not to fail is to summon a stone from Connelly's desk." Draco continued. 'The words for that would be 'Accio, stone'. I haven't brought a stone, but these objects will do as well. What's important for this exercise is that the object is unique in the room. So if any of you happen to have brought scissors, a pin-cushion, teddy bear, mug or wooden spoon in here, please say so now."

Sonja quickly checked her book bag, but came back up smiling. "No, my scissors must be in my locker."

"Good. Sparks, I want you to try to summon the teddy. Curly, the scissors, but be careful not to hurt yourself, Julia, the pin-cushion, Sonja, the mug and Nico the wooden spoon." Draco ordered.

They tried. At first nothing happened, though.


At that moment Noel hurried in. "Sorry, I got held up."

"No problem, Noel, but you'll have to wait a little right now. I don't have any object for you to summon." Draco told him. "Sparks, why are you staring at Noel? Keep practising. Curly, you forgot to wave your wand. Nico ..."

And all of a sudden the pin-cushion jumped off the table and into Julia's hand.

"I did it!"

Everybody stopped to stare at Julia.

"Very good." Draco told her. "Now try doing the same with the mug."

"Accio, mug!" Julia called and the mug jumped right into her hand.
"Good. Nico, you can use the pin-cushion." Draco ordered. "Julia come over here. The rest of you keep practising. Now, to earn a three Connelly made us summon a box, while leaving another on her desk." he explained to Julia. "The problem with that is this. If you say Accio jar!" Draco quickly caught both the jars that were hurtling towards him. "... all jars within reach of your spell will react. You have to define exactly which jar you mean. Accio, dark jar!" he demonstrated. "Now you try."

Julia summoned the dark jar at her first try and proved she could do the same with the light one. Draco was looking for a new task for her when Curly suddenly called out to him proudly waving the scissors in his hand.

"Good!" Draco called over to him. "Have you tried with one of the other objects as well?"

"Not yet." Curly admitted.

"Okay, I'll be with you in a moment." Draco promised. "Julia, I'd like you to summon a quill out of your backpack. Think well about what you need to say. There must be at least as many quills as students in here, most likely more. You'll have to return them all, if you summon too many."

Then he turned to Curly who hadn't managed to summon the mug on his first try, but did so in the second attempt.

"Okay, try the teddy." Draco ordered. Second try might be okay, but first would be better.

"Accio, goose feather quill!" Julia ordered behind him.

"Julia, the one that looks like a baby and a raven tried to pull it apart's mine." Draco called back over his shoulder.

Julia cursed softly.

"Accio, teddy!" This time it worked.

"Okay Curly, you can come with me to try the jars now." Draco decided. "Those of you who own goose feather quills, please collect them from Julia, before you continue practising."

Curly took a little longer to manage the jars and while he was still working on it, Sonja, managed to summon both the mug and the abandoned scissors, soon followed by Nico. Draco asked both of them over and explained the jar problem to them while Curly was still trying. Then he had to explain the quills to Curly and Julia returned and reported that she'd returned all the quills and Noel threw the pin-cushion against the wall in frustration.

Draco decided that six students might have been a bit too many to start with. If only he had an assistant!

"Just a moment, Noel. I'll help you as soon as I'm done here." he called over to the first group. "Julia, do you realise what you did wrong with the quills?"

"Yes, I should have added my, I suppose." she said looking a little embarrassed.

"No problem." Draco assured her. "Just explain it to Curly and try again. If Nico and Sonja master the jars before I'm done with Noel, please explain it to them as well."

Noel's problem turned out to be a wrong wand movement. After Draco had demonstrated a few times, he had no problem summoning any of the objects and Draco took him over to the jars, which
Sonja and Nico had already left for the quills exercise.

Draco called them back anyway and let them demonstrate. Julia, Sonja and Curly also demonstrated summoning their quills, but nothing happened when Nico tried.

"Try to picture your quill in your mind, when you call for it." Draco advised then returned his attention back to Noel who managed the jars with surprising ease.

Sonja and Curly volunteered to explain the quills to Noel while Julia was trying to help Nico visualise his quill.

That left Draco free to work with his last student.

"Sparks! You're supposed to summon Cuddly, not play with him!"

Sparks jumped guiltily. Cuddly was sitting on the overturned mug, with the pin-cushion in his paws while Sparks had been watching Nico's efforts at summoning his quill.

"Sorry, got distracted." Sparks admitted.

Draco sighed. "All right, summon the pin-cushion."

Sparks tried.

"Smaller wand movements." Draco ordered. "Try again."

Sparks raised his wand. "Hey, Noel did it!"

"Great, summon the pin-cushion." Draco ordered.

"Accio pin-cushion. I think Nico's almost got it." Sparks declared.

"Could you please try to look at the pin-cushion while you summon it?" Draco suggested slowly losing his patience. "Is that so much to ask? Nico will get a three, if he doesn't manage the third exercise. That's an okay grade, but you're going to fail, if you don't even manage the first."

The bell rang for the end of the fourth lesson and Draco decided to end his lesson as well after Sparks managed to summon the pin-cushion. He collected the money from his students and advised Nico to practise the quills some more.

"You should all pass Connelly's test, but it'd be nice if you all passed with a perfect record." he explained. "Sparks, try to at least summon a few other objects at home, okay?"

Sparks nodded a little glumly, but bounced out of the library a moment later. "I'll get you your next list. You just go right ahead to DADA."

Draco sighed once again and packed up his teaching material. The pin-cushion didn't seem to have taken any damage from its encounter with the wall. Draco was glad Noel hadn't been working with the mug or Cuddly, though.

Sparks dashed into DADA A only a minute or two after Draco and Curly brandishing the small piece of parchment. "Here." he said as he handed it to Draco. "Listen Dragon, I don't have another three sickles with me, so could you add me to the list for two? I won't bother you. I'll let everybody else go first."

Draco sighed. If he started giving discounts, nobody would want to pay the full price anymore, but
Sparks had helped him out when he'd needed a Potions partner. He glanced down at the students list. Five names.

"Did you see how many there are on the last list?" he asked Sparks.

"Only three so far. Why?"

"Six are a bit much and I know you don't take Arithmancy. I'll take you for two sickles tomorrow, if you swear nobody will find out you got a discount for being my friend, okay?"

"Okay." Sparks agreed.

Curly raised an eyebrow at Draco.

"I owe him." Draco explained. "And I think I ignored him too long this lesson. Also two sickles are better than nothing."

Curly picked the list out of Draco's hand. "You're making good business." he remarked after a short look.

"Connelly's creating quite some demand." Draco answered. "I'm surprised Lisa hasn't jumped at the opportunity as well."

"Lisa can't teach." Curly told him. "She tried giving a first year History lessons back in second year, but it didn't work out. She was too impatient and the kid got frustrated and found a different tutor. Hey, isn't Pat in your class?"

"What class?" Draco asked surprised by the sudden change of topic.

"Charms A."

"Yes, she is. Why?"

"Then what's she doing on your tutoring list?"

Draco grabbed his list back and indeed there was Pat's name on there. He blinked a few times, but there it remained.

"Well, she didn't manage the charm in class." he finally said. "I guess she must have decided that's the best way to catch up."

DADA despite Draco's efforts to be attentive was dead boring today. He really didn't understand what some people found so fascinating about the magical theories of the growth process of a vampire's fangs. He almost bet even the vampires didn't give a damn. He really wished Curt and Cindy would stop asking all those questions. Maybe Clarence had the right idea after all. Psychology couldn't possibly be any more boring than this.

Then Draco remembered Professor Binns and decided that maybe this wasn't that bad after all. The teacher did answer questions and her voice was animated enough that it didn't force you to sleep.

Many students rushed out right after class ended, while others walked away more slowly. The later group was probably on their way to Conjuring, Draco thought while the first were already leaving.

Bubbles and Herb were waiting for him by the door.

"Really Julia, skipping Creatures like that!" he heard Debby tell off her friend as they walked by
"It was the only way. I couldn't miss Conjuring or Arithmancy, but with your notes I'll catch up Creatures easily enough." Julia argued. "And now I can show Dolly and Tanja so they won't have to skip class as well."

"Well, then you can borrow their Creatures notes." huffed Debby.

"Julia skipped class for my tutoring?" Draco asked surprised.

Herb shrugged. "So what? It was her choice. They can't blame you for it."

"Yeah, you didn't invite her and even suggested those that had classes during your lessons should ask Lisa for help." Bubbles added. "The whole year can confirm it."

"It's not about being blamed." Draco said. "I'm just surprised she'd risk it."

"Anything not to get in trouble with Connelly." Bubbles commented. "I can understand her perfectly."

"You aren't skipping class right now, are you?" Draco asked.

"What? No. Wouldn't take Conjuring unless you paid me for it." Bubbles grinned. "I hate singing."

When they reached the library, they found it empty except for the librarian, who looked quite surprised to see them.

Draco sat up his teaching material again and demonstrated summoning each of the objects for Herb and Bubbles, then told them to each pick an object and start practising.

The girls arrived just after Bubbles' first attempt, which to Draco's surprise had caused the mug to fall over, even though Bubbles had been trying to summon the spoon. That phenomenon was completely new to Draco and he wondered what to do, if Bubbles kept affecting the wrong object.

He decided to leave the problem alone for now, though and start with the girls instead. At first he concentrated mostly on Hester, who didn't seem to be able to get the wand movements right, but then turned to Pat, who kept dropping the scissors halfway there.

"Pat, I think it might be better, if you tried with the pin-cushion." he told her. "You're going to damage something if you keep dropping the scissors."

So, Pat exchanged objects with Belinda, but her results didn't improve any.

"You've got it, Pat." Draco tried to encourage her. "You just have to hold the charm a bit longer."

"I'm just not good enough." Pat shook her head. "Connelly's right. I'll never manage."

"Connelly's an idiot who can't even explain a charm right." Draco told her. "She doesn't know a thing. If Professor Flitwick had explained it to you, you'd have mastered it long ago. I'm just not Flitwick. I haven't got the experience to know how best to explain. Lets try..."

"Hey!" That was Hester's voice.

Draco turned to her. "What's wrong?"

"Uh... I successfully summoned the mug." Bubbles admitted a little sheepishly.
"But wasn't Hester supposed to do that?" Draco asked. "I thought you were using the spoon?"

"I was." Bubbles admitted. "But I got the mug instead."

Draco sighed. What now? "Okay Bubbles, give Hester the spoon and summon the mug."

"Accio, mug!" Bubbles called and the scissors zoomed into his hand.

"Argh! Bubbles! I almost had it!" Belinda yelled. "They were already moving towards me."

"Bubbles, give back the scissors and try calling the mug spoon." Draco ordered. Whatever would Old Connelly say to that?

"Accio, spoon!" Bubbles called fixating the mug.

Seconds later a teddy and a pair of scissors collided right in front of his face, then dropped into his lap.

"Accio, Cuddly!" Draco yelled. "Why ever did I bring my poor teddy for this?" He glared at Bubbles for a moment then continued checking Cuddly for damage. "Does he look like a spoon to you?"

"No." Bubbles admitted. "But neither does the mug."

"Okay," Draco said as soon as he was sure Cuddly was alright. "Let's try something new."

He put the pin-cushion right in the middle of the table.

"Bubbles and Pat I want you both to summon the pin-cushion at the same time. I'll count to three." Draco announced. "Ready your wands. Now look at the pin-cushion, see exactly what it looks like."

Everybody was staring at the pin-cushion. The other objects lay forgotten except for Cuddly whom Draco was still clutching tightly to his chest.

"Now close your eyes," Draco continued. "Can you picture the pin-cushion? It's got white and blue stripes and one corner's a little crumpled right now. Can you see it how it lies on the table?"

He saw the looks of intense concentration on their faces.

"Good, now open your eyes again." he told them. "Remember that your charm must be stronger now, because there will be another pulling the other way. Make it as strong as possible. Now, picture the pin-cushion in your mind again. One. Two. Three!"

"Accio, pin-cushion!"

The pin-cushion twitched in Bubbles' direction, then sailed into Pat's hand.

"Excellent, Pat. Now try summoning the mug."

It worked. Pat had finally found the courage to go through with the spell. Draco handed her the two jars and told her to try the exercise Connelly had used the two boxes for.

"You remember the trick?" he asked her, before turning back to the rest of the class.

"Yes, I think so." Pat confirmed.
"Good. Try it a few times and tell me if it doesn't work."

Bubbles managed to summon the pin-cushion now, but the attempt to summon the mug, brought the spoon hurtling towards him once again.

Belinda couldn't find the scissors until Herb finally discovered that they were still lying in Bubbles' lap. Belinda blushed deep red and asked Herb to get them for her.

"No," said Draco. "Don't. Belinda, if you want those scissors, you'll have to summon them."

"Acio, scissors!" Belinda tried.

"It's Accio, Belinda, not Acio. Try again."

"Accio, scissors!" and indeed the scissors jumped into the girl's hand. Belinda beamed.

"Good, now try the mug." Draco told her and soon was able to send her off to watch Pat work with the jars.

A quick glance that way showed that Pat was doing fine with the exercise. He'd have to explain the feathers trick to her in a moment, but right now he had Bubbles to worry about.

"Accio, teddy!" Hester tried for the tenth or so time. "Uh... Dragon? Do you think you could hold that teddy a little less tightly? I think then I might have a chance."

Draco stared at her for a moment. He'd completely forgotten that he was still clutching Cuddly.

"Sorry." he mumbled and sat the teddy back on the desk.


"Okay, okay, enough!" Draco shouted quickly. "I believe you."

"This is fun." Hester declared, but did return the objects before she went to join the other girls where Pat was now coaching Belinda through her first try with the jars.

"Okay Bubbles, focus on the mug." Draco started another attempt. "Concentrate and summon it."

"Accio, mug!" Bubbles shouted and the spoon sailed into his hand once again.

"Do you always have to summon whatever I happen to be working on?" Herb asked slightly annoyed. "Accio, spoon!"

The spoon hurtled back to Herb, who put it back on the desk as if nothing had happened and summoned it again.

"Herb?" Draco asked gently.

"Yes?"

"You just did it." Draco pointed out.

"I know. You were just to busy to notice until now." Herb told him. "Accio, mug! ... See?" he held out the mug to Draco.

"Well, why didn't you tell me?"
"Because you were busy with everybody else and I didn't need any help." Herb grinned.

Draco shook his head and sent Herb off to work with the girls. Whatever was wrong with Bubbles?

It took five more minutes until Bubbles could summon the mug, but when Draco told him to try the spoon now, the pin-cushion reacted instead once again and Draco really had to get back to the girls.

A look over at the other desk revealed that only Herb was still playing with the jars, while the others had stepped aside a little. As Draco watched Belinda raised her wand.

"Accio, Charms book!" she shouted.

"No!" Draco yelled almost at the same time as the librarian. "Don't!"

It was too late of course charms books rose out of most of the backpacks, off the librarian's desk, out of her book trolley, off almost every shelf in the library and in a huge flock out of the Charms section.

Belinda screamed and dropped her wand, but it was too late. She didn't manage to drop the charm the way Pat had done by accident and got buried under books.

"Oh no! Belinda!"

At first everybody was shouting hysterically, but then the mountain of books shifted and Belinda crawled out from under it.

"Owch." she declared as she got up and brushed out her clothes.

"Belinda, never ever summon books in a library." Draco told her after a deep breath of relief, then took in the pile of books. "We're going to have to sort all of those back into the shelves."

The students looked at each other in horror.

"Well," grinned the librarian. "At least you found all the misplaced Charms books. Do you by any chance know the Convoco spell already?"

"I do." Draco told her. "But the others don't."

"In that case you're going to learn that next." she informed them. "Watch! You draw a circle above the point where you want to summon the objects, then point right at it and call. Convoco, Charms books by authors starting with A!"

The pile of books moved again as some books took flight once again, while others remained and soon a smaller pile formed on the floor in the Charms section.

"Now all you have to do is summon out the ones by authors with Ab, then Ac and so on." the librarian explained. "And sort them back onto their shelves."

"And remember always to add Charms, when you summon them." Draco admonished his classmates. "We don't want any more books falling out. Be as precise as possible with your commands. But first: Accio, my Charms book!"

Draco grabbed the book that flew towards him obediently stuffed it into his backpack along with most of his teaching material and carried the backpack out into the corridor.

"Bubbles, keep practising Accio while the rest of us clean up." he ordered then walked over into
the Charms section, where Belinda and the librarian were already busy sorting the works of Professor Abram while the others were trying the Convoco charm without any signs of success. "Convoco, Charms books by authors starting with Ac! Hester, Herb, start with this pile. "Convoco, Charms books by authors starting with Ad! Pat, help me with these."

By the time they reached Bo Herb and Pat had mastered Convoco and when they started C Belinda and Hester managed it most of the time. Still, sixth lesson was long over when they finally found Bubbles' Charms book. The poor boy still hadn't entirely mastered Accio and hadn't dared to summon the book. At least his charms usually worked on the second attempt by now.

"Almost three hours of Charms practise!" groaned Pat when they were finally done. "And all because of Belinda."

"Well, at least we've mastered two summoning charms now." Herb told her. "That should shut Connelly up for a while."

"Yes, you'll all pass when she demands Convoco of you." Draco agreed.

"Only I'll fail Accio." Bubbles sighed.

"No, you won't." Pat told him. "You'll manage on your second attempt and get a four and look better than me."

"You'll make up for it with Convoco." Draco told her.

Draco grabbed his last two teaching objects and went to collect his backpack. Those were fifteen very hard earned sickles, but when he thought about all the nice Christmas presents he might buy for Billy with that money, he had to smile. Just a few sickles more and he might even have enough for a stuffed animal. Or maybe Billy would prefer a little ball? He already had a teddy and a rabbit, after all.

Would Sarah let him play with a ball in the flat? Something might get broken and if Billy cut himself on a shard it'd be his fault.

Maybe a muggle toy? Those little cars looked like great fun, but they also were more expensive than the smaller balls. With just a few more tutoring lessons, though, Draco thought he should be able to afford one.

If only the librarian allowed him back into the library again tomorrow.

A/N: Will Bubbles really fail? Will Sparks do better in his next lesson? And how will Connelly react if she finds out Draco's teaching her students?

In the next chapter: We find out Max's problem, Draco gets an owl and Charms B has their Accio test.
Draco was a little worried in Transfigurations the next morning. He'd been just in time to give Mary her Potions lesson the day before and hadn't found enough time to do all his homework. It wasn't really a problem, yet, because he didn't have any of Tuesday's subjects on Wednesdays, but there'd be more homework added today and he didn't think he'd be able to do two days' homework in one evening.

If they got many assignments today he had a problem.

Professor Winter had just arrived and was still counting his students when there was a sudden knock on the window.

"Professor?" Belinda reported. "There's an owl outside the window."

Draco looked up and saw a fat barn owl that perched on the windowsill.

"Hoot!" the bird declared when nobody moved to let her in.

Professor Winter regarded her with a raised eyebrow. "Do any of you know this owl?"

Silence. The students looked at each other questioningly. The owl didn't look like a local, if you looked more closely. She might be a common barn owl, but was young and obviously well kept. Her feathers had the healthy gleam of a spoilt pet and the envelope tied to her leg looked like it was made out of the kind of parchment Draco was used to seeing at Hogwarts. No West Hogsmeade resident he knew would waste money by buying such high quality envelopes.

"Hoooot! " the owl insisted and scratched at the window pane with her foot.

"Alright." Professor Winter conceded. "Let her in, Theo. Lets see what she wants."

Theo opened the window and the owl hopped inside, then spread her wings and sailed onto Draco's desk. She climbed onto his Transfigurations book and held out her foot to him.

Draco looked to Professor Winter.

"Is that your owl, Dragon?" the teacher asked.

"No, my familiar's a raven." Draco defended himself.

"Maybe your uncle's bird then?"

"No, he's got a raven, too and I don't think she's a Hogwarts owl either."

"Your aunt's perhaps?" Bubbles suggested.

"Aunt Sarah has a cat." Draco frowned. "And I've never seen this bird before. I'd know her, if she belonged to my aunt. Maybe she's a Hogwarts owl after all." he decided. "My friend Gregory might forget that I'm in class at this time and send an owl. He doesn't mean to interrupt class. He's just not very bright."
He untied the letter and the owl gave another hoot and flew back to the window which Theo had closed again as soon as she'd entered.

"Well, please tell Gregory not to address your owls to school." Professor Winter told him. "Theo, let the owl out."

"I don't think Gregory even has this school's address. I certainly didn't tell him." Draco looked down at the envelope in his hand. "Thought so. It isn't addressed at all. There's only my name on it. And that's not Gregory's handwriting." he turned the letter over to check for the sender. "Neville Longbottom!" he exclaimed in surprise.

"Well, Gregory or Neville doesn't make much of a difference." Professor Winter answered.

"Yes, it does." Draco said. "This owl's been flying for at least a day. You can't time a distance owl that well."

Draco's heart hammered. This was Neville's answer to his apology. The owl must belong to his grandmother, or maybe that uncle he sometimes spoke of. The one who'd bought him his toad.

"Well, no reading in class time either way." Professor Winter ordered. "Save it for later."

Draco put the letter down on his desk and tried not to think of it for the rest of the lesson, though his fingers were itching to open it the whole time. He couldn't concentrate on transfiguring his glass jar and his snake ended up having a translucent tail tip, but he seemed to be just fine with that.

At least Professor Winter didn't seem to think it was as bad as the fact that Andy had once again produced a cobra. Despite all of the boy's assurances that he'd really meant to make it a harmless garden snake, the Shark was ordered to see the headmaster during lunch break.

The moment class ended Draco tore open the letter.

"Hey, Dragon." Cathy told him slightly impatiently. "We've got to get to History. You can't read now."

"But I have to know if he has accepted my apology." Draco argued.

