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**Redeem Me**

by [Samayel](http://archiveofourown.org/users/Samayel)

**Summary**

Two years after the events of Harry's sixth year at Hogwarts, Draco stumbles back into his life. Harry is a bitter and vengeful young man, Draco is a walking wreck...and who is helping who? (Explicit rating is for later chapters. This fic is HBP compliant with only very small adjustments to suit this plot.) OOC- is for semiDark!Harry.
Interrupted Musings, Interrupted Meal

Harry found himself brooding...again. The year since Voldemort’s defeat and destruction had been difficult in every way. He'd lost friends in the short, ugly war that preceded his destruction of Tom Riddle, spent months hunting down left over Death Eaters and sympathizers for the Ministry, watched his few friends grow apart from him until there was scarcely room for him in their lives, and poured himself into magical studies to compensate for the loss of his seventh year at Hogwarts.

Loss and stress had made him quiet and grim, most particularly the loss of Albus Dumbledore. It had gnawed at him relentlessly since the end of sixth year, an aching reminder of how quickly evil could do irreparable damage. The deaths of Ginny, and later Hermione, had hurt him terribly, but not as profoundly as the loss of Dumbledore had, coming, as it had, on the heels of Sirius’ murder.

It was that, more than anything else, that had changed him. The world had needed a hero, and there had been no time for Harry to grieve. Even now, there were a few tattered remnants of old Death Eater covens still trying to blend into the background and escape the Ministry. Harry hounded them relentlessly, ceaseless in his quest for retribution, sure that he would be satisfied only when every last one of them was dead and buried.

It was better now. The battles were fewer and far less severe than at first. The initial fighting had been bad enough to leave a few scars on Harry that even magic couldn't cure. The shock of hair just above his left temple had been left white as snow by a near miss with an Unforgivable, so he let his hair grow long to cover most of it. Another curse had nearly taken off his leg, and the Healers had been quick and expert, but the scarring remained visible down most of his right thigh. These were just physical injuries, and Harry shrugged them off as quickly as they were healed, but the Healers had nothing that could salve his heart.

The press had taken to calling him Black Harry and Dumbledore's Revenge and other ridiculous names that had only a little to do with his wardrobe and a lot to do with his conduct. His black robes were perfect for the kind of work he had to do. Night raids on tiny cells of Death Eaters called for dark gear, but the nicknames came because of the dead or maimed Death Eaters that were often found in Harry’s wake. He was careful not to get caught red-handed…sometimes literally…and it was a fortunate thing that the Auror service discreetly approved of his actions, but fearful families that held sympathy for the slain had turned their voices to the press, sure that Harry was responsible…and they were right.

The Daily Prophet had actually changed their tune within months of Voldemort's death, going from calling him "The Savior Of The Wizarding World" to "a loose cannon with no conscience!" Not that Harry cared what the staff of The Prophet thought, since he held a special license granted by the Ministry, authorizing him to act as he saw fit where Death Eaters were involved. The fact that very few lived to see the inside of Azkaban didn't really bother him either. In Harry's book, a few dozen
dead Death Eaters were just a good start.

The unfinished business with Snape and Malfoy still smarted even after more than a year. The last time Harry had seen either of them had been at Snape's trial at the Ministry. In the end, Snape had been absolved of guilt, since it was divulged that Dumbledore had been aware of the entire situation and had known the risks of being near Snape while the Unbreakable Oath was in effect. Malfoy had just sat in silence the entire time, apparently still in Snape's custody since their flight from Hogwarts months before.

Lucius Malfoy was killed in the final battle with Voldemort, Narcissa had suffered a complete breakdown and resided in St. Mungo's, and with Draco implicated in a Death Eater plot and bearing the Dark Mark upon his arm, the Ministry had seized all lands and properties from the Malfoys. Draco's appearance at the trial was the first he'd made in months. The only thing Harry remembered about that day, other than blind rage at their being freed, was Draco's complete silence and lack of attitude. Harry couldn't afford a public scene, and had just watched from a balcony, simmering with rage, while Snape, and a vaguely numb-looking Draco Malfoy, strolled out of the Ministry and back into world.

A few days later, he'd taken great pains to send a short message to Snape. It was a classic of brevity. Just three lines.

'This island is mine. You have a week to get off of it. If I see you again, no potion will cure you. HP.'

Three days later, the rumor mill had it that Snape had made a few hasty goodbyes and left for Germany. Nothing was heard from or about Draco Malfoy since.

"Harrrrrryyyy....come on down, love, dinner's ready!" Molly Weasley's voice rang out from downstairs.

Harry looked at the clock and realized that he'd been lost in thought for nearly an hour. He put aside the books on Occlumency and Wandless Magic Theory that he'd been failing to actually read, and headed down to dinner.

The Burrow was his home now. Arthur and Molly had understood why he didn't want to live in Grimmauld Place after Sirius's death, and had taken him into their home cheerfully. They even shuffled the upstairs rooms so that Harry could have a small comfortable room of his own, with ample space for his work desk and books. Ron played Beater for the Cannons now, and visited whenever his schedule allowed, just like Fred and George, Bill and Fleur, Percy and Charlie.

Ginny. Poor Ginny had been killed outright in a terror strike by Death Eaters in the first days of the war. That tragedy had hung over all their lives ever since. Later, Hermione had been murdered in cold blood while in Diagon Alley, and it had taken almost a year for Ron to start his life again. Bill still wore his scars with pride, but they constantly reminded Harry of the night that Malfoy had breached Hogwarts' defenses.

George now wore a more modern version of the magical eye that Mad-Eye Moody had used, owed to a curse explosion at their shop, which had been an early target in the war. At least the inventions, for which the twins were now famous, had paid off. They held a half dozen Ministry contracts, and supplied the Auror service, as well as Harry, with quite a few handy tricks. That coup had brought in a flood of money, enriching not only Fred and George, but Harry as well.

Most of the time, it was just Molly and Arthur and Harry. Despite their mutual grief, something about the Burrow had always felt like home, or what Harry thought home should be. Perhaps it was the
well worn, but serviceable, furnishings that spoke of comfort and familiarity, or perhaps it was the heavenly aromas that came from Molly’s always busy kitchen. Even the ghoul rattling about in the attic seemed right and good. The Dursleys’ house had never felt like a home to Harry, despite having lived there almost eleven years. There was very little left in the world that Harry could say he truly loved…and almost all of it was here in this house.

Harry sat down and started serving himself. Arthur was already smiling in satisfaction while he devoured his stew and bread. It was thick, hearty fare that stuck to one’s ribs, the only kind Molly ever made, and as she was deft with her seasonings, Harry savored every bite. A childhood spent deprived of food made Harry an appreciative eater, and Molly Weasley loved few things more than seeing that empty stomachs were made full.

The pace of their meal slowed as they went, and soon a bit of supper conversation trickled in between bites.

“Oddest thing at work today, Harry. Spot of advice from you might shine a little light on the subject. What, exactly, is a Cee-Dee Player?” Arthur had a look of intense curiosity on his face, as he always did when Muggle devices were involved.

“Well, CD’s are a Muggle way to store music and then listen to it whenever they want to hear it…and a CD Player is the device that ‘reads’ the music off of a CD and ‘plays’ the music out loud for them. What happened?” Harry’s interest was piqued. Vandals were always executing pranks on Muggles, and occasionally Harry picked up tips on anti-Muggle activity from Arthur’s office.

“Ahhh! That explains a lot. Some clever wag charmed one of those ‘Players’ to play only one kind of Muggle music non-stop day and night, and locked some poor Muggle fellow in a room with it. Drove the poor blighter right to the edge. We found him battering his head against the door. St. Mungo’s is patching him up, but we’ve had a deuce of a time trying to silence the thing.”

“Really? I wouldn’t have thought music would do that to anyone. What did he charm it to play, or do you know?”

“Hadn’t the foggiest myself, but Jenkins…you know the new lad at the office…he said it was called ‘rap’. Odd thing to call music if you ask me, but it did have that fellow we found rapping his head against a locked door fairly hard. Lucky we found him as early as we did!”

Harry stifled an inward chuckle. Arthur’s stories from work often gave him a smile.

“There’s a pretty strong spell I remember reading about that interrupts Muggle devices…especially ones that depend on electricity. I’ll look it up for you, if you’d like?”

“Ah, thank you, Harry. That’s our secret weapon at work! Always got a good spell up your sleeve when we-”

Harry jumped from the table when the wards signaled someone approaching the edge of the property. Arthur and Molly knew that people welcomed here had been cleared to enter by Floo or Apparition, but the wards Harry had built against strangers were the most powerful anywhere in England save Hogwarts. Harry nodded to them and headed for the door, while Molly and Arthur made sure their wands were handy. There were Death Eaters still roaming the world, albeit fewer now, but it was well known that Harry resided with the Weasleys, and there had been more than one attack over the last two years.

It had been almost a year since the last, but they treated every alert from the wards like it was a full on assault, and Harry always took the lead. He strolled confidently through the early fall snow that
drifted across the walkway, and had his wand drawn and ready when he saw the indistinct shape at the edge of the wards.

It was definitely human, but Harry wondered briefly if it was an Inferi, an animated corpse, until he saw that the shambling gait was just made necessary by the bitter chill in the air. The figure at the end of the path looked fairly wretched, in ill-fitting Muggle clothes that appeared entirely wrong for this kind of weather, and they were shuffling from foot to foot, trying to keep warm.

Harry drew closer, and leveled his wand at the pitiful figure in the worn blue jumper and tattered jeans. He still didn’t cross the wards, and kept the last ten paces between them while he called out through the swirling snow.

“Announce yourself and your business or move on! This is private property, and the penalty for trespassing is higher than you want to pay!”

The slight figure in the hooded jumper jerked slightly, as if suddenly awakened, and looked up, directly at Harry. Cloud gray eyes, wide and slightly dazed looking, met Harry’s, and Harry saw blond hair peeking from under the edge of the jumper’s hood.

Draco Malfoy was looking at Harry for the first time in about two years, and opened his mouth to speak, his once familiar drawl now a harsh croak.

“P-please help m-me. S-sanc…sanctuary. P-please.”

Harry stood stock still, more completely gob-smacked than if a tribe of giants had dropped by and politely asked to sit down for tea and biscuits.

“Fuck.” It had been such a good day until now.

TBC
Harry's Rage, Molly's Hope

DISCLAIMER: Warning! I make no claim to any property of J.K. Rowling's, and am in no way profiting by this. I do offer her my sincerest thanks for allowing us this garden of the mind in which we play. Further Warning! This story...and likely any I ever write...are dominated by gay themes and characters. That's how it is, if this in any way makes you uncomfortable...do not read further.

Redeem Me…by Samayel

Chapter 2: Harry’s Rage, Molly’s Hope

“Malfoy.”

Harry spat the word like curse. The boy in front of him bore little resemblance to the one he’d seen in the Ministry a year ago. Draco Malfoy was no longer pale, but almost ghostly in pallor, and the blond bangs that jutted out from under the hood of his jumper were greasy spikes that looked as if they had been hacked short at some time in the recent past. The dark hollows under Draco’s eyes looked more like sullen bruises than anything else, and Draco appeared to have difficulty focusing his eyes.

Draco’s hands were shoved under his armpits for lack of gloves, and the chill of October winds was biting at both of them. Harry had outrage to keep him warm, but apparently Malfoy had nothing but several thin layers of Muggle clothing more fit for late spring. Even beneath layers of clothing, Harry could tell that Malfoy was too skinny to be healthy. Draco wiped his nose on his sleeve, and broke into a muffled fit of coughing that left his eyes watery, and the noises that rattled in his lungs sounded decidedly unhealthy. Harry really didn’t care, but he was dumbfounded as to why Draco Malfoy would have the nerve to seek sanctuary here…and from him!

“Sanctuary? You want sanctuary, Malfoy?” Amused sarcasm dripped from Harry’s tongue. “Sure…come on in…invite your pals to join in and kill a few more people I love. FUCK YOU! I can’t believe you have the balls to show up here and ask that!”

Harry stepped through the wards, feeling the faint crackle of their power right through his skin. Anyone not keyed to the wards he’d built would be fried to a crisp in a heartbeat, and Harry liked it that way. Malfoy was still silent, unfazed by Harry’s outburst, but he did have the grace to hang his head and back up a step. Malfoy wobbled, sniffling before Harry heard him speak again.

“I…I’m sorry. N-need…help. P-please, Potter.”

“You’re fucking daft! Shove off back to whatever hole you crawled out from under, before I kill you on general principle. In fact, I think the only reason I’m letting you live…is because it looks like that would be crueler! Now piss off!”

Malfoy looked up with eyes that pleaded even in the face of no hope, and seemed briefly lucid.

“You…you h-have to help me. Th-there’s nowhere…no one else. I…I don’t have a wand. I’ll swear an oath. I j-just want sanc-sanctuary.”

Malfoy started to break down completely, and his face twisted into a grimace while he tried to keep from coming apart completely. Harry was unmoved, and to be completely honest, more than a little pleased by seeing Draco in such a state. He couldn’t just leave the pathetic little bastard out here, though, and eventually he’d have to chase Malfoy off…if the prat wouldn’t go of his own accord.
Harry bit back the curses and hexes on the tip of his tongue, and smiled pleasantly for show.

“I don’t ‘have’ to do anything, Malfoy. I owe you a world of hurt, and I think I’ve been generous enough so far, but I’ll indulge this just a little longer. Nowhere to go? What about St. Mungo’s, they’ve got a free ward for the sick and down on their luck? What about your precious clique of Slytherin schoolmates? Wouldn’t at least one of them look after you? There’s always a job or two out there. Considered getting dirty hands for a living yet, or have you just scuffed around sponging off others until I’m the only person left who hasn’t already thrown your arse to the curb?”

Shaking from standing still in the cold, Draco’s lower lip trembled, and then he broke into another coughing fit, doubling over while his lungs racked. Harry was observant enough to see the tiny smear of vermilion in the spittle that Draco wiped from lips a second later. The harsh croak was back, reedy and grating on his ears.

“N-nobody will let me stay. St. Mungo’s recognized me and they…they threw me out. Everyone else…is…is scared of you. I…I tried everywhere…Hogsmeade…Diagon Alley…but no one will even talk to me. Then I…” Malfoy shivered and paused, and Harry suspected that something was off. “I g-got robbed. They t-took my wand, my s-signet ring, everything…everything I had. Everyone else is afraid of you. I’m sick…I’m cold…I need help…so I c-came to you. Please…please help me. I’ll do anything you ask, Harry.”

The sound of his first name being spoken by Malfoy struck a nerve in Harry, coming alongside the reminder of his darkening reputation in the wizarding world. Harry felt his temper cresting fast, and snarled out his response.

“It’s Potter to you! You haven’t got the fucking right to call me anything else! Wanna know why no one will help you? I don’t think it’s me that keeps them from bothering…I think it’s that, under the surface, there isn’t one fucking thing about you worth helping. You’re a miserable, murderous little shit, and we’re all holding our breath waiting for you to just die and get out of our sight. Besides, if you lost your wand, how did you get here without someone’s help? Answer me that, fuckwit!”

Draco cringed a little, stifling a cough. “There was an old, half-blind witch in Diagon Alley. Didn’t recognize me. Sh-she hailed the Knight Bus for me. I walked fr-from t-town. I just thought…I don’t know…I…thought you might help me, because Dumbledore would have.”

At the mention of the former headmaster, Harry exploded into action. A booted foot to the chest sent Draco sliding across the ground, retching and gasping for air, and a second later, his right arm was being wrenched until the pop of dislocation could be heard. There was no way to even scream, since Harry’s boot continued to slam into Draco’s stomach and ribs, and only vague gagging sounds came from the skinnier boy, who began to vomit strings of bile, and passed out cold seconds later.

Harry punctuated his kicks with shouted curses. “YOU…MURDERING…FUCK! How dare you mention his name! You got him killed, and I watched him die, because of you! I’LL FUCKING KILL YOU!”

Harry’s eyes were bulging, and veins in his face and neck throbbed heavily while something almost like a growl formed in the pit of his throat. When Malfoy stopped struggling, and appeared to be unconscious, Harry pulled the hood from Draco’s head, and grabbed hold of a thick handful of greasy blond hair, dragging Draco’s limp body toward the wards, talking to himself in blind rage as he went.

“It was a fucking accident, right? The pathetic shit tried to cross my wards. Another dead Death Eater…no big deal. Who’d even care? Had this coming since~”
“HARRY JAMES POTTER! Put that boy down this instant! What do you think you’re doing?!” Molly’s incredulity and outrage snapped Harry back to reality, and he dropped Draco to the ground. Arthur and Molly were just inside the wards, staring in shock at Harry’s treatment of the stranger at the edge of their property.

“Just taking out the trash! It’s Malfoy…the arrogant little ferret came begging for sanctuary! Sanctuary…here! Can you believe that?” Harry looked down at the motionless form on the ground beneath him, and snorted in contempt.

Molly looked soberly at Arthur for just a second, then pursed her lips, as if making a decision that deeply disagreed with her.

“Bring him in.”

Harry stood with mouth agape, shell-shocked by Molly’s declaration.

“But…but…it’s Malfoy?! You can’t be serious! He let those bastards into Hogwarts and…this…this piece of shit is why Dumbledore’s dead!”

“Harry Potter, you know I love you dearly, but don’t you make me repeat myself! Sanctuary is a tradition since the days of witch burnings, and no Weasley OR Prewett has ever turned away a wizard or witch seeking sanctuary! This family will not break with a centuries old history of kindness, and we will most certainly not attack a person who comes in peace. If you don’t pick that boy up this instant and bring him inside…then I will!”

Harry hadn’t been on the receiving end of one of Molly Weasley’s tirades since he and Ron had made use of Mr. Weasley’s flying car. Flabbergasted past the point of being able to maintain anger, Harry slumped his shoulders with sullen and poorly veiled outrage…and cast Mobilicorpus with an irritable flick of his wand, raising Draco Malfoy into the air. Harry towed Malfoy along behind him as he trudged back to the Burrow, silently willing the wards to permit his onetime childhood rival through without harm.