"Oh, is this the boy that got hurt?" Cathy asked. "It wasn't your fault, you know."

He'd by now given up trying to explain the snowball incident to the Rakers so he just shrugged and pulled the parchment out of the envelope.

Cathy grabbed his arm. "Come on, you can read it in History."

Draco sighed and accepted that he wouldn't get a chance to read now. He threw his Transfigurations book and glass jar into his backpack and let Cathy drag him to History. Of course there he didn't get a chance to read his letter either, because Charlie was already there and had to hear the story of Grandma Longbottom's owl.

He started reading during attendance, but this time Professor Tempore started class unusually quickly.

"I'm quite impressed with some of your essays on Grindelwald's childhood." the teacher announced. "Svenja and Lisa even researched his siblings even though that information is quite hard to find. Sally made some excellent points about Mrs Grindelwald's second marriage. Lars found out facts about the German wizarding prison, even I had never seen before and Dragon,
"Where did you find all that information on the muggles?"

"In a muggle history book." Draco told her. "You said to write about the wizarding society of the time and I found a remark about muggle society influencing it, so I decided to check the muggle section and found much more material than I expected."

"You take Muggle Studies?" Tempore asked him.

"Yes, it's quite a fascinating subject." Draco confirmed. "And from what I found when researching that essay probably more important than we realise."

"Indeed, there are surprising parallels between muggle and wizarding history in Germany in that time." Tempore told the class. "In his essay Dragon states that a lot of muggle families were struggling similarly to the Grindelwalds and might have been equally tempted to turn dark, if they had been wizards. In fact a muggle dark lord did take over Germany and was the cause of the war that was used as a cover for Grindelwald's attack on the ministry."

Hands shot into the air all over class.

"Yes, Lucy?"

"How can a muggle be a dark lord? If he can't use magic, he can't use dark magic even if he'd want to, can he?" Lucy asked wide eyed.

"A dark lord isn't necessarily defined by the use of dark magic." Professor Tempore explained. "Maybe you'll understand best if you look at the results. Grindelwald and He Who Must Not Be Named both murdered lots of innocents, they tried to take over their respective countries and terrified the wizards on the entire continent. Hitler, the muggle dark lord, did take over Germany, conquered several other countries and attacked even more. Even without counting the soldiers forced into that war, some of whom were no older than you are, he murdered far more muggles than the two wizards together. Yes, he fell upon his own kind, killed them, because their ancestors had come from a different country, because they had a different religion, or different political ideals, or simply, because they spoke out against him. He talked a whole nation into believing he was right to do these things, while those who knew better were silenced by fear of him. He brought war to the entire world."

"But why didn't all those people work together to stop him?" Anya asked. "He was only one man."

"As was Grindelwald." Tempore answered. "As was He Who Must Not Be Named. Like the wizard dark lords he had followers who did his work for him and protected him. Unlike the wizards, he took over the first country from within. He was a convincing orator and convinced many dissatisfied people. Muggles can be just as dark as wizards and that one was even more successful."

Draco shuddered. So what did this mean for their own time? Should they watch out for a muggle version of Voldemort to rise up? Or should this story warn them of what might happen, if Voldemort won?

He wondered if Uncle Severus knew about that dark muggle. Was that why he was so sure that Voldemort would kill everybody, if he ever got the chance?

He didn't find the time to read Neville's letter until lunch break, but after he had eaten, he finally got it out while the others were arguing over the last piece of cake, which Jack didn't want.

The letter was surprisingly friendly. Neville was still at his grandmother's, but feeling much better and would return to Hogwarts next week. He thought it was very nice of Draco to show concern
for his health, but told him not to worry, since he was already walking around again, albeit with a
slight limp since his right knee still hurt a bit. He was sure he'd be fine by the time Draco saw him
again after Christmas.

He also was quite surprised that Hugin had grown this much in less than a week.

Draco laughed when he read that. He'd have to explain Munin when he wrote Neville back.

"Are you coming to the library, Dragon?" Sammie asked him suddenly.

He looked up and realised that the table was almost empty.

"There isn't enough time left to do any real studying," he told Sammie after a moment. "I'll just get
my list and go outside for Herbology."

"List?" asked Sammie. "What list?"

"My tutoring list." Draco told him as he got up and put Neville's letter back in his pocket.

"Tutoring list?" Sammie hurried after him. "I thought you were only tutoring Mary?"

"No, I'm also giving Charms lessons at the moment." Draco grinned. "Connelly's making it really
good business."

Sammie stopped to think for just a moment, then ran after Draco who was already halfway to the
entrance hall. "Do you think there's a market among the first years as well?" he asked eagerly.

"I don't know, but I'd assume with Connelly's teaching method, there would be one in every year.
There definitely is in fifth and fourth." Draco answered. At least Mary had told him that several of
her classmates were looking for a Charms tutor and that she was afraid she'd fall behind just as far
as she already had in Potions.

Maybe he ought to mention it to Mike. He'd decided never to take on more than five students at a
time from now on and, if only half of Connelly's students in fourth year needed a tutor he'd never
find the time for all of them.

There were still only three students on the list, Draco saw. He probably should have taken all the
lists down yesterday like he'd originally planned. It wouldn't have made a difference.

At least this should give him the time he needed for Sparks. The class consisted of Curt, Theo and
Max, an all boys group. Remembering how few girls he'd seen in the library the week before that
wasn't surprising. Obviously they all either took Arithmancy or had Sports at that time.

Theo, he decided, most likely wouldn't be a problem case. Draco had seen the boy perform in
Transfigurations and doubted he had many problems with any kind of magic. Curt had appeared
rather desperate when he'd asked for tutoring, but Draco chalked that up to fear of Connelly, not
lack of ability. Curt did well in Potions, which of course didn't necessarily prove that he had to be
especially good with his wand, but had given Draco the impression that Curt was a good student.

He didn't really know Max, though. That short talk they'd had outside Charms class hadn't told him
anything about the boy's abilities.

This time it was Herbology A that ended up having the surprise quiz. Draco wondered, if he should
have considered it a warning when Herbology B had had it last week, but that class had another
teacher, so he hadn't thought much about it.
Professor Azalea assigned them seats for the quiz and Draco ended up between the last two members of the class he hadn't even spoken to yet, a small dark haired boy named Ivan and his tall and well muscled friend and gang mate Zach.

Draco sent a wary look Zach's way as he sat down. That one might be dangerous in a fight.

The quiz was hard. Draco remembered almost all the facts about the African plants, but there were two he couldn't answer about the invisible lilies and whatever were snapping fairies? His memories of mandrakes weren't all that clear anymore either, but at least he could answer the question about their uses quite easily and give a vague description of their looks and the necessary precautions when handling them.

He tried to peek at Ivan's parchment hoping to catch the answer to one of the invisible lilies questions. Professor Azalea couldn't blame him for not having learned of snapping fairies at Hogwarts, but he had been there for the invisible lilies.

It was no use, though. All he could make out was that Ivan had gotten the uses of mandrakes mixed up with those of willow bark. He considered telling the boy, but didn't want to risk getting caught cheating. Sure, if it had been Cathy or Charlie, or even Clarence he might have given them a little push, but he had no idea how Ivan might react.

Instead he just tried to guess when invisible lilies bloomed and how many leaves they had, waited for the end of class and handed in his parchment.

"We didn't have snapping fairies at Hogwarts." he told the professor.

She nodded at him and wrote a quick note on an extra parchment then continued on to Zach.

As soon as the bell rang he waved Sparks over and hurried to the door. He did not want to anger Cathy by watching Amanda and Vio change again and after all he had better things to do.

Curt joined them in the corridor since Herbology D had gotten out early. Apparently the film they'd seen had been shorter than expected.

The librarian gave them a wary look as they entered, but didn't kick them out. Draco sent her a reassuring smile in return and started setting up his objects. He left the scissors in his backpack for now. With only four students he didn't absolutely need five objects and the scissors might be dangerous, if they fell into Sparks' hands.

Max and Theo arrived five minutes later hands still covered in mud.

"Sorry, we learned to pot swamp plants." Theo explained when he saw Draco's look.

"You're not allowed to touch my teddy." Draco informed them. "Nor the pin cushion. I can wash the other things."

They nodded obediently.

"Before we start." Draco began his lesson. "Whatever you do, don't under any circumstances summon any kind of book during this lesson. Is that clear?"

They all nodded again.

"Fine." Draco said. "Then let's get started."
Theo only required a few attempts and a correction of his pronunciation. As Draco had already suspected the boy should have been in A. He explained how to do the jars exercise to him, then returned his attention to the other three.

Curt and Max were still trying without success, but Sparks was watching Theo in fascination.

"Sparks, keep practising!" Draco reminded him, then turned to Curt who'd forgotten to move his wand.

"What? Oh, Accio, pin-cushion." Sparks tried. The pin-cushion didn't move however and now Draco was leading Curt's hand through the wand movements.

Sparks put his wand down on the table to watch.

Curt required a few attempts to time the wand movements correctly and coordinate them with the words, but once he had it, the charm worked flawlessly and Draco could turn to Max, who apparently had a more serious problem.

Max's wand hand trembled causing his wand to make uncontrolled jerks in the middle of the movements. When asked Max admitted that it wasn't an unusual occurrence, it even got worse during Charms class when Old Connelly's presence made him nervous. He was struggling in Transfigurations because of it, but had avoided similar problems in DADA by taking Psychology. Wand problems weren't that noticeable in a class where more than half of the students were squibs.

It was a miracle Max had managed to make it into Charms B, but now Connelly didn't seem to want to switch him.

What did one do in a case like that? Draco supposed that Max probably required a trained mediwizard to determine the source of the problem and tell him what to do about it.

Max swore that he wasn't nervous now, so it didn't seem to be just that. He probably needed to do special exercises or take a potion to stop the trembling.

Draco took a moment to give Curt and Theo their next assignment. Explaining the quill problem took his mind off the trembling problem for a bit. Maybe, if he thought it over once more with a clear head afterwards he'd come up with something.

"Sparks! You're supposed to summon the pin-cushion." he reminded his friend on the way back to Max.

Sparks returned to his chair, but spent most of the time on watching Draco and Max, instead of practising. After several failed attempts, they found a way how Max could support his wand hand with his other hand to steady it without hindering the wand motions for the charm. A few more attempts and it worked. It wasn't perfect, but Draco counted on Connelly giving Max the same number of chances she'd given the Charms A students.

Max should manage after a few attempts.

Draco took him over to the jars, told him to experiment a bit to see, if their trick worked for this as well and went back to Sparks. He was beginning to lose patience with his friend.

"Okay Sparks," he told him. "See this pin-cushion? I want you to summon that. Now."

"Accio, pin-cushion!"
To Draco's surprise the pin-cushion flew right into Sparks' hand.

"If you didn't need my help at all, couldn't you have done that ten minutes ago?" he asked the boy.

"I got distracted." Sparks told him. "I've got concentration problems."

Draco sighed. Well, at least this entire group had mastered the charm. Now he had time left to show them the more difficult exercises.

Max's trick worked on the jars, but failed with the quills. That ought to earn him a grade three, then, making Bubbles his biggest worry as Sparks proved that he could do all the exercises easily as long as everybody's attention was on him, which it no doubt would be when Connelly tested him.

They joined the nervous crowd outside the Charms classrooms where this time the Charms B students were even jumpier than the Charms A ones.

Connelly's double appearance and strictly kept rituals were no longer exciting, but the words she opened the lesson with did earn some surprise even from Draco.

"Next week we are going to finish studying Convoco and Advoco." she informed them with a glare. "I will test you on Convoco on Monday and Advoco on Tuesday. For those of you who failed Accio, please bear in mind that the third failing grade in sequence will get you down-classed into B."

Draco wondered idly whether the last information constituted a threat or a promise. Judging from Pat's face it was the first, but Anya's expression hinted that she might consider it the later.

The rest of the lesson was spent on frantic scribbling down of notes on the two charms and the moment Connelly let them out Pat raced after Draco.

"Dragon, I'll need tutoring for Advoco." she informed him.

"Well, I'd like tutoring for Convoco first." Cathy hissed angrily.

Draco grinned. "Hey, calm down. Pat didn't ask for tutoring in kissing."

"But are you going to continue with the tutoring lessons?" Jim asked him just as the door of Charms B opened and a group of smiling students rushed out.

Smiling?

"I got a one." Julia shouted out to everybody.

"Everyone who managed all three tasks on the first attempt did." Curly informed Draco.

"Thanks to you Connelly didn't find much to criticise today."

"Yes, when's the next tutoring session. Dragon?" asked Max.

"How did you do?" Draco returned.

"A three." Max grinned. "Best charms grade I've had this year."

"Where's Bubbles? How'd he do?" Draco continued.
"Three as well." Max was fighting laughter. "He did well, but was so nervous he accidentally summoned Connelly's glasses instead of the stone the first time. She got a little angry about that. I'm afraid."

"So everybody passed?" Draco asked with a smile. "That's great."

"Not quite." Julia admitted. "The twins didn't manage."

"Well, I didn't tutor them, so you can't blame that on me." Draco shrugged. "Can't help them, if they don't want my help."

"So how about more tutoring?" Theo pushed. "We've got to learn something called Convoco and Advoco now."

Draco nodded. "I've got to talk to Mike," he decided. "Hopefully he'll agree to help me so we can offer more lessons. I'll hang up a new list tomorrow morning."

"Mike has Arithmancy sixth lesson today." Cathy told him.

"Arithmancy?" Draco asked. "But he went home with us after fifth lesson last week."

Cathy shrugged. "The class must have been cancelled for the sixth year last week. They usually have Arithmancy on Wednesday and Thursday."

"Well, I guess I'll have to talk to him at home then." Draco sighed. "The list will be up by lunchtime tomorrow at the latest, though."

Mike luckily wasn't hard to convince to make some money, so they wrote up a number of new lists which allowed for sixteen classes with a maximum of five members each. The main notice also stated that all students in one class had to be of the same year and there for the same subject, either Charms or Potions. Lessons would cost five sickles for only one student, four for two students and three for three and more. Only Draco's potions lessons would be more expensive at one galleon for singles lessons and five sickles for three and more students.

Sarah regarded their finished product with a smile. "I told you you're just like your uncle." she said at first. "Are you sure that you want to stay in school for the sixth lesson every day, though?"

"It's the time when most students don't have classes, so we're probably going to make the best business then." Draco pointed out.

"We don't expect to get customers for every class we're offering right now." Mike added. "We'll know which ones we can scratch once we see which ones are the most popular."

Hugin cawed happily to confirm that and flapped onto Mike's shoulder to take a look at the parchments on the table as well. Mike jumped at the sudden weight of the bird and Hugin complained loudly at the sudden movement of his perch.

That reminded Draco that he'd meant to write Neville and he also had lots of homework to do. At least there wasn't any Charms homework.

To their surprise they found a number of fifth year students already waiting for them when they arrived at school the next morning even though they'd made sure they arrived early.

"There are going to be two Charms tutors now?" Anya asked before they could even start hanging up the lists.
"Yes, me and Mike." Draco answered nodding towards his friend.

"Good." Anya decided. "I only want to work with Mike then."

Mike looked her up and down a little surprised. He didn't even know the girl.

"Add any special wishes to your name and we'll try to arrange it, if at all possible." he told her after exchanging a quick look with Draco. "I can't tutor while I've got class."

"If possible we'd like to have all fifth year Charms students that want tutoring on the list by lunchtime." Draco announced as soon as they'd pinned up the last parchment. "So please DADA B, C and D students tell your classmates that the list's up."

He wasn't sure if his classmates had heard him, though as they were all crowding up to the message board quill in hand.

"Can I take a Friday class this week and Wednesday after that?" Jim asked suddenly.

Draco nodded. He should have thought of that before. For those students who hadn't already learned Convoco on Tuesday tutoring would come too late, if they didn't get it today or on Friday.

"Just add once and regularly behind your name on the list, so we'll know how to plan our schedules." he told Jim.

Meanwhile Mike was having an argument with Mary, who'd been trying to reach the list as well. They'd agreed not to inform the other years of their offer, yet as the fifth year Charms students were to have priority, but Mary insisted that she should have the first right to choose her lessons since she had been Draco's first student.

"You can always arrange for evening lessons at home." Draco heard Mike tell her and Mary finally trudged off pouting.

He suspected she'd be back as soon as her first class was over, but by then the fifth year should have claimed several dates for themselves.

Sparks was already up in the DADA classroom when Draco arrived, but ran back down once he heard that the list was up. When Curt and Curly arrived, Draco told them as well, but they'd already seen it for themselves when they'd come in.

DADA itself was rather boring today. The teacher had very little to say that Draco hadn't already heard from Uncle Severus. At least Latin proved more entertaining when Elly once again arrived almost ten minutes after the class had started.

This time Professor Magnus refused to back down. Elly pleaded and made promises, but nothing helped. With a deeply disappointed expression Professor Magnus handed her a detention slip.

Mike arrived at lunch with a happy smile on his face. "Did you see?"

"See what?" Draco asked back.

"We've got a huge crowd in front of the board." Mike grinned. "Looks like you were right about tutoring being good business."

Things had calmed down again by the time they went to check the lists after lunch. Against Draco's expectations all fifth years had signed up for Friday lessons, while Mary had picked the fifth
lesson today together with one of her classmates and the sixth lesson had been claimed by a group of three third years.

"Mary." Mike growled when he saw that.

"No problem." Draco shrugged. "We've got Potions at that time, so no fifth year could have come anyway. We'll have to tell Mary that that's one of your lessons, though."

"She also picked sixth lesson on Monday and asked for you both times." Mike pointed out. "Now what? Do we alternate her lessons between us, or should I take both?"

"We'll just ask her what she wants." Draco decided. "I think she and Larry were going to the library."

"Which doesn't mean they actually got there." Mike grinned. "You've got a bunch of third years for Charms sixth lesson."

"Cheering charms." Draco read the topic the third years had been kind enough to supply. "That ought to be fun."

"I had a classmate whose cheering charms had a slightly depressing effect on his victims." Mike told him. "He got switched down to B and then on to C over it."

Draco shrugged. "I'll just make them practise on each other," he decided. "Mary's problem is that she doesn't know the ingredients' names. She can tell you exactly what effects they have when she sees them, but she doesn't know which one you're talking about, if you just give her its name. We wrote a list. Make her show you that and do a vocabulary test."

Mike nodded. "What about the fifth years? That one girl absolutely wanted me."

Draco checked the list again. "Anya. I got her a detention in our first Charms class together and now she just doesn't like me. She failed Accio in class, but that might have been because she had to go first."

"She's in A, then?" Mike asked.

"Yes, I don't think she'll be a problem from what I've seen." Draco answered. "You've got Cathy Friday fifth lesson. Keith and Lisa as well. All three are in A and the other two, Belinda and Herb already know Advoco. That ought to be a good class."

"Good. How about your third?" Mike asked. "If you have any problem cases maybe we could switch some of them."

Draco regarded the list again. "Julia's good, Bianca did fine as well and Hester's one of those that already did Advoco. I haven't had either Dolly or Tanja, yet, so I can't say anything about them. All I know about them is that they're in my Potions class."

"There are twelve names listed for sixth lesson." Mike stated suddenly.

"What?" Draco quickly counted them again. Indeed there were twelve even though they'd only announced ten openings.

"All of them are only once, though." Mike added. "It is a most unpopular lesson normally."

"Let's see." Draco mumbled. "Anya absolutely wants you and Jim wants to go with her. They're the
only outsiders in the group so that makes sense. Sonja wants me and Eric should go with her. Anya, Jim and Eric are A students and I didn't have any problems with Sonja. Curly wants me and so do Nico, Curt and Max." he shook his head. "I don't want six in one class, especially not with Max in there. He's a problem case. Needs a lot of time."

"Then you take Noel as your sixth and I'll take Max, Sparks, Bubbles and Theo," Mike suggested.

"That group'll never work. Theo's good enough, but Sparks needs constant reminding or his mind just wanders off and Bubbles kept summoning the wrong object last time. Those three were really my most difficult cases."

"Can you ask Max or Sparks to transfer into the fifth lesson then?" Mike asked. "Bubbles' problem's probably Accio specific. If the fifth lesson group is as good as you said, I should have time for an additional student."

"Draco nodded. "Maybe we should transfer the other one to third lesson."
he suggested. "We'll have those other two groups in the library at the same time, even if we work separately."

"Which means we can help each other out in emergencies," Mike reminded him. "I wouldn't move a known problem case into a group with two unknown students. They might turn out even more difficult that Max or Sparks."

"More difficult than Max is hard to do," Draco stated. "His hands tremble. He has to find a position in which he can support his wand hand to hold it still enough to perform the correct movements. That took most of our lesson together."

Mike scanned the list again. "He's signed up for Wednesday fourth lesson as his regular time. Only four students in that group so far."

"That'll be an unpopular spot as well." Draco confirmed. "Charms is right after that."

"Which could be an advantage for Max." Mike suggested. "If he comes to the test right from practise, it should be a little easier to perform the charm."

"And fewer students leave me more time to work with him." Draco added. "Who are the other three?"

"Bubbles." Mike sighed. "Theo and Curt."

"Bubbles and Max." Draco repeated. "Well, I managed once before. Curt and Theo are good."

"Fine." Mike said. "Then I'll need to talk to Mary and you try to catch Max and Sparks. Tell me which one you're moving after school."

"I've got Sports next lesson." Draco told him. "I can ask Sparks there. I don't know where Max will be for that lesson and we'll be in Potions for the rest of the day. Don't know what level he's got there either."

"If you've got Sports now you'd better go get changed. I'll find Mary either now or shock her when she arrives for her lesson." Mike decided.

Draco was the last student to arrive for Sports class. As he entered the changing room the door of the girls' changing room opened as well and a bunch of tiny girls rushed out.

"Susie?" Draco asked surprised. She couldn't have been changing all lunch break, could she? And
hadn't he just seen her at lunch?

"Hi, Dragon!" Susie called happily. "Dinah beat up Tiny! She's still crying."

"W... What?" Draco asked but Susie was already gone. What was so great about Tiny, whoever that was getting beaten up?

"Do any of you know somebody called Tiny?" he asked his classmates as he closed the door behind him.

"Isn't that a boy in seventh year?" asked one of the twins.

"Yes, but there's another one in fourth year." confirmed Curly.

"And the latest addition to the Angels is called Tiny as well." added Sparks.

"Is that a first year?" Draco asked. Beating up an Angel made sense in his mind.

"Yes, I think she is." Sparks answered.

"And is there another first year called Dinah, perhaps?" Draco continued while slipping out of his robes.

"Yep," Sparks confirmed at once. "One of the Lords of the Market. Quite nasty for such a small kid."

"Ah, then it all makes sense." Draco decided.

"What does?" Clarence asked from where he was sitting on the floor blocking the door.

"Dinah beat up Tiny and now Tiny's sitting in the girls' changing room crying." Draco reported.

"Oh, so that's what the whole commotion was about?" Lenny asked unimpressed.

"Who cares about a bunch of first years anyway." sneered Nico.

"Oh, I think it's rather nice to know that's an Angel crying over there." Noel smirked.

Indeed you could hear muffled sobbing through the wall, if you listened for it.

"Sparks, I need to talk to you." Draco told his friend when he saw him head for Clarence and the door.

Sparks hesitated. "What about."

"The tutoring list." Draco answered. "There are too many people in the sixth lesson on Friday."

"That's not my fault." Sparks insisted. "When I signed up, there were only eight names up there."

"I signed up late." Noel admitted. "But all classes before Monday were full and I need the tutoring."

"I know." Draco told them. "I talked it over with Mike and we decided to move one student to the lesson before that. Your concentration problems will be a lot worse with twelve students instead of six as you'd have in the fifth lesson."

"We've both got Muggle Studies then, though." Sparks argued. "And I want you to teach me."
"I can only teach six and you're the eighth asking for me." Draco answered. "You'll have Mike this
time anyway."

Sparks pouted.

"Mike's my best friend, Sparks and a great tutor. He gave me Transfiguration lessons in the
summer and I really impressed Professor McGonagall with my homework afterwards." Draco tried
to convince him.

"Will I at least have you for the fourth lesson on Tuesday?" Sparks asked.

Draco thought for a moment. "Yes, Mike isn't even available then, so I can guarantee that." He
sighed. "Guess I'll have to try and catch Max before Potions then."

That seemed to finally console Sparks and with the help of the twins he pulled Clarence away from
the door long enough to open it and get into the gym.

This time they played a game called Volleyball, which Draco discovered he was rather terrible at.
How did you make a ball fly up instead of down, if you could only hit it with your arm instead of
your hand? Draco just couldn't figure it out, at least not when hitting the ball overhead. It wasn't
quite as bad with low balls, but those were rather rare.

Potions was a lot easier. Draco didn't have time to catch Max, who as Curly told him was in
Potions B, but Noel had promised to tell him that Draco needed to speak with him after class.

Sparks seemed to have forgiven him already and was as hyper as ever as he accidentally smashed
two jars and almost pushed over their cauldron. Professor Funnel gave Draco a grateful look for
catching Sparks just in time and saving the potion, then went to inspect the damage.

"Well, Sparks, looks like you'll have to pick up all the ladybird wings." the Professor announced.
"The crocodile tears are lost however. I trust your mother will replace them?"

Sparks nodded dejectedly. "She won't be happy, though."

"Then you will have to be more careful in the future." Professor Funnel told him.

"That'll come out of my pocket money, I bet." Sparks whispered to Draco. "If I don't have a good
day on Monday, can I pay my tutoring lessons in two weeks?"

Draco sighed. "I guess so, but try to explain the need for them to your Mum first. Maybe she'll let
you keep the money."

Max luckily took it rather well when Draco explained that Mike had a particularly good class in the
fifth lesson and would be able to devote more time to him.

As soon as he had Max's agreement Draco went straight to the library to meet his new students.
Tom, Tim and Alia it turned out were three completely different cases. Tom was another victim of
Old Connelly's attempt to catch up to Professor Flitwick. He was a Charms A student who'd
managed to handle her constant terrorising so far, but her suddenly increased demands were
making him worry.

Alia was in Charms B and had been struggling for a while. She'd already been looking for a tutor
before Connelly had sped up her teaching schedule. Once they started to work she soon proved that
her main problem was Connelly's bad teaching, not a lack of talent.
Tim on the other hand didn't even have Connelly at all. He was a true problem case, failing in Charms C, despite his teacher's best efforts. The teacher had advised him to find a tutor, as he could no longer keep up with the class, who'd actually already mastered the cheering charms and moved on. Tim now had to catch up on his own time.

Tim's case was interesting for Draco as it showed a Charms C class was further ahead than A and B. He hadn't considered the possibility that the other Charms teacher was secretly ahead before, but now he decided it was time to talk to a few Charms C students.

Alia caught on quickly and once cheered by her Tom soon followed. Seeing that Draco decided to have both of them demonstrate once more on Tim in the hopes of encouraging him enough to manage the charm. Unfortunately the end result remained a terribly weak charm.

"How are you doing in other subjects?" he asked Tim finally at the end of the lesson.

"Okay, I guess." Tim answered after a moment of hesitation. "I'm in A in History."


"C in Transfigurations and DADA. I took Psychology, you know. Currently C in Potions, but I might get switched back into B again soon." Tim shrugged. "It depends on if Professor Funnel has anyone to switch me with."

"You take Psychology." Draco repeated. "What other electives?"

"Creatures and Runes. Why?" Tim asked finally catching on to the strange questions.

"You aren't particularly good in any magic requiring subjects." Draco summed up. "But seem to be better at wand-less magic." He stared at the boy's old scratched and shabby wand. "Was that wand bought for you?"

"No, it's my grandfather's old one." Tim explained. "Mum says I can get my own once Dad has a permanent job again."

"Maybe it's the wand then." Draco decided. "It might not be suitable for you."

"And if it isn't?" Tim asked him a little nervously.

"Then, I guess, you'll just have to live with not having much magical talent." Draco told him bluntly.

Tim bit his lip and lowered his head.

"I'm no expert, Tim." Draco told him more gently. "And it really could be the wand. And there are lots of things you can do without much magic. I have a ... friend at Hogwarts whose strength is Herbology, for example. You're good in History. Have you ever thought about studying muggle history perhaps?"

"Muggle history?" Tim stared at him.

"It would be easier if you'd taken Muggle Studies, of course, but I recently discovered there are parallels between their history and ours." Draco said. "I thought it might be worth exploring more deeply, but I'm already planning to study Physics."

"But where would one learn muggle history?" frowned Tom.
"At a muggle university, just like Physics, I assume." Draco said.

"Muggle university?" Tim repeated wide eyed.

"It's probably a bit of an adventure, but you've still got four years until graduation, enough time to make up your mind." Draco smiled at the boy hoping that it looked encouraging. Maybe he ought to add this to his letter to Neville? It was already written, but he hadn't been able to send it, yet due to his lack of a messenger bird.

A/N: Is Draco making friends with Neville? Is there any way he could help Tim? And do the Snapes celebrate Christmas at all?

In the next chapter: Draco and Mike have some strategy meetings, we find out the differences between Convoco and Advoco and get to know Dolly (No bat parts!) a little better.
"Mary's doing fine." Mike told Draco on the way home afterwards. "I can't believe she's having problems. Her friend is much worse. Doesn't know a thing about potions."

"So the vocabulary test worked for both of them?" Draco asked.

"Yes, but I'll have to start with some first year stuff with Ann and Mary doesn't need that." Mike said. "Maybe I can find some written exercises for Mary for next week."

"Wait till after her Monday lesson and I can give you some ideas." Draco suggested.

"How was your third year class?" Mike asked a little later.

"Tom's very talented, Alia needs a good explanation and Tim seems to lack the magic for it." Draco reported. "The other two will be fine. Alia might even have been in A, if she'd had a good teacher. For Tim it would probably have been better, if he'd been a squib."

"You think you can't help him?" Mike asked a little worried.

"I managed to teach him a very weak cheering charm, but Charms 3C has already moved on." Draco reported. "That's another interesting fact. The C class actually seems to be better than B."

"So you think it'd be better for Tim to be in B?" Mike asked.

"I'm not sure. He'd have Connelly then." Draco reminded him. "She'd totally discourage him. I put Max into the fifth lesson by the way. He's probably easier to handle than Sparks. He didn't seem to have concentration problems last time at least and all you'll have to do is teach him a passable Convoco. I can work on Advoco on Wednesday."

"We'll need to find out what Connelly's next plans are. We have to start teaching whatever she'll test on Monday before she announces it on Wednesday." Mike remarked. "Can you just ask her that?"

"She doesn't exactly like me." Draco shrugged. "And she wouldn't see why I'd want to know."

"Then it'll have to be one of the others." Mike decided. "Someone who has a reason. Max, perhaps. She knows he's one of the weaker students."

"He passed the last time, though." Draco pointed out. "Maybe someone who failed would be best."

"Anya?" Mike asked.

"Or Pat." Draco added. "I heard the twins failed as well, but I'm not sure we can convince them. I don't know about Dolly and Tanja."

The planning for his next tutoring lesson at least kept Draco awake during Professor Sharter's lesson on Friday. Transfigurations had required too much concentration to let him think, but another lecture about she eclipshe was just perfect for it.
Aunt Sarah had let him borrow a box of pins, a potions jar full of peas and some paper-clips and Mike had supplied a sack of marbles, a box of matches and some small nails. Sarah had also offered to lend them some needles, but Draco had declined that offer. If somebody dropped the needles in mid air, they would be too easily overlooked and he didn't like the idea of somebody sitting down on one of them. It was bad enough with the pins, but those at least had colourful heads.

Mike had also suggested to tear up some used paper and parchment for the sixth lesson, so they'd have more objects to summon, but for now what they had ought to be enough. He went up to the library early after lunch to find that Julia, Dolly and Tanja were already there working on their Transfigurations homework. Draco joined them at their table and emptied his boxes and jars in the middle of it, then stirred the objects through for good measure.

"Better than rearranging the library again." he commented to Hester when she arrived a few moments later and gave the pile a curious look.

The other three girls put their books away and looked at him expectantly.

"Do any of you know where Bianca is?" he asked them.

The third lesson hadn't really begun, yet, but the girls looked like they expected him to start anyway. Now, if only his class were complete he could get a head start.

Unfortunately they didn't know where Bianca was, though. Draco would have preferred, if it had been Hester that was missing, since she didn't need the Convoco practise anyway, but he could at least get to know Dolly and Tanja.

"So how did you two do in the Accio exam?" he asked the girls.

Tanja blushed. "I got a four, Dolly a three. Julia showed both of us how to do it, but I got hit in the head by the boxes anyway. Connelly wasn't happy."

"Of course she might just have been unhappy, because most of the class was doing so well." added Dolly.

"Okay, so you're better at Charms then Tanja?" Draco asked Dolly.

"Yes, she's better in Potions, though." Dolly answered.

Remembering what Sparks had told him about the girl Draco doubted that, but didn't argue.

"Before we start," he remembered just in time. "Whatever you do, never summon any kind of book in a library. Belinda accidentally did it on Tuesday. Hester can tell you what happened to the poor girl."

"And how long it took all of us to clean up the mess." he added after a second.

Tanja gulped.

"Belinda was in school on Wednesday." Dolly reported. "I remember she got a one in Charms."

"But she had those little scratches in her face." added Julia.

"Right now, since you're the better Charms student, Dolly, summon the paper-clips out of the pile." Draco ordered.
"Accio, paper-clips?" Dolly more asked than ordered, but the clips reacted anyway. Dolly was of course unable to catch them all and was showered by the clips most of which ended up on the floor. She blinked then looked to Draco for advice.

"That doesn't really save us much work, does it?" Draco smirked. "You managed to separate the paper-clips from the rest of the pile, but you'll still have to pick them all up from the floor and, if it had been the marbles, it would probably have hurt as well. Imagine doing it with needles."

Dolly frowned.

"Wouldn't it be much nicer, if we could just make the paper-clips form a nice separate pile somewhere on the table?" Draco continued. "Well, that's exactly what Convoco does. It summons objects to the exact spot you pick. To summon the paper-clips the correct words are predictably 'Convoco, paper-clips' The wand movements are simple as well. You just make a little circle above the spot you want the paper-clips, then point right at it the moment you finish with the words. The only difficulty you're likely to have is to time your words and wand movement correctly. Hester, please demonstrate summoning the paper-clips"

"Convoco, paper-clips!" The paper-clips rose from the floor, out of the folds of Dolly's robes and even out of her hair and flew to a spot on the desk right in front of Hester.

"See." Draco smiled. "Quite simple and useful. Now you try. Dolly, you can use the marbles, Tanja the peas and Julia the matches."

He was just about to start explaining Advoco to Hester when the bell rang and Bianca ran in a half eaten sandwich still in her hand.

"Sorry, I was late for lunch." she explained. "Did I miss much?"

Draco quickly stirred the paper-clips back into the pile. It was an odd feeling to have your hand in there while the marbles were zipping out between your fingers.

"You're right." Dolly commented. "This is easy. Convoco, green marbles!" she tried while the matches flew past her on their way to Julia. "Look, you can even separate them into smaller categories! Convoco, small marbles!"

While Dolly, Tanja and Julia were happily experimenting with making piles of small, red marbles, short matches, yellow peas and such things, Draco repeated his earlier demonstration for Bianca. He was just demonstrating the wand movement a second time when a disappointed "Oh!" from Dolly attracted his attention.

Draco turned back to her and found that Dolly's latest experiment had led her to discover the limits of the Convoco charm.

"What went wrong?" she asked Draco. "I pointed my wand right into the middle of the jar and said 'Convoco, marbles.' She held up the glass jar which held only four or five marbles while the rest of them were rolling around outside it.

"Nothing," Draco told her. "Convoco can help you sort objects, but not put them away. The marbles will try to get close to the point you picked, but if there are walls around it, most will crash into them or each other instead of going over. To get the marbles into the jar you need to use Advoco."

"Show me!" Dolly demanded eagerly.
Seeing that he already had all the girls' attention and that all except for Bianca had already mastered Convoco Draco decided to use the chance.

"Advoco, marbles, jar!" he called and the marbles obediently rose into the air, gathered above the jar and fell inside in a neat line. "There are two important differences between casting Advoco and casting Convoco." Draco explained. "As you can see the circle and point motion is almost exactly the same, but performed from a side-ward angle instead of directly above and you have to keep pointing your wand until the last marble is inside the jar. If the line between your wand tip and the jar is broken before then, the marbles will fall uncontrolledly and the result will be similar to the one Dolly got with Convoco."

That would be almost impossible for Max, he realised all of a sudden. Whatever could they do to help him hold his wand still for that long?

"The other difference is that you have to add where you want the marbles to go to the words. 'Advoco, marbles.' alone will not get you any results." he continued. "You do not have to define the location exactly, even if there are several jars, as the pointing of your wand will guide the marbles to the proper one, but you have to add the word jar."

He emptied the jar again and gave it to Tanja, then handed out the marble sack to Dolly, the matchbox to Julia and the nails' box to Hester. "Try it."

Then he turned back to Bianca. "And you summon the paper-clips again."

As Dolly soon discovered Advoco worked excellently even if you were summoning objects into a vessel that was quite a bit out of your reach, but yielded no results at all when trying to affect only one single object, while Convoco could be used on a single quill just as easily as on twenty marbles.

Even though it took the girls a little longer to master Convoco than it had with Advoco, they were done in clearly under an hour. This was obviously a good class, Draco decided as he demonstrated a simple banishing Charm for the ever curious Dolly. Well, it couldn't hurt to get a little ahead of Connelly's teaching schedule. He only hoped that she'd really continue with banishing charms next.

He'd worry about Max some more later, now he had to get the teaching material to Mike whose Potions class was just ending. He could hurry up all the way to Potions A or wait for Mike in front of Latin A. But could he make it from Latin A to Ancient Runes class in time, if Mike took his time to get to Latin?

The Latin classrooms were right opposite the library, so Draco decided to at least have a look inside each before he left the corridor. A quick glance into Latin D revealed that most of the kids in there looked too small to be sixth years. Draco didn't remember seeing any of them before, so he walked on.

In the door to Latin C he almost collided with Amber of the Sharks. She sneered at him.

"Have you seen Clever Mike?" he attempted to be civil.

"Get lost." Amber snarled as she dashed past him.

Draco shrugged it off. Try being nice to a Shark...

"Hi, Dragon!"

Draco shot back around to face the classroom again, but it was only one of the Lions' false twins,
Rob or Bob, Draco still didn't know how to tell them apart, if faced with only one of them.

"Hi," he answered avoiding to use a name. "Have you seen Mike anywhere?"

Rob or Bob shook his or her head. "No, I think he's in A, though."

"Thanks." Draco said and went on to check Latin B.

By now there were groups of sixth years coming down the isle and hordes of whatever year that was coming out of Latin, rushing out. Latin B looked quite full and Draco was already beginning to worry that he'd overlook Mike when he noticed a blue cap somewhere in the back.

As he got closer he noticed a second cap next to it. Maybe Larry? He was in sixth year too, after all, but then the two looked up and noticed him.

It was only Mary and Matt. Then that had to be the fourth year that was on its way out of Latin right now.

"Hi, do you know where Mike is?" Draco greeted his friends.

Matt shrugged. "He should be in Latin A next lesson, but he still has five minutes to get there."

"And I have five minutes to find him, give him these and get to Ancient Runes." Draco held up his pack of teaching material. "Sorry, can't stop and chat."

"Wait! We're coming with you." Mary declared. "We'll help you look."

Unfortunately Mike wasn't in Latin A either. Elena and Big Babs hadn't seen him since before Potions and Draco definitely wasn't going to ask Chris. Meanwhile almost all fourth years were gone and they had to fight their way back towards the stairs against the stream.

Pretty Ricky dove into the library when he saw three frowning Rakers heading towards him, but they only spared him an amused glance.

"Larry!" Mary yelled into Latin D as they walked past. "Have you seen Mike?"

"Last time at lunch!" Draco heard Larry yell back.

"Guess that means he's still upstairs." Matt decided when they reached the stairs without any sign of their friend. "I'd love to help you more, but we've got History in three minutes, so we'd better stay on this floor."

Draco watched them disappear into the other corridor, then decided to go up to the second floor anyway. If Mike wasn't on the first floor yet, he had to pass the second floor landing on his way down.

When he reached the second floor there were only two minutes left and still no sign of Mike.

Now what? Should he continue up to the third floor and check the Potions classrooms while risking being late for class, or should he go to class and try to catch Mike after the lesson? Muggle Studies was on the first floor again and Mike had no reason to leave it as he'd have to be in the library right after the lesson.

He was just about to give up when Mike finally came running down the stairs.

"There you are. I've been looking all over for you."
"Sorry, our potion boiled over and we had to clean up. Lac's still scrubbing." Mike panted.

"Lac?"

"Lachlan. My Potions partner." Mike explained. "Any problems with your class?"

"No, they were great. Good luck with Max." Draco answered hastily. "Have to rum."

Actually they both did, though the spilled Potion probably was a good enough excuse for Mike. The male Professor Magnus wasn't likely to punish Mike for a one time offence after all.

Ancient Runes brought another boring discussion about why nobody wanted to sit next to Martha. This time Sally was the unlucky victim, but to Draco's surprise the resident know-it-all didn't go down quietly and Martha had to walk home with a torn lacy hat and ink stains on her robes. Sally, despite a long scratch down her left cheek walked into Muggle Studies with a very triumphant look on her face.

After this Draco decided to take Charlie's advice never to underestimate the outsiders, or a squib, seriously.

When Draco and his classmates from Muggle Studies arrived at the library they found it rather chaotic. Mike was still working with Max while Keith, Lisa, Belinda and Herb were already packing up and leaving and the new class was coming in and surrounding Mike and Max curiously.

Mike looked up after another unsuccessful attempt. "Can you start explaining to everybody?" he asked Draco. "I'll join you as soon as we're done here."

Draco nodded and led the group of students to the next table over bringing two fists full of teaching material as well. A quick count revealed that he didn't have all the students, but which ones belonged to the group he wanted and which ones were the ones Mike had just taught?

"Sparks, Jim and Anya, could you come over here please?" Those were the only ones missing he was sure about.

"I'm not in your group." Anya pointed out with a sneer. "Mike's my teacher."

"Fine." Draco said suppressing a groan. "But could you still come over here and just watch? You don't have to do anything, but I'd like to separate the students coming in from the ones leaving."

Anya frowned, but trudged over after the boys and Theo and Curt followed as well. That put the number of students standing or sitting around the table at eleven, not counting Draco. That ought to be about right.

"Good," Draco declared. "Now, if you could just drag over some chairs for yourselves ..."

Anya remained standing demonstratively and Draco decided to ignore her. Instead he quickly checked the sitting students for a suitable candidate. Curt would be a good one, but he was sitting in the second row, which might make the exercise more difficult. Sonja was in a much better position.

"Sonja, summon the paper clippings."

The demonstration worked perfectly once again, just like it had for Professor Flitwick back at Hogwarts when he'd done it with Millicent. Draco smiled slightly to himself. What would Uncle Severus say when he found out he was imitating Flitwick's teaching style?
He continued with his demonstration of Convoco and a little speech about the spell's advantages over Accio. Mike was still busy with Max by the time he ended. Now what?

Draco continued by explaining how to adapt the spell to get only a certain colour of marbles, or a certain size of peas.

Another quick glance, but Mike was still busy.