Molly Weasley watched sternly as they walked the path to the house, ignoring Harry’s muttered complaints as they went. Harry was already rallying a chain of logic that would support his position, hoping that as soon as she’d had her fill of healing Draco up, she’d let Harry send him on his way as soon as possible. It was inconceivable to him that Mum Weasley, however sweet she was, would allow the boy who got Bill maimed into her house. He’d bide his time, then bring it up later, using his most reasonable tone of voice, and hope she saw reason.

Harry followed Molly upstairs and into the room next to Harry’s, once used by Percy. When he ended the spell while Draco was a half foot over the bed, letting him flop gracelessly onto the sheets, Molly bristled, and gave Harry a glare so menacing that even Harry…who had faced and slain a Dark Lord at the peak of his power…quailed a moment and backed down.

“I’m sorry. I really am, Mum. It’s just…I don’t want you in danger. I don’t trust him, and if anything happened to you two…God, I don’t know what I’d do. I don’t know how I’d live. He shouldn’t be here, and it isn’t safe, but…it’s your call.”

Molly’s features softened, touched by Harry’s concern for her.

“Harry, I know there are a lot of reasons to not help someone who’s done the things that this boy has, but Arthur and I didn’t fight that war just to live out our lives in hiding, turning away people in need. We’ve never lived that way, and we won’t now. Bring my supplies from the cupboard in the kitchen. I’ve still a few basic potions left from patching up my boys, and a few tidbits left from when
the war was still on. If I need more, I’ll Floo Poppy Pomfrey and see what she can send me.”

Harry nodded assent and headed down the stairs as quickly as he could, not wanting to leave Molly alone with Draco, conscious or no, for more than a few minutes.

Molly Weasley set about casting a few diagnostic spells to sort out the sickly boy’s precise condition and ailments, and almost dropped her wand in shock and repulsion. The mental list of problems was so long as to stagger her memory, and much of it suggested things...dark, ugly things...that she almost dared not speak aloud for fear that they would be made true and certain.

Aside from a high fever and the beginnings of pneumonia, Draco Malfoy had been the victim of many injuries, long before Harry had attacked him. Some of the harm done to his body was long-healed, and there was evidence of multiple magical Healings to sustain his life while he was repeatedly tortured. There were ribs that had been broken more than a few times, and had just been broken again by Harry, scarring of a lung that suggested a past puncture…now agitated by the same rib poking inward once again, the shoulder just dislocated by Harry, and multiple surface scars from cuts, abrasions and burns. To top that off, there was faint scarring in…other places…which implied severe and continual sexual violation, and infection with two separate, but not uncommon or incurable, Muggle social diseases. Last, he was suffering the effects of prolonged malnutrition, in the form of scurvy. A sentence to Azkaban would have been a far gentler punishment than what this boy had suffered since the war’s end.

Draco Malfoy was lucky to be alive, but Molly could scarcely call surviving such things ‘luck’. Whatever debt the youngest Malfoy may have owed for his crimes had certainly been paid in full, and it was beyond her to hold hatred of others past the point of reason. Molly sat in the chair beside the bed, horrified by what she’d learned in the past minute. She was determined to do what she could for the poor thing, but it might well be that some of this was beyond her skill. This boy needed real Healers. All she could do was manage with the supplies at hand and try to stabilize him until he could be sent on, and that would just have to do.

Harry returned, satchel of potions and herbs in hand. He placed the bag on the desktop and turned to Molly. “You alright? You don’t look well…what’s wrong?”

Molly weighed her options. Even if she wasn’t a mediwitch, it was a betrayal of another’s privacy to share details as serious as the ones that surrounded Draco’s injuries. Harry’s help would be needed, and perhaps, just perhaps, a little bit of knowledge might open his mind to the possibility of forgiving Draco.

She’d watched Harry brood and darken for over a year, and it broke her heart each time he left at night, and The Prophet later reported another round of suspicious killings. All that loss, all that suffering. It had all but snuffed out the happy, shy little boy she remembered running about with her Ron. Certainly, the people he’d killed deserved Azkaban, or some punishment, but not death. Harry would refuse to speak about the subject when approached, and there were details that leaked back to them through the Ministry, tales of what Harry might have done, that were so terrible in aspect that Molly honestly didn’t want to know if their Harry had done such things.

It might be too much to hope for, but this act of sanctuary seemed a plausible way to make Harry confront his loss and move forward. Anything to break the spell of sadness and anger that hung over Harry’s heart and mind. Molly made up her mind, and sighed deeply before looking Harry in the eyes.

“I’m fine, Harry. No worries...I was just a bit tired, love. Thank you for fetching my things. Harry, before I start, we need to talk.”
TBC!!!
Molly led Harry out into the hall and closed the door to the room in which Draco lay. She leveled her most serious gaze upon Harry, and impressively, for a short and frowzy housewife of some fifty-plus years, she had Harry Potter waiting quietly for her to speak. A determined Molly Weasley was a force not to be trifled with at any time!

“I spelled him for diagnosis, Harry. Aside from what was done to him today…on OUR front walk, that boy shows every sign of having been starved and tortured, possibly for months. I may not be able to treat more than a few of his most minor maladies, and if at all possible, I mean to see if St. Mungo’s can take him after I’ve gotten him a bit better.”

Harry broke in. “He said St. Mungo’s threw him out. Apparently they won’t take Death Eaters in…probably because the wards are full of their victims…it’s like asking for trouble to happen. His classmates and a few of the places around the wizarding communities shrugged him off, too. That’s why he came here. Nowhere else left to beg, I guess.”

Harry left unspoken Draco’s assertion that ‘fear of Harry Potter’s wrath’ was a part in people’s refusal to offer him help. Molly’s brow creased as she scowled and thought of another possibility.

“Tell Arthur to Firecall Poppy Pomfrey, and see if she can at least visit and consult. If she can’t come, I’ll write a list of what I’ll need to do this myself and owl it to her, but I’d prefer she have a firsthand look. I only have remedies for some of the surface level injuries, and for the sickness in his lungs. At the least, I’ll need some Scaradicate Salve and some new Sleeping Draughts, as well as a few spells I’m sure she can look up for me once I’ve spoken to her.”

Harry nodded compliance, despite obvious discomfort about Draco being in the house at all, and turned to deliver her message to her husband. Molly spoke again, and Harry turned back and listened intently.

“Harry. I’m deadly serious when I say that young Malfoy has been a victim of someone…before you! The injuries he’s sustained…all I can say is that your fit of temper outside was nothing compared to what he’s been through. He isn’t here to pay for his crimes, he’s here to recover, and I expect you to conduct yourself accordingly. You’ll not harm him under this roof, and I expect you to help me get him back into decent shape, do you hear me?”

Harry grimaced, then nodded agreement again, cursing a blue streak inside. Malfoy had been in the house less than ten minutes, and his otherwise peaceful home life had already fallen apart. The little shit could actually ruin Harry’s day while unconscious! Nonetheless, Harry headed downstairs to pass Molly’s words to Arthur.

Molly Weasley entered into the room where Draco waited, and rummaged through the satchel of
Healer’s supplies. She pinpointed several potions that would be useful, a few herbs that she could use later in other potions, and a few odds and ends that might yet make themselves handy. Then she raised her wand and went to work.

It took quite a bit longer than she expected to work just the spells she knew, and several had to be cast again, since Draco’s condition was serious enough to resist lower order spells. At least she was able to kill the infections, but it would take a fair amount of time before the rest of the healing took place naturally. She’d reduced the swelling on his briefly dislocated shoulder, reset the ribs that had cracked…this time properly and well, and closed some of the more serious half-healed wounds that had been draining strength from the boy. No doubt the pneumonia had set in from being half-dead to start with, and yet wandering about in clothes that were scarcely fit to warm a body in spring.

The social diseases had been stalled, but she hadn’t a cure for them and would need Poppy’s help with that. What Draco needed most right now was a proper meal, a decent hot bath, and a few good nights of rest. Given the advanced state of Draco’s starvation, Molly thought it best to start with something simple, some bread and a bit of heavy broth perhaps. These were things Molly knew well enough, and could see to quickly.

Her work was done for now, and she felt more than a bit tired. There had been a time when her energy had been boundless, but time does what it does, and those days were past. She’d need Harry’s help if they were to get Draco bathed and properly bundled off to bed while she fixed something to eat for the lad. She knew Harry wouldn’t like it, but at the moment, what Harry liked was the least of her concerns.

Harry had delivered the message to Arthur promptly, and while Mr. Weasley conversed with Poppy Pomfrey, Harry drifted to the kitchen and wolfed down the rest of his meal. He needed to think…quietly…just for a few minutes before he faced the situation upstairs again.

‘So someone gave the bastard what for before I got to him. Big fucking deal! He’s still here…still alive…and still a pain in my ass! I can’t believe I have to help take care of the prat. God knows I love Molly, but she’s too sweet for her own good. I just know there has to be more to this than Draco needing a place for a few nights. Something’s off about this…and he wasn’t saying what. There’s more to it…I can just feel it! Fuck. Now I can’t leave here until he’s gone…I can’t leave her alone with him in this house at night. As soon as he gets hold of a wand, there’s no telling what he might be capable of. Maybe I can pull some strings and see if St. Mungo’s will bend the rules and let him in anyway. Anything to get him the hell out of here!’

Harry gulped the last of his tea to wash down his supper, and headed back upstairs. Molly was resting in the chair beside the bed, sorting a few herbs on the desktop.

He’d made up his mind to play it cool for now. He’d never had a mother, not the way other people had, and Mum Weasley was as close to one as he’d ever known. He’d done a good job, keeping danger, and his life outside of here, from creeping into the home of the people he loved, but now a potential time bomb was ticking in the bed next to Molly, and it scared him more than he dared to admit.

If he found a solid reason to believe that Draco’s presence put Molly or Arthur in any danger, he knew he’d have to kill Draco outright or at least remove him from the premises by force. It would be better to leave the Weasleys angry with him and have to move away, than to see two more beloved friends killed because of him…again. If that meant watching Draco like a hawk, and doing Molly’s bidding when it came to helping heal Draco, while he dug for information, then so be it.

“Everything alright? Need me to do anything?” Harry asked innocently, if a little stiffly.
Molly sighed relief. “Yes. I’m going to draw a hot bath for him. He’s been Merlin knows where and some of his injuries won’t heal properly until he’s thoroughly clean. Once the bath’s drawn, I’m going downstairs to make some broth for him, mixed with a few herbs that will help feed him up a bit and get him back on his feet. I want you to peel off those filthy clothes of his, then bring him to the bathroom and settle him in the tub. He needs a good scrubbing down with soap and all, and be gentle where he’s still healing.”

Harry lost his mask of innocence a heartbeat later. “WHAT? You want me to…to…”

“Bathe him. Properly…and carefully, too! No just dipping him in and dabbing a cloth at him. I want him clean and warmed up before he’s back in this bed.”

Harry’s incredulity reached new heights. “You can’t be serious. Why me? Can’t it wait until he comes to and can do it himself? I mean, bloody-”

“HARRY! I’m not in the habit of explaining myself! I need to talk to Arthur and find out when Poppy can discuss this with me. I have a bath to draw, a meal to start for when he does wake, and clothes to sort out for him. He’s been dosed with a Sleeping Draught and I have too much to do already! Will you PLEASE do what I ask of you without all this carrying on?”

The expression on Molly’s face was one of pinched frustration, and Harry felt suddenly ashamed. Only Molly ever made him blush these days, and she’d done it again. He didn’t mean to get her so worked up…but really, bathing Draco Malfoy like he was a bloody infant? He’d have to…have to touch…eeeww! Harry had stalked Death Eaters to their lairs, hunted Horcruxes through magical traps and faced slavering monsters…but touching a naked Draco Malfoy…now THAT was scary!!!

Harry sighed expansively and gave in. “I’m sorry. I just…I’ve never…well…”

Molly opened her eyes wide with realization. “Oh! Well...Harry...people are just people, no matter who they are. I forgot you’ve never done any Healing before. After raising my children, some things are just old hat to me. It’s one of those things you just ignore while you get on with what has to be done. You’ll be fine. I’m off to draw the bath, so just be a dear and do what you must, then bring him in a few minutes from now, alright?”

“Aye. Will do, Mum.”

Molly toddled off and Harry heard the sound of the water running, filling the bath slowly, while he stared at the pathetic figure sprawled across Percy’s old bed. Harry inched forward nervously, stomach turning at what he knew he had to do.

‘Come on, Potter! You faced a basilisk when you were bloody twelve. You won the Tri-Wizard Tournament. You gutted the Dark Lord like a Christmas goose without breaking a sweat. No reason to be afraid of this, is there?’

Harry started with the laces to the worn out tennies on Draco’s feet. That was easy enough to take care of, but the ratty socks, covered in holes, that came next were just filthy. Harry held his breath while he peeled off the disgusting things. The stink was worse than Ron’s! Then he carefully removed the too thin jumper and the shirt beneath it. It took a bit of fumbling with Draco’s limp arms, but he finally got them free and dropped them into the pile of discarded clothes.

It turned out that Draco stunk everywhere. Once the shirt was off, Harry’s nostrils were assaulted by both the initial funk of Draco’s unwashed feet, and the peppery, acrid stink of old sweat. Despite his contempt for the person in front of him, Harry stared in surprise at Draco’s too skinny chest and matchstick arms.
Scars and still-healing wounds, both large and small, practically dominated the landscape of Draco’s body. The slender chest was hairless, save for small blond tufts of fur beneath the arms, and what should have been an expanse of pale, healthy flesh, was now a battlefield’s worth of magical and non-magical damage. Harry had seen the work of Death Eaters before, and this showed all the signs of being their handiwork.

There were burns from hot irons, old whip weals, and signs of cutting implements having been used at least a month ago. None had been properly healed by magic, but Harry knew enough of Death Eater habits to know that Draco likely wouldn’t have lived if some spells hadn’t been used to occasionally heal him.

Molly hadn’t been kidding about Draco being tortured. This was the work of a person, or several persons, with a knowledge of how to inflict survivable agony. It occurred to Harry that, just maybe, it was possible that Draco really did want sanctuary for honest reasons. The black and angry parts of Harry’s psyche warred with the impulse to sympathize. Draco had played with fire…if he’d gotten burned, it was his own fault. He was lucky that Harry hadn’t found him first. Harry had never tortured people for days or weeks or months, but when he wanted someone dead, they died, and he made sure they hurt before they left.

Also visible were two things that caught Harry’s attention immediately. One was the faint lines of an old curse scar that ran along Draco’s chest. Harry had put that there sixth year, with a spell from Snape’s old Potions textbook. Sectumsempra. One word and he’d nearly killed Malfoy on the spot. How often had he wondered whether finishing the job that day might have saved lives? Would Dumbledore still be there for him, his guide and teacher, his trusted friend? Albus was just a painting now. A memory locked in a frame, sitting in a school that was only just reopening this year. It could have been different…if he’d just killed Draco then.

The other thing Harry saw was the shadowy remnant of the Dark Mark on Draco’s slim arm. Branded into wan flesh was the Skull and Serpent herald of the Death Eaters. Once upon a time, this skinny, wretched boy had given himself over willingly, accepting a mark that bound him to Voldemort as a servant. The people who wore this mark were murderers, torturers, rapists and violent bigots. Across the wizarding world, this was a mark that made people draw away in fear of their lives. Innocent people…decent people with families and children and normal lives to live. So many had suffered at the hands of people who wore that mark, but Harry had turned the tide. Today, the wizarding world lived peacefully enough, but for those who wore this brand upon their arm. They fled in fear, as they ought to, fleeing the justice that was due them for their crimes, hiding like the cowards and bullies they had always been.

“Harry! The bath is ready. I’m off to the kitchen, then I’ll be sorting out some decent clothes for him. Bring him in when you’re ready.”

Molly’s voice broke Harry from his bitter reverie. It looked like the worst was last. He still had to get Draco’s trousers off, and the notion made his stomach roll in disgust. Harry had lived in a dormitory for almost six years at Hogwarts, but he’d never been comfortable with nudity. A lifetime being berated as a freak by the Dursleys hadn’t really prepared for him for intimacy of any kind, and the notion of taking off an unconscious person’s clothes just rankled!

Harry winced and half-looked away while he unbuttoned and unzipped the fly of Draco’s threadbare jeans, then he grabbed the cuffs at the bottom and pulled them away. As it turned out, Draco wasn’t wearing any underwear, and the job was finished just like that. Harry surveyed the rest of the damage.

Draco Malfoy was twitching in his potion-induced sleep, and his face was twisted into a grimace of
fear. Garbled words brushed past his lips, but Harry couldn’t make anything out except ‘No’ and ‘Please’.

Malfoy was starkers, and Harry couldn’t turn his gaze away. Slat-ribbed, hollow-eyed, and battered almost beyond recognition, Harry’s childhood enemy lay nude and vulnerable in front of him. Nestled in a puff of dark blond, beneath hipbones that, made obvious by long hunger, jutted sharply outward, Draco’s manhood was wrinkled in upon itself. The cold had made his genitals pull inward toward his body, and the effect left the impression of near-genderlessness.

Harry had imagined some grotesque situation involving a somewhat more visible evidence of manhood, and it caught him off his guard to realize that Draco was half-frozen, terrified even in his sleep, and badly maimed to boot. A tiny thread of guilt crept into his mind, nagging that his attack earlier had been unwarranted and cruel, and Harry pushed that thought away quickly. A hasty Mobilicorpus, and Harry was towing Draco along to the bath.

‘Draco Malfoy shows up. Draco Malfoy moves in. I’m going to bathe Draco Malfoy. Can this day get any worse? Maybe I should just give in and disembowel myself with a rusty nail before the universe takes that last question as a challenge.’

TBC!!!
Following Erections…Uh…Directions

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Redeem Me…by Samayel

Chapter 4: Following Erections…Uh…Directions

It was probably the most intensely embarrassing thing Harry had ever done, washing Draco with soap and scrubbing firmly but carefully with a towel. It didn’t seem possible that he could blush without interruption for nearly a half hour, but he proved that it could actually be done. Harry’s mind reeled at the necessity of touching Draco’s soft, yet feverishly hot skin, and shifting his limbs to bathe and scrub him properly. He’d held hands with girls, and kissed or snogged them a bit back in school, but nothing could have prepared him for washing down a naked boy…particularly since the boy was Draco Malfoy!