"Well, I guess we'll have to start practising without Mike." he decided. "Sonja, I'd like you to continue working with the paper clippings." What was Mike using in his work with Max? The pins? Was that a good idea? "Bubbles, the parchment clippings, Sparks, the paper clips." Those ought to be safe to handle, right? "Eric, the marbles, Curly, do you think you can work with the nails without accident? We can't have them flying about wildly or someone might get hurt."

Curly nodded. "Sure, no problem."

"Curt, the peas, Theo, the matches." Draco announced. "Uh ... Can any of you think of something else we might use?"

"We could add some of our potion ingredients." Noel suggested after a moment.

Draco frowned. "I hate to abuse them like this. Some even lose their magical abilities, when you summon them."

"I'll use my own then." Noel suggested. "Will fairy knolls be okay?"

"I think so." Draco nodded. "At least I don't remember my uncle ever saying they couldn't be summoned."

That left Theo, Nico, Anya and Jim.

"I've got a full pack of bubblegums." Bubbles volunteered. "They're wrapped, so they'll still be fine afterwards."

"Fine, do you mind lending them to Theo?" Draco asked. He preferred that Bubbles continued to work with the well tried paper clips.

Then he turned over to Nico who was already digging through Noel's potions kit and finally came up with a jar of beetle legs. "I'll replace them, if anything happens to them." he promised to Draco's surprise.

Maybe Nico really wasn't as bad as the rest of the Demons.

Now there really wasn't any room left at the table and Anya probably would refuse to participate anyway. Draco looked to Jim, who shrugged.

"We'll just wait for Mike." Anya insisted.

Things soon got chaotic enough anyway. Most of the students caught on very fast and got bored of Convoco while Bubbles and Sparks still hadn't managed the charm.

Draco told them to try the more specific summoning and Jim finally decided to start practising despite Anya's refusal when he realised that the parchment clippings had been abandoned as they were all of identical size and colour.

"What about Advoco, then?" Sonja finally asked impatiently.
Draco sighed. "As soon as Mike comes over." he promised.

"It's been almost half an hour." Anya complained.

"Well, you're the one who didn't want to start without him." Jim pointed out. "Here, you can have the parchment clippings now. I'm done with them."

"You can continue with trying to sort the paper clippings." Draco suggested to him. "I don't think Sonja needs them right now."

"Not, if you don't start teaching us Advoco." Sonja pouted.

"Mike!" Draco shouted. "How much longer?"

"We've almost got it." Mike called back.

Draco sighed again and decided to concentrate on Bubbles for the moment. His problems weren't as bad as they had been with Accio, so maybe he could get him to catch up with Jim, if he stopped spending so much time on Sparks.

It didn't work that way of course. By the time Mike finally came over Jim had caught up to the rest of the group, while Bubbles and Anya were just starting the sorting exercises.

"Finally!" Draco greeted his friend. "Anya's been waiting for you and I'll also need you to take over Bubbles and Sparks. I'll take the rest of them over to the other table and start on Advoco."

"Fine, but leave me the marbles, paper clips and parchment clippings." Mike agreed after seeing what his new students were working on.

Even though Draco was now rid of the three most problematic students the lesson remained chaotic. They were always short of objects to summon and when Mike sent Bubbles after them a few minutes later Draco had twice as many students as he could usually handle.

Luckily Curt and Sonja had already mastered Advoco by then and stood back to let the others use their objects.

"Neither Max nor Sparks can manage Advoco." Mike reported afterwards. "You were right about those two. Anya can't either, but it's her own fault."

"How so?"

"I told her repeatedly to join your group to learn, but she refused." Mike shrugged. "I had to concentrate on Sparks and couldn't work with her properly."

Draco quickly checked his student lists again. "I've got Max right before the Wednesday lesson, so we'll get one more chance to practise Advoco. The same goes for Sparks on Tuesday."

"And I have Anya on Wednesday as well." Mike reported. "We should have organised this differently from the start. One of us should have taught Convoco and the other Advoco with the students switching between us whenever they were ready. How about you take Anya and Max on Wednesday and I teach the rest of the class?"

"Anya will refuse me again." Draco pointed out. "I could send Max over to you and maybe Bubbles as well, if you send me your better students, but I'm not taking on another class as big as today's. I just can't handle it."
"I bet Uncle Severus could, though." Mike teased.

" Easily, but he's a professional. I'm just doing it to earn some money."

" So does Uncle Severus." Mike grinned.

" We need to find out what the next exam will be on Monday." Draco reminded him once again to distract him.

"No problem. I asked Anya to provide that information for us."

"Anya?" Draco asked surprised.

"She's the most likely candidate as she already failed once and probably won't do as well as the others on Monday either." Mike answered with a shrug.

"She is weaker than the others then?" That was unexpected. As a Charms A student Draco had expected her to be more talented than most of the Charms B class.

"I can't say for sure." Mike said after a moment. "I've never tutored Charms before and can only compare her to the other students I had today and they all had a full hour to learn. Anya only left herself half as much time. Max is the only one who's worse than Anya, but with his handicap he doesn't really count."

"What's 6C Charms studying at the moment?" Draco asked later as they climbed up the stairs at Merlin Park.

"I don't know." Mike shrugged. "You'd have to ask Larry."

"Do you think they might be further ahead than your class?"

"What?"

"The third year are." Draco explained. "So it might be that way in the other years as well."

"We'll ask Larry then." Mike agreed. "I want to hang up a new list on Monday," he continued. "We've still got room for more students in all the Potions classes and some Charms groups as well."

"You want to specifically announce the open spots?"

"Yes, and we've still got the sixth lesson on Friday to offer." Mike reminded him.

"I thought we weren't going to teach every lesson we could."

"I didn't expect that good a result this soon." Mike grinned. "I think our business still has some potential to grow."

"Sammie hinted that he wanted to participate." Draco smirked.

Mike shook his head. "Sammie's only a second year and in B or C in most of his classes. A tutor needs a little more qualification than that."

This time Uncle Severus wasn't home when Draco arrived, but Hugin and 'That Dog' greeted him excitedly. Draco scratched one behind the ears, the other on the head, then went on to greet Billy and Sarah.
He told them about his tutoring over dinner.

"You could have used that situation to make peace with Anya, you know." Sarah pointed out when he got to the part where Mike had been too busy with Max to take his other students.

"Make peace with her?" Draco repeated incredulously. Why should he want to make peace with Anya when he still was busy making peace with Neville?

That reminded him that he needed to borrow an owl or raven. Well, tomorrow Uncle Severus would be home with Munin and he'd finally get a chance to send his letter.

Severus didn't arrive until after lunch, though. Draco had already been waiting impatiently, but when he finally came he forgot all about his letter at the sight of the huge picnic basket he was carrying.

"A gift from the Hogwarts house elves." Severus explained when he saw Draco's wide eyed look. "They don't know that I have a family and fear that I don't eat enough when I'm not at Hogwarts." he smiled. "The food's usually more than we manage to eat on two days."

"And Dumbledore allows that?" Draco asked surprised.

"He doesn't know." Severus answered, then after a pause continued: "At least I think he doesn't."

Draco stared at him. "You think?"

"Albus knows all sorts of things that you wouldn't expect him to, especially about what's going on in the school." Severus explained. "But if he knows and hasn't objected yet, that means he doesn't mind."

"It's good food and saves us money." Sarah stated as if that explained everything.

Maybe in a way, it did.

"Draco and Mike have started a tutoring business." Sarah told Severus later while they were eating the house elves' gifts. "It seems to be going quite well from what I've heard."

She sounded almost proud of him, Draco thought.

"Tutoring? Well, he is my best Potions student at the moment." Severus allowed.

"We're mostly tutoring Charms, though." Draco explained. "Professor Connelly is very demanding and never really explains or demonstrates a charm. Professor Funnel's too good to leave much work to do."

"And you're managing?" Severus asked. "I know you've never had problems in Charms, but do you know how to teach it?"

"I can do it better than Connelly." Draco told him with a slight frown. "I've had Charms with the Hufflepuffs for four years, Uncle Severus. All I have to do is remember what methods Flitwick used and so far one of them has worked on everyone."

"Really?"

"Well, except for Max." Draco amended. "But he needs a mediwizard, not a teacher."
"A mediwizard?" Sarah asked.

"His hands tremble so much that he can't hold his wand steady and he swears it isn't from nervousness." Draco explained.

"And the Hufflepuffs are really so bad, that Flitwick has to use everything he knows?" Severus asked doubtfully.

Draco blushed. "Well, actually I'm mostly using the tricks I saw him use on Gregory and Pansy. And I wouldn't swear that it's all Flitwick knows. It's just more than Connelly ever does to help them. They're used to being on their own in Charms. All my students passed the Accio test on Wednesday." he added proudly.

"Accio test?"

"Yes, Connelly tells us the name of the Charm and when we have to be able to perform it and then there's a test on that day. Two out of the eight of us in Charms A failed it on Monday, but Charms B did much better after I tutored them."

Severus thought for a moment. "Maybe I should try that sometime: Tell a class the name of a potion and whoever doesn't brew it correctly in the next lesson gets a failing grade. It should be an excellent chance to take points off Gryffindor and spare myself some work in the process."

"And blow up the classroom while you're at it." Sarah remarked. "Unless it's an extremely good class."

"A Potions class with Gryffindors in it is never an extremely good class." Severus glared at his potatoes, probably imagining a group of students on his plate instead. "Most of them don't even bother to do their homework properly. Even the Hufflepuffs show more interest in the subject than they do."

"Oh, come on, I don't believe the houses are really that different." Sarah sighed. "Each child is unique. You can't just sort them into four groups that are all the same."

"Of course they're not all the same. There's Hermione Granger, for example. A Gryffindor that would do Ravenclaw proud. I could do a test like that with her, no problem, but there's also Neville Longbottom in that class, who tries, but messes up most of the time anyway. He needs me to explain first, tell him what not to do."

"Gregory and Vincent do too," Draco pointed out. "And they're Slythins."

"Yes, your class might really be a bad example," Severus allowed. "It's got a much too wide spectrum of talents. But Potter and Ron Weasley are the perfect example of typical Gryffindors. They'd talk all lesson while their cauldron boils over, if I didn't remind them to get back to work every five minutes. They're always late, forget their homework, or copy half of it from Hermione Granger. Those types always seem to be Gryffindors. The Hufflepuffs are at least diligent even if they tend to get distracted by talking as well."

"So all Gryffindors except Hermione don't care for their studies?" Sarah asked. "Do you really believe that?"

"Not all," Severus agreed. "Even the Weasleys aren't all the same. The twins don't generally care for their grades, but they do take an interest in Potions, because they know it's useful. Percy and Bill were very good students and young Virginia is at least trying while Ronald couldn't care less. There's just at least one or two bad ones in Gryffindor every year. The best classes are usually..."
Slytherin Ravenclaw combinations, though sometimes you get a good year in Hufflepuff as well."

"Maybe the Gryffindors would try harder, if you encouraged them more." Sarah suggested.

Severus sneered in distaste. "Encourage Gryffindors? Even if my Slytherins wouldn't hang me for
that." he paused. "Everybody else does it anyway. Somebody has to support Slytherin."

"Even at the price of losing some of the others completely?"

"The choice, Sarah, is to lose either some of the Gryffindors, or all of the Slytherins." Severus said
sharply. "Slytherin is my house and nobody else gives a damn about them. If I don't stand up for
them, nobody will."

Sarah sighed, but didn't argue.

So Uncle Severus actually did like some of the Gryffindors. It was quite a surprise to Draco even
though he'd mentioned something like this before.

"What about Neville then?" he asked finally. "Do you like him or hate him?"

Severus took so long to answer that Draco almost repeated the question.

"I don't know." he said finally.

"Can I use Munin to send him another letter?" Draco asked.

"Why? Do you think the first one got lost?"

"No, he already answered me." Draco said. "I just wanted to tell him something more."

"Wait until the evening then," Severus advised. "He might still be on the train right now."

"He's coming back to school today?" Draco beamed. "Then he's fine again?"

"Not entirely, but well enough to attend classes," Severus told him. "He's still excused from Flying
classes and his grandmother's hinted that she'll get him excused from flying permanently."

"Is that even possible?" Sarah asked surprised.

"Yes, with a written statement from a mediwizard that he's either physically unable to fly due to his
injury, or that he can't fly for psychological reasons." Severus explained.

"Psychological reasons?" Draco asked.

"He had a very bad accident while flying," Severus said. "He might be afraid of flying now."

"But he always was afraid of flying!" Draco argued.

"The mediwizard doesn't have to know that," Severus smirked. "It might help Neville anyway,
even if his fear has nothing to do with the accident. Flying isn't an absolutely necessary skill so
why torture the boy. In a few years he'll be able to apparate and he can use the floo until then."

"But he can't play Quiddich, if he can't fly." Draco reminded him.

"I don't think he wants to," Severus answered. "At least I've never seen him play."

Draco had to admit that was probably true. Neville and bludgers didn't sound like too good a
combination, once he thought about it.

He waited until a while after dark before he called over Munin and held out his letter to him.

"Take this to Neville, Munin." he told the eager raven. "He ought to be back at Hogwarts by now."

"Caw!" declared Munin. "Fly!"

"Caw!" announced Hugin. "Home!" and hopped right beside Munin trying to grab the parchment. "Caw!"

Munin elegantly ducked under Hugin's snapping beak and flew over to the window.

"Home!" Hugin protested with the only English word he'd mastered so far and flapped after him.

"No Hugin, stay here!" Draco ordered as he went to open the window for Munin.

"Home!" insisted the young raven hopping even closer to Munin.

"No, Hugin!"

"Let him go." interrupted Severus. "He'll be safe with Munin and it'll only help his training, if he
watches an adult post bird at work. Don't worry, Munin will bring him back soon."

Draco gave his beloved raven a long look. Hugin looked much too small to be out in the world all
alone.

"Caw!" Hugin insisted.

With a sigh Draco opened the window and watched the two ravens fly out into the cold dark winter
night.

A/N: Will Hugin come back alright? Will Max ever master Advoco? And will Connelly answer
Anya's question?

In the next chapter: Neville writes back, Draco tutors Martha and there's some trouble at lunch.
Trouble at Lunch

Chapter 53: Trouble at Lunch

Hugin and Munin returned an hour later, this time with Hugin carrying the letter. At first Draco was elated to see that, but it soon turned out that the baby raven wasn't quite ready for the task, yet.

He did his best to evade Draco's hands whenever the boy made a grab for the letter and only a stern intervention from Munin stopped him from tearing it off his foot with brute force. Draco had no idea how Neville might have managed to tie his letter to Hugin in the first place.

In the end Severus had to hit the raven with a strong calming charm to get him to sit still long enough for Draco to get his letter.

Neville seemed to have been quite surprised, but happy to hear from Draco again. He said he was feeling much better and that it was great to be back in school. Except for a slight limp he was completely healed and looking forward to Draco's, and Harry's, return.

'More to Potter's, I bet.' Draco thought, but it was still nice of Neville to have included him. 'Maybe we'd have gotten along, if he'd been sorted into a different house. Hufflepuff would have fit him nicely.'

Concerning Tim's problem Neville didn't have a solution either, but he offered to come and meet the boy on a Hogsmeade weekend. Maybe it would make Tim feel better to talk to someone who shared his problem.

Draco wasn't sure that Neville would be the right choice for that, though. In his opinion Neville wasn't nearly as bad as Tim. He'd probably get the same effect, if he introduced Tim to Clarence. Maybe Max would be able to relate best, Draco thought, but how could he bring the two together?

Well, maybe he'd get lucky. He'd keep an eye out for both of the boys and try to call them both over to talk, if he caught them at the same time.

Monday's Charms lesson went perfectly according to plan. None of the Charms A students had any problems performing the charm. Connelly seemed surprised, but only slightly disappointed. Maybe she thought she'd finally impressed Draco with the performance of her students.

Just before the bell rang to announce the end of the lesson Anya timidly raised her hand.

That was a rare enough occurrence that it immediately attracted Old Connelly's attention.

"Yes, Miss Allen?"

Anya swallowed nervously. "I was just wondering whether we'll have another exam next Monday, Sir." she said. "And if so, would you mind much, if you already told us what it will be?"

Connelly frowned. "Why would you want to know that?" she asked sharply.

"Well, I ... I'm a little worried about my Charms grade, Sir." Anya stuttered managing to look terribly embarrassed. "I know my performance hasn't been too good lately and I ... I really don't
want to be switched down, so I thought I'd better start practising early."

Connelly glared at her, her lips a tight, stern line.

"Very well," she said finally. "We'll start on banishing charms next. I'll test you on the basic banishing charms either on Monday or Wednesday. It depends on how far we get with the theory this week."

"Oh good." Anya managed a smile at the teacher. "That should give me enough time to practise. Thank you, Sir."

Connelly glared, but didn't say anything in response.

"I got another three." Max told Draco when they met on the way to lunch. "Better than the twins again." he beamed.

"The twins?" Draco asked. "Why? What did they do?"

"Oh, Alex managed the charm on his last attempt, but Connelly decided that was only barely enough for a four. Andy failed completely." Max answered with a smirk. "But I did it."

Draco smiled. "That's great, Max."

They were just about to enter the lunch room. Now, if Tim was somewhere inside this might be his chance.

Sparks pushed open the door and stopped apparently frozen on the spot. Draco and the others stepped past him. The first thing they saw was a first year running towards, then past them with her arm bleeding.

A few steps further into the room Luke was wrestling with another girl, that looked big enough to be a second or third year. Tiny, the youngest Angel was lying on the floor not far behind the fighters staring with wide eyed fear at a yellow cap lying next to her.

It took Draco a moment to understand what was going on, but when he saw the bloody knife in the bigger girl's hand he got a pretty good idea.

Should he help Luke?

A quick look to the Rakers' table revealed that Jack was watching the scene with interest, but no sign of any intention to get involved. Only Mary looked eager to join the fight and Mary was always eager to join any fight. Susie was with a group of first years that stood near the fighters watching. Draco assumed that the first years had just come in when the fight had started.

At a table on the other side of the room the reaction to the fight had apparently been quite different from that of the Rakers. The gang with the yellow caps had already left their seats and were walking slowly, but in obvious patrol formation, towards the fighters.

Did the cap on the floor belong to the injured girl, or her attacker? Draco assumed the later as he saw no other gang colours on her and she looked too old to be a wannabe, while the first year might well still be one.

Luke looked up for a moment and saw the approaching gang. His eyes widened, he let go of his
opponent and scrambled backwards placing himself between the yellow caps and Tiny.

Was he really trying to protect an Angel?

The gang leader elbowed her way through the watching first years as the girl with the knife got up and snatched her cap back, causing Tiny and Luke to back away even further. The two boys flanking the leader pushed through behind her, one of them accidentally shoving Susie into a nearby table.

Susie's surprised yelp brought the other Rakers out of their seats in a heartbeat. Jack didn't waste any time with slow stalking. Instead the Rakers rushed right in.

Draco joined them as they stopped only steps away from the yellow capped gang.

The leader shot an angry glance at the boy that had 'attacked' Susie.

"Idiot!" she hissed.

The strange gang's formation shifted to face the Rakers. The girl with the knife finally stepped away from Luke to face the new threat as well.

Luke and Tiny realising that they were currently ignored chose to use the chance to head for the door.

The two gangs stood facing each other quietly. Draco saw the yellow capped leader's eyes wander up and down measuring Jack, then over to Larry, Mike, himself and finally Mary. Cathy, Charlie, Matt and Sammie got only quick glances. Apparently she had already seen enough to know that she didn't want a fight with the Rakers.

Susie had meanwhile gotten up and retreated to a position right in front of Jack.

Jack slowly placed his hands on her shoulders, never taking his eyes off the other gang's leader. They matched stares for a while until the girl finally nodded and turned towards the girl with the knife.

"Put your knife away, Mint." she ordered, her voice forcedly calm and soft.

Mint took one quick glance at the Rakers and clapped the pocket knife shut, then let it drop into her pocket.

The leader looked back to Jack who gave her a tiny nod. She nodded again, then started to back away. Slowly the yellow caps returned to their table never turning their backs on the Rakers on the way.

Jack waited until they were all sitting again, then shot a challenging look through the room before turning around and walking back to his own table followed by his gang.

"You didn't move to protect Luke." Draco observed later when they were talking about the incident.

"Why should I?" Jack asked with a shrug. "He's not a member of this gang."

"We do protect our wannabes from the Sharks, though." Draco pointed out.
"We protect them from other gangs invading our territory." Jack answered calmly. "And when they get attacked working for us. If Luke is stupid enough to attack someone holding a knife, though, that's his own damn problem. An Angel isn't worth protecting and he should have realised he had no chance against the bigger kid, even if she hadn't had a knife."

"Should have known she'd get backup from her gang, too." Matt added.

"Do we want to accept an idiot like that at all?" Mike asked suddenly. "The kid seems to be more trouble than he's worth."

"I thought we can always use another fighter and he is our only reserve player in a Soccer match." Draco reminded him.

"He isn't that impressive a fighter." Larry snorted.

"And he'll get us into unnecessary fights with actions like that." Cathy added.

"He's been wanting to become a Raker forever." Susie said a little sadly. "It'll hurt him a lot."

"We're not here to make him happy." Mary reminded her. "We don't owe him anything."

"Dragon has a point, though." Charlie interjected. "We do need a reserve player to play the Lions."

"We can always borrow one of the other wannabes." Mike said. "Larry's brothers will make good defenders someday and Mely isn't bad either."

"They're still too small to make much of a difference." Jack said. "For now we might still need Luke and he might improve, yet. If he asks you, Mouse, tell him that I was not impressed with today's little scene and won't accept him anytime soon, but don't mention that we're considering not accepting him at all."

Susie nodded. "I don't talk with him much anymore, though."

"Then tell Mely." Mike suggested. "She'll take the news back to the wannabes."

Draco was a little surprised at this discussion. So far it had always appeared to him that the wannabes assured their place in their gang of choice with their loyalty. They were generally demonstratively ignored by the gang members until they were considered old enough to join and then accepted at a convenient time.

What would become of Luke, if the Rakers didn't accept him? He was getting too old to be a wannabe and had never shown any interest in another gang. Why should the Sharks or the Black Ring take him in?

Draco's 'workday' ended with his tutoring lesson for Mary and two of her classmates. He found that the group was rather pleasant to work with as long as he managed to stop them from talking about boyfriends long enough to get their attention for Potions.

The boy-talk was annoying, but all in all Draco decided that he liked this group. It was Wednesday's Potions class that worried him. Well, to be honest it was just one student that worried him about that group: Martha!

The rest of the names for the group was unfamiliar to him, even though they were in his year. He
could only hope that they were really there to learn something and would help him to keep Martha under control.

First came Tuesday, though, with a rather easy Charms tutoring lesson for Pat, Sonja, Nico, Noel and Sparks. The only actual problem Draco had with this group was Sparks. Noel did fine with the banishing charms, though he was a little insecure with the summoning ones.

Draco wasn't too happy about that, but it wasn't bad enough that he was in any danger of failing Connelly's tests.

During the sixth lesson he taught Potions for his own year, but Mary insisted on sitting in anyway. Draco doubted she understood much of what they were doing. The class consisted of Clarence, Zach and a boy called Terry, whom Draco had never even seen before. Well, that much about knowing his entire year.

Terry was nice enough, but seemed to like to slack off and often got in trouble for not bringing his homework. That had made him fall behind in Potions class and now he needed help to catch up.

Clarence's problem appeared to be only with the practical side of Potions. He was well up to answering any questions Draco picked out of their Potions book, even ones from chapters that the other two claimed not to have covered in class, yet.

Draco sighed. He'd have to find some-place where they could actually practise brewing then. Should he ask Clarence to come visit him at the Snapes'? But the boy didn't even live in Hogsmeade and except for Friday, when Clarence left after the fourth lesson all of Draco's sixth lessons were already occupied. He couldn't well ask Clarence to sit around and wait for an hour every week. Maybe Professor Funnel had some small practise room he'd let him use?

Zach was the most difficult of the three. Not only was Draco a little afraid of him, but the boy also made it quite clear that he didn't want to be there in the first place.

"Look, Zach," Draco finally dared to tell him. "If you don't want Potions tutoring then why did you sign up?"

"Professor Aconite made me," Zach told him with a glare. "He said if I didn't get a tutor, he'd owl my father that I was failing. My father ..." Zach winced. "He doesn't take it so well when I get failing grades. Says I have to pass to ensure my future."

"Well, good grades really might help you get the job you want someday." Draco pointed out.

"I want to be a professional Soccer player." Zach hissed. "That's my future. There's a lot of money to be made in muggle Soccer and they don't give a damn about grades, especially not about wizarding school grades."

Suddenly all fears were forgotten. Draco smiled at Zach. "You play Soccer?"

"Yes, I'm on the school team." he said proudly. "Second best player on the reserve team. I bet next year I'll make the first team."

"If I stay at this school I'll try out next year too." Draco told him. "The Sports teacher seems to think I've got a good chance to make it, since they'll need a replacement for Steve. Then we'd be team-mates."

"So why do you bother with this Potions stuff then?" Zach asked. "If you want to be a professional, training is much more important."
Draco thought for a moment. Yes, it sounded like fun to make money with playing Soccer.

"I've got bigger plans than that," he told Zach, though. "Yes, maybe playing Soccer would be nice for a while, but I want more out of life than a few years of fame. I want to go to muggle school after I graduate. I want to bring muggle Physics into the wizarding world. If I can convince them to make it a subject at wizarding schools, I'll be remembered forever for it."

Zach stared at him.

"And anyway, Potions is a very interesting subject and a lot of fun." Draco shrugged a little embarrassed at having let slip this much.

"Really?" Clarence asked eagerly. "Oh, please teach me how to have fun brewing."

Terry snorted. "Well, I just want to pass."

"Fair enough." Draco decided. "How about you Zach, do you want to pass as well?"

"I suppose so." Zach said. "At least that'll spare me my father's wrath."

"Okay then. I'll just start by asking you all some questions, to see what you already know, so I'll know where we have to start."

The lesson went well after that, though the big difference of knowledge between Clarence and the other two would probably be a problem later. Draco would have to set up two different lesson plans for this group, a practical one for Clarence and a theoretical one for Terry and Zach starting somewhere around chapter three of the book. Maybe he could make Clarence brew the potions he was going to teach the other two about, though.

Wednesday's fifth lesson brought another large Charms class, but this time Mike and Draco were a little more organised and managed to work as an actual team. Despite all their joined efforts Max didn't manage to hold Advoco long enough, though. He'd fail this exam, but at least his banishing charms showed some promise. They weren't great, but he'd clearly pass. If they got another chance to practise them before the exam, Max might even earn a one.

The Charms A students went through another comparatively good Charms lesson and except for Draco, who had an hour of Martha before him, left the class in very high spirits. Outside they almost ran into a bunch of slightly pale looking Charms B students.

"What's wrong?" Eric who'd also been in today's tutoring group asked Max. "Did Connelly give you a hard time for not being able to finish the charm?"

"Well, she wasn't very nice about it, but not as bad as she could have been." Max answered softly.

"She switched the twins." Curly told Draco. "Nelly and Conny will join the class in their place on Monday."

"Yes, they'll probably want tutoring as well." Julia added.

"There are still some spots free." Draco said. "The list's still up, so they just have to put up their names. I'd talk to them, but I've got a Potions group waiting for me right now and I don't know either of them."

"I'll try to catch them." Sparks announced. "They probably haven't even heard, yet." And before Draco could say anything he dashed off.
Draco could only hope the two girls could handle such bad news from a bouncing Sparks as he hurried down to the library for Martha and ... he checked his list again, Ian, Tony and Conny. Wait a minute Conny? The same Conny that Sparks was going to talk to? Draco would have to ask her.

Of course he didn't get to ask Conny anything when he arrived. Instead Martha threw herself at him with a squeal of delight.

"Martha! Get off me!"

"Oh, but Dragon ..." Martha whined.

"We're here to study Potions, Martha." Draco pushed her away roughly. "Now please sit down so we can get started."

"I don't care about boring potions." Martha declared. "I want to go out with you."

"If you don't need Potions tutoring, then please leave." Draco said as coldly as he could. "Your classmates are paying good money for the tutoring and I'm not interested in going anywhere with you. I already have a girlfriend."

"I'm much more beautiful." Martha informed him posing.

Draco looked her up and down. "Well, it's hard to tell with all the paint in your face, but I seriously doubt it. And in any case Cathy Cat is much more intelligent and probably a better fighter as well."

"I'd do anything." Martha pleaded. "What do you like to do best?"

"Play Soccer and study Potions." Draco smirked. "And you probably can't do the first and don't want to do the second, so get out."

"I could learn to play Soccer for you." Martha fluttered her lashes.

"And Cathy already knows how. Now, get out!"

"But I need Potions tutoring." Martha insisted.

"Are you failing?" Draco demanded.

"Yes." one of the boys confirmed. "Unfortunately she is."

"She's the only one in class who's doing worse than I am." the other boy added.

"All right Martha," Draco sighed. "In that case sit down. You're Conny, I assume?" he asked the other girl at the table.

"Yes, I was sick for a few weeks back in September and never managed to catch up in Potions." she explained. "I'll probably be fine again, if you can only help me understand the things I missed."

Draco nodded. "Is there another Conny in our year, or are you the only one?"

"Huh? ... Oh, no, no, I'm the only one." Conny stuttered confused.

"In that case you've just been switched into Charms B." Draco informed her. "Connelly's had enough of the twins and decided to exchange them for you and someone called Nelly. She'll be testing us on basic banishing charms next week."
Conny frowned. "Oh great, Connelly!"

"There are still a few tutoring spots free, if you want." Draco offered.

"I'll think about it." Conny promised. "We finished the banishing charms last week, though."

"So Charms C is ahead of A and B in our year as well." Draco smirked as a plan began to form in his mind. "Are you two in Charms C as well?" he asked the boys.

"Yes, why?" the dark blond asked back.

Draco nodded. "Are you Ian or Tony?"

"Ian." the boy grinned.

"Do you think you could write down the names of the charms you learn each week for me, Ian?" Draco continued.

"Sure, but what would you need them for?"

"To check them against Connelly's syllabus." Draco answered still smirking. "If she follows exactly the same order as her colleague, I'll have an early warning system what her next exams will be. That ought to help my Charms tutoring classes."

Despite Martha's continued attempts to flirt with him Draco managed to get a rough idea of his students' abilities once that point was settled. Martha really seemed to be the worst of the group, but Draco hoped that some of her answers were due to her being distracted with her flirting. If not, a practical lesson with Martha would be life threatening.

Tony and Ian worked together well for the most part. They both lacked some basic knowledge, but completed each other well. Usually, if one couldn't answer a question, the other could.

Conny's basic knowledge was acceptable, though it would never have satisfied Severus Snape. Well, Draco wasn't here to make her a Potions expert. She only wanted to catch up what she'd missed and that would be easy enough. Draco decided to concentrate on her needs for now. Once she was caught up he could start with the second and third year stuff Ian and Tony had missed and maybe he'd even find out what Martha's actual Potions knowledge was then.

He was exhausted by the time the lesson was over, though. Maybe there was a chance to dump this class on Mike?

But when he met his friend in the entrance hall and asked him, Mike shook his head.

"Sorry partner, but I've got a sixth lesson class on Wednesdays. You'll just have to deal with them."

"Martha is an Angel, Mike." Draco complained. "An Angel that's after me."

"And you honestly think she wouldn't be after me just as much, if I got anywhere near her?" Mike asked grinning. "Angels are like that. You just have to learn how to deal with them on your own."

Draco glared at him. Some friend Mike was.

Then again he wouldn't have risked going anywhere near Martha for Mike either, if their situations had been reversed. Maybe there was such a thing as an anti-love potion? He'd have to ask Uncle Severus about that when he came home on Friday. Until then he had to concentrate on his classes, homework, tutoring and somehow getting a potions lab for Clarence. And in between he had to
meet with the gang to play Soccer, hang out or patrol their territory. Hogwarts had never been this much work!

He decided to approach Professor Funnel right after their next Potions class. The Professor clearly liked him and was quite impressed with the ease with which Draco brewed potions that were completely new to him. Maybe he had a chance to convince him.

So that Thursday after Potions Draco approached Professor Funnel.

The Professor smiled kindly at him. "Dragon. What can I do for you?"

"Well," Draco hesitated for a moment. "I'm giving some classmates Potions tutoring," he started cautiously.

"Ah yes, I heard. My colleague was quite impressed with the effect your tutoring had on your friend Mary."

"Well, Mary's problem is rather simple. She just doesn't know the proper names of many ingredients which is easy enough to remedy." Draco admitted. "Most of the others lack basic knowledge or just missed some lessons, which isn't that much of a problem either."

"I see." Professor Funnel smiled again and sat down in his chair. "Then what is the problem?"

Draco sighed. "One of them, Clarence, is able to answer all my theoretical questions, but still fails at actually brewing correct potions. He knows exactly how to do it, but can't."

Funnel nodded at him to continue.

"I think that in order to help Clarence, I'll have to actually watch him brew." Draco admitted. "With the others it isn't an absolute necessity, but some practise would probably do them good as well. So I was wondering whether you might have some lab I could borrow. I know not to harm anything." he added hastily. "I've spent enough time in my uncle's labs both at home and at Hogwarts."

"Unfortunately I don't have a lab in the school." Professor Funnel said to Draco's disappointment. "My office on the second floor is much too small to safely set up a cauldron in."

Draco nodded sadly and grabbed his backpack from the floor. He had to get to the library and meet Tom, Tim and Alia. "I understand. It's okay. I'll find another solution."

"Dragon, wait!" Funnel called after him.

"You could use the classroom when I'm not teaching."

"The Potions classrooms are among the most used rooms in the school, but they're always free during the sixth lesson and almost all of Wednesday." Funnel continued. "When I'm not here you can get the keys at the caretaker's office. That's on the second floor, left corridor, first door on the left only two doors from my own office. I trust that you'll clean up properly, lock the door and return the keys to Mr. Wiper after you're done."

Draco nodded eagerly. "I've got Potions tutoring on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, all in the sixth lesson, so there shouldn't be a problem with the times. And don't worry, I promise you'll find
everything just the way you left it the next morning."

As an afterthought he pulled out his schedule and checked Mike's Potions lessons. No, chance there, he saw. One of them was on Thursday in the fifth lesson, when his own class had Potions, the other on Monday in the sixth lesson when Draco needed the room for Mary's group. Well, maybe he and Mike could occasionally switch students, so the first years could get practical training as well. Mary's friend Ann would have to do without, though.

Draco smiled at his teacher. "Thank you, Sir. That'll help a lot."

Funnel smiled as well. "You're welcome, and so are your students. It'll be nice to have a little diversion in the room when I'm just waiting for a potion to boil. Maybe I can even give you a few teaching tips. If you don't mind, of course."

Draco soon found out that he didn't mind at all. On the contrary, it was great to work with Professor Funnel in the room. He never took over the lesson, as his Uncle Severus would have done, but was always ready to help, if a situation threatened to get out of control or one of he students just wouldn't understand Draco's explanations.

With all the knowledge he'd learned from Snape, the didactic tricks he'd picked up from Flitwick and the tips he got from the even more experienced Funnel Draco started to truly enjoy teaching. Yes, becoming a Physics teacher sounded better than becoming an electrician, after all. And why not work at a muggle school, if he couldn't convince wizards to teach the subject? It couldn't be that different from teaching a class full of Squibs and there was nothing wrong with Squibs, after all.

The next weeks went by quickly. Draco was enjoying himself despite his rather tight schedule and he was proud to watch the improvement of his students.

Some disappointed him, though. Clarence was working hard and slowly getting better, but Zach was always difficult to motivate to do anything. Martha managed to outdo even Sparks for lack of concentration and Max and Tim were constant causes of worry.

Draco had to keep reminding himself that those two weren't at fault for their slow progress. They were doing their best and losing his patience and yelling at them wouldn't help. To his surprise he discovered that yelling did get results from Sparks however and the little thief didn't even take it badly.

Conny and Nelly, a small dark haired girl with beautiful almost black eyes, quietly joined Wednesday's Charms group and Draco took to bringing five students up into Potions A during that lesson while leaving he other half of the class with Mike. The smaller group was much easier to teach and the quiet of the Potions classroom helped them to concentrate. The only one who always stayed with Mike was Anya, who still refused Draco's offers for peace. Curt however seemed to have completely forgotten their bad start and became almost a friend.

The Thursday before the last week of school before Christmas a Hogwarts owl almost flew straight into Draco on his way home from school. He instinctively threw up an arm to protect his face and the owl used that to land on.

"Hoooot!" it declared blinking in the sunlight as if to explain it's navigating problem. All the snow was probably reflecting too much sunlight into the poor night active animal's eyes.

Draco decided not to comment and instead just accepted the letter the bird carried. From Neville, as expected. Gregory and Vincent had written him only once. It was hard work for those two with
their big clumsy hands. Neville however wrote regularly keeping him up to date on both his recovery and the events at Hogwarts.

"So how's Neville?" Mike asked when Draco tore the letter open right away to read it on the street.

"He wants to meet me!" Draco exclaimed surprised. "It's a Hogsmeade weekend and he wants to meet up in town."

"There you see that he's forgiven you." Mike grinned. "Can I come too? I want to see that boy."

Draco thought for a moment. "Sure," he said then. "As long as you don't treat him like a rich kid. His family might have money, but his parents were killed by death eaters when he was a baby, so he doesn't really have such a great life."

Mike nodded. "Fine. Though he's not the only orphan I know." he said eyeing Draco.

"What?"

"Well, you haven't got any parents either." Mike reminded him.

"They weren't so great when I had them." Draco shrugged. "And I've got the Snapes. At least for now."

In the end not only Mike joined Draco on his way to meet Neville on Saturday. Cathy, Charlie, Susie and Sammie also invited themselves along, while Draco had actually asked Tim and Clarence to come and somehow Sparks had found out that something exciting was going on.

Jack had taken one look at the group that had set off from Merlin park, then still consisting only of Rakers, called them a bunch of disloyal bastards and walked out on the gang once again. Mary and Larry had just shrugged and dragged Beth off to who knew where and Matt had gone home to do some overdue homework.

"Just don't scare the poor boy away," Draco warned his entourage as they crossed the bridge into the better parts of Hogsmeade. They were all in full gang colours, except for Clarence of course, who was wearing a pair of old jeans under a warm winter cloak, fitting in perfectly with his surroundings. Draco wondered whether those were his everyday clothes at home, or he'd just put them on to look more like a local.

Neville did hesitate a little when he saw the crowd waiting for him, but when Draco went ahead to greet him he relaxed a little.

"Sorry about the entourage." Draco explained. "I was only going to bring two or three friends, but they were all so curious to meet you."

Neville gulped a little nervously. He'd never been good at meeting people.

"Hi! I'm Sparks. I live near the market."

"Ignore the blond whirlwind. He's always like that." Draco advised.

Sparks pulled a face at him. "I'm Dragon's Potions partner. Don't know what he'd do without me."

"Probably clean up fewer spilled ingredients." Charlie commented.

Neville looked up at her words and smiled. "Are you Draco's girlfriend?" he asked, then blushed. It was probably not what he'd meant to say.
Charlie blushed as well. "No, just a friend."

"Charlie's the one who invited me to that ballet performance Weasley was so jealous about." Draco explained.

"You should have seen it. She's an excellent dancer." Cathy added.

Charlie blushed even more, but was still smiling at Neville.

Draco shot her a surprised glance. What was Cathy up to praising Charlie like this?

Cathy just sent him a mischievous smile in return.

"Oh, you've got to be really talented then." said Neville admiringly. "You're lucky: Both beautiful and talented. I'm just terribly clumsy and almost a squib on top of it."

"Almost?" Charlie asked. "You can't be almost a squib. You either are, or you aren't."

"Never mind, Neville." said Clarence. "Squibs just don't understand that kind of problem. I know exactly what you mean."

"Really?" Neville asked hopefully.

"Yes, sometimes I really wish I'd been a squib instead of having just a tiny little bit of magic." Clarence confirmed. "It'd make it a lot easier, if I could just say I can't do magic and move on to other things."

Neville stared at him for a moment. Moving on to other things was something that had never occurred to him. What was there for you, if you couldn't do magic?

Draco interrupted them before he could ask. "Hey, don't crowd Neville like that. I haven't even introduced you."

The group fell silent and Draco continued: "Okay Neville, you've already met Charlie, the ballet star. This is my girlfriend Cathy, my best friend Mike, Susie the Dancemouse..."

"Dragon named me." Susie announced proudly.

"Because she never stands still for a second." Draco explained. "And talking about people who can't hold still, the blond whirlwind's Sparks of the Mercenaries gang and the one beside him is Sammie the Weasel. Not Weasley, weasel. Watch your money pouch around those two."

"Hey, I'm not a thief!" Sammie protested.

"Yeah, sure Sammie." Draco grinned. "The kid who wants to be a squib's Clarence and then we've got Tim, the History of Magic expert I mentioned in one of my letters, I think."

Neville nodded. "The one I said, I'd like to meet. I remember."

"You wanted to meet me?" Tim squeaked surprised.

"Yes, I've never met anyone who thought History was interesting before." Neville told him.

"You haven't?" asked Charlie. "And I thought everybody likes History. It's so fascinating. We're discussing Grindelwald's followers right now."
Draco smirked. "You'd understand, if you'd ever seen one of Professor Tempore's lessons." he told Neville. "She's nothing like Binns."

"Yes, Tempore's great." Tim agreed. "She knows almost everything and she's a squib too, so she doesn't look down on people who're bad at magic."

"You have a squib teacher?" Neville asked incredulous.

"Several." smirked Draco. "West Hogsmeade is the only wizarding school in the whole UK that's actually got classes for squibs, so they're very proud of them."

"Are we going to stand around here all day?" Sparks complained. "I'm getting cold. Let's go somewhere, Dragon."

Draco thought for a moment. He hadn't really planned anything for the day. "Well, you're the guest, Neville. Anything special you'd like to do?"

Neville looked just as clueless at first, but then his face lit up as he had an idea. "We could go to the Three Broomsticks for some hot butterbeer to warm us up." he suggested.

The idea met with general displeasure however.

"No way." declared Sparks.

"Not the Three Broomsticks." Charlie insisted.

"It's way too expensive." Sammie explained.

"Butterbeer sounds good, though." Mike added.

"We could go to the Happy Hag instead." Cathy proposed.

"The Happy Hag?" Neville asked.

"That's where my Mum works." Cathy explained. "It's a pub just a little north of the market place."

"My Dad says it's no place for kids, though." interjected Susie.

"Well, it's a bit rowdy in the evenings." Cathy admitted. "But we've got bright daylight right now and my Mum's there. She won't let anything happen to you."

"And we're not little kids anymore anyway." added Mike. "What do you say Neville, butterbeer at the Happy Hag?"

"You say it's cheaper than the Three Broomsticks?" Neville asked.

"Anywhere's cheaper than the Three Broomsticks." Charlie snorted. "The place is a real tourist trap."

"Yeah, never buy anything in the centre of Hogsmeade." Clarence told Neville. "Even I know that much and I don't even live in town."

"Yes, stick with us and we'll show you all the cheap places around." Sammie promised.

"Hey, maybe we can even get a discount, because we know Cathy's Mum!" enthused Sparks.
"Don't get carried away there." snorted Cathy. "Mum's just a simple barmaid. Her boss rarely gives anything away for free especially not to his employees."