Despite his best efforts, a few of the untreated and smaller wounds opened and bled, and Harry was forced to cast a few minor Blood Staunching Charms he knew, just to keep the bath from turning red. The water was already filthy from the grime that had come off of Draco, and he’d had to drain the tub and start over again once already! It was gross in every respect that he could think of. At least it was almost over, and all that was left was to levitate Draco from the bath and keep him aloft while Harry dried him off with a towel.

Head lolling to one side in slumber, Draco hovered in the air just a few inches off the ground. Harry took a good look at what had become of the younger Malfoy. Harry had still been growing during his sixth year, and hadn’t stopped during the year after. He’d finally settled down at a respectable six feet and one inch, almost the same height as his father, or so he’d heard. Malfoy had been taller, or at least Harry’s match in height, since their first year, but the last two years hadn’t seen any growth for Draco, and in fact, it looked like he’d lost more than thirty or forty pounds of weight since school.

The niggling memory of brutally kicking Draco’s prone body came back, and Harry pushed it away again, making himself busy with the towel, drying Draco off as quickly as possible. His urgent need to distract himself led his way, and Harry carefully detached himself from what he was doing, and went about the business of patting Draco dry from head to toe.

The steamy haze in the bathroom was fairly comfortable, and Harry relaxed a bit while he patted and daubed soft, nearly white skin to dryness, carefully ignoring the flaccid male organ displayed before him. This didn’t prevent him from noticing that, even when soft, his was still a fair bit larger than Draco’s, but he refused to dwell on that notion for more than a few seconds. A few minutes passed while he worked, and then something both unexpected, and entirely horrifying, occurred, destroying his sense of detachment completely.

Harry suddenly became conscious of the way his own cock was filling out his trousers, engorging slowly with blood and swelling steadily, until the faint tickling sensation of arousal was beyond his ability to ignore.

“FUCK!”
'What the fuck am I doing?! This…this can’t be happening. Thisiswrongthisiswrongthisiswrong! This is soooo wrong! It’s a boy!…it’s Malfoy!…he’s out cold!…he’s fucking scarred all to hell and gone…what the hell is wrong with me?!

Harry made short work of the rest of drying Draco off, bombarding his mind with the least sensual images he could conjure.

‘Dead puppies! Snape naked! Filch in a G-string! Hagrid showing plumber’s crack! Please, pleeease, God, make this go away!’

Harry was a bit rough and distracted, quite purposefully, when he finally wiped down Draco’s groin. He tried not to look at what he was doing, but when he pulled the towel away after, his heart skipped a beat when he saw the long smear of crimson that had come from between Malfoy’s legs.

Panic threaded its way through Harry’s nerves. He’d seen a lot of blood in his time, and even caused the shedding of it for more than a few Death Eaters, but never…never THERE! Draco was bleeding…from…he’d been…someone must have…

Harry was all too familiar with the victims of Death Eaters. His mind made the final leap to realization, and he only barely made it to the sink, just in time to lose his dinner. He stood by the counter, still shaking even though his stomach was back under control.

Molly must know. She did the diagnostic spells, how could she not? Harry cast the Blood-Staunting Charm in the appropriate direction, hoping that more wouldn’t be necessary. If anyone had told him a week ago that he’d be bathing Draco Malfoy and casting Healing Spells at him instead of hexes, he’d have accused them flatly of total insanity.

There were many things that Harry had done this past year that could have been called questionable. He had killed in hot blood and in cold, and he had killed some of them slowly, leaving gruesome evidence behind as a warning to those who wore Voldemort’s Mark. The people he’d killed were murderers, or at least the deliberate allies of murderers, and that made a difference to him. Those who had surrendered to Ministry custody were safe, and only the handfuls of renegades that lurked in the shadows of the Muggle world had to fear him.

Bellatrix LeStrange had been one of those, hiding in an abandoned tenement flat with a few other fleeing killers. It had been Bellatrix who had killed Sirius, mocking Harry all the while, and it had been Bellatrix who attacked and killed Ginny at Platform Nine and Three-Quarters. Harry evened the score when he found her, and she hadn’t mocked him then. Before he finished, she had begged just to die, and he finally obliged her.

There were no traces of Dark Magic, because Harry hadn’t used any. He’d used a knife. The same knife he’d gutted Voldemort with, though Bellatrix hadn’t deserved such a perverse honor. It had taken longer than he’d intended, but he’d hung her gutted corpse from the rafters by her own entrails. Before the week was out, half a dozen more renegade Death Eaters had surrendered to the Ministry.

For all that Harry had done, he had never harmed an innocent, never violated another person sexually, and never tortured anyone for more than minutes before he killed them. Whoever did this to Draco deserved death, because while Draco was no innocent, that person was still out there somewhere, and no person so steeped in evil would balk just because there wasn’t a deserving victim handy.

When Draco finally woke up, Harry would have no choice but to question him about his past. Draco had lied about being robbed, and Harry was certain of it now. There were Death Eaters at the core of it, and Harry would make sure that they never harmed another human being this way.
Harry cleaned up the bathroom, and towed Draco’s levitated body along behind him, back to the bedroom. He lowered Draco gently into the bed this time, and set the sheets and blankets enough to keep Draco warm. It was Molly’s orders, right? It was necessary to be kind, for now. That sickly feeling in his stomach didn’t go away, no matter how much he told himself it wasn’t sympathy for Malfoy. Molly finally walked in, rescuing Harry from swirling thoughts, all of which were uncomfortable in the extreme. Poppy Pomfrey entered right behind her, and Harry felt a certain sympathy for the look of distaste on Madam Pomfrey’s face.

“Hmph! You didn’t say it was the Malfoy boy when you Firecalled, Molly. I wouldn’t have bothered to come this late in the evening if I’d known. If you wish to give him sanctuary, it’s your affair, and I shall help, but only because a Healer’s oath requires it.”

Molly rejoined. “Poppy, I didn’t tell you his name because I wanted you to actually come. Cast a diagnostic spell for yourself and you’ll see why I called you here. You should know that I value your time as much as my own…and I would never waste it, dear.”

Harry sat down in the chair and watched Poppy Pomfrey concentrate as she cast her spells. The woman had seen a lot of different injuries over the years, both from the war and from her position as Hogwarts resident medi witch. It was the first time Harry had ever seen her blanch. Molly turned to shoo Harry off before discussing things with Poppy, and Harry balked her immediately by looking her in the eye.

“I know…about what’s happened to him. As much as you do anyway. There’s no need to send me off. Do what you have to for him, I’m fine.”

Molly pursed her lips, unsure of how to proceed, and settled for turning the conversation back to Poppy.

“You see what I’m dealing with then. This is after I used as much of my old potion stores as I could, and cast the spells I do know for elementary healing. I can’t deal with some these things without help. The boy has done a lot of harm, Poppy, but no one should have suffered the things he has. I know you can see this.”

Poppy fumbled with her wand a bit, flushed and humbled. She’d taken Arthur’s call at face value, and assumed that the guest in question needed serious help. She may not have expected to see Draco Malfoy, the stripling boy who betrayed an entire school, but she wasn’t made of stone, and she had never refused a patient yet.

“Very well, Molly. I brought a few things along based on what you told me, and there are a few spells I can cast tonight. I’ll owl you the rest of what you need tomorrow. He’s a fortunate boy, to be here in the home of people he once helped terrorize. You’re a generous soul, Molly. It would ill behoove me to do any less.”

Molly smiled and relaxed. “Thank you, Poppy. I knew I could count on you, dearie. I’d never have trusted my own boys to anyone else’s care. If we can get him up and about, I’m sure he’ll be on his way soon enough, but I won’t have him leaving here until he’s well enough to care for himself.”

Poppy nodded and began to unpack her kit, handing potions to Molly and explaining the requirements for their use. When the salves and potions had been sorted out, Madam Pomfrey cast a series of complicated and very specific spells, with incantations that neither Harry nor Molly had ever heard. It took quite awhile to complete them, but the stern medi witch pocketed her wand and turned back to Molly and Harry when she was finished.

“I suppose you were right to call me. You did quite well on your own, but several of his ailments
have lingered far too long for my comfort. It may take quite some time for him to fully recover, and the potions I’m leaving with you may help ensure that he doesn’t relapse. I’m afraid he should stay a week at the least, possibly several...if you’re willing to commit to such a lengthy stay.”

“It will take as long as it takes,” Molly affirmed.

Poppy nodded somberly, then sighed and packed her kit.

“Do be careful, Molly. Don’t take on more than you can handle. Harry, I expect you to help take up some of the slack for Molly, at least right at first. Mr. Malfoy will require a fair measure of care from both of you for the next few days. Do take care of yourselves, and I’m sure I’ll see you again sometime soon. Feel free to owl or Floo if you need any advice. Good night, all.”

Poppy excused herself, and Molly turned to Harry, while Poppy made her way to the fireplace downstairs.

“So you know.”

Harry sighed. “Yeah. There was...some bleeding while I was drying him. I figured the rest out myself. I know Death Eaters, I just didn’t think they’d do that to him.”

“Well, I’ve never seen the like, not through two wars, and I’m glad I haven’t. He was right to come here, and I mean to see him well. Will you help me, Harry?”

Molly’s tone spoke volumes. This time it wasn’t a command, it was a request. Harry hadn’t been proud of the hard words between them this day, and he capitulated instantly.

“Yes. I don’t trust him, and I don’t like him, but I’ll help you. You know I’d always help you and Arthur, Molly. It isn’t even a question.”

Molly smiled warmly, flustered by Harry’s sincerity, and pulled his head down so she could kiss him on the cheek.

“You’re a good boy, Harry. I always believed in you, and I believe in you now. Thank you, love. Just do the best you can...that’s all I could ever ask. He’ll sleep the night from the potions I gave him, and we’ll see what can be done tomorrow. It’s been a strange day. Go on to bed if you like, and we’ll see you at the table tomorrow morning.”

Despite the black moods that crept on him often, Molly and Arthur Weasley had always made him feel safe and welcome. Harry couldn’t quite bring himself to regret their generosity, even if it led to a room next to Draco Malfoy. Harry nodded agreement and wished Molly goodnight, then stepped into his room and peeled away his clothes to make ready for bed.

No mistake, it had been a strange day. Harry was reserving further judgment on Draco, even though the prat had already lied to him once. He wasn’t the victim of a simple robbery, and he should have known to tell Harry, of all people, the absolute truth. He’d question Draco privately when he came to consciousness, and if Draco played nice, this stay of his might not be a complete hell on earth.

As he made himself comfortable and let his mind drift, the incident in the bathroom played back through his mind again. Harry wrote it off as the price for still being a virgin at nineteen. Not that it was all his fault...after all...he’d had Dark Lords to kill, his first serious crush had been murdered in cold blood, and he’d waged a one man war against evil since he left Hogwarts. How was a boy supposed to worry about dating with a life like that?

It had been damned unnerving, getting stiff while tending to Draco, but it was doubtlessly the side
effect of being alone so long. That was it! It was just one of those random things that happened…and it was purest chance that it had happened at that moment. That was all there was to it. Harry held that comforting notion to himself, and sleep slowly came to him, blotting out the world of complications and difficulties that awaited him tomorrow, trading it for a circus of subconscious fears that marauded through his sleeping mind.

TBC!!!
Farewell Knives Of Pain, Hello Knives Of Fear

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Redeem Me…by Samayel

Chapter 5: Farewell Knives Of Pain, Hello Knives Of Fear

Draco Malfoy woke late in the afternoon. Faint clicking noises rattled at the edge of his conscious mind, and panic stole through him as he sensed an unfamiliar environment. He woke with a start, pulling in a panic breath and staring around, wild-eyed and frightened, searching for an exit if one was needed.

Molly Weasley was sitting in a battered old chair, knitting a scarf, needles clicking away as she worked. She let the needles work by magic while she turned and smiled pleasantly at Draco.

“Well! Good afternoon, sleepyhead. You were a terrible mess last night, but you look a bit more alert today. How do you feel, dearie?”

Draco couldn’t answer through the shock that overwhelmed him. ‘I’m…I’m in the Weasley Burrow. How the HELL did I get here?’

Although he was terribly light-headed, and suddenly more than a little dizzy, it was the first time in longer than he could remember that he wasn’t feverish from multiple infections. The sense of mental clarity was shocking, and he was aware of so many little things at once that, at first, it took him aback.

The strange sensation of resting on an actual bed for once. The sudden awareness that he was clean, didn’t smell, didn’t feel greasy or unkempt, and didn’t itch from the filth. The scent of musty blankets and quilts that likely hadn’t been used in years. Warmth. He was warm for the first time in weeks. It was quite possibly the most pleasant feeling he’d ever had…next to the realization that he could breathe deeply and it didn’t send knives of pain through his chest. He suddenly realized that he was leaving his host’s questions unanswered, and he couldn’t even remember what she’d said.

“W-what?” It turned out his voice was still unsteady, and his throat still hurt a bit. He wound up coughing, but it wasn’t half as torturous as it had been the day before.

“Oh! I’m sorry, young man. I have a potion for that throat of yours that ought to help. I was just waiting for you to wake before I used it. Never liked dosing people while they were unconscious…always felt wrong…and I certainly did enough of that last night. Here you go.”

Draco shakily reached for the offered potion, sniffing the contents warily. Then it dawned on him that he didn’t really care if it killed him or not, and he drank it without complaint. The soreness of his throat soothed immediately, and he could feel a pleasant numbness soaking through his upper chest. When he finally spoke, he was amazed to hear his own voice, sounding like himself for the first time in a year, coming out of a mouth that had rasped and hacked for longer than he could recall.

“Thank you. How…how did I get here?”
“Mr. Malfoy…you asked for sanctuary last night. We honored that request. You were very ill, but between Poppy Pomfrey, myself, and Harry, we managed to put you into slightly better shape than you were in. You were terribly feverish, and I suppose I’m not surprised that you forgot. I do need to know how you’re feeling, else I can’t decide what to treat next, or whether to continue treatment of a few of your more lingering ailments.”

Molly Weasley’s friendly and matter of fact tone made Draco edgy. He’d spent so long living like an animal, it was hard to remember that he used to think…and live…another way. Etiquette was something he hadn’t used in more than a year, and he hesitated before answering, unsure of what to say after such a revelation.

“I…I feel better…like I can think straight. I just feel weak, though. Tired. Dizzy. But I can breathe…and it only feels sore…like my shoulder. You…you gave me sanctuary?”

“Yes. No Weasley or Prewett has ever rejected a request for sanctuary. I should like to apologize on behalf of our household. I’m afraid Harry assaulted you last night…and rather violently I’m afraid. The soreness in your shoulder was from a dislocation he caused. I stopped him, and accepted your request for sanctuary, and you have nothing to fear inside these walls. Now that you’re a guest, if you mind yourself and don’t harm anyone here, you may stay as long as it takes to recover completely. Your dizziness and fatigue is from hunger. I’ve already prepared some good broth and bread to start you on, and we’ll get you back on some proper feeding as soon as we can.”

Draco’s mind reeled at the influx of information. Flickers of memory crawled across his vision. Things had gone pear-shaped in Muggle London. He’d made it as far as Diagon Alley, his first visit there since…Draco pushed that memory from his mind and continued. He’d been fevered and hurting badly, hunger sick from the journey to Diagon Alley, and after being pushed out of people’s way, and spat on when recognized, he’d gotten a notion.

In his fever-crazed brain, one common link held true. Everyone was afraid of Harry Potter. No one would help a former Death Eater, and no one would even associate with him longer than was necessary to tell him to piss off. It always came back to Harry Potter. Everyone knew he guarded the Weasley Burrow like a hawk, and lived there when he wasn’t out hunting for ex-Death Eaters in hiding. There was one person that wasn’t afraid of Potter…and that was Potter himself.

It had occurred to him that he might well get killed asking Potter for help, and again, he really hadn’t cared. Death sounded like a long and quiet rest next to what he’d seen this last year, and if that was the worst that could happen, so be it. He’d stumbled around begging for help shamelessly, until an elderly witch with poor eyesight took pity and called the Knight Bus for him. Ottery St. Catchpole was a fair journey from Diagon Alley, and all he remembered was fitful sleep, a bouncing stop, and a freezing walk of several miles after that.

Potter. He remembered green eyes that blazed with smoldering wrath, and the surprise that Potter seemed enormous now. He remembered talking…begging really. Then he remembered the bright sharpness of pain, and blissful darkness. He’d thought he was dying. The last thing he remembered was feeling relieved when his consciousness slid away. Now he was here, warm, clean, and feeling better than he’d felt in over a year. Then he remembered that his host was in front of him, waiting patiently.

“Thank you.” Draco sighed and slid back onto the pillows. “Thank you. No one else would help me. I…I thought I died last night. I didn’t think I’d wake up like this. I can’t…I can’t believe you healed me. I don’t have any money…I should go…I can’t take…”

Molly Weasley raised her voice sternly. “Draco Malfoy! Don’t you dare imply that any sort of payment is owed for sanctuary! I wouldn’t take it if you had it. Sanctuary is a tradition, and a well
respected one at that. You aren’t well yet, and you won’t be going anywhere until you are. Your gratitude is appreciated, but I should appreciate it more if you put your effort into getting yourself healthy!”

Draco cringed a little, frightened by the notion of giving offense to the woman who had obviously just saved his life. Molly’s face softened when she saw him hunkering back against the pillows, and she spoke quietly.

“Mr. Malfoy, you’ve been made welcome here, and not with reservation. You owe nothing, but we do need to talk. To heal you, it was necessary to learn what ailed you. It was quite a list. Is there anything you wish to tell me about how you came to be here?”

Draco shuddered. His mouth opened and closed involuntarily. The horrifying realization came to him quickly. She knew. More than she was saying. She knew some of what had happened. His face burned with shame, and Draco bit his lip nervously, biting down hard enough to make it hurt, hoping he wouldn’t lose his self control.

“I…I was robbed. They…I got hurt. Lost all my stuff. Wand, signet ring, a little bit of money. That’s how I wound up wandering around without help. People…weren’t very kind. Please, it’s just Draco now. Please call me Draco.”

Draco couldn’t seem to stop shaking…his own limbs were betraying him. Molly spoke even softer than before. She reached out to pat his hand, which was nervously clenching the sheets, and he pulled away like he’d been scalded…it wasn’t even a conscious gesture, more a gut reaction to encroaching panic.

“Draco. You have nothing to be ashamed of anymore. Whoever hurt you is to blame for what they did…not you. The war is over. That mark on your arm means nothing now. I rather think you’ve paid more than enough for your mistakes. Perhaps your things were taken from you, but there was far more to it than that, I’m sure. Deception isn’t appropriate here. You may tell me that you don’t wish to speak of something, and I’ll accept that, but no one here will think ill of you for having been hurt.”

Draco’s rather tenuous grasp on his calm evaporated. Later, he wasn’t really aware of how long he’d been crying, only that there were more tears inside him than he’d imagined were possible. At some point he became aware that his head was being held in Mrs. Weasley’s lap, and his hair was being stroked, while she cooed out words of sympathy and soothing. He wasn’t sure how long he’d been out of control, and flushed furiously, sitting up slowly, painfully conscious of the fact that, with the sheets slid back, his naked chest and back were a mass of scar tissue, now exposed. She had already seen them, but he wasn’t used to being seen by others like this. It was horribly awkward…almost humiliating. Two years ago, such a loss of dignity would have been unthinkable.

Draco accepted a cloth to wipe his eyes and nose with, and mused that, two years ago, he’d had dignity left to lose. That was a different life, and had no relevance to his existence since then. He felt an instant and overwhelming affection for the woman he’d once sneered at from a distance, and mockingly to her son.

His own mother never would have encouraged such a display of emotion. Not that it mattered, since his mother was a vegetable in St. Mungo’s now, tortured nearly to death, and left completely catatonic, by the Dark Lord. It had been punishment for Draco’s failure, and for his sudden disappearance with Severus Snape. Molly Weasley had shown more kindness in a night than he’d witnessed in years, and he felt a closeness to this person that he’d never felt before, even with his own family. He finally started speaking…rambling really… he just felt like he had to say something.
“I’m sorry…I’m sorry…about everything. The things I said, the things I did. Snape left me alone…I had nowhere…no one to turn to. I ran into one of them…Knockturn Alley…I asked for place to stay. They…then they hurt me…for a long time. Please don’t ask…about it. They took everything, they pushed me out of an auto in Muggle London. I don’t know how long I’ve been wandering around, and I had to…to do things…just to live. When I got here, I half-hoped Harry would kill me. I can’t believe you took me in. I’m so sorry…for Hogwarts, for all of it. I swear you won’t be sorry you let me in…I swear it!”

“Tch tch…shhhh! It’s alright, love. You’re safe here.”

Inwardly, Molly was fighting tears of her own. It was hard to watch a young man so wounded by life fall apart in front of her, but like wounds of the flesh, the dark and ugly wounds to his spirit had to be opened and cleaned before they could properly heal. It was hard for her as well, but she knew it must have been far harder for a boy that had once been so proud.

“I have some food to fetch for you, and I have some clothing sorted out that ought to fit at least passably well. Some of Percy’s old things, he was always a tall, slender one, our Percy. You shouldn’t do more than rest for now, but the bathroom is down the hall on the right, and there’s a chamber pot beside the bed if you’ve trouble walking. I’ll be back in just a bit, and we’ll go over some of the potions and spells that you’ll be seeing a lot of for awhile. Now just breathe easy and collect yourself…and remember…the past is dead and gone…nothing changes that. All we have is today, and the future. You’ve got to make up your mind what to do with them, and no one can do that for you…you’ve got to do it yourself. Understood, love?”

Draco sniffed and nodded, unsure of what to say to such a thing. Slytherin didn’t prepare a person for bluntness and profound statements. He mumbled assent, and leaned back against the pillows, suddenly noticing that the muscles of his stomach hurt from sobbing. Molly Weasley stood up, and with a wry and careworn smile, left the room to bring some food, which already sounded frighteningly good to Draco, even if it was bread and broth.

His head was still fuzzy, owed to months of malnutrition, and his vision spun a little while he rested, turning the room into a carnival funhouse. Draco sighed deeply, feeling oddly comfortable, and yet terribly uncertain at the same time. Fear had been a constant companion for so long that he wasn’t sure how to let go of it, but he couldn’t feel afraid right now.

Draco’s eyes flicked to his right, and the tall, lean shadow in the doorway moved forward silently. Draco cringed back before he could stop himself, and he felt thinly veiled anger and menace radiating outward from Harry.

Potter loomed over the bed, a perfect mask of neutral control clamped down over his features. He was taller than Draco remembered, and heavier looking, too. The schoolboy hadn’t looked so powerful, or so dangerous. This man looked like Potter, but he carried himself like a killing machine who knew what he was capable of, and was at peace with it. Draco’s instincts told him to remain as submissive as possible, and he followed those instincts to the letter, keeping his head low and his hands close to his body, trying not to tremble too obviously.

“Malfoy. This is my home. These are people I love dearly. Like Hogwarts used to be. You’re here, and you’re staying, but you need to know one thing before Molly gets back.”

Harry reached behind himself, and withdrew a huge, black-bladed, and wickedly sharp knife from some hidden sheath. Draco felt his heart leap and his eyes bulge. His bladder felt painfully full all of a sudden, and if crawling toward an exit had been possible, he’d have started on the spot.

“If anything…anything at all…happens to these people, I promise you that, when I get my hands on
you, I’ll make anything Voldemort dished out feel like a stern lecture from Dumbledore! Am I absolutely clear?”

Draco swallowed, and nodded eagerly. This was the nightmare Harry of last night, just a foot from him, armed, and terrifying in his wrath. Suddenly, he realized that this wasn’t as safe a place as he’d hoped and almost believed.

Harry slid the knife into the sheath on his back, and looked at Draco coldly.

“Good. As long as we understand that, you’ll get on fine here. We’ll talk again.”

The last words were delivered with a sneer that was reminiscent of Draco’s youth, and it seemed so out of place on Harry’s face that it was all the more nerve rattling. Harry turned around and walked out, footsteps as faint as before, all the grace of a hunting cat in his gait. Draco shivered from head to toe, wondering if he’d dropped out of the frying pan, only to land in the fire.

TBC!!!
Molly Weasley brought hot broth and fresh bread on a large tray that sat comfortably over Draco’s waist, as well as a pitcher of iced water and some hot tea. Draco got one whiff of the broth and almost whimpered. It smelled like heaven…with garlic. Only her insistence that he pace himself slowly prevented him from gorging himself on the spot. A giddy smile was plastered onto his face as he dipped the bread into the bowl and mopped up every last drop of broth. It wasn’t a large meal, but he felt ridiculously full, and quite sleepy, when it was finished.

“Thank you, Mrs. Weasley. That was wonderful. It’s…well…it’s been a few days since I had anything to eat, and it wasn’t much then. That was delicious.”

Molly cleared away the tray, bowl and cutlery, sending them on a journey to the kitchen sink with a flick of her wand, and sat down with an eye to the row of potions on the desk beside her.

“You’re very welcome, Draco. Now let’s see about your treatments. Poppy Pomfrey left me some most useful things. I’ve some fine Healing Salves for your skin, as well as plenty of Scaradicate, which will clear up the older injuries nicely. I’ve several spells and potions that will prevent re-infection and speed healing, and some potions for healthy sleep that ought to see you well rested. If you don’t mind, I’d like to start with a couple of spells that will speed the closure of wounds, and we can start with your left arm since that’s the closest. How does that sound?”

Molly Weasley’s matter of fact calm was infectious, and Draco felt himself feeling a bit more at ease. Harry’s intensity and icy glare had frightened him more than he would have admitted aloud. There was something horribly wrong about it. Seeing Harry Potter again after two years had been hard enough. It meant looking back at the moment his entire life had turned for the worse. To see Harry, who had been decent enough…when he wasn’t being heaped with accolades and cosseted by Dumbledore for being the school’s hero, transformed into a grim and dangerous monster, perfectly at home with killing his enemies…well…it seemed like the world had spun off it’s hinge and nothing could be right in a world like that.

Draco held his arm out gingerly, and winced a little when Molly’s calloused hand took his own. She centered her wand on a large burn scar that was still open after a month due to infection. Draco closed his eyes, fighting the nausea and hysteria that came from being touched. He’d learned to fight it well, but it seemed worse now that someone was touching him in kindness. Molly was gentle while she chanted her spells, but Draco’s memories of being touched were dominated by a year that could only have been described as hellish.

He could feel the weird, ticklish itch of fast healing skin on his arm. Molly was uttering another spell, this time at a nearly healed slash behind his elbow. He suppressed a shudder, but he could feel Molly’s grip on his hand change. She knew he wasn’t comfortable, bless her.
“Just a few more, love. We don’t have to hurry this unless you want to. I’ll just spell a couple more and we’ll round things off with a potion. Alright?”

Draco sighed relief, but kept his eyes closed. He’d cried enough in front of Mrs. Weasley for one day. He nodded in silence, glad that this would be over soon.

‘Fucking coward! You know she’s trying to help you. What the fuck is wrong with you? It’s just her hand. She’s just holding your hand. She wouldn’t…won’t…you’re safe, damn it! Stop shaking like a fucking baby, Draco!’

The internal pep talk took up just enough of his attention to allow Molly to finish her spells. Draco felt his cheeks burning when she let go of his hand and reached for a potion. How humiliating. It wasn’t that he didn’t have good reasons for being a little ‘out of it’, but it still rankled.

“Here you go. This will prevent re-infection while we wait to heal up the others. Its effect will hold for a few days, two at least, given the number of separate wounds. It won’t taste too awful, but I have some tea ready for you once you get it down. Then we can natter a bit and we’ll see if you can’t get a little more rest before supper tonight…and don’t you worry about resting too much! No such thing! It’s precisely what you need.”

“Thank you. I…I’m sorry I…I just…I can’t…”

Molly knew what he was trying to say. She nodded sagely, and held up a hand.

“Don’t worry for it, Draco. You’ve only just woke. New place, new faces and the like. Don’t feel like you’ve got to get well by tomorrow. These things take a bit. Just take your potion like a good lad. Nap if you feel like it…I’ve got a bit of needlework to keep me company awhile. We can always chat another time.”

Draco gulped the proffered potion down, and then gulped down the tea, washing away the heavy, herbal bite of the potion. Ever since he’d eaten, he’d felt sleepy, and it was easier than he’d imagined; just drifting into slumber while Molly’s needles clicked and clacked in the background.

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Harry paced the length of his room and back again. Draco’s mere presence made it almost impossible for him to relax. He’d already exercised, doing sit-ups until his stomach burned and push-ups until his arms ached, but he couldn’t concentrate on his Occlumency texts or his Wandless Magic Theory books. He’d been making great progress, until last night. These studies might not have been necessary if he’d had a seventh year at Hogwarts, and the reason he didn’t get one was lounging in the room next to him, eating Molly’s cooking and soaking up potions!

‘I’ve got to get him alone again. There are Death Eaters at the core of this, and he knows names and places. He must want them to suffer for what they did. If I can just get Molly away from him for awhile, I can get that information…then…then I can do a little ‘work’. There can’t be more than a dozen ex-Death Eaters in England, the rest are overseas. Every minute they’re free, another person could be going through whatever they did to Draco. I can make them stop. I can stop them all. Permanently.’

Harry heard footsteps in the hall, and a familiar gentle rap on his door. He stopped his pacing and opened it.

“Harry, dear. I’m Flooing into town for a few supplies. I exhausted some of my herb stocks last
night, and Draco’s resting right now, so I thought I’d pick up a few things and be back in an hour or two. Just keep an eye on him, and if he needs help getting upright or down the hall, lend him a hand, will you?"

Harry’s grimace spoke volumes, but he nodded agreement anyway. At least he might get a little time alone with Draco now. Molly surveyed his expression, then stepped in and sat down on the edge of his bed, gesturing for Harry to sit in his chair.

“Harry, I’m sorry I was so curt with you last night. I know this isn’t easy for you; it’s written all over your face. You look at him and you see Hogwarts, and all the things that happened that night, don’t you?”

Harry sighed, knowing full well that she was right. He took his chair and flopped gracelessly into it, tired of feeling tense all day and keeping his concerns to himself.

“Yeah. Yeah I do. I know he seems harmless like this, but you’re not the first person to underestimate him. He was clever enough to find a way through Hogwarts wards, and even if he didn’t kill Albus himself, he nearly poisoned Ron, almost got Kate Bell cursed to death, and he let Greyback and a pack of murderers into a school full of children. If I hadn’t left that potion with Ron and the others, there’s no telling how many people could have been killed that night.

Molly…I can’t let that happen here. I just can’t. If anything happened to you two…it would kill me. I can’t help wondering if this is some elaborate plot like last time, and there’s some angle I haven’t seen yet. If I’d acted sooner last time, I could have stopped it all, and I won’t spend the rest of my life looking back at what I should have done…again. I know you want to help, and I told you I’d help, too, but don’t ask me to stop looking out for you. I won’t.”

Molly waited patiently until Harry was finished, and smiled, flattered beyond words by Harry’s protectiveness. There was good there, despite her disapproval for his activities. If she’d thought he was beyond help, she’d have insisted on his living elsewhere, but even if Harry was confused and angry, lashing out in controlled bursts at former Death Eaters, he was still Harry. He was a decent, loving boy that cared for those he loved the only way he knew how. There was hope here.

She’d disbelieved the accusations against him at first, only realizing what he’d been up to this past half year. It seemed impossible to imagine this quiet young man doing the things the papers described. Beheadings, burnt and butchered bodies scattered around tenement flats, gorier details left unmentioned by the press but whispered everywhere by Ministry people who’d cleaned up the mess. The first time she’d actually seen the monstrous side of Harry’s anger had been at the front walk of the Burrow, and it hadn’t seemed at all like the Harry she knew and loved. Before that, the only hints had been late night departures marked by the crack of Apparition, and occasional small stains of blood on his clothing when he returned.

She’d complained before, and more stridently as The Prophet began hounding Harry relentlessly, but it hadn’t done a lick of good. He always asserted his love of the Weasley family, and his need to protect people from further acts of terror. It was a sentiment that Molly even faintly agreed with at times.

It had been damnably hard when Ginny had died. They’d only just recovered from the shock, and were beginning to accept the permanent hole in their lives, when Hermione Granger’s murder left Ron a complete ruin. Her baby boy had lost his sister and his fiancé in a few short months, and it had broken her heart a thousand times to watch her Ron hurt so.

Perhaps…perhaps she’d let Harry fall into this…this state of affairs because she’d wanted him to get revenge, too. It hadn’t been healthy for Harry, or right or decent or good, but a part of her had
wanted payback for her children’s pain, and for her own aching loss. She’d failed Harry then. There had been a time when her influence was strong enough to have stopped him from taking this path… and she’d been silent, and Harry had paid the price for that silence. She knew it had to stop now. The minute she’d seen him pulling Draco toward the wards, blazing-eyed and livid with cold fury, she’d recognized what would need to be done. She’d allowed something terrible to grow in Harry, and for better or worse, it had to be faced, drawn out, and done away with. She wouldn’t fail this wonderful, loving boy, who had literally saved them all, again.

“Harry. Don’t think for one minute that I’ve forgotten what happened. Arthur and I knew Albus before you were even born, and we miss him dearly. I don’t think Draco is suddenly innocent of the things he did, but I do know that Albus would have wanted this. He always believed that people could change if they wanted to, and I don’t feel any wickedness in that boy. He’s sick, and tired, and alone…and frightened. For all we know, the boy you knew at Hogwarts is dead and gone. This is a chance to see what kind of person he could have been all along…to let him be who he would have wanted to be. The war hurt almost everyone, Harry, and it looks like it hurt him as badly or worse than most. Be gentle with him, and perhaps we’ll see something that no one would have guessed was there. Will you try this…for me?”

Harry sighed expansively, and put his head in his hands. It was almost too much. The notion that Malfoy was not the same prat he’d known…it had crossed his mind a couple of times. It was hard to imagine anyone so badly scarred choosing to help the Death Eaters who did it. It was just damned hard to imagine Malfoy as harmless. When Molly said it, things just seemed more real, clearer, and possible. Harry acquiesced.

“Alright. I’ll give him the benefit of the doubt. As long as he doesn’t do anything suspicious, I’ll try to let the past stay in the past, and just see how things go. I’m doing it for you, though, not for him.”

Molly stood up and pulled Harry into a hug, kissing his forehead. “That’s all I could ask for, Harry. That’s all I could ask for.”

Draco could wait for another day. Molly shopped for her herbs, and Harry watched him sleep for awhile, keeping his distance in the hall. Draco slept fitfully, twitching and muttering all the while. Harry stood silent by the door, wondering what shape Draco Malfoy’s dreams took, and wondering if they were even half as unpleasant as his own.

TBC!!!
Nightmares, Daydreams, and Bitter Ironies

DISCLAIMER: Warning! I make no claim to any property of J.K. Rowling's, and am in no way profiting by this. I do offer her my sincerest thanks for allowing us this garden of the mind in which we play. Further Warning! This story...and likely any I ever write...are dominated by gay themes and characters. That's how it is, if this in any way makes you uncomfortable...do not read further.

Redeem Me…by Samayel

Chapter 7: Nightmares, Daydreams, and Bitter Ironies

Hands. Hands were touching him. There was no kindness in them, no warmth, and no affection. These hands only conquered and claimed, plundered and tore. He could barely move, he couldn’t fight, and panic filled him even as he struggled ever so faintly against restraints so thorough as to almost be a torture in and of themselves. This wasn’t the first time, and it wouldn’t be the last. Days didn’t matter anymore; it had been so long now that weeks and months had ceased to have meaning.

His life consisted of slop for food, fitful slumber in the cell beneath the earth, and those terrible moments when he was carried away to another room. This was only one of a hundred such moments, and all of them meant pain. Pain until his throat bled from screaming, and his screams were only music to the ears of his tormentors. Spells kept him awake when he collapsed from exhaustion, and he’d long since discovered that pain could plateau, taking him to a place where nothing worse could happen, and a creeping numbness overtook his reality. Only then would he become useless, and be returned, half-healed, to his cell.