Neville got a little nervous when they crossed the bridge into West Hogsmeade so Draco leaned over to him and whispered: "You'll be fine as long as you stick close to us. They won't harm you, if you're with a group of locals."

"Are you sure they all know they're locals?" Neville whispered back nodding towards the rest of the group.

"Sure," Draco smiled. "Except for Clarence we're all wearing gang colours. Any local knows what a Rakers cap looks like and since we're not going into Merlin Park, we're not likely to run into anyone who'd want to challenge the Rakers."

"You're absolutely sure?" Neville asked one last time.

"Rakers means Merlin Park to them." Mike said before Draco could answer. "And to the gangs around the market place Merlin Park means 'really mean kids'. You guys at Hogwarts might be afraid of them, but they're afraid of us."

"So nobody would challenge you?" Neville asked impressed.

"The other Merlin Park gangs might." Mike shrugged. "And maybe the gangs from around the train station. That's a bad area too. The market gangs are all soft, though."

"Of course." Neville laughed suddenly. "You just had to make friends with the very worst people in all the school, didn't you, Draco?"

"The worst would probably be the Sharks." Draco mused. "No thanks. Can't stand them."

"Even if they hadn't picked on your little brother the first time you met them?" Cathy asked suddenly.

"Yes, even then." Draco confirmed without hesitation. Looking back he wasn't really sure how things would have gone, if he'd met Mark the Shark under different circumstances, but he didn't regret the way they had turned out that day. He'd found great friends in the Rakers and couldn't imagine doing the same with the Sharks. They just didn't seem as nice.

"You have a brother?" Neville interrupted his thoughts.

Ups! How could he explain Billy without lying to Neville, which he really didn't want to do, while still keeping the Snapes' secret?

"Billy's actually my cousin, but people around here aren't that strict about relations. Billy sees me as a big brother so in the eyes of the neighbours that's what I am to him." Well, it wasn't really a lie, was it?

"There it is." Cathy pointed at a shabby little building ahead of them. "The Happy Hag."

It didn't look nearly as inviting as the Three Broomsticks, but it did promise a chance to sit down and warm themselves up and not to forget some hot butterbeer. So they fastened their steps and hurried inside after the happily bouncing Cathy Cat.

The inside didn't look much better than the outside. The Happy Hag was dark with a low curved ceiling and simple wooden tables and benches with only an occasional chair. Some long thin
pillows attempted to make the benches look a little more inviting, but they were probably rather uncomfortable to sit on for long anyway. Still, everything looked clean, the pillows were made from cloth in comfortable rustic designs and there was a nice fire dancing in the fireplace.

There weren't many customers around, but Mrs. McDougall ushered the kids through into the back anyway where they found a less well kept kitchen and met the cook, a young Goblin woman, who welcomed them kindly and told them to sit at the staff table.

At this time of day the pub wasn't very busy and so Mrs. McDougall and the cook were the only employees around. In the evening, when it started to fill up, the barkeep and two barmaids would be serving in the front room, while two cooks manned the kitchen. Altogether the pub had a staff of seven people, but they only worked all at the same time on special occasions.

The cook served them not only the butterbeer they asked for, but also some hot soup.

"Eat, children," she said. "It's made from yesterday's leftovers and we'd just have to throw away what we can't eat today anyway, so you don't have to pay for it."

"You'd throw food away?" Charlie exclaimed.

"It's not good enough for the customers anymore and it won't keep over another night," the cook explained. "So sometimes we have to throw something away after a slow night."

"Mum usually brings some of it home after work," Cathy added. "But we can only eat so much."

The soup tasted good anyway and it was nice and warm and even though the table was a little too small for such a large group the kids soon relaxed and chatted happily.

"Do you play Soccer, too?" Draco heard Susie ask Neville sometime later.

"No, I'm no good at sports," Neville admitted. "Too clumsy. My dorm-mate Dean always talks about Soccer, though. I still don't know the rules."

"Hogwarts offers only Quiddich," Draco explained. "Most of the students don't know Soccer at all."

"No Soccer team!" Tim exclaimed horrified. "Well, then I'm glad I don't have to go to school there."

"You could start a team, if you went there," Sammie suggested.

That gave Susie an idea. "You could teach them, Dragon! You could teach Neville and your other friends to play and make your own team and then our team could play against your team!"

"We don't even have a ball at Hogwarts," Draco pointed out. "And I'm not even sure there would be enough people interested to form an actual team. I doubt Neville is, for example. He likes sports no better than Clarence does. He'd probably much prefer, if we used the space for flowerbeds."

Neville grinned. "Well, I wouldn't mind having my own little herb garden, but with Professor Sprout's big glass houses we don't really need more room." He hesitated, then added: "If you don't expect me to be any good at it, I'm willing to give it a try. Dean says there's no flying involved, so I guess it can't be too dangerous."

"Dangerous?" Cathy laughed. "Soccer isn't dangerous. It's fun."

"Some people say that about Quiddich," Neville remarked.
"You could play runner." Draco decided. "That's pretty harmless. You've only got to run and pass the ball. Except we don't have a ball and I'm not even sure they'll let me back into Hogwarts."

Actually he wasn't even sure he wanted to return. Of course he missed Potions classes with Professor Snape and Flitwick's Charms classes, but he also liked West Hogsmeade and all the friends he'd made there. Whatever decision Dumbledore made, Draco knew he'd be both happy and disappointed.

Despite how much he enjoyed Neville's visit and the chance to spend the holidays with his friends at Merlin Park Draco was sad that the holidays had already arrived. Or maybe he was just nervous because of Dumbledore's decision?

A/N: Will Neville learn to play Soccer? If so, will he like it? And what would the other Slytherins say, if they knew Draco met Neville on the Hogsmeade Weekend?

In the next chapter: It's Christmas, Albus wants to talk to Sevi and Sevi has a very special gift for Draco.
Christmas in West Hogsmeade

Chapter 54: Christmas in West Hogsmeade

And before Draco knew it the last week of school was over and the Christmas holidays had begun. It was hard to believe that he might never come back here, he thought as he left the Muggle Studies Classroom that Friday. In the entrance hall, between all the shoving and pushing students eager to get out he stopped one last time to look back at the central staircase.

No, it wasn't nearly as great as Hogwarts with it's moving stairs and hallways decorated with paintings, busts and suits of armour, but he'd miss it, if he was allowed to return to Hogwarts. Somehow it felt more like home.

"Come on, Dragon! Do you want to stand here for hours?" Jack's impatient call woke him up. "We've got a patrol to get to."

"Patrol? Today?" Draco asked Mike as they walked down the few steps leading up to the school's front doors.

"Yes, today." Mike confirmed. "During the holidays everybody has more time for these things and, if we don't show our readiness to defend our territory now, we might soon have another challenge from the Sharks on our hands. Everybody will be patrolling today."

Indeed they ran into everyone of their neighbouring gangs during their patrol that day. The Avengers barely answered their insults before hurrying on hastily and the Black Ring paraded past them without much interest, but the shouting match with the Sharks almost escalated to an actual fight. In the end the Sharks withdrew, though. They still hadn't added any new members and probably felt at a disadvantage due to the Rakers' numbers alone.

Over the weekend the gardener, with a little help from the man they called Tess' Joe and some of the other neighbours decorated the park's largest tree with candles and straw stars. There weren't any artful, but fragile Christmas ornaments, the way Draco knew from Hogwarts, but it was still a nice gesture form the city, even if they'd left the whole job to one lonely gardener.

"But doesn't Tess' Joe work for the city as well?" Susie asked surprised, when Sammie mentioned it.

"He does," confirmed Matt. "But he's here in his spare time."

"And that even though he has all those fancy Christmas trees in Hogsmeade's centre to decorate." added Charlie. "I bet he doesn't get much help with that either."

"It's beautiful, though." Draco commented still staring at the tree.

"Yes," confirmed Cathy. "And not as overloaded as those other trees. They look ridiculous, if you ask me."

"Woof!" declared 'That Dog' and dashed off to lift his leg at the Christmas tree.
"Does that mean he likes it, too?" Beth asked with a grin.

"I guess so." Draco said. "At least it means that he's claiming it as his own."

'That Dog' sniffed the tree to check his signature, then got distracted by a passing snowflake.

"Woof!" and he jumped after it trying to catch it.

Draco couldn't tell whether he'd missed or the snowflake had just melted in his mouth, but 'That Dog' looked disappointed for a moment, then jumped even higher at the next one.

"Caw! Dog!" Hugin declared and 'That Dog' turned his head towards them quizzically. Somehow he reacted better to the raven's calls than to those of the wizards.

Draco smiled and threw 'That Dog' a snowball to race after. Hugin, though still very childish at times wasn't one to play with snow, but the dog apparently couldn't get enough of it. He raced after the ball until it disappeared in the mass of snow on the ground and Susie threw another snowball right at him, which he caught and ate with a rather disgusted look at its coldness that made the children laugh and throw him even more snowballs.

Monday was market day as usual, but this time Draco had very special plans. He needed to buy Christmas gifts for all his friends, preferably without anyone seeing their presents already. Considering that everybody would be at the market today that wasn't easy and to complicate matters he also had the items from his usual shopping list to buy.

With two separate money pouches and 'That Dog' in his backpack Draco set off to try his luck. His first stop was the vegetable stands as Aunt Sarah and Uncle Severus would have gotten suspicious, if he'd left them in any other direction. Since he was already that close to them he went on to the fruit stands next and to his relief found that there was nothing else on his shopping list.

Of course, with uncle Severus here to do part of the shopping as well, the list would be short. Now, where should he go next? The most important gifts were the ones for the Snapes, but he wasn't quite sure what to get them. He'd already decided to buy a toy car for Billy, but what would be a good gift for Severus or Sarah?

After a moment of indecision he decided to head to the apothecary. Maybe he'd think of something there.

"Hello, aren't you Professor Snape's young friend?" the owner greeted him when he entered. Apparently the Christmas holidays were a rather slow time in his shop as there were only three other customers inside.

"His nephew, yes." Draco corrected slightly and watched as the wizard packed up a jar of beetle wings for the old witch he was serving.

"Ah, family, I see." the shopkeeper nodded to himself. "Looking for your Uncle then? He hasn't been here yet today." he continued while he pulled an already finished package out from under the counter and handed it to his next customer. "That'll be one gallon five Mr. McCoan. I'm afraid the lizard teeth are still missing. There was a mix-up at my suppliers' and they delivered lizard scales instead."

"No, actually I'm looking for Christmas presents for my aunt and uncle." Draco answered leaning against the counter. "I'm not quite sure what to buy for them and thought this might be the best
"Ah, just a moment." the shopkeeper said. "Let me just serve the young Lady here, then I'll show you something."

The girl that had been looking up at them shyly smiled. "Mum said to ask for the ingredients for pepper up potion," she said. "I don't know what they are, though."

"No problem." the shopkeeper smiled back at her. "I know. Those are the ingredients I sell the most often." He told Draco while he packed them up. "I could pick them out with my eyes closed."

"And you never get bored with it?" Draco asked him.

"Sometimes." he admitted. "That's why I'm always glad to see your uncle. It may be difficult to get some of the things he wants sometimes, but it's always interesting. ... There you go young Lady. That'll be seven sickles. Care for a bonbon?"

The girl nodded eagerly as she placed the money on the counter and the shopkeeper held a jar of sweets out to her.

"Thank you, Mister." she said politely as she picked a red bonbon. She plopped it right into her mouth before picking up her purchases and running out.

"Sweet little thing." the wizard commented. "Now, to you, my young friend." He pulled a book out from under the counter. "This here should be just right for your aunt. A Chinese muggle born witch's work about similarities between medical potions and muggle medicines. Your Aunt's been asking me for it for months, but it was only delivered last week. It shouldn't be hard for me to convince her I won't get it before Christmas."

Draco beamed. "That's perfect!"

"For your uncle we could make a special package of ingredients. He's working on some project with wolfs-bane potion, isn't he?"

"Yes, at least that's the basis for his project." Draco confirmed.

"Well, then we should use mostly ingredients for that. Then I suggest we add an assortment of these specially charmed jars." the shopkeeper pointed at one of his shelves where he kept all sorts and sizes of ingredient jars.

"Specially charmed?" Draco asked as he regarded them curiously.

"The ones with the red rings keep the ingredients inside warm, while the ones with the blue rings keep them cold. The black ones keep them in the dark, of course, and the white ones are the really special ones. They seal air tight, you see, to protect ingredients that lose their potency when exposed to air. All of them are charmed to be unbreakable, of course."

Draco nodded eagerly. "Yes, I'm sure he'll like those."

"Then we'll add a pack of vials and I just got a delivery of small foldable cauldrons." "No, no foldable cauldrons." Draco declared. "He doesn't approve of those. Says a cauldron has to be nice and solid to work properly."

"I see. Rather traditional, isn't he? But we should add some lemon leaves. He appears to use a lot of those."
"Yes, they're his favourite flavouring ingredient." Draco agreed.

"And I'll make you a really special price, if you take the lizard scales they accidentally delivered instead of Mr. McCooan's lizard teeth. I don't have many customers who're familiar with them at all and your uncle is sure to find a use for them. At the very worst he can use them to show his students."

"I've never worked with lizard scales." Draco admitted. "What are they used for?"

"Mostly to fine tune the effects of dragon scales, but there are some very interesting and varying effects you can create by combining them with other ingredients as well. A master's tool of course. A casual brewer could never predict the effects they could have when combined with several ingredients, nor would they require the fine-tuning of the effects that is their speciality. All their other effects can be achieved more easily with standard ingredients."

"They're a substitute ingredient then?" Draco smiled. "Uncle Severus will like that. He enjoys varying his potions from the standard versions."

"Then you like my suggestion?"

"Very much, Sir, thank you."

Draco was quite happy with the results of his visit to the apothecary and decided to get Billy's present next. The first toy stand he visited unfortunately didn't have any toy cars, but he found a nice black stuffed cat that he bought as a mascot for Cathy.

At the second try he found what he'd been looking for. There were all kinds of muggle toys in the boxes at this stand and Draco didn't only pick a green car that was almost as big as his hand for Billy, but also chose two little wind up toys for Beth and Susie. One was a little white rabbit, the other a frog or toad and when wound up they both hopped along the table surprisingly fast for uncharmed toys.

His next stop was the bookshop. He needed a present for Mike and had a feeling that he'd enjoy a book more than a toy. But which book would he want?

This gift took some time to find. A little booklet on Soccer caught Draco's eye, but it was aimed at children from age eleven to fourteen. Mike would like something for adults better. This would have suited Susie more, but Draco had already bought her gift. He put the book back down and was about to walk away when he thought of Sammie. It probably wasn't perfect, as Sammie didn't like to read, but then he did love Soccer.

Draco picked up the booklet once again and walked over to the magic books section. There he found lots of books that might interest Mike. After a few minutes of indecision he bought a lexicon of charms for his friend and went to pay for the two books.

There by the counter still was the display of writing tools and he remembered suddenly that Matt had complained that he'd lost his muggle pencil. He’d probably be happy to get a new pencil, Draco thought and picked out a nice one with little pictures of tigers all over. There also was a tiger shaped eraser that Draco picked along with the pencil.

Right next to the erasers was a display of muggle diaries, the first one Dracos eyes fell on with a picture of a ballerina. 'Charlie!' Draco thought. This looked exactly like he remembered Charlie on stage during her ballet class' big show.

Draco smiled. That left only Mary, Larry and Jack. Those were difficult, though. They most likely
wouldn't like either books or toys. He decided to pick a muggle pen for Jack and get some sweets for Mary and Larry.

He'd already handed his purchases to the bookseller behind the counter when his eyes fell on a little muggle key chain in the shape of a Soccer ball. On impulse he picked it up as well. It wasn't until after he'd left the shop that he thought about who to give it to.

Mary and Larry already had matching skull key chains that Mary had brought home after going out with Beth one day. Draco thought they were terribly ugly, but the pair loved them dearly. They'd never part with them.

He picked the little ball out of his bag and regarded it for a while. Was it proper to give a Christmas present to a wannabe? Mely would certainly love to have it and it wasn't exactly an expensive gift, just a little something to acknowledge her existence, but that was exactly what the gang members usually avoided. Maybe he could ask Sarah about it?

Well, for now he needed to get the sweets for Mary and Larry and the line at the sweets shop was very long today. Remembering that Larry had said that Mary loved everyflavour beans, Draco took a nice Christmas edition box for her, then chose a package of chocolate frogs for Larry and a box of lemon drops for each of he two. Hopefully they liked lemon drops.

A few more muggle sweets should do for his other friends. He wondered briefly what Vincent and Gregory would think of them, but after all, they'd never refused food before, especially not if it was sweet. Neville, he was sure, would love it. He'd mentioned that his Grandmother usually kept him short on sweets as she feared that he'd get fat.

The holidays were great. Even though very few Merlin Park families got Christmas trees, many did bake for the festivities and several of the Rakers showed up with bags of broken or misshaped biscuits, that had been deemed unfit to be served on Christmas by their mothers, but were too good to throw away. Thus Draco spent most of his afternoons sitting in the garden shed talking with his friends and munching on biscuits.

Sarah didn't bake anything herself, but when Draco asked her for something he could bring his friends in return, she produced a whole cauldron full of tea, that, after Severus added some heating charms to the cauldron and Cathy fetched a tray of glasses, proved to be perfect to go with the slightly dry bakeries.

Unfortunately Matt's little sister was sick again and despite all his assurances that he hated her Matt was very quiet and unhappy. Sarah brewed her special cold potion for babies again, but this time it didn't seem to help and thus Draco and the Snapes spent most of the 24th of December in the lab trying to brew a stronger potion, that wouldn't be harmful to the tiny patient.

Sarah was thinking about using a weak pneumonia potion, while Severus was all for trying to weaken down his pepper up potion and even tried to find a way to make it taste like the baby's favourite tea which was about the only thing she still drank voluntarily.

Draco almost felt like crying whenever he looked at Matt's mother who was sitting on his bed cradling her sick child. The only sound that came from the baby was occasional coughing or sneezing.

Draco only hoped that whatever she had wasn't contagious, but Sarah hadn't wanted to take any chances and had taken Billy to Aunt Sabrina's place to spend the day there.

"Oh, this won't work!" Sarah exclaimed in frustration sometime around lunchtime. "If we want to
lighten the pneumonia potion, we can't use the blue fire-plant leaves, but without them as a hastening agent it will take almost a week to brew the potion."

"I told you it wouldn't work." Severus reminded her. "If we can substitute the fire ants in the pepper-up potion, though, we'll have a working potion today. Unfortunately we don't have the ingredients for it and all the apothecaries are closed for the holidays."

"Maybe we could owl Professor Funnel for help." Draco suggested. "What ingredients can substitute for fire ants?"

"Scarab wings or fresh spider legs." Severus answered absently. "Frank's very unlikely to have either at this time of the year. Another possibility would be adding one ice flower petal and five lizard scales, but unfortunately we don't have lizard scales either."

Lizard scales! "We do!" Draco yelled excitedly startling Sarah with his sudden outburst. Luckily the jar she dropped was already empty. "I have lizard scales!"

Severus stared at him. "Whatever for? You're not even supposed to know what they're for."

Draco blushed. "They're part of your Christmas present." he admitted softly. "They were on offer at the apothecary and the shopkeeper said they were usually used only by potions masters."

"Oh, this is fate." declared Matt's mother. "God won't let my baby die on Christmas."

Severus shook his head. "I don't believe in fate. We have no proof that the potion will save her. You really ought to take her to a mediwizard."

"We don't have the money. The last time she was sick cost us everything we'd saved for emergencies." Matt's mother shook her head. "Please, I just know this potion will help."

"If it doesn't cure her, it might still help her enough to give us time to brew the pneumonia potion." Sarah decided. "Draco, get those lizard scales."

Draco looked to Severus a little unhappily. "I'll have to rip open your present."

"A life is more important than a Christmas present." Severus stated calmly. "And you know, you didn't have to give me anything at all. I'll love you just as much without it."

"Oh, you'll get the rest of the present anyway." Draco assured him quickly. Had Uncle Severus really just said that he loved him? "It just won't be wrapped up so nicely."

The potion was finished three hours later and given to the baby in Billy's old bottle, that Sarah had been planning to pass on to Mrs Brown, but hadn't quite gotten around to giving her, yet.

The little girl had her own bottle of course, but there was still some milk inside that they'd tried to feed her earlier and Sarah was strictly against mixing the potion with anything else.

"It might reduce its potency, or she might not want to drink that much. And her body will absorb the potion faster, if we don't give her anything else with it." she argued.

About half an hour later the baby's coughing seemed to have gotten less frequent and her temperature had gone down a little.

"It's not the result I'd hoped for." Uncle Severus commented sadly. "Her temperature should have normalised completely."
"It's a start." Sarah said trying to sound hopeful. "The potion helped and the pneumonia potion's already brewing."

Draco still went to bed feeling very depressed that day. Matt's little sister might be dying, Billy wasn't home to play with and tomorrow was supposed to be Christmas. He wondered whether Billy had even eaten anything, if neither Dako, nor his Mummy or Dada were there to feed him. How well did Billy know Aunt Sabrina? Would he be able to sleep in a strange room?

He woke up the next morning hoping for good news from the baby girl, hoping to hear that Billy was coming home today, hoping that Sarah had come up with a way to finish the pneumonia potion faster. He was not hoping to find two nicely wrapped packages at the foot of his bed.

Draco stared a them for a moment. How had they gotten in here without him noticing? Of course at Hogwarts they'd always just appeared like that as well, but Hogwarts had a whole army of house elves who were well practised at making things appear soundlessly. After all they did it at every mealtme.

It took a few moments until Draco thought to pick up his presents and examine them more closely. The smaller was quite obviously book shaped. Draco put it aside for a moment to wonder about the other. A cube and lighter than he'd expected when he'd picked it up.