He would heal, and gratefully lap his slop from his bowl, starved for every drop, sleep while curled in a single blanket stinking of blood and filth, and exist on the faint hope that this time it would be longer between journeys to that other room.

Hope meant nothing. They always came back. Sometimes it felt like only hours had passed, other times it seemed like days. They always came back. Rough hands would drag him, limp and utterly without spirit, down that cruelly short hall and into the room he’d grown to fear. He was on his way back to that room, and the hands that dragged him had no mercy in them.

Draco wasn’t really conscious of waking. His own screams echoed hollow in his ears, and when hands tried to touch his own, he scrambled across the room and curled into a corner, keening pitifully. It was instinct, really, not thought that drove him. He wasn’t conscious in any discernable way until the spells hit him, and a potion slid down his throat, funneled carefully, and the magic slithered through him, stopping his panicked breaths, smothering his urge to scream, and slowing his thundering heart. A few soft and shallow breaths later, Draco’s world slid into blissful darkness.

Harry collapsed back into his own bed. Part of him was savagely annoyed that Draco had woken him from sound sleep, but the surreal memory of having found Draco bound in his own sheets, screaming like a banshee, asleep even with his eyes open and trapped in some nightmare realm beyond his control, was still with him. It was yet another burden on a household, including Harry, that scarcely needed another, but Harry couldn’t feel much more than shock after seeing Draco...
Malfoy in such a state.

Molly had been right. Whatever had happened to Draco had been terrible beyond their ability to guess at, and tonight was proof positive of that. He’d tried to shake Draco awake, and the pale, blonde boy had just exploded into a panicked flurry, scrambling out of the bed and curling into a ball in the corner of the room, moaning like a wounded animal. It had taken several spells to immobilize and calm him, and a Potion of Dreamless Sleep to get him back into the bed and slumbering quietly. Less pleasant still, he’d had to Scourgify the sheets, which had been soiled in Draco’s fear-crazed state.

He’d sent Molly and Arthur back to their room afterwards, as they’d arrived just as he’d finished, and Molly thanked him kindly before toddling off back to bed. His heart was still racing from the entire affair, and it seemed unlikely that he’d find sleep again sometime soon, so he contemplated the matter of Draco Malfoy while he tried to relax.

The Draco he’d once known had been dangerous because of his arrogance, his contempt for others, and because of his foul temperament. There was no way to be certain which traits were still issues, and which had changed. Draco did seem different, but Harry wanted to know a lot more before he declared Draco ‘harmless’. It was reasonable to give Draco a certain amount of space for now, but eventually he would have to push for details, even if they were uncomfortable. Death Eaters with a taste for torturing others couldn’t be allowed to roam free, and Harry had abilities, tools and connections that even the Ministry didn’t. A little information from Draco and he could bring the number of Death Eaters in England a little closer to zero.

‘What the hell could they have done to him…to leave him like this? He was always a bit of a sniveling, whiny, little piss artist whenever he got the slightest scratch, but there was nothing fake about tonight. The last time I saw anyone this close to the edge of insanity, it was Ron…after Hermione was killed. He’s a mess, but I have to have those names. What he knows could save lives, but…but I don’t want to hurt him.’

His last thought was the most sobering of all. NOT wanting to hurt Draco Malfoy?! Hell, he’d dreamed of hurting Malfoy for more than two years. Watching the bastard walk out of the Ministry with nothing more than a reprimand, and the confiscation of the Malfoy estate, had made Harry’s blood boil. Hurting Draco for all he’d done could have been a religious experience, and it had felt so good when he’d torn into him in front of the Burrow. He’d been almost blinded with anger when Draco had mentioned Albus, and Harry had felt like an angry god delivering his justice when he’d lashed out. How could things have changed so much in a single day?

The sight of Draco still angered him, and he resented the disruption of the one peaceful place in his life, but when he thought about it…really thought about it, he didn’t want to kill Draco anymore. He didn’t even want to maim or pummel Draco now. He’d never seen a human being so thoroughly lost in fear, and it was almost impossible to muster a genuine desire to hurt or frighten a person in such a state…even if the person was someone he’d loathed for more than eight years.

His heart had slowed its pace, and drowsiness was creeping steadily forward. Harry closed his eyes and let his thoughts drift pleasantly, only occasionally marred by the recurring memory of Draco’s expression of naked terror.

Blood. Blood on the walls. On his hands. The floor was both slick and sticky with it. The copper rich stink of it was in his every breath. It choked him and yet pulled him closer. Repelled and attracted at the same time. Blood was life, and he held the power to give it or take it. It was heady, intoxicating, sickly-sweet like treacle and yet as bitter as brimstone.

One mangled and ruined body was the same as another…and another…and another. Neverending.
A cycle of destruction made necessary by humanity’s inherent flaws. Even if he killed and killed again until Judgment Day, the world would generate fiend after fiend, pulling him into the cycle of violence forever. Blood was in his past, and blood was his future.

The room was filling with it fast, a surging crimson tide that left him paralyzed. Floating on a tide of gore, the ceiling seemed closer, the air thinner and thinner. He was pressed to the ceiling, sucking panic breaths from the inch of oxygen left, and then there was none. Blind in an ocean of red, vaguely conscious of foul things brushing against him, a flotsam of death. He sucked in instinctively at last, and blood filled his lungs. Air. Anything for air! Darkness.

Harry woke in a cold sweat, fists clenched and muscles straining. His head pounded mercilessly, and he reached for the headache cure-all he kept handy these days. The nightmares hadn’t come until after he’d killed Voldemort and started his little crusade against the remaining Death Eaters. They’d come steady since then, some bad, some worse. At least tonight it hadn’t been the faces of dead friends begging him to find justice for them.

There was no hope for further sleep tonight. Harry rolled out of his bed and forced himself to do fifty sit-ups despite the fast fading pain in his head. He slipped into a faded and oft-patched favorite bathrobe, and wandered into the hall. Harry stopped by the entrance to Draco’s room, looking in at the boy he’d almost killed twice. Draco was still sleeping peacefully enough, but a taut miserable expression was still on his face. Even in dreamless slumber, protected by potions, he wasn’t at peace.

Harry sat down in the chair beside Draco’s bed. Molly’s knitting supplies were at the desk, and a new wizarding book, a recent best-seller, was there as well. Not Harry’s preferred reading material, but it would serve as a distraction. The last hours until daybreak whirled away with painstaking slowness, and Harry heard the sounds of Molly and Arthur stirring at last. The book was returned to the desk, and Harry headed back to his room to grab some clean clothes, then moved to the bathroom for a shower.

Harry let the shower warm while he peeled out of his bathrobe and shorts. The cold sweat of his nightmares had left him itchy and uncomfortable, and an early shower would set things to right. Perhaps, if Malfoy really was as harmless as he now suspected, he could enjoy a run into town and back.

Harry hadn’t merely grown more powerful magically, but also physically, through exercise, and mentally, through Occlumency and Legilimency. Years ago, Snape had mocked and ridiculed him for his lackadaisical approach to his studies. He’d been laughing at Harry even as he fled Hogwarts, Draco in tow, after murdering Albus Dumbledore in cold blood. Even if the greasy bastard was long gone from England, never to return, Harry took a grim pleasure in the knowledge that Snape had taken his threats seriously. It meant that even Snape had realized that, with the death of Voldemort, Harry had clearly come into the fullness of his strength as a wizard, and was no longer a half-educated, fumbling boy.

Harry slipped into the shower, enjoying the steamy heat and the way the water sluiced away the sweat and grime from his body. He lathered himself heavily with soap, and the scent of it cleared away the last memories of dream blood and fear from his palate. Harry’s impatient dick began to swell insistently, demanding attention.

Some people wanked before they slept, but Harry had long since started his day with it, since, as far as he was concerned, it was the perfect way to relax before starting the day, and fuck knows he needed to relax today. He leaned against the wall of the shower for support, and slid his right hand around just the head of his rapidly inflating prick.

It was a comfortable and familiar ritual; an act so commonplace, and yet still so pleasurable. Harry
stroked himself in earnest, eyes closed, mind blessedly blank, just enjoying the moment for what it was.

Most people wanked to fantasies of some sort or another, and just as he was different from most in so many other ways, Harry was different here, too. Harry had very few of what could be called ‘fantasies’. When he wanked, his mind flickered with notions only of intimacy. What it would feel like to have the warmth of another beside him, or the ghost memory of lips against his own, this time the lips of a lover that knew him well, and not an insipid teenage crush doomed to failure. Harry found images like these enticing, and he imagined the sense of honest intimacy with another person as more intoxicating than any mere sexual act.

Harry tensed slightly, eyes clenched, as the peak of climax drew closer. He was too far gone in the act to stop himself, slave to the rising tide of orgasm, when the final images flitted across his mind’s eye. Velvet soft skin, nearly as white as marble, and the tanned and calloused presence of his hand made a stark contrast. All this was well enough, until the alabaster flesh in his mind displayed the faint mark of a scar.

Harry finished the shower in seconds, grabbed a towel and dried himself off with brutal efficiency, donned his clothes, and stomped into the hall with every intention of going for a run as soon as he could reach the door. Only a foot from the door to his room, Malfoy lay in the hallway, crying without shame, collapsed on the floor.

“Got dizzy.” Malfoy sniffled pitifully, flushed with shame while Harry stared in confusion.

“What are you even doing out of bed? You’re under three spells and as many potions. What the fuck did you think would happen?!”

Malfoy huffed in frustration, looking at Harry with an exasperated pout. “I just wanted the bathroom. I don’t want a damn chamber pot! I couldn’t even make five fucking steps before I fell. Help me up, please?”

Harry froze. This was not the ideal moment for Draco to need a hand…from Harry. The image of pale flesh, marred by cruelty, was made real in front of him, and Harry stood stock still, unsure of what to do.

Draco took it as a refusal, and looked wounded by it at that. “FINE! Don’t need you…don’t need help. I can do this. I can…do this.”

Harry watched as Draco pulled himself across the floor with his hands, not quite on his hands and knees, staying low and near the wall to keep his balance. All the while, he muttered to himself tersely, ignoring Harry entirely. Harry snapped out of his reverie and stepped in front of Draco, who looked up in annoyance, half-expecting a mocking sneer, only to find Harry’s extended hand waiting for him.

“I’m sorry, I just…I didn’t know what to say for a moment. Take my hand.”

Draco stared at him uncertainly, a mixture of resentment and fear struggling across his face.

“It’s okay, Malfoy. I want to help…really. I made my point earlier, as long as that’s clear, we’re fine, so just take my hand and we’ll get you there…alright?”

“It’s Draco…not Malfoy. Just Draco. Please.”

Draco took the offered hand, but was surprised by the weird look on Harry’s face when their hands met. Harry’s strong, dark and calloused paw closed around his pale right hand, and Draco was struck
by the contrast between them. He also thought he recognized the look on Harry’s face; to Draco, it looked like disgust and horror. He used his other hand to right himself against the wall, for balance, and shifted his hand to Harry’s shoulder, using the taller boy as a crutch.

“I fucking hate this. I hate being like this. It’s a fucking shite state of affairs. I…I can’t help it.”

He was half-talking to himself, but he was aware that he had an audience in Harry, who was moving very slowly beside him, letting Draco set his own pace, and looking away the whole while, despite the fact that Draco was now wearing an old pair of pajamas that Molly had left out for him. Apparently he was so hideous that Harry Potter couldn’t even look at him. How fucking pathetic.

Harry finally spoke first, breaking the tension between them for a second.

“I know. I…I’m sorry about the other night. I shouldn’t have…well…shite…I shouldn’t have lost my temper, but I did. Can’t undo it, but I can try not to let that happen again. C’mon, given our history, could anyone have expected anything different?”

Draco didn’t mention that what he really hated was having no choice but to touch someone else. He did let his mind reel at the revelation of an apologetic Potter. To be honest, he hadn’t expected an enthusiastic welcome, and in fact, he’d been so feverish that he couldn’t even remember exactly when the idea of seeking out Harry had come to him.

“No. Not really. I…I think…I hoped you’d kill me.”

Draco’s voice sounded very small, but horribly matter of fact. Thankfully, they’d reached the bathroom, eliminating the need for further conversation, since after a statement like that, neither of them knew what to say. Draco slumped in and let Harry close the door, then dragged himself along the counter until he reached the toilet. He was light-headed and sweating from head to toe, but at least he wasn’t squatted over some god-awful chamber pot like a complete invalid.

Draco went about his business, and when he was ready to leave, he fumbled his way to the door and opened it, clinging to the counter for support.

Harry Potter was no where to be seen.

‘That bloody prick bastard! He fucking left me here. Sod him! I can do this my bloody self. If crawling is what it takes, so fucking be it!’

He was sweating and miserable when he made it back to the bed, and it had taken some ten minutes of his life that he hoped he wouldn’t have to repeat, but he’d done it. Potter was an ass, and that was all there was to it. An occasionally homicidal, insensitive, and obnoxious ass.

‘So why does it hurt so much…knowing that he looked at me in disgust?’

TBC!!!
Standing At The Crossroads

DISCLAIMER: Warning! I make no claim to any property of J.K. Rowling’s, and am in no way profiting by this. I do offer her my sincerest thanks for allowing us this garden of the mind in which we play. Further Warning! This story…and likely any I ever write…are dominated by gay themes and characters. That's how it is, if this in any way makes you uncomfortable...do not read further.

Redeem Me…by Samayel

Chapter 8: Standing At The Crossroads

Harry walked out the door of the Burrow, pulse pounding, his headache back in force…apparently with several reinforcement headaches along for back up. This was impossible. It just wouldn’t work. How the hell could he be expected to live under the same roof with Draco Malfoy? It sounded simple, but in reality it was a lot more complicated than he’d imagined. The only time he ever felt this insanely tense was before a raid, but here there was nothing to do but sit through it, and endure still more tension with every passing minute.

’He hoped I’d kill him. He wanted to die. I don’t think he expected Molly to stop me. He really didn’t care if he died. I almost killed him, too. Now…what the hell is wrong with me? The day before yesterday, I knew what I was doing. How the hell could that change so fast? It isn’t right. I can’t fucking deal with this!’

Harry hoped there wouldn’t be a flap over leaving Draco alone, but fuck-all, he’d needed to get away. In the shower he’d…no…never mind that! It didn’t matter. It was just a fucked-up response to the stress he was under. It was hell trying to remain calm and polite near Draco, and the encounter in the hallway, after a lousy night’s sleep, had just made things worse.

Harry wasn’t sure enough about Draco to leave the property, but he did need to burn off stress, headache be damned. He took off running, around the edge of the Burrow’s property line. It didn’t take long to make a single lap, and the headache was fading before the third was finished, and by the twentieth, nothing short of being sat on by a dragon could have bothered him.

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Molly checked in on Draco, and was pleased to see him awake and coherent so early. It was a solid sign of a fast recovery, and it lifted her morning spirits a bit higher. She’d gone to bed with a few too many melancholy thoughts, and good news was a far better way to start the day.

She set a fair breakfast spread for Arthur, who had taken his morning tea and gone upstairs to properly greet their guest for the first time. It was necessary to spell the food for freshness and warmth, since no one had come to the table yet, and then she gathered a tray for Draco; heavy broth, fresh bread and a bit of jam as well, and juice as well as tea.

Molly felt herself trembling, and a nervous sweat broke over her skin. She placed the tray on the counter and took a few deep breaths. It was unseasonably warm today. She opened the window and let the crisp, autumn air cool her. A minute later she felt right as rain, and went back to her mission with relish. Tray in hand, she made the journey up the stairs, only slightly miffed that Harry and Arthur hadn’t made it to the table yet.
“-needn’t worry for a thing with my Molly looking after you. She did a marvelous job of putting my fingers back on after that incident at work with a Jinxed blender. Awful row, that was. Kept bleeding all over my paperwork for hours afterward, had to come home early and let Molly set them right.”

“ARTHUR! It’s good of you to say hello, but your breakfast is waiting and you’ve another fifteen minutes before you belong at work…you know can’t get a decent thing done when you haven’t had your breakfast. Now shoo!”

Molly’s tone was full of largely feigned exasperation, mingled with the faintest hint of adoration. Arthur Weasley smiled widely before answering, giving Draco a mocking, sidelong nod of sympathy.

“Right then, I’m off, but we’ll see you again soon enough. I’ll try to drop in now and then, perhaps for a bit of tea when you’re feeling well enough.” He stood and turned to Molly. “Thank you for the reminder, love…almost forgot the time.”

Arthur kissed his wife before heading downstairs. Draco felt horribly uncomfortable at the muted display of comfortable and familiar intimacy between them, and averted his eyes politely. Molly settled the tray in front of him, and Draco’s eyes almost bulged when he saw the jam.

Given that his diet hadn’t consisted of much of anything for months, and the last decent meals he’d had were sometimes days apart, luxuries such as fresh bread and jam were instant hits with Draco. He mumbled appreciative comments while he cheerfully wolfed down every bite, as well as nearly gulping his broth. Molly watched carefully, admonishing him to slow down when he looked a little too frantic.

It occurred to Molly that, since Draco suffered from considerable anxiety about being touched, it might help to serve him a Calming Draught, and then engage him in conversation while she worked. It was a common enough practice for Healers, but she’d only ever had to distract her boys before, not work around the legitimate fears of a victim of such beastly cruelty.

“Did you have a nice chat with Arthur? I know he can go on about his work, but he’d so wanted to say hello properly since you arrived, but he was off to work and you were asleep when he returned.”

Draco was licking the last traces of jam off one of his fingers, still focused almost entirely on the sensation of eating something that tasted good. He glanced back to Molly immediately, and smiled conspiratorially.

“I did. Really. Even with the work stuff. It sounds like they have a lot of misadventures in his office, but he was very nice.”

“Well…I had sound reasons for marrying him…and not just because our Bill was on the way! More than thirty years and I still adore that man. Wouldn’t trade him for all the Galleons in Gringotts!”

Draco looked wistfully out the window. “That’s…sweet. You’re very lucky…to have that. It would be nice…if everyone did, wouldn’t it?”

Molly started prepping the potions and salves, and Draco accepted the offered Calming Draught without complaint. A minute later, he seemed a different person, without the nervous twitching and tensed muscles that were almost ever present. Molly went back to work on the arm she’d started healing the day before, and Draco still seemed edgy, but not nearly as uncomfortable as the previous day.

“Mrs. Weasley…where’s Harry?” Draco phrased the question innocently enough, as if only mildly
interested. Mostly, he wondered what the great prat had been in such a hurry over, but he wasn’t about to discuss his morning encounter with Potter. Draco had already experienced enough conflict for a dozen lifetimes…he wasn’t about to risk creating any more.

“Oh, he’s likely off for a jog. Muggle exercise…just runs and runs. Usually has his breakfast about now, though. Odd that, but that’s our Harry.”

“He…he runs? In this weather? Voluntarily?” Draco shook his head and shivered at the thought of being outside again. A month of living in Muggle London…in abject poverty…had been more than enough to make him sick of cold weather.

“Oh, yes! Loves to. Most times, he runs longer when he’s worked up over something or other. He says it relaxes him. Arthur was saying that Muggle doctors recommend that kind of thing…for health. Arthur and I are a bit far along in life for that sort of thing, but I can’t argue that it’s kept Harry fit. Not at all the wee little thing we first met years ago.”

Draco mulled the notion of a stressed out Potter, who jogged whenever he needed to relax, roll through his mind. It helped keep his thoughts away from the hand that held his arm still while Molly whispered another charm…then reached for more salve. Draco bit his lip, then asked a question a bit more delicate than he would have liked. He trusted Molly Weasley more than he’d trusted anyone he’d ever known. It seemed likely that she’d indulge his curiosity. Besides, he needed to get along here, and feeling out how to deal with Harry was part of it.

“What happened to Harry? He’s…he’s not like I remember. I didn’t think he’d be so…well…different.”

Draco could feel the surprise in Molly, through the hand that held his arm still while she worked. Despite the fact that she never looked up from her work, he could sense a shift in the mood of the room around them, as if matters had shifted from light-hearted conversation, to a subject of enormous importance and far-reaching consequences.

“It’s good that you asked this, Draco.” Molly was studiously applying salve while she spoke. “I wanted to talk to you about that very thing, but I wanted you to get a bit better first. You weren’t in any shape to fret over such things the night before last. What do you think is ‘different’ about Harry now? I just want to hear your thoughts on the subject.”

Draco paused a moment, thinking carefully before he answered. He hadn’t had long to make observations, just a handful of encounters that hadn’t gone well. He didn’t want to offend his host, but he did want to answer Molly honestly.

“It’s not just that he looks different. He’s taller, and bigger than I remember, but it’s mostly that…well…he seems angry. Even when he’s quiet. It’s like you can feel it all around him…like the warmth from being near a fire. He wasn’t like that in school. I don’t remember much of when I showed up outside, but I remember that, when he was looking at me, it felt like he really wanted to kill me. As if, just under the surface, he was thinking about how to do it. I thought he’d still be everybody’s hero, but…I didn’t think I’d…I didn’t think I’d be scared of him. He shouldn’t be like that. I don’t know why, but it just seems wrong.”

Molly listened with an inward sigh of relief. Draco had confirmed her hopes. In this boy, she had a potential ally. Harry ‘reacted’ to Draco, and in that, there might just be a way to bring Harry around. It would have to be done carefully, both for Draco’s sake, and for Harry’s, but it could be done. She’d just needed a reason to believe that Draco would help…and now she had one. Molly paused in her work, sitting back and looking Draco directly in the eyes.
“Harry is as dear to me as if he were one of my own children, but I’m not blind to how he’s changed. The war was hard on everyone, Draco, but Harry…Harry endured more than anyone should have. It took his parents from him, and cost him his godfather, the only decent living relative he had, after just a year of knowing him. When Albus died, Harry couldn’t stop thinking about ways he could have prevented it, but he was still the Harry you knew in school, and that we’d known for years.”

Draco listened raptly. The mixture of poignant regret and loss, tempered by time, was clear enough in her tone, and Draco didn’t dare interrupt.

“Our Ginny was killed a few months later, and we were grieving then, for our loss, and weren’t thinking of Harry. When Hermione Granger was killed, Ronald needed our help, or I don’t know what he might have done. Again, no one was watching Harry. He seemed so strong, so determined and fierce. We were all so proud of him, fighting a war that was handed to him when he was just a child. I was terrified for him and Ron most of the time, but I suppose I did believe in them all along. We were so busy celebrating, after he killed You Know Who, that it never even occurred to us that something was wrong.

Harry just seemed distant, as if something was always on his mind. He was working with the Aurors at first, and no one could blame him for wanting to bring in the rest of You-Know-Who’s inner circle. He came to stay with us then, and he was a right blessing from the first, always helpful and always a kind word when you needed one. I didn’t believe the rumors from The Prophet. Not even when they started being parroted by Arthur’s co-workers. It just didn’t seem possible. None of it sounded like anything our Harry would ever do.

He’d leave at night, and I’d hear him come back in late. Aurors at the Ministry would talk about what they found on the days after those nights. I tried to talk to him about it, but he always leaves quietly, or insists that what he’s doing is necessary, but I can’t bring myself to mention the things he’s done. I wish I didn’t believe them, but I know they’re true.

I know he loves us, and I know the decent, wonderful boy we love is in there, and he would never be a danger to us, but I also know that what he’s doing is wrong. Those who haven’t been taken in by the Ministry should be caught, and some of them certainly deserve Azkaban, but they don’t deserve death, and even if they did, it isn’t supposed to be up to Harry to decide that.

He’s killing people, Draco, and he’s getting away with it only because of who he is, and what they’ve done, but it’s still wrong. If he keeps doing what he’s been doing, the Aurors are talking about pulling his Ministry license, and if he’s ever caught at it, I can’t bear to think what might happen. Even if he isn’t our own child, I couldn’t bear to lose him.

I’m not telling you these things for no reason at all. Harry needs help, desperately, and I can’t seem to get through to him. I know you’ve no reason to help him, after what he did, but I’m asking anyway. Will you help me to get him talking, and to get him to stop this madness and let the Aurors do what they’re supposed to?

Something about you makes him react, makes him feel, makes him think about Hogwarts and Albus and everything else, and you might be able to make him face topics he won’t even let me broach. I want him to be healthy again, and I want him to be happy someday. Draco, I won’t ask again if you don’t want to do this, and I certainly don’t expect it of you if you don’t want to get involved, but I’m asking you plainly…will you please help me to help Harry? It might be his only hope.”

Draco reeled under what he’d been told. He’d read the papers when he’d reached Diagon Alley, and he’d heard the rumors on the streets, but he’d never imagined it sounding as real and as terrible as when Molly told him of it all. Harry Potter really was a killer, and an unrepentant one, too. He’d never thought of what Harry had lost; he’d been busy losing everything he had ever known.
Draco had lost his parents, his fortune and home, and even his sanity and health had been nearly torn from him, not to mention his life. He’d never have called himself innocent, until he was forced to realize just how innocent and naïve he’d really been. During all that he’d endured, it had never once occurred to him that The Boy Who Lived had suffered anything worse than bad press.

Molly wanted his help. The only person in the wizarding world who had been kind enough to help him, without any hope of reward or recompense, was asking him to risk Harry Potter’s wrath, to save The Savior Of The Wizarding World from himself.

And Draco said yes.

TBC!!!
Draco couldn’t believe the word even left his mouth. He’d agreed to something that, if he were in any other house than Molly Weasley’s, would be suicide. He hoped Molly had a plan that didn’t involve making Harry seriously angry at Draco, because, while Harry probably wouldn’t hurt him inside the walls of this house, Draco wouldn’t put it past Harry to drag him away bodily and kill him somewhere else!

‘Merlin save me! No wonder she needs help. Potter isn’t just stubborn, he’s bloody mental as well and means to stay that way. What the hell did I just get myself into?’

Molly was smiling like she’d just gotten a new lease on life, thanking and praising Draco, and Draco couldn’t help but feel good about that. She was, however, getting all misty-eyed, and Draco winced at the realization that he kind of wanted to do the same. He was only just well enough to control himself. When he’d been at his worst, he’d had no control over his emotions, and he’d humiliated himself completely. The fact that Molly didn’t judge him for it only made him want to help her all the more.

Harry could be heard downstairs, returning from his jogging, and Draco and Molly ceased their conversation for the time being. Draco suddenly realized that, in the course of their scheming, his right arm was almost finished, save for scarring that would be taken care of later.

Molly pointed out a selection of garments she’d put aside for Draco, and while Draco’s gut reaction was vague distaste, the more practical side of him acknowledged that his previous clothes were practically bloody rags, and it would be nice to wear anything warm after living in Muggle London in October!

Molly went back downstairs to look in on Harry, and Draco stared at his newly healed arm. It was amazing to him, that he’d come through what he had, and sometimes his past life seemed like nothing more than a bad dream. Other times, this surreal new existence in the Weasley house seemed like the dream, and he found himself terrified of waking up, back in the living hell he’d known for months.

He hated that he was so shaky whenever he stood up. He’d been so sick, for so long, that he’d grown used to coping with it…at least until his situation had gotten so bad that it became necessary to seek help. Draco closed his eyes, fighting off silent tears. He’d been a mess in Muggle London, and he’d been incredibly lucky that the Muggles who found him were basically kind-hearted. They hadn’t really been able to help him much, except to put clothes on him and feed him a bit, but even that had been a hardship for them.

He’d been like a wild animal then, so far from sanity that there hadn’t been much communication,
and the only reason they’d been able to touch him had been that, until that time, he’d grown used to not fighting back. How ironic that, when his spirit had been completely broken, his captors had finally tired of him and discarded him, expecting him to die. Stolen drugs, stolen food and stolen clothes had been all that kept him alive, and the Muggles that provided such largesse couldn’t have known who they were helping.

The notion that Muggles were somehow a living offense against the magical world had left him during those weeks. Some things were the same everywhere. Some Muggles possessed the kindness of saints, others were more bestial than animals, and most were somewhere in between. It was impossible to feel the same about them as he once had, now that his outlook on life had been irrevocably changed.

Memories were coming back to him, clearer now that his health was returning. Hazy, nightmarish flashes of suffering and degradation. Things that made him burn with such shame that he wanted to kill himself rather than face that they had actually happened. Molly surely had guessed some of it, and that knowledge was painful enough, but she could never know the depth of it, nor all the details surrounding it. These were things that he didn’t dare speak aloud, for fear that, once shared, those memories would be made all the more real. Better to let them rest in a haze of fevered memory, never to be reviewed by choice.

Harry was still a problem, and a problem of epic proportions. How did it feel to be the Boy Who Lived, living with being every bit the killer that Draco had failed to be? Was that why he seemed so angry? What the hell could Draco possibly do to make him open up? Molly had notions of forgiveness for past sins and new friendship, but Draco cradled his doubts to himself.

Potter had always been a stubborn git. It was so Gryffindorish that it was pathetically stereotypical. Forcing a confrontation was impossible…the man would go homicidal, so Slytherin guile was the only option. There was a vicious brand of irony in the situation that would have appealed to Draco…if he hadn’t been right in the thick of it. Slytherin guile used to save a man who had probably made the class reunions for three generations of that house a moot point? Ludicrous!

It was somewhere to start though, and Draco needed a new life…the one he’d had before was gone. If Molly wanted his help, she could have it, and he really would try for her, because he literally had nothing else to do with his life than offer thanks to the woman who saved it, by making her dream come true.

There was bitterness in Draco, but it was muted. There was sorrow, and loneliness, and an anger at the world that was general in nature, but the vanity and arrogance that had been his birthright were gone. The urge to hurt those weaker than himself had been torn from him, because he had been the ‘weaker’, and he could never again look down at others the way he once did. Draco Malfoy was dead. Draco, on the other hand, had no idea what he should do with the rest of his life, but finally doing something for the right reasons had a certain weird appeal, and that would have to do for now.

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Harry stepped back into the house and headed for the kitchen. Several dozen laps around the Burrow had cleared his head of thoughts other than breakfast, and that was fine by Harry. Sweat was pouring off of him, and a serious endorphin rush from his exertions had buoyed his spirits. One of Molly’s breakfasts would set the morning back to rights, and Harry tucked in with gusto, wolfin down a meal that would have put Ron to shame, and Ron was rumored to have a ‘hollow leg’ when it came to food.
Harry smiled as Molly re-entered the kitchen. Her usual care-worn smile looked a bit more chipper than usual, and Harry liked seeing his friends happy. At the least, a smile meant that Molly wasn’t upset about Harry leaving Draco alone that morning. That line of thought didn’t bear further exploration, and Harry dropped it immediately, wished Molly a good morning, and concentrated on the food in front of him.

"Harry, love. Our guest is doing very well, but there’s quite a bit to do in the way of healing yet. I was hoping that after lunch you might be able to help me. I know you’re quite good at a few spells for cuts and such. Would you mind terribly if I asked you to cast them, while I work on some others that need salve?"

Harry suddenly lost his appetite. He couldn’t really say no, could he? He’d promised to help Molly as much as he could, and it would get Malfoy well sooner. It was just…just a matter of…

'I’ll have to look at him…in a room…with Molly. What if I….NO! There’s nothing wrong, nothing will happen, and that’s all there is to it! It’s just healing some cuts and nothing more.’

Harry nodded quietly and tried to return to his meal, but the food suddenly tasted like ashes. Why the hell did he feel like a man condemned to Azkaban? It was just a little healing. Closing a few little wounds…on Draco…leaving behind clean…healthy…pale…skin.

Shit.

Molly beamed at his seemingly untroubled acceptance. ‘That’s my boy! You’re a blessing to me, Harry.’ Molly kissed his head while murmuring a bit more praise, and Harry felt himself blushing again. Only Molly could make him feel like a gawking twelve year old again. Sometimes he almost resented this power she held over him, but he also loved her dearly for it.

His name had been on the Weasley clock since the year he’d moved in. On his eighteenth birthday, Molly and Arthur had unveiled the clock, clearly showing Harry’s name upon the ancient device’s face, alongside Charlie, Ron, Fred, George, Bill, Fleur, Percy and their own names. That, more tellingly than any words, had told Harry that this was his home. It wasn’t a formal adoption, but it was as close as such a thing could come, and Harry loved them dearly for the gestures of love they’d shown him.

Molly went about organizing her new herb stores, and laid aside ingredients for later use as needed. Harry recognized ingredients for Calming Draughts and Scaradicate Salve. Apparently more was needed than anyone had expected, and that sent his thoughts spiraling back toward pale flesh, marked by torment. At least Molly wasn’t asking him to apply the salves!

Harry cleaned up after his meal, keeping the kitchen as orderly as Molly would have. One of the things that Molly had always praised him for was his personal habit of compulsively cleaning up after himself. She hadn’t any idea that it was rooted in Vernon and Petunia Dursley’s deliberate cruelty, and Harry let it stay that way. Even now, almost three years later, the notion of leaving behind a mess to be found by others made his hands itch to clean up, and his face would grow hot with shame, echoing the endless scolding and punishment that even slight infractions had brought. Molly’s praise was music in his ears, and Harry very nearly felt relief when he heard it, happy at the core of his being that someone felt he was good.

While Molly set about her task, Harry strolled through the house, rattling off small spells for dusting and cleaning as he went. He made his way upstairs, gingerly passing Draco’s room, and paused at the door as his peripheral vision caught a glimpse of what lay within.

Draco was curled on his side, his back to the door, and the sheet had slipped away just enough to
reveal the bare flesh of his torso. The reddish-gray of old whip scars stood out in stark relief against snowy skin. The bones of his spine and ribs were sharply detailed, since quite a few good meals would be required to bring back a healthy weight. The cuts and burns that had once been hideously infected were now simply scabbed shut, scattered across his backside at random. As gruesome a scene as it may have been, Harry couldn’t stop staring.

He noticed that Draco was shivering slightly...or at least shuddering in his fitful sleep. It was warm and comfortable in the Burrow, so it couldn’t have been from cold. Harry found his hands itching to pull the blanket up higher...his feet were already moving...even while his mind shouted out against continuing.

Harry pulled the sheet and blanket up, intending to tuck them in near Draco’s neck, but it was a gesture that was doomed for failure. At the first feel of cloth being moved across him by another’s hand, Draco flickered into a panicked semi-wakefulness, shoving himself off the bed with a strangled cry, away from Harry, and he was crawling across the floor sucking in panic breaths before he realized where he was.

Harry stood dumbfounded, half-furious at himself for letting this happen, wishing there were a way he could call this someone’s fault beside his own. Draco’s eyes were like saucers, and his thin chest was heaving like a bellows. Then he started to cry.

Draco had only dozed lightly, and his dreams hadn’t been vivid enough to remember thoroughly. There were images of Muggle needles piercing his flesh, and of bitter consciousness sliding away to peace. In a place outside himself, he’d watched silently while others had ravaged him, limp and uncaring, through the haze. It was all so fuzzy that it was hard to recall clearly, but the feel of someone touching him in his sleep had awakened his instincts...and he’d fluttered to wakefulness in an instant, fumbling to get away and tumbling to the floor when his legs had failed him.

It was just too much, being seen in such a state, remembering things he only wanted gone, enduring so much ’contact’ with people when he desperately wished to be left untouched, and sometimes even unseen. The stress of it struck hard and fast, and his will crumbled. He pounded feebly at the floor with his fists, biting back tears that wouldn’t quit.

“Fuck...fuck...FUCK! I HATE THIS! I hate it...IhateitIhateitIhateit!” Draco dissolved into a muffled sob of mingled self-loathing and helpless frustration.

“Look, Malfoy. I’m sorry...I didn’t mean to-”

“DON’T CALL ME THAT! JUST...JUST LEAVE ME ALONE!”

Molly arrived on the scene, and Harry looked at her with a silent plea for help.

“I just pulled his blankets back up...he looked cold...I didn’t mean to...for this...”

“It’s alright, Harry, leave this to me. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

Molly cut him off with a look that suggested she understood perfectly, and a tone that soothed automatically. Harry left the room, still in shock over Draco’s reaction. He could hear the sounds of her speaking comfortingly to Draco through the wall, and even though he tried to read The Prophet and pick through his latest mail, he couldn’t push the image of Draco sprawled and weeping out of his mind.