He turned it over a few times, but aside from a little note saying that Uncle Severus wished him a Merry Christmas, there was no hint what it might be. Then the book had to be from Aunt Sarah, Draco concluded.

The cat jumped on the bed beside him and pawed at the parcel as if to say: 'Open it already!'

Draco tore off he paper and the cat immediately jumped at it. Oh, so he wanted to play ball! Obligingly Draco crumpled the paper into a tight ball and threw it on the floor and the cat went after it with a wide leap. He had soon shredded it with his sharp claws, but Draco didn't stop to watch. He now held a plain cardboard box in his hands. Still no clues as to what might be inside.

Curiously Draco pulled it open and ... His own Soccer ball!

His shout of delight brought the whole family into the lab. 'That Dog' dashed in circles around the room barking at the top of his lungs while Hugin dove right at the wrapping paper scraps.

At the sight of the noisy pair the cat gave a huge cat frown and stalked off into the living room. Draco once again didn't notice. He was too busy hugging Severus.

It took him almost an hour to settle down enough to hand out his own presents to the Snapes and open Sarah's gift, which turned out to be a Muggle school book. Science, of course. As he leafed through it Draco found all sorts of Physics experiments described inside that he wanted to try out right away, but Sarah insisted that there'd be time for it tomorrow. Right now it was time for breakfast and then they were going to Aunt Sabrina's flat to spend the day with her and get Billy back.

"Hurry up and get dressed or we'll be late." Sarah mock scolded Draco.

"But we've got the whole day." Draco complained laughing.

"Actually, we don't." Severus said suddenly serious again. "I have to attend the Hogwarts Christmas feast in the evening. Albus will never forgive me, if I skip it."
Draco pouted. "You're not having Christmas dinner with us?"

Severus shook his head sadly. "I can't, but we'll have Christmas breakfast and lunch tomorrow. The house elves always pack me a huge basket of leftovers at Christmas."

Draco sighed. Well, it was better than nothing. Stupid Hogwarts.

Right after breakfast he wanted to dash off to take his Christmas presents to the Rakers, but Severus called him back.

"Your friends won't come out today anyway," he said. "And I have something important to talk to you about."

"I just wanted to give them their Christmas presents," Draco said with a little pout. Something important sounded ... well, important, though, so he sat back down to hear what Severus had to say.

"I'm sure they'll be just as happy to get them tomorrow, Draco," Sarah said from the kitchen side of the room.

Draco glanced over to her and noticed that she wasn't actually doing anything. The dishes were already washed and put away and if they were having lunch at Aunt Sabrina's flat there was no reason to start cooking anything right now. Sarah was just leaning against the cold stove and watching them.

"Do you like it here?" Severus asked suddenly. Sarah sent him an encouraging smile.

What were they up to? "You mean the school?" Draco asked confused. "Sure I do. I've got a lot more friends there than I did at Hogwarts and the Muggle Studies classes are a lot better. Most of the teachers are great."

"No, not the school, Draco." Severus interrupted him. "Though we are glad to hear that. No we were wondering whether you liked living in Merlin Park. It's not what you were used to from your parents' home."

"Oh, it's much better than the old manor," Draco laughed. "I never had anybody to play or talk with there. Here there are so many people, I don't even have time for all the things I'd like to do sometimes."

Another nervous glance to Sarah. Draco had never really seen Uncle Severus nervous before. Sarah smiled again, but she too looked nervous. What was going on?

"Well, then, would you perhaps like to stay with us for longer?" Severus asked.

Oh, so this was about the school after all. Were they just worried how he would take being expelled from Hogwarts, or did they already know that Dumbledore was going to expel him?

"I'd love to," Draco said honestly. "Then I could spend more time with my friends, play with Billy some more, go to the market more often ..."

"Then," Severus leaned forward in his chair. "Would you mind much if we ... adopt you?"

Draco stared at him. What? How? Had he really just said?

"Really?"

"Well, only if you want us to," said Severus.
Draco practically flew out of his chair and around the table to hug Severus for the second time that day. "I'd love that!"

Severus beamed and hugged him back and when Sarah came over and put her arms around both of them the world was almost perfect. Almost.

"But won't you have to ask permission from all my relatives? What if they won't allow it?" Draco asked fearfully.

"We already did, Draco." Severus smiled at the boy who was still clinging to him tightly. "All we need now is the ministry's permission, but that will make it final so we didn't want to take that step against your will."

Draco beamed. For the first time he was happy that none of his relatives wanted him. Yes, the world was perfect, absolutely perfect. Only ...

"Do you think the ministry will let you? They don't really like us much, do they?"

"That's why I'll have to ask Albus for help." Severus answered calmly. "They'll agree, if he backs our request and Christmas usually puts him into a good mood."

"So, are you two ready to visit Aunt Sabrina now?" Sarah asked as she finally let go of them and stepped back. "She's probably already waiting eagerly. You know how lonely she gets."

Aunt Sabrina lived in the Lions' territory, it turned out. Her flat wasn't much different from the Snapes', but didn't look out onto the park as it was on the backside of the house. It looked old and dark, but everything was sparkling clean and Sabrina had even put up some holly and Christmas tree twigs.

"They're leftovers from the trees that they sold at the market." Sabrina explained when she saw Draco's surprised look at them. "I only actually bought the holly."

"Oh Sabrina, it's beautiful!" Sarah exclaimed. "But you really shouldn't have. I'm sure it was expensive."

"Ah, but I can afford to waste a few sickles once a year, can't I? I don't have any children to feed, after all, and when my only family comes to visit, I want to make it special." Sabrina insisted and led them to the living room table where their presents were waiting for them under the biggest twig.

Draco felt a little guilty for not thinking to buy her anything when Sabrina handed him a nicely wrapped gift, but Sarah quickly brought out three parcels of her own, one from her, one from Severus and the third, she said, was from the whole family.

Sabrina's gift to Draco turned out to be a thick blue jumper.

"I wasn't quite sure what you'd like." she explained blushing a little. "But I thought that you could definitely use something warm to wear. Especially in this weather."

Looking out the window Draco realised that it had started to snow once again. Yes, it did look cold outside. He put on his new jumper right away then helped dress Billy in his own little jumper, that Sabrina had given him. Now they really looked like brothers despite their very different colouring, Draco thought as he sat down with Billy in his lap and pulled out his present for the baby.

Billy found it rather hard to unpack the parcel, but with a little help from Draco he managed and he
really enjoyed ripping pieces of paper off it.

"Uggy?" Billy asked when he saw the wheels on his new car.

Draco laughed. "No Billy, that's not a buggy, it's a car. Like the muggles have instead of coaches. Or like the vans you see on market day."

"Uggy!" Billy decided anyway hugging the car close to his chest.

Later after they'd eaten Draco had to show him how he could make the car drive over the floor and the new little squishy toy from Sarah soon lay forgotten in a corner as Billy delighted in the new type of toy. The little multi coloured ball Severus had bought him was very interesting as well, though, but Sarah soon removed it insisting that it was an outside toy and not made to be thrown around in a flat.

"There," she said when Billy started to complain. "Play with your car instead." and soon Billy was smiling happily again as Draco pushed the car towards him over the carpet.

All too soon Severus had to leave for the Hogwarts feast however. In the cold weather and deep snow it wasn't a pleasant walk and when he arrived he ran straight into Minerva McGonagall who wanted to know where he'd been all day. Apparently she hadn't even noticed that he'd been gone all holiday.

After the socialising with the other teachers he had to endure another of Albus' cheery Christmas speeches and then a discussion of the effects of growing Charms on plants that only Professors Sprout and Flitwick could truly find entertaining.

Luckily the food arrived to distract them, but that only brought on exclamations about the house elves' skill. Not that Severus didn't think that the food looked excellent and had to have been a lot of hard work, but he hated the false or exaggerated compliments that his colleagues repeated every Christmas, just because it was Christmas.

He scowled at the lot of them and busied himself with his food.

"Severus?" Albus said once everybody was distracted by their own conversations. "There's something I'd like to talk to you about."

Severus nodded. "I did want to speak with you as well."

"After the feast." Albus suggested when Severus didn't seem to be inclined to continue. "My office?"

Severus nodded and turned to glare at a second year Gryffindor who was busily drawing stars into his mashed potatoes.

About an hour later they finally reached the headmaster's office. Severus felt relieved as he leaned back in the comfortable chair he usually used when talking with Albus. The headmaster poured out tea for them both.

How he hated those noisy feasts and festivities Albus always forced him to participate in. At least for this year Christmas was behind him. That left only the smaller celebration of Easter and the horror of the leaving feast, which had at least the advantage of announcing the start of the summer holidays, which Severus planned to spend mostly with his family and as far away from all
"So," he asked as he accepted his teacup from Dumbledore. "What was it you needed to tell me about?"

Albus sighed. "It's about the snowball incident."

"You have come to a decision about it then?"

Dumbledore hesitated. "It wouldn't be fair to make it final without having spoken to the boys when they return, but well, Aurelia Longbottom was quite angry and I do believe there have to be dire consequences in order to protect the good name of the school."

"Two boys were suspended for over a month." Severus pointed out. "Don't you think that's dire enough? It's been years since the last suspension from Hogwarts and that was only for two weeks."

"Calling for mercy towards the students, Severus?" Albus teased. "That's not at all like you."

"And I will not admit to it in public." Severus confirmed calmly. "The decision is yours, Albus, and I will not contest whatever you decide, but I do believe both boys to be equally guilty, so in my opinion they should be punished the same. Also consider the consequences of expelling Potter."

"The consequences of expelling Harry Potter indeed." Albus sighed again. "He is our saviour and the symbol of the light to the entire wizarding world. Hogwarts is honoured to have the chance to teach him. It has raised our status even among the international competition. His expulsion would be widely criticised. More importantly however, his guardians are muggles. They might well decide that he should attend muggle school after his expulsion and that is a step that could well have grave consequences not only for Harry, but for the entire wizarding world."

"A political decision, then." Severus stated.

"Indeed." Albus confirmed. "For political reasons we can't afford to expel Harry, but Aurelia's protest calls for some kind of reaction before it gets to the media."

"Not likely." Severus remarked. "Aurelia Longbottom's a Gryffindor, after all. It wouldn't be her style."

"Her brother was a Ravenclaw, though. He might well think of a revenge like that."

Severus had to concede that point and did so with a curt nod.

"What is the Malfoy boy to you, Severus?" Albus changed direction abruptly. "You seem to be fond of him."

"I am." Severus admitted. No use denying it, if he wanted to go through with his plan. "Very."

"I see." Albus said assuming that this was as clear an answer as he was going to get. "It would bother you, if I expelled the boy, then."

"Do as you have to." Severus said after taking a deep breath. "It will not affect my relationship with him much."

Abbus twinkled at him for a moment. Obviously Severus had managed the rare feat of confusing the headmaster.

"The decision is yours, Albus." Severus emphasised. "I do not wish to influence you in any way.
Draco was quite happy attending West Hogsmeade Wizarding School for a month and will be fine, if he continues there."

"I'm assuming his family has enough money to send him to Durmstrang or Beauxbatons. West Hogsmeade, even if only temporarily ..."

"I'm the one who sent him there." Severus interrupted the headmaster sharply. "His so-called family wouldn't have bothered."

Albus blinked some more.

"Well, maybe the American branch would have, but they already have seven younger kids." Severus amended. "Leaving Draco with them didn't seem quite fair to any of them."

"So what will happen to Mr. Malfoy, if we expel him?" Albus asked suddenly.

"Like I said, he will continue at West Hogsmeade. Sarah and I would have problems affording Hogwarts' fees for another two years anyway." Severus answered calmly.

"You intend to come up for the rest of his education?" This time Albus forgot to twinkle at all.

"I intend to adopt him." Severus explained outwardly calm despite his nervousness. If Albus refused to help him, the ministry was very unlikely to sign those papers. "In fact I have all the papers prepared, but considering my relationship with the ministry, I will need help to convince them."

"The Malfoy boy, Severus? Slytherin's poster boy dark wizard?"

"He's not dark, Albus. He may have appeared dark in the past, but he was just a child trying to win his father's approval. Once separated from Lucius he quickly developed a fascination with muggle culture and made friends with two squibs. That's definitely not the behaviour of a child with a dark nature." Severus paused. "Few, if any, of my children are truly dark, Albus. They are raised to believe things and act on them. Put them in different surroundings and you get completely different kids."

Albus held up his hand to stop him. "What are you trying to say, Severus?"

"Maybe that Hogwarts, despite all my efforts, is still failing the Slytherins? I don't know. What I do know however, is that Draco is my son and that I'd like to make that official, but I will need your help for it."

"The boy has a very big family, Severus. I know of at least three living relatives of his."

"And I know all of them. There are about fifty and the only ones that really care about the boy are the Colemans and Edmond Glizzard. The last thing Eusebia Coleman needs is another child on her hands. She just doesn't have the time to give Draco the attention he needs and she knows it. Mr. Glizzard is an Unspeakable who believes that any contact with his family will put them in danger from dark wizards. I have written confirmation from all of them that they support my adoption of Draco, I have the boy's consent, all I need is the ministry's agreement. With your backing, that should be easy enough to attain."

Albus nodded slowly. "Very well, if that's what you want, I'll owl the department of social services. You do realise that I might still decide to expel the boy, whether his name is Malfoy or Snape, though?"
"And I already told you, I won't contest your decision. Draco will be fine at either school." Severus got up and walked to the door. "Thank you, Albus."

Headmaster Dumbledore sat there staring at the door for a few moments. Severus rarely thanked him. Of course, since he rarely actually asked him for anything and Albus tried not to let him know about the things he did for him on his own, he rarely had reason to. The boy really had to mean a lot to him.

So what now? Expelling Harry Potter was out of the question, but expelling the son of one of his teachers? A head of house at that. He might get away with expelling the child of a relatively new teacher, but Severus had been working for him for years. Albus considered his senior staff members his personal friends and he owed Severus a lot. What would expelling Draco do to their relationship?

Albus sighed. Just when he'd thought he'd come to a decision the whole situation changed again.

A/N: Will the ministry allow the adoption? Will Albus expel Draco? Will the Dursleys let Harry return to school?

In the last chapter: School starts again, there's another Potions class and Draco is looking for a chance to play with his new ball.
A/N - Well, here it is. The final chapter. I'm both happy and sad to see this end, but it's high time I moved on to another story. This has grown much bigger and taken me a lot longer to write than I originally planned and I'm not leaving West Hogsmeade and it's people forever. I'll be back to write a mini sequel to this.

Albus Dumbledore kept his promise. He owled the magical social services right away and only five days later the Snapes went to London to officially adopt Draco. To celebrate the occasion they went to a muggle shopping centre afterwards, though they didn't buy anything.

People stared at them, because of the two free flying ravens and muggle children crowded around Draco to ask him questions about his unusual pet. Hugin was a little unsure about the whole commotion and stayed in the air most of the time, but Munin decided to make a landing right in front of the kids and even let some of them pet him. When one of the smaller children tried to grab him however he retreated onto Severus' shoulder complaining with a loud caw about the indignity of such treatment.

None of the children dared to bother Severus. His usual classroom scowl kept them in check even though they'd never been in one of his classes.

Draco smiled. Nobody who saw him like this would guess how kind his father really was. His father! That brought up a new question he needed to ask, but the shopping centre was hardly the right place for it, nor were the crowded streets outside or the busy floo station.

Thus it was on the way back home somewhere near the bridge that led them back into West Hogsmeade that Draco finally asked: "I suppose I'm to call you Mother and Father now?"

Severus grimaced at the sound of that. "You can call us whatever you feel like calling us, but, if you can live with that, I'd prefer if you didn't give me that particular name. It's what you called Lucius, isn't it?"

Draco nodded. "Yes, it's what I called Lucius, but I wasn't comparing you to him. ... Dad." he added after a moment. That was what all the other West Hogsmeade kids called their fathers, after all. It sounded good to him and nobody could find it odd, right?

Severus smiled and put his arm around Draco's shoulders. "I know, son, but it just sounded wrong to me."

"Yes, nobody here says that. The neighbours would think us strange." Draco answered well aware that this wasn't about what the neighbours might think.
Two days later a young barn owl arrived at their flat with a letter asking one Draco Malfoy to come to Hogwarts a day early and see the headmaster about his suspension. Draco was tempted to send the owl right back with the comment that that person was unknown at this address, but Sarah advised him strongly against teasing Dumbledore.

"Not that I like the thought of our son going to that horrible school of yours." she told Severus. "But his getting expelled wouldn't be too pleasant either."

"Albus might expel him anyway." Severus reminded her. "He's worried it might cause a scandal if he doesn't take severe measures and another scandal is the last thing he wants either Hogwarts or Potter involved in."

"There, that's exactly why I hate that two faced, posh school of yours." Sarah sighed and was about to launch into a rant, but Severus cut her off.

"Politics are a dirty game, Sarah. We both know that. The outsiders will never treat us fairly, but a Hogwarts NEWT just counts more than a West Hogsmeade one and we already paid the school money for this year. Lets just give it a try."

"And what if I do get expelled?" Draco asked a little nervously.

"Then at least we won't have the problem of getting together the school money for next year." Sarah declared.

"Your education won't be any worse, if you continue at West Hogsmeade." Severus added. "It'll just be less recognised."

Draco smiled encouragingly. "Well, I plan to go on to muggle school anyway. It'll be the grades I get there that'll count when trying to get a job as a Physics teacher or electrician. And I really like West Hogsmeade. It's a lot more fun than Hogwarts."

Despite those words Draco felt increasingly nervous as he walked up towards the castle to his meeting with the headmaster days later. At first he'd wanted to wear his West Hogsmeade uniform for the visit, but his parents had been against that, saying that it was practically asking to get expelled.

Sarah had even suggested that he should wear his Hogwarts uniform, but in the end they'd agreed on muggle clothes. So he was now wearing his favourite pair of jeans and Aunt Sabrina's blue Christmas jumper under his warm winter cloak and his Rakers cap.

The gang had quietly joined him and his father on the way as if it were only natural and Draco felt a little comforted by that.

A single horseless carriage arrived at the front gate just as they were walking up the stairs and a rather rumpled looking Harry Potter climbed out. The Rakers stared a bit when they noticed the scar, but when Severus and Draco walked right on without waiting for the boy they followed them into the castle without too many backward glances. After all they knew that Potter was in the Gryffindor gang and that those were the enemies of Draco's Slytherin gang even if Draco apparently liked that Neville Gryffindor.

Harry jumped out of his carriage intending to hastily straighten his Hogwarts uniform and make himself presentable before hurrying to the headmaster's office, but froze at the sight of Draco and his entourage. Professor McGonagall hadn't come out to meet him and who were all those kids?

Harry was pretty sure none of them went to Hogwarts and those caps ...
Some of them were downright scary, he decided after a glance at a huge girl and boy that were holding hands and scowling at him at the same time. And was that one even still a kid at all? He met the oldest boy's eyes for only a second then quickly looked over at the smaller ones. The little girl and smallest boy didn't look that bad, but the last one looked like a miniature version of the scary girl. Were those Draco's relatives?

He felt strangely lost and alone as he stood there in the snow watching Snape, Draco and their entourage disappear into the castle he usually considered his home. He'd just barely been able to convince the Dursleys to take him to Kings Cross Station at all. It had probably been only the hope to get rid of Harry a day sooner than expected that had made Uncle Vernon get out his car at all. Except for two or three owls from Ron and Hermione Harry hadn't heard from his friends all the time he'd been gone and neither had spent the holidays at the school. They'd arrive tomorrow with all the other happy kids coming back after having a great time with their families.

Well, it was no use standing here mourning his lack of friends to stand behind him at this difficult moment. He had to go up there and convince the headmaster not to expel him. He just had to!

Harry ran up the steps and pulled off his cloak as he entered the castle. It looked like every student that had stayed for the holidays had come downstairs to see his arrival. In front of their curious eyes Harry didn't dare straighten his robes as he'd planned. Instead he just folded his cloak over his arm and hurried on towards the headmaster's office.

Draco's entourage was already waiting at the top of the stairs. Including Professor Snape!

Professor McGonagall however still was nowhere in sight. Of course she had better things to do than just stand around in front of the headmaster's office to wait for his verdict on Harry's future, but shouldn't the same be true for Professor Snape?

"Do you really think they'll expel Dragon?" the smallest girl asked Professor Snape sadly.

"From what the headmaster said last time we talked about it, it's quite possible. Neville Longbottom could have been killed, you know."

"But I've met Neville," said one of the older girls. A very plain looking one, that Harry hadn't even noticed until now. "He's a very friendly boy. He even told me he's long forgiven Dragon the little accident. He blames it all more on his bad flying skills and that he was using a very old broom."

"It's the headmaster's decision, though, not Neville's," the boy next to Professor Snape pointed out.

"And it's only good for us, if Dragon gets expelled." said the oldest boy who might not even be a boy anymore at all. "Then he won't be away at this stupid school all the time."

"Yeah, keeps the Sharks afraid." grinned the scary girl. "We haven't had many good fights with him around, though. He isn't that terrible."

"Mark thinks he is." smirked a pretty curly haired girl. "And that's enough for the rest of them."

Harry was getting more and more nervous. If they expelled Malfoy, they'd most likely expel him as well, wouldn't they? But then again it had been Malfoy who'd actually hurt Neville, not Harry. No, this wasn't his fault, so they couldn't expel him for it.

Of course he'd been trying to hit Malfoy and the fact that he'd missed didn't change his intent. If he'd hit him, it'd have been Draco that would have ended up in the hospital wing.
For a moment he wondered how Neville was doing, but then his attention returned to the door Malfoy must have gone through only moments before he'd arrived. He wished he knew what was going on in there.

Meanwhile Draco was sitting in Dumbledore's office doing his best not to show that he was nervous about it.

"Well, Mr. Malfoy." the headmaster said regarding him intently over the rim of his glasses.

"Snape." corrected Draco. "It's Mr. Snape." He forced a smile. "The ministry was surprisingly fast in granting my adoption. I believe I should thank you for that by the way. It must have been your owl that convinced them."

Dumbledore smiled and twinkled a little. "Ah, it's good to hear that my word still carries some little weight in the ministry. With the way the minister has been acting lately I was a little worried that the social services department might ignore me as well. Mr. Snape then." he decided. "Your father told you that Mr. Longbottom was rather badly injured, I expect?"

"He did." Draco confirmed. "And Neville also told me about it himself."

"You've spoken with Mr. Longbottom?" Albus asked surprised. He clearly hadn't expected that.

"Yes, I met him in town on the last Hogsmeade weekend, but we didn't talk about his injury much then. He doesn't like to talk about it much and I think he tried to downplay it in his owls to me."

"He owled you?" Dumbledore asked. "Why?"

"Why not?" Draco asked at first, then shrugged. "I wanted to apologise and ask how he was doing and since I don't know his family well enough to just floo over, I wrote him. He wrote back that he'd liked hearing from me, so I wrote him again. It was nice having a pen pal. Gregory and Vincent never owl me. They find writing too hard and I saw my other friends every day at school."

"So you don't think Neville is afraid of you?"

"Afraid? Of me?" Draco asked incredulously. "Why would he be? I told you he met me on his Hogsmeade weekend. He wanted to get to know some of the friends I'd mentioned in my letters and we went out for butterbeers."

"You went to the Three Broomsticks together?" Dumbledore said surprised.

"No, the Happy Hag. My girlfriend's mother works there and it's a lot cheaper."

"You took Neville into West Hogsmeade?" Now the headmaster sounded alarmed.

"He was perfectly safe with us. Few people in West Hogsmeade would attack a Raker, much less a whole bunch of them."

Albus nodded slowly. Did that mean he was convinced or not?

"You went to school in Hogsmeade during your suspension." the headmaster switched topics before Draco could come to a conclusion on that question.

"Yes, my parents thought it best for my education."
"That's a very ... erm ... problematic school." Dumbledore commented.

Draco frowned at him. "It's just as good a school as Hogwarts." he protested. "Maybe even better because it adapts to individual talents."

"It's actually meant to be a school for squibs." Albus reminded him.

"That's what it used to be a long time ago. Now it's a school for everybody. What's Hogwarts doing for squibs? Nothing. West Hogsmeade doesn't just take squib students, it also has squib teachers."

"To teach the squibs, of course."

"To teach everybody. I had a squib teacher in History of Magic. The best History teacher I've ever seen in fact. The students loved her classes. Binns has never seen that much participation in any of his lessons." Draco continued angrily. "I had a squib classmate there that could probably have beaten even Granger."

"That may be, but the magical subjects are very important as well."

"Okay, so they're behind in Charms, but they're actually slightly ahead of Hogwarts in Transfiguration, have a Potions teacher that meets even Dad's approval and are so far ahead in DADA that my class here probably won't even get there before taking the NEWTs. Their Muggle Studies classes are incredible and Flying classes aren't nearly as fun as Sports. To say nothing of all the clubs and the Soccer team they have."

"All right, so you think they're up to the competition academically, but I was thinking more of the social problems actually." Dumbledore stopped the tirade.

"Social problems?"

"How did you get on with your classmates, I mean? Your friends out there don't seem to be all in your year."

"No, only Cathy and Charlie are. The other students were great too, though. I made more friends in the first week there than I ever had at Hogwarts."

Dumbledore blinked. "You liked them?"

"Most of them." Draco confirmed thinking of Martha. "Some were annoying, though."

"Annoying?" Dumbledore asked. "The squibs or the gangs?"

Draco laughed. "The ugly girl that didn't see what already having a girlfriend had to do with me not wanting to go out with her."

Dumbledore blinked again. "And you got along with everybody else?"

"Well, not with the Shark twins. The Sharks are our biggest rivals in Merlin Park and the twins are pretty mean." Draco answered with a shrug. "And then there was Anya. She never forgave me for getting her a detention in our first class together even though I didn't do it on purpose. We just had a bad start, I guess."

Dumbledore thought for a moment, then said: "Tell me a little about the friends you made. What were they like?"

So Draco started to tell Albus about Curly and Sparks, then Bubbles and Keith, but the headmaster
stopped him in the middle of telling about Clarence's problems with Sports class.

"Why did you like him, if he was such an outsider?"

Draco burst out laughing. "He reminded me of Neville, I think." he forced out through his laughter.

"What's so funny about that?"

"Sorry." gasped Draco. "Not that. You ... you called Clarence an outsider."

"Well, from your description he seems like one."

"He is. People who don't live in West Hogsmeade are called outsiders there."

"Ah, I see. Do the outsiders get picked on a lot? Was it a problem to be friends with one?"

"No, not really. I think they get picked on in first year, but they form a tight group of their own in the higher years which protects them pretty well, because usually no gang has that many members in a single year. Charlie warned me about them from the beginning and she was right. They're pretty strong as a group."

"She? Who's Charlie?"

So Draco explained the gang and its members to the headmaster.

"I see." Dumbledore said finally. "How did you do in your classes?"

"Well, not so well in DADA, of course. And I also had problems in Transfigurations. I never was particularly good at the subject and we never learned to transfigure something back, or worked as independently as Transfiguration A classes do. Professor Winter thought I might do better in B, but didn't want to switch me, if I wasn't staying. I did great in Charms and Potions, naturally and the History teacher seemed to like me as well. It probably was my essay on Grindelwald and dark muggles, though."

Dumbledore nodded. "I'd like to see a report on your progress and behaviour from each of your teachers. I probably should have thought of that sooner."

Draco grinned. "Dad did. Here it is."

He'd been a little miffed when Severus had written to the headmaster requesting the report, but all in all it had turned out quite positive. Only Professor Connelly called him disruptive and disrespectful.

"Your Charms teacher wasn't very happy with you even though you claim to have done well in her class." Dumbledore remarked promptly.

"I insulted her professional pride by telling the whole class that she was a whole year behind Professor Flitwick. She thinks rather highly of herself, but interestingly the weakest Charms students, who are taught by a different teacher are usually a bit ahead of the rest of their year. Not where Flitwick is, but better than Connelly."

"You are impressed by Professor Flitwick then?"

"Yes, he appears to be an excellent teacher."

"But not so much with Professor McGonagall?" there was a touch of hurt in the headmaster's
"She's good and an animaga, which is quite impressive, but Professor Winter isn't easy to beat. You should have seen the casual transfigurations he performed and he also knows how to guide students better than she does. They're both good in different ways, I suppose. It's just not my subject."

Albus watched the boy closely all through their talk. He definitely didn't seem to have his father's prejudices anymore and he was Severus' son, but what about Aurelia Longbottom? How could he appease her without expelling the boy?

Neville had apparently forgiven him. Was Aurelia aware of that?

He couldn't possibly expel Severus' son.

"Well, it seems that you're truly sorry for what you've done and I do believe that you never meant to hurt Mr. Longbottom. Please remember that I'll be keeping a close eye on your future behaviour from now on, though." he finally announced. "Please send in Mr. Potter next."

"Thank you, Sir." Draco said as he shook the headmaster's hand, but he wasn't quite sure whether he was happy with his decision. He'd miss West Hogsmeade and all the friends he'd made there.

Harry looked at Draco with both relief and fear when he stepped out of the office. He'd been waiting for over two hours now. Just what had taken so long in there?

Malfoy's face showed neither disappointment nor triumph as Harry had expected. Hadn't Dumbledore announced his verdict, yet? Or had he learned to hide his feelings this well? Maybe young death eaters were trained not to show pain and disappointment?

There was no reason to hide triumph, so this had to mean that either Malfoy didn't know, yet, or he'd just been expelled. If Malfoy had been expelled, then Harry was sure to get expelled, too, wasn't he? But he hadn't really done anything. He hadn't hurt Neville and Dudley always loaded his snowballs and had never gotten in trouble for it.

"Your turn Potty." Malfoy said with his characteristic smirk and held the door open for him.

Harry gathered his courage and walked in.

"Hello Harry." Dumbledore greeted him with his usual happy twinkle. "Take a seat. How were your holidays?"

Malfoy closed the door behind him and Harry felt slightly better. He didn't want the Slytherin to hear this talk.

"The usual, I guess." Harry answered Dumbledore. "The Dursleys weren't happy to see me, but they let me come back to school."

"Ah yes, you've heard from Neville, I suppose?"

"No Sir." Harry said. Maybe he should have shown some concern sooner? What if poor Neville was still hurt? He couldn't be dead, if the headmaster assumed that he'd contacted Harry. "Is he alright?"

"Yes, he has recovered well, though I think his leg still hurts him a little sometimes."

But that was all Malfoy's fault, wasn't it? "I'm glad to hear that."
“What have you been doing while you were at home, then?”

“Mostly helping out around the house, doing chores and sit in my room. The Dursleys didn’t allow me to go out.”

“I see. Lemon drop?”

Afterwards Harry didn’t understand what had taken so long when Malfoy had been in there. They only talked about the school and all the classes he’d missed some and then Dumbledore sent him to the common room to unpack his things. Maybe Malfoy had been expelled after all?

But to Harry’s dismay Malfoy was at breakfast the next morning, that creepy black bird on his shoulder and smirk on his face, just as always. The great hall was almost empty for the meal as only very few students had stayed for the holidays and none of them were people Harry knew well.

Malfoy, of course, was surrounded by Slytherins of all ages that seemed to be very eager to ask him about wherever he'd spent the time of his suspension.

"I even had most classes together with my girlfriend." Harry overheard him saying when he walked past the Slytherin table.

Classes? Malfoy had gone to a different school? Harry suddenly remembered Dumbledore's advice to start studying right away in order to catch up before the OWL exams.

If only Hermione or Ron were here, so he could borrow their notes. But they weren't and the other Gryffindors in his year weren't either.

At lunch Harry finally spotted fifth year Ravenclaw Terry Boot, who reluctantly agreed to let him see, but not borrow, his notes.

Luckily by dinnertime Ron and Hermione were back and it turned out that Hermione had even copied all her notes for him over the holidays.

"It even helped me with revising." she told the boys happily. "But you really ought to do Snape's reading assignment first, Harry. You know what he's like."

"Reading assignment!" Ron squeaked in sudden panic. "Oh no! I completely forgot! What was the reading assignment, Hermione?"

"Why really, Ron. If you can't remember your homework, you ought to write it down." Hermione scolded. "It was the chapter on dye potions in our Potions book."

"An entire chapter?" Harry gasped. "We'll never make it in time!"

Minerva McGonagall hated Monday mornings that year. Starting work after the holidays off with a class including Slytherins wasn't exactly the best thing for her mood.

The fifth year Slytherins and Ravenclaws didn't look much happier about it as they trotted tiredly into the classroom. Minerva suppressed a yawn and pulled out her class list to take attendance. Slytherins first.

"Mr. Crabbe?"

"Mmmm." made Vincent Crabbe sleepily.
Minerva took that to mean he was present enough of mind to have heard her. "Mr. Goyle?"
"Here." Gregory Goyle yawned.

"Mr. Malfoy?"

No reaction. Minerva looked expectantly towards the boy in the last row next to Millicent Bulstrode. "Mr. Malfoy!"

Still nothing. All heads turned to look at Draco who looked back at them calmly.

Minerva walked over and knocked on his desk. "Mr. Malfoy, would you please confirm that you are present?"

"Er ... Professor? Mr. Malfoy is in Azkaban." Draco informed her. "I doubt he can hear you from there."

"Oh, and who would you be then?" McGonagall sneered. "Mr. Potter perhaps?"

Draco smirked. "Why Professor, your class list must be out of date. I'm Draco Snape of course. Don't you know that?"

For a moment there was total silence in the class, then everybody started talking at once.

"You're who?" Minerva finally got out.

"Draco Snape." Draco repeated obligingly.

Snape? How could he be called Snape? Minerva knew only one Snape and she was quite sure that he had no family. Well, maybe some distant relatives he had no contact with and never mentioned because of that?

"Snape?" she asked faintly.

"Here." Draco grinned. "I can show you the adoption papers." he added when his classmates wouldn't stop staring.

Well, he did have Severus' old Transfigurations book. Minerva decided to just accept it.

"Mr. Zabini?"

"Here."

'Right just ignore it and go on. You can ask Severus about it later.' "Ms. Bullstrode?"

Unfortunately her students kept getting distracted. Millicent Bulstrode spent more of the lesson time questioning Draco Malfoy or Snape, or whatever his name was, than trying to transfigure her mug and everybody around them kept getting distracted and trying to listen in.

With a sigh Minerva stared at the odd crosses between mugs and lizards the students handed in after the lesson. It would take her at least an hour to figure out how to turn all of those accidents back into mugs.

Somehow they managed to read through the whole huge chapter before their Potions class in the
end, but Harry doubted that he'd be able to answer any questions Snape might ask. He hardly remembered anything of what he'd read through so hastily while the Weasleys had discussed Quiddich strategies at the next table.

Snape was already waiting for them when they arrived even though they'd made an effort to come early this time. The Professor watched silently as the students filed in. He sent Draco a quick smile when he arrived, but didn't move from his post at the front of the class.

As soon as the last student was inside he slammed the door shut with a quick wave of his wand.

"Remove everything except your quills and ink-pots from your desks." he ordered the class briskly.

The students exchanged confused looks, but packed away their books and potions kits.

"The cauldrons as well." Snape ordered.

More nervous glances, but the students removed them as well.

"Now, Miss Patil, if you would please switch places with Miss Parkinson. Mr. Goyle, with Mr. Longbottom. Mr. Crabbe and Mr. Weasley." Snape continued. "No, just leave your bags. You won't need them, just your ink-pots and quills. Yes Mr. Longbottom, I want you to sit with Draco today. He won't bite."

Neville, who'd been standing next to the desk he'd shared with Hermione hesitating, blushed and hastily sat down almost spilling his ink.

Draco sent him a reassuring smile. "Don't worry. He wouldn't hurt us."

Snape continued to pair the whole class one Slytherin, one Gryffindor, then pulled out a pile of parchments. "It has come to my attention that some of you consider my exams unfair claiming that I ask Gryffindors more difficult questions than Slytherins and call on them at less opportune times. To remedy that and give all of you the same chance to prove what you remember of your reading assignment, I have decided to do a little, absolutely fair, quiz instead of the usual oral exam today. It will allow me to test the knowledge of the whole class instead of only that of a few people. The questions are the same for all of you and you will all be given the same amount of time to answer them. This quiz will also have much influence on your Potions grade, so I suggest you do your very best. Draco, please hand out the test forms."

The class sat like frozen staring at their teacher. This was completely new. Snape had always preferred oral exams, probably wanting to see his victims twitch in front of the whole class.

"Does everyone have a copy? Then start."

Harry turned over his parchment and started reading. 'Name the most frequently used ingredient in dye potions?'

What was that? He knew it had been in the text, but he just couldn't remember. He glanced over to his neighbour. Crabbe was staring at his parchment scratching his head. No help there.

Harry let his eyes wander over the class. Hermione was working in deep concentration, but even she hesitated several times during the short time he watched her. Goyle was trying to copy from her, but seemed to have problems reading her small handwriting. At the next desk over Draco was scribbling away happily.

Harry blinked. It looked almost as if he were inviting Neville to copy the way he was holding the
parchment.

But that couldn't be! Or maybe he was so used to letting Goyle copy his work that he didn't notice what he was doing?

Harry returned to his own test. Maybe the next question would be easier. 'What is Merlin's dye? What are it's uses? For extra credit explain it's historical significance.'

Merlin's dye? That was a dye potion invented by Merlin, but what was it used for and what the hell was its 'historical significance'?

Well, at least Harry had something he could write about it. Unfortunately the third question stumped him again. 'Why are rose leaves never used in dye potions?'

Malfoy's eager and unrelenting scribbling was annoying. How came he to know so much?

Ten minutes later Snape collected the parchments and told them to read the recipe for Merlin's dye. "You'll be brewing that by heart in our next lesson."

Two minutes before the end of class he was finished marking the quizzes.

"I am very disappointed." he announced. "Only Draco has managed to get all the questions right. Good work also from Mr. Longbottom who didn't finish the last three questions, but managed to get two extra credit questions right, and Mr. Zabini, who answered everything except the extra credit correctly. Miss Granger, I'm shocked. Not a single extra credit question answered and you missed half of question five. That's not your usual standard."

Hermione blushed deeply and hung her head in shame.

"Mr. Crabbe, I'm afraid I couldn't read all of your answers. Please try to write more neatly next time. Mr. Potter, that was poor. What is your excuse?"

"I only learned of the reading assignment after I returned from the holidays, because of my suspension, Sir. I had to read it very quickly to finish in time and don't remember it very well."

"You could have made an effort to find out your homework sooner, but considering that your work isn't even the worst in class, I can see why you didn't deem it necessary." Snape informed him coldly, but moved on. "Mr. Goyle, please learn to spell. This is even more painful to look at than your essays."

Gregory Goyle, to Harry's surprise, looked just as devastated as Hermione.

"Mr. Weasley, I was hoping you'd make an effort to catch up and improve your grade over the holidays, but your result is even worse that Potter's, who actually admits to not having done his reading properly." Snape hissed. He looked actually insulted at Ron's work. "Merlin's dye is not used to bleach parchment and it was definitely not invented by a goblin in 1904. Why did you think it's called MERLIN'S dye?"

"Um... I confused it with another potion." Ron stuttered.

"That's what I would have assumed, if I knew of any bleach potions invented by goblins."

Snape glared at him. "I am not sure whether I should let you take your OWLs this year at all. I doubt you can still catch up to the rest of the class."

Ron was still fuming about that remark on the way to Quiddich practise that evening. "I've had it
with Snape and his threats. What can he really do to me?"

"Actually, he can do just what he said." Hermione, who was tagging along with her nose buried in her Transfigurations notes, informed him. "If a teacher fails you at the end of fifth year and you have to repeat the year, you are not allowed to take the OWLs. It hasn't happened at Hogwarts in years, at least not in fifth year, but Marcus Flint failed Transfigurations in his seventh year and had to take his NEWTs one year late."

"Snape wouldn't..."

"Of course he would. That's Snape we're talking about." Harry reminded him. "Hey, what's going on over there?"

Angelina Johnson, the Gryffindor Quiddich captain stood on the Quiddich field arguing with none other than Draco Malfoy, who was holding, what looked like a Soccer ball in his hand.

"You'll be playing in the air, we on the ground." Harry heard the Slytherin yell as they got closer. "What's the problem?"

"We booked the pitch!" Angelina yelled back.

"Hey Neville!" Ron picked the first friendly face among the bystanders. "What's going on?"

Neville turned. "Draco got a Soccer ball for Christmas and wanted to teach us how to play. Professor Snape said we could play here, since the ground's nice and flat and Quiddich is played in the air anyway, but Angelina won't let us." he explained.

"Soccer?" asked Ron baffled.

"Draco?" Harry repeated incredulously.

"You're playing with the Slytherins, Neville?" Hermione asked.

"For your information: I am a Ravenclaw." little Minty told her promptly. "It isn't a house team." Neville tried to explain. "We just want to have a little fun, not play for house points."

"You're spying on us, Malfoy, admit it!" Angelina yelled.

"Don't call me Malfoy! My name's Snape!"

That silenced everybody.

"Uh... What?" Angelina asked perplexed.

"My name's Snape." Draco repeated. "I'm legally adopted."

Crabbe and Goyle nodded eagerly.

"I knew it!" crowed Ron. "I knew they were related."

"Oh, so that's how you aced that test in Potions today." Hermione hissed angrily.

"Oh no. Dad didn't tell me anything about what he was planning." Draco hissed back. "He never even taught me about dye potions."
Their argument finally grew so loud that Madame Hooch came over to find out what was going on. To the Gryffindor Quiddich team's horror she decided that Snape was right and that she loved the idea of starting a Soccer club at Hogwarts.

"It'll be a wonderful alternative for children who can't fly that well or don't have their own brooms," she declared. "And some muggle borns prefer Soccer to Quiddich anyway."

Draco smirked at Angelina's horrified expression and led his group onto the pitch to show them how to kick a ball.

Harry sighed. "Well, we'll just have to ignore them."

That was easier said than done, though. It was hard to concentrate on catching the snitch while below him Crabbe and Goyle were trying to figure out how to direct a ball into the direction they wanted with their feet despite the snow.

Neville wasn't doing much better than the two Slytherin goons, but apparently he was having lots of fun anyway. In fact the whole group seemed to enjoy themselves immensely. The frequent laughter from below kept distracting the Quiddich players and the Chasers kept dropping the Quaffle.

When Draco had to pick it up for them for the fifth time he shouted up to them: "Are you sure you don't want to come down and play with us instead? You can't lose a Soccer ball that easily."

The Gryffindors didn't deem that worthy of an answer, but Draco didn't mind. Things were going great for him. Most of the friends he'd invited to play were eager to try again soon and several other students had gathered to watch them. Maybe some of them would want to join them as well next time.

If they did, there might actually be a chance to start that Soccer Club Professor Hooch was hoping for.

On his way back inside Draco made a detour into the great hall and hung up his tutoring offer on the notice board. He still needed a way to make some money and just because nobody he knew had taken money for tutoring at Hogwarts before didn't have to mean none of the rich kids were willing to pay. It seemed worth a try.

Draco smiled when he heard the excited whispers of the group of second years that had watched him hang up the parchment. He didn't stay to listen to what they had to say though. Instead he slipped down into the dungeons and into his father's office. Let Vincent and Gregory look for him all over the school. He'd spent the whole day with them.

Now he wanted to be with his Dad. It was a good feeling to know where he belonged again.

A/N: So did you like it? Think Draco's Soccer Club has a future?

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