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Molly spelled the sniffling boy back into the bed with a hasty Mobilicorpus, speaking to him as
soothingly and plainly as she could. Sometimes a businesslike attitude was more effective than overt sympathy, and Draco’s state hinted at a desire to feel normal. To meet that, she kept her tone almost bored, as if it were perfectly routine to find him collapsed and sobbing on the floor.

“Right then…breathe deeply, Draco. Harry didn’t mean a thing by it. It won’t happen again. You’re as safe as can be here, love, and if you’d like a bit of Dreamless Sleep potion, we can let you have that nap properly this time, eh?”

Draco couldn’t stop shuddering. Molly’s kindness in the face of his pathetic display was unbearably sweet, but it couldn’t make his feelings of frustration dissolve.

“I’m sorry. I couldn’t help it…when he pulled the sheet…I just…I have nightmares. I hate being like this…I just want it to stop. I know…I know he didn’t mean anything.”

He turned his head into the pillow after gulping the potion she handed him. “I just want it to stop. I’m tired…I’m tired of…I just want to feel normal anymore…but I can’t stop.”

Draco had whispered the last of it, refusing to look at Molly, because if he saw her face now, he’d lose his composure yet again. He could feel her weight shifting the edge of the bed as she sat down.

“You have the right to feel that way. Don’t feel like you have something to hide, love. You don’t. Not here. Not anymore. It may be a long while before those feelings go away, and you can’t hold them in all the time. Just be yourself, and no one here will blame you, or look down at you for it. If you want to talk about it, you can always talk to me, and if you don’t, I’ll still be here for you when you do.”

The potion slid over his jangled nerves, and exhaustion was replacing his terror and angst quickly. Draco was breathing slowly, feeling calmer and sleepier by the minute, while Molly just sat nearby, speaking calmly. After a long silence, he spoke, voice hushed so that only she could possibly hear.

“Needles. I dreamed about Muggle needles. I think they got bored. They gave me shots of Muggle drugs that made everything go away. I actually thought they were being merciful. They kept it up for weeks…and then they stopped giving me the drugs. I thought I was dying, it was so bad. I begged and screamed even though no one was hurting me; it was all inside. I raved and pleaded. I promised them anything. I offered anything they wanted…if they’d just give me some. I did ’things’ for them…willingly…for the first time…just to get more of that feeling. That was why they did it. They were tired of just using me that way while I screamed or passed out from pain. They wanted to make me beg for the chance to let them do it…they liked the irony.”

Draco’s voice trailed off, and the potion he’d taken pulled him into oblivious slumber, where even the most horrifying dreams could only flutter at the edges of his mind. He never knew that Molly Weasley left the room silently weeping, wondering if there was any hope at all for a world where such things were allowed to happen, and wondering briefly if she was even right to stop Harry from indulging his desire to kill the people who committed such acts.

TBC!!!
How The Other Half Live

Harry lounged in his room, trying make sense of an advanced Occlumency text. It outlined several techniques that few mastered, both for Legilimency and Occlumency. Most students of these arts mastered what was necessary to interrogate an enemy, or to resist interrogation. Harry, as in all things he did now, was pushing himself to master the art more completely than others had, buying himself another edge against his enemies. There was only one obstacle to his accomplishing that goal…and it took the shape of a painful erection that wouldn’t go away despite his best efforts to ignore it completely.

It had been two days since his unfortunate incident with Draco in the hallway, and his later encounter with him his room. Two days of stiffly assisting Molly in the casting of spells, healing the open, formerly infected, injuries on Draco’s body, some of which had been in quite personal areas. Adjusting the sheets to expose only the area to be spelled had minimized the impact, but buttocks were still buttocks, and inner thighs were still inner thighs!

Two days of watching Draco force himself to stand and walk, a pale and determined little ghost in oversized pajamas, limping to the bathroom first with Harry’s help, and yesterday, completely alone. Two days of Draco forcing terse conversations out of him with polite small talk, starting with an apology for yelling at him. The entire experience was disorienting.

If Draco would just hurl insults at him, he’d know what to feel, and how to react. This alien Draco was infuriating. There was almost no guile of any kind in his behavior. He was polite, and honest to a fault, sometimes making statements so blunt that Harry wanted to flee rather than be forced to acknowledge that he’d heard them. Sitting up at night to respond to Draco’s nightmares had given Harry a window to Draco’s soul, and what he’d seen made him want to run from the room screaming.

At the edge of Harry’s conscious mind, there was a vague acknowledgment that whatever had happened to Draco had completely shattered every trace of the vain, spiteful, bullying Playboy that Harry had known in school. The person in the room next to him bore almost no resemblance to Draco Malfoy, and Harry had coached himself to follow Draco’s request and stopped using his surname altogether.

The skinny, blond boy one door over in the hall possessed a weird intensity that sustained him, and pushed himself to get well with a fervor that he’d never shown in school. Harry had expected Draco to lay about, waited on hand and foot, carping about his pain and sorrow. Instead, Draco only grudgingly asked for help at all, and that looked like it pained him more than the actual wounds. He hated being touched, but he would subject himself to examination and spells daily, gritting his teeth in silence while Molly and Harry worked at healing him.
This Draco showed gratitude openly for even the smallest things, and apologized whenever he thought he might have given offense. Harry had idly toyed with the notion of looking for a magical explanation for such a personality shift. It just seemed impossible that the Draco he had once known could be strong in the face of his own fears, soft spoken and polite, and stoic in the face of pain and discomfort. He’d discarded the notion after realizing that, wandless, Draco had no Glamour upon him, no potion to Polyjuice himself, and no means by which to hide a magical presence from Harry.

He still couldn’t say he trusted Draco. His every nerve screamed against such a thing. Draco had been the ultimate Slytherin’s Slytherin in school, and no one could change that much…could they? Even so, it had to be admitted frankly that this new Draco was passing friendly and fair spoken, with traits that were genuinely admirable. It complicated things a lot more than Harry expected…and that brought him back to the swollen flesh straining against his trousers.

He’d stopped masturbating after the ‘shower incident’, in the vague hope that nothing like that would happen to him again. It hadn’t worked, and in fact, the matter had gotten worse as the last two days passed. Now he suffered unpredictable, random erections during the day and night, and they seemed likely to occur whenever he was stuck in the room with Draco, be it for healing, or for watching Draco sleep, in the event of nightmares that needed treatment. Now he was stuck with the prospect of having his wank interrupted by thoughts of Draco, or going on like this, stone hard and aching at random intervals.

Harry had never considered the prospect of being gay. Never seriously, anyway. There had been others at Hogwarts who clearly were, and they’d been the subject of locker room speculation and a little friendly ridicule. He didn’t feel animosity toward the idea, but he certainly wasn’t comfortable with it. He’d only ever gotten to snogging with Ginny…unless you included a few flustered pecks from Cho, before she stormed off, weeping over Cedric. He’d rather liked it, but Ginny felt as much a sister to him as a girlfriend.

The events of his sixth year, and the death of Albus, had put a halt to his romantic impulses. The deaths of Ginny and Hermione had further isolated him, convincing Harry absolutely that people close to him were targets. He’d retreated to the Weasley’s, who were already targets, and secured their home against attack as effectively as he could, hoping to keep the few people he cared for alive, since the remaining Death Eaters didn’t care about Voldemort’s death, and seemed hell-bent on carrying out their master’s wishes even after stunning and absolute defeat. Since that time, sex and sexuality had been the last things on Harry’s mind, pushed aside in favor of combat tactics, spell craft, exercise…and looking after Molly and Arthur.

There wasn’t any question about certain matters. Clearly, something about this ‘new’ Draco seemed to capture Harry’s interest. He watched things closely, little gestures, and they seemed to speak to him as never before. Where once Draco would have snatched things from people with hands that grasped acquisitively, now he reached out gently, tremulous, apparently honored even to be given a glass of water. The smirks and sneers that had crossed his face had vanished, and only nervous smiles and apprehensive curiosity showed now. These little things, tiny symbols of greater changes, lingered in his mind long after, and clamored for conscious attention in a way he just couldn’t explain.

He didn’t dare mention such feelings to Molly. Not that he felt that she’d reject him, he was secure in the knowledge that she cared about him, but she would almost certainly be flustered and overly worried about Harry’s well being, and Harry really didn’t want Molly worrying over him. The woman he thought of as a surrogate mother had more than enough to worry about already.

He wasn’t at all worried about what she might think of his sudden and inexplicable interest in another young man. Charlie had emerged years ago as gay, and Molly hadn’t anything to say on the
subject except a stern exhortation that Charlie find himself a proper boyfriend and not squander his life fooling around with who knows who. Charlie had settled down with a rather dashing, dark-haired fellow dragon tamer, who was a native of Prague, but spoke English fluently, and flattered Molly effortlessly. No…Molly wouldn’t care about that, but she certainly wouldn’t approve of an unhealthy fascination with a severely damaged Draco, and that was that!

‘Charlie! I should talk to Charlie and Dula! They wouldn’t give me any grief over this, and if I ask for privacy, they’ll keep mum about it too.’

Harry rose and headed down the hall for the stairs. Draco was at rest again, exhausted after forcing himself to walk to the shower, though he’d needed a chair to sit in while he cleaned himself. Thank the heavens that Molly had accepted spells of Cleansing as a substitute for further baths, or Harry would have suffered every bit as much indignity as Draco.

He made it to the fireplace without complications and clutched a pinch of Floo powder. A clear command and a fiery puff of green, and his body may have been in the Burrow, but his head was poking out of Charlie and Dula’s fireplace.

“How’s our Harry then, eh? Keeping Pop out of trouble?” Charlie’s relaxed and cheerful tone was pure relief after the stress of living in a house that reeked of pain and worry since Draco’s arrival.

“I’m alright…just having a hard time the last few days. Wanted to know if I could step in and chat a bit. Just…things on my mind.”

“Sure. Come on through. Dula will be home in a half hour or so…want to stay for supper? It’s not Mum’s cooking, but nothing is, is it? Still, my goulash hasn’t caused any fatalities…yet.”

Harry stepped through the Floo and emerged into the living room, dusting himself off as thoroughly as he could.

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Harry stepped through the Floo and emerged into the living room, dusting himself off as thoroughly as he could.

Great! I needed a break from things at home. It’s been…tense lately.”

“Follow me, you can take a seat and tell me all about it while I finish dinner. Nothing too awful I hope…Mum and Da okay?”

Harry followed Charlie into the kitchen and made use of stool beside the long galley-style counter. Charlie grabbed a few jars of spice and started stirring them into the pot of goulash.

“Yeah…they’re fine. Great really. Your dad’s been as happy as can be ever since Shacklebolt put him charge of the Misuse Of Muggle Artifacts Office. The pay raise really leveled things out at
home, too. Your mum hasn’t fretted over money since. She’s really doing well…still keeping busy, even when I can’t figure what needs doing so urgently. She’s a bundle of energy.”

Charlie smiled and started dicing tomatoes into small chunks. “That’s my mum. Never a wasted minute. So what’s the problem then? Surely the Saviour of the Wizarding World doesn’t need my advice on wrestling dragons?”

Harry choked a moment, thinking of metaphorically wrestling with Draco the way Charlie wrestled dragons.

“Not quite, but close. Draco Malfoy is staying at the Burrow.”

“OUCH! Bugger all!” Charlie had slashed open his finger with the heavy knife. A muttered spell and it closed quickly enough. “Let’s hear that again. I think my brain just seized up!”

“I’m dead serious…sorry about catching you off guard while you were holding a sharp object, but it had the same effect on me when it happened. Draco showed up a few days ago, poor as any beggar, wandless, wearing Muggle clothes, wounded nine ways from Merlin, and begged sanctuary. Your mum granted it, and he’s been there all week while we feed him up and heal his injuries. Looks like he had a run in with Death Eaters, and they worked him over pretty badly.”

Charlie stirred the tomatoes into the pot, the placed the entire thing in the oven, and the wave of heat emanating outward was refreshing in the slight chill that saturated the house. Apparently the Burrow, for all its tiny familiar faults, was less drafty than Charlie and Dula’s house, but the two dragon tamers were hardy enough to feel comfortable here.

“Color me bloody stunned! Malfoy? What was mum thinking? Is he behaving himself?”

“Yeah…better than I would have thought…that’s not the problem at all.”

“Well, spit it out, mate. If living with Draco Malfoy isn’t the problem, I don’t know what else could be.”

Harry took a deep breath. It felt like an anvil was resting on his lungs. His vision swam a little from the tension, and he found himself clutching the counter for support.

“Charlie…I…since he showed up…I…shite! I…can’t stop…he’s just…”

Each word came out curt and choked, laden with audible tension. Harry was on the edge of hyperventilating, and Charlie furrowed his brow with worry.

“Relax, mate. It can’t be that bad. Whatever it is, just tell us and we’ll see what we can do.”

“Charlie…I…I think I’m going queer.”

Harry let his breath out with a puff, sucking oxygen into his lungs as quickly as possible, trying to get a grip on the vertigo that was overtaking him. He’d never imagined saying such a thing aloud in a million years.

“Easy there, Harry. You’ve worked yourself into a hell of a state over it, but it isn’t such a big thing at all. Maybe you are, maybe you aren’t, but don’t let it tear you up like that. You’re among friends, alright?”

“Yeah…yeah…I’m fine. I just…I never thought I’d say that.” Harry looked at Charlie with a silent plea for help, unsure of what else to say.
“So how’d all this come about? What makes you think you’re on the edge of playing for our team, eh? Not that you wouldn’t be welcome…you’re a fit bloke in your own right, and if you hadn’t been so much younger, and arrow-straight at the surface, I’d have asked you out myself. Before I met Dula, of course. You lean, dark-haired lads are just my style.”

Harry stared at the counter miserably. “It’s Draco. I keep, you know, thinking about him. Like I think he’s beautiful, but he isn’t. He’s a mess, scarred almost from head to toe. It’s the way he acts now. Helpless, scared, polite…decent. It’s like he’s someone else in Draco’s body, and I can’t get him out of my head. I mean, fuck all, a straight bloke doesn’t think of naked guys when he has one off, does he? Draco shows up, and the sight of him makes me sick, but when I try to have a swift one at the wrist, there he is in my head, right? I should owe him a trip to the morgue, but now I…I wanna take care of him, I want to…look after him. What the fuck does it all mean?”

Charlie let out a low whistle of surprise, then clucked his tongue like Molly would have.

“Well, it’s a bit early to declare yourself a poof, but you could be a bit of both you know. Bisexual. Happens more than people like to admit. Funny thing, when two people don’t know they want each other and don’t feel comfortable with the notion of it, they act a bit like you two did in school. Perfect rivals, constant pissing matches to figure out who’s the better. Hadn’t thought about it before, since I wasn’t there to see it all, but it makes sense, if you ask me. I wouldn’t worry yourself over it, though.”

Harry looked up, surprised by Charlie’s casual attitude.

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Harry stood up and took a deep breath. The anvil was gone, and he felt better than he had since Draco first arrived. He’d dealt with worse, and he’d deal with this. Charlie stepped around the counter, and held his arms out for a hug.

“You look like you need one, so give us a hug before I kick your teeth in, ya prat.”

Harry let himself slide into his friends arms, stiff and on edge for the first time, suddenly keenly aware of the fact that it was a man he was so close to…and it felt unutterably good to relax in Charlie’s arms. Being patted on the back was something new as well, and oddly comforting at that. It
felt safe, comfortable and familiar, and Harry found it as pleasant as it was foreign.

“How charming. I leave my lover alone for less than a day, and he’s already in the arms of another man. Hello, Harry.” Dula’s lightly accented English surprised them both.

They broke apart, and both looked at Dula’s merrily sparkling brown eyes. Charlie’s lover was perhaps an inch taller than Harry, but leaner than Charlie, with straight black hair in a single long braid that almost reached his waist. Dula’s mocking smirk and aristocratic bearing were eerily reminiscent of Draco, and Harry suddenly felt flustered to within an inch of his life.

“It’s not…we weren’t…I…oh, hell!”

“Oy! Dula…guess what? Our Harry might just be one of us!” Charlie grinned at Harry’s stammering.

Dula raised a dark eyebrow in surprise. “Really? I certainly wouldn’t have guessed that! Bravo, Harry. I applaud your courage. Whatever you decide, it’s well with us. You’re staying for dinner, aren’t you?”

Harry let himself be made welcome, and their supper was plain, but hearty, and the conversation was a pleasant change from the routine of home. He watched the way Dula and Charlie interacted with keener interest than before. Their affection was muted and mature, but ever-present in many ways. The little shared glances, the peaceful way they were aware of each other and blended almost seamlessly as a couple, despite their many differences.

Dula was from Europe’s wizarding nobility, but chose the life of a dragon tamer over a life of relative ease and comfort. He was subtle in his wit, charming in any social occasion, and refined in every gesture. Charlie was a boisterous Weasley, raised without much in the way of wealth, save for the love of a good family, and open with his affection and words in a way that made some ‘society’ types blanch. Somehow, the two of them just ‘felt’ right together.

It wouldn’t be such a terrible thing, to have something like their life, Harry thought. It was later than he expected when he finally took the Floo home, well and rightly cheered by the time he’d spent with Charlie and Dula.

Harry stepped out of the fireplace and dusted himself off, coughing a bit, and headed upstairs for bed. Draco seemed to be sleeping peacefully, and Harry didn’t begrudge himself a glance at Draco’s face. There were no scars there, and nothing marred the clean lines of Draco’s jaw and cheekbones. A little color had returned to Draco’s skin, and he’d started eating three full, solid meals a day and sleeping less during the day. All in all, Draco looked like he was getting well quickly, and Molly and Harry were making it happen.

’Maybe he’ll get well enough, in other ways, that I could think about…other things…sometime. Or maybe not. Either way, I guess it’ll work itself out. Peaceful dreams, Draco.’

Harry stepped into his own room, peeling off his shirt for bed. A sealed letter waited on his bed, bearing the seal of the twins, Fred and George. Harry cracked the seal while his heart pounded nervously.

‘Harry,

Our mutual sources have some information of interest. We will make sure we’re available at the office tomorrow to discuss the details.

Let justice be done,
Your Friends,

Fred and George’

They’d located another Death Eater, or perhaps more than one. Harry felt his hand tremble, itching for the hilt of his knife. If the information panned out, tomorrow night, he would kill again.

TBC!!!
Yesterday And Tomorrow

Draco slumbered fitfully, despite the Potion of Dreamless Sleep he’d taken. The potion could take away the dreams, and the images that haunted him by night, but they couldn’t take away the physical memories of pain and fear that were with him constantly. Only time could do that, and time was ticking away ever so slowly, making Draco frantically wish it would hurry.

A small gasp and he was awake, edgy in the darkness, blinking owlishly and praying that there was nothing lurking in the gloom to harm him. In seconds, his vision adjusted to the faint hint of starlight from outside, and he breathed a sigh of relief and allowed himself to relax, thankful that he was alone.

It was exhausting, pushing himself to get well, working overtaxed muscles each day until they shrieked in protest, but he refused to be an invalid burden any longer than necessary. Molly had been too kind already, and he wouldn’t abuse the hospitality that he was so grateful for, not even if it killed him.

The quiet was welcome. It gave him time to think, and he needed that time desperately, for there was so very much that needed thinking about. Harry topped the list. Harry was an enigma, wrapped in a mystery. He’d seen Harry’s violent side more than once, and he knew it was real, and a thing to be feared, but it had vanished these past few days. Now Harry seemed grimly quiet, and determined to help Draco recover. He didn’t grimace at the sight of Draco’s scars, and he didn’t abandon Draco at a needful moment again. He just stoically, silently, stiffly assisted Molly or aided Draco at every turn. The only sign of emotion he’d gotten from Harry had been the day before.

Draco had walked, or rather limped, to the bathroom without the assistance of Harry or Molly, for the first time. Upon reaching the door, he turned back, smiling giddily, happy just to have something to be proud of, even if it was something as pathetically normal as walking unaided to the toilet for a piss. Harry smiled back, nodding soberly, a tiny acknowledgment of approval that made Draco’s heart leap in his chest. It wasn’t much, but it meant something, and that was enough.

The previous two days had been the best he’d had all year. Eating food that made his mouth water for more until he was full to bursting, escaping nightmares through the Potion of Dreamless Sleep, and watching the painful wounds that had covered him from the neck down slowly disappear. It was grueling, enduring such close contact while his head screamed for him to flee, but he was making it, and Molly had praised him several times for his efforts. Even Harry, who hadn’t spoken a word on the subject, seemed to hold a grudging admiration, and oddly enough, Harry’s approval mattered the most, because it had been the hardest to gain.

Draco thought back through the years, mentally kicking himself for the things he’d done. So many opportunities wasted and ruined, and so many people left hurt in his wake. He’d had everything in
the world at his fingertips, and he’d pissed it all away…just to be like his father.

‘How the hell did I ever look at him with envy? Father never treated me like anything but a pet; giving me treats when he was pleased and tearing into me when he wasn’t! I wanted him to be proud of me…for anything…just once! I’d have done anything to make him happy. All it got me was this fucking Mark and a life that wasn’t worth a shit until this week!

It had got him worse than that actually. Most of a year in Snape’s safe house, hiding in a cellar and living on the staples that Severus could provide when he was able to visit. He’d had a lot of time to think during that period, since there’d been little else to do, and Snape had been…well…enlightening, to say the least. One night of Draco’s carping and whining about the fix they were in and the state of the safe house, and the normally taciturn professor had snapped. He’d slapped Draco so hard it had knocked him halfway across the room, then roared at him in a voice that not-so-subtly threatened murder.

“YOU ARROGANT LITTLE FOOL! DO YOU KNOW WHAT I’VE JUST DONE FOR YOU! YOU UNSUFFERABLY SPOILED, IGNORANT, MEWLING LITTLE BRAT! I’VE KILLED…KILLED FOR YOUR INCOMPETENCE AND PRIDE.”

Snape stalked closer to him while Draco scrabbled across the floor, still stunned from being struck by his once favorite professor.

“I tried to help you, labored on your behalf, beseeched you to trust me, swore an Unbreakable Oath that could have been the death of me…just to protect you, and carried you to safety after your whimpering cowardice left me no choice but to kill for you! My lifespan and yours could well be counted in hours because of you! It might just have been easier to kill you and let the Oath kill me! You will obey me in all things, and you will do so in SILENCE. If you cannot do this, I swear I will turn you out into the hinterlands after snapping your wand myself, Oath be damned! Have I made myself clear?!"

And that had been that. Draco had whimpered his assent, cringing in fright, and he’d obeyed Snape’s every word like it was gospel. Months had crawled by while he ate and slept, waiting for word from Severus. He’d nearly gone insane, and he’d contemplated suicide or flight any number of times, but for some stubborn reason, he’d clung to life and endured until, finally, word came that the war was over.

Potter had won, the Dark Lord had fallen, his allies were scattered and fleeing, and the Ministry was rounding up every person with a Dark Mark under the auspices of Kingsley Shacklebolt, the new Minister of Magic. It was then that Snape told Draco everything. It was then that he learned of Severus’ true loyalties, and learned that the man Snape had executed for Draco’s sake had been his only stalwart friend for more than a decade. Snape Apparated the both of them to the Ministry, and gave himself and Draco over to their custody for eventual trial. It was the only hope they would have for a life rooted in something other than constant flight, and Draco had been too numb to do anything but follow along in shocked silence.

The Manor had been confiscated, and his father was sentenced to Azkaban in absentia, until his corpse was recovered from the basement of Riddle manor. Draco’s mother resided in a ward at St. Mungo’s, having been tortured by Voldemort until mad, all because of Draco’s failure, and Draco himself spent months answering questions and enduring Veritaserum interrogations until every detail of his life until that day had been recorded as evidence. When their trials finally came, he’d been set free, primarily because of his youth, and because of Snape’s testimony regarding his unwillingness to kill Albus Dumbledore. The loss of Malfoy Manor, and the loss of his parents and family fortune, were held to be sufficient punishment.
Snape had been set free as well, the evidence from his own mind clearly proving that he had been Albus Dumbledore’s agent, and that the former Headmaster had been aware of Draco’s plot since the beginning of the year. Dumbledore had chosen to risk death rather than let Draco be incarcerated or caught, which would have resulted in the prompt execution of Draco’s parents. It was an unthinkable sacrifice that the Headmaster had made, apparently despite Snape’s frequent admonishments and protests. He’d gone to incredible lengths just to gamble on the chance that Draco would refuse to kill. And he’d been right.

Draco felt tears leaking down his face, burning hot trails down his cheeks in the cool, still air of night. These weren’t even his worst memories, in fact, what came later made these seem like a time of joyful innocence.

Snape had taken them back to the safe house, where renegade Death Eaters couldn’t reach them, and was preparing to make arrangements for lodging elsewhere. That was when Potter’s letter had arrived. Snape had packed his things, muttering about ‘psychotic upstart brats with more power than brains’ and left for Germany, where an old associate was willing to offer him a bit of work and cheap lodging. He’d left Draco behind with an icy glare and a cold answer to Draco’s pleas for assistance.

“Draco. The Oath ended when I fulfilled your task and saved your life. I have endured the sight of you for months as a final payment to Albus for his kindness, but I am finished here. You are the final and pathetic product of an upbringing so lacking in basic decency, that I have no doubt that your failure as a human being will become the stuff of cautionary tales to the children of others. You have cost me my home, my career, my country, and my oldest friend. I would wish ill upon you, but I’m certain that you will bring far more upon yourself than ever I could conjure. There is a pouch of Galleons on the mantle, you have your wand, your wits, and the advantage of youth. If you cannot make something of yourself with such a start, it is the fault of no one but yourself, and I wouldn’t pity you, even if I could. As inappropriate as the word may seem for the occasion…farewell.”

And then he was gone. Draco stayed in the safe house until the last crumb was eaten, and when his stomach ached from hunger and he feared starvation worse than the wrath of leftover Death Eaters, he left for Diagon Alley. He’d been jeered at when recognized, harried from every haven, cast out of every inn and shop, and even pelted with merchandise by vendors in the street. Glamours allowed him to seek refuge and purchase food, but even they had their limits, and each time someone penetrated them, he was found out and chased away. His old ‘friends’ lived in mortal fear of capture, even though they had never been Marked. Their association with a known Death Eater had tarnished them already, and with Potter and the Aurors hunting people down by the score, no one dared to risk housing him.

The money ran out long before other’s fear or contempt for him did, and that last month in Diagon Alley had been sheer hell. His old clothes were threadbare and filthy, and he’d been nicking food out of trash bins at the end. Running into another person who bore the Mark had felt like a miracle…just having someone near him that didn’t hurl curses and stones had been a relief. And that had been his downfall.

Draco pushed his memories away and returned to his musings over what to do about Harry. There were things in his mind he fervently wished could be Obliviated, but to remove most of a year from his life would leave him a drooling idiot. He had to learn to function in spite of those black and horrifying thoughts that dogged him. If he didn’t, madness awaited.

Harry had been quiet during the evening. Far quieter than normal. He’d almost seemed friendly until some five or six hours ago. When Draco had woke from his after dinner nap, Harry had been sitting in the chair beside the bed, calmly reading an Occlumency text. His face was inscrutable, grim and serious, and he seemed irritated with Draco from the start, but too reasonable to show it in any
obvious way.

Something was amiss, and Draco was sure of it. He could almost feel the palpable change in the atmosphere around him. Without a wand, he’d learned to use the few senses available to him as much as possible, and if one could call the knack of reading moods and possibilities a ‘sixth sense’, then Draco had honed his to razor keenness. Harry had something on his mind, and it was something new.

Draco suddenly had the oddest thought. All his Slytherin cunning and guile were bent to a single task: helping save Harry Potter from himself. How ironic was that? It actually felt...good. He didn’t have any purpose when he came here, save for a desperate, last-chance grab at survival or a quick and easy death. Now he had a purpose, and it was a good one. Maybe he wouldn’t go about it like a Gryffindor would, but he was doing something basically...noble! The very thought made him smile. Who would have imagined that? Still, how to help Harry when he barely opened up at all, and how to move the topic subtly toward Harry’s habit of seeking out and murdering former Death Eaters?

Inspiration struck Draco in a flash. Just as Draco had examined his own past, Harry needed to look at his, and rather than starting at the end, which was made up of Harry’s actions now, he could start at the beginning...The Dark Lord’s death. That was when Molly said it all started. If he asked Harry for the story of Lord Voldemort’s destruction, it would at least open the door to future conversations with a similar theme.

Draco curled against the pillow and wiped the half-dried tears off of his face. He pulled the sheets and quilts back to rights and tried to calm his mind for sleep. The potion he’d taken earlier that night guarded his mind against nightmares, but not against the cruel barbs of memory in the waking world. He was tired, and more than a little sore, but he had a plan, and that gave him a sense of satisfaction as he drifted back to sleep.

Silenced by spell and sitting in his own room, Harry sat up late into the night, as restless and hungry as a great cat, whetstone in one hand, blackened steel in the other. No one save him could hear the grind of metal against stone, and he honed his weapon of choice to razor sharpness. Tomorrow night, another one of them would finally pay. The Ministry couldn’t seem to catch them, but Harry could, and when he did, people slept safer for what he’d done. For every weeping relative that claimed injustice, a hundred victims of the war lay still and silent in graves throughout England. Where was their justice? A few hundred in Azkaban? Where was mercy when Hermione died? Where was fairness when Ginny was killed? Would any of those he hunted have shown a shred of decency to another human being, Muggle or wizard alike? Draco was living proof of their unrelenting thirst for evil. Harry would settle the score. Blade ground against stone long into the night. Tomorrow. Tomorrow another one would pay.

TBC!!!
Shameful Ardor and Chilling Tales

Draco woke early that morning, somewhat logy from the Dreamless Sleep Potion, but otherwise feeling quite well. He dithered over plans for communicating with Harry while he made use of the bathroom and shower, and even though he still needed a small chair to sit on while he cleaned himself, he felt discernibly stronger. Good food and sleep were slowly eating away at the malaise that had clung to him since his arrival, and he hoped that tonight he might actually manage the stairs by himself and join Molly, Arthur and Harry for supper. Most people didn’t react so poorly to the potions he’d been given, but his condition on arrival had been so appalling that he’d been hit harder by them than most.

Arthur was on his way off to work, tea still hurriedly being sipped, while he tipped his hat to Draco on the way down the stairs to the Floo. Draco collapsed back onto the bed with a sigh of relief, just happy to make it back to the bed unsupervised and unassisted.

Today would be the last day of formal healing for him. There were only a few injuries on his back left to close, and when Harry and Molly were finished, all that would be left would be the application of Scaradicate Salve. Draco peeled off the pajama top and looked down at his chest and stomach. The hip bones were still too sharp, and the stomach a little too concave, but at least his ribs didn’t show as much as they had. The reds, browns, purples and grays of scar tissue were everywhere, but he’d trained himself not to look at it for long, since too many memories risked surfacing if he dwelt upon them too much.

He was really healing, and it still seemed impossible that only a week ago he’d been on the edge of death. He could hear Molly humming to herself on the way up the stairs, and he knew that breakfast was on the way. His mouth was already watering at the thought, but not without a tiny twinge of guilt for remaining in bed while he could walk…sort of. The sooner he could work his way up to handling stairs, the better!

Molly arrived, smiling widely, and set the tray down on the bed. Sausages and eggs, bread and jam, tea and juice were all in abundance, and Draco had a little difficulty suppressing tears of happiness while he ate. Molly left him to his meal after gently tousling his hair when he mumbled his thanks through a mouthful of eggs and sausage, and Draco feasted in relative silence, looking forward to today’s healing session more than usual. He still hated the tension that came of close contact, but today he had a purpose and a plan, and today he would see the last of his wounds healed. No more itching flesh that slowly stitched together, no more sitting at wand point with his teeth clenched until his head ached. This had all the makings of a good day.

Draco finished his breakfast, and sat back with a slightly dazed smile. He could hear noise from Harry’s room through the wall, and the urge to show off his ability to get about on his own emerged anew, not the least because he needed to spend more time talking to Harry. Draco pushed aside the tray, slung his legs over the edge of the bed, and started to work his way to the door, one hand on the wall at all times for balance. It only took a minute or so to make it to Harry’s door. He gave a couple of timid raps, suddenly unsure of how Harry would react to unexpected company.

The door opened on its own, doubtlessly a feat of wandless magic by Harry. Draco looked in as the door slowly turned, and found himself staring in shock at the man doing sit-ups on the floor. Whatever the past years had done to Draco, it had done the opposite to Harry. Harry was wearing nothing but gym shorts, and was doing sit-ups with a ferocity and ease that was intimidating…and fascinating. He was flushed mildly from exertion, and a sheen of sweat was visible on every inch of him. Every muscle was tensed and straining, as he was obviously fairly far along in his routine. His
tanned chest looked as chiseled as a statue’s, carved from granite and every bit as solid, and yet his build was that of a runner or a swimmer; lean, flexible and yet powerful when needed. Long, dark hair was bound back by a single black ribbon, and Harry’s face was utterly peaceful, as if in the midst of his efforts, nothing could disturb him. Draco also noticed that the bulge in Harry’s gym shorts was…well…bloody remarkable at the least, and it was fairly obvious that it wasn’t even erect!

“What’s up? Aside from you, that is.”

The question was matter of fact, and almost emotionless, but Draco barely heard it at all. He couldn’t pull his eyes off of the shining expanse of tanned and toned flesh in front of him. He was still mauling over a reply, when nature struck with cruel precision. Draco’s libido had been dead for over a year, and wounded longer than that. Well fed, well rested, and comfortable in his environment, the trauma of his past seemingly far away, Draco’s sluggish sex drive received a sudden metaphorical whack to the back of the neck, snapping it to life quite by surprise. Draco suddenly became conscious of the erection threatening to tent his pajama bottoms, and doubly conscious of the idle fantasy crossing his mind’s eye. He wanted to reach out and touch the wonderful, tawny body in front of him.

Reality slammed back into gear and Draco stumbled backwards, limping toward his room, mumbling apologies he didn’t even hear himself speak.

‘Sick! Wrong! FUCK! What’s wrong with me!? What did they do to me? I can’t…I can’t want…that!”

The worst kind of memories tumbled through his mind. First of his own violation at the hands of others, quite unwillingly, then in numb submission to inevitability, then finally, aching from drug withdrawal, frantically laboring to please his captors. No one should want those things. Something had been done to him, made him sick and foul and a perfect freak. He’d never thought of things like that before, and even if he had, he hadn’t done them! His face flamed at the thought of his own dick betraying him, swelling in full sight of others at the thought of touching another man. Nausea overtook him, ruining the pleasant feeling of fullness he’d been enjoying from breakfast.

A single flash of memory stood out, far older than any other. His father’s outrage at a garden party, when Draco had been caught kissing another boy as part of some insipid childhood game. He’d been caned to within an inch of his life, and the years that followed had been full of lectures about proper manly deportment and his duty to his lineage. Purebloods of the sort that followed the Dark Lord considered faggotry among their own ranks as a sin far graver than the mixing of blood. Choosing not to bring heirs into the world, but to instead seek out dalliances with other men, thereby depleting an already thin gene pool, well…there could be no worse crime.

The caning had lived in his mind ever after, a moment of brilliant and blinding horror, carrying with it the same message, over and over again. Such things were wrong…and Draco had believed it, because he’d been just seven years old, and it had never occurred to him that there was a way in which his father could be wrong. Even in the rational mind of an adult, more than a decade later, an instinctive terror crept into Draco at the thought of actually desiring Harry. What he’d done in the past had been forced, compelled, or necessary. He had never known pleasure from such things, and if he had his way…he never would!

Draco tumbled back into his bed and pulled the covers up, shivering with tension and self-loathing. He fumbled briefly at the nightstand until he reached a Calming Draught and gulped it down. Harry entered the room wearing his bathrobe and wiping sweat from his face with a towel, his face reading a mixture of irritation and concern.

“You alright? Didn’t expect to see you walking around without a reason. Well done.”
The approbation rang hollow in Draco’s ears while he stared intently at the ceiling, refusing to look at the man in the doorway.

“Y-yeah. Fine, just…you know…exercising. I’m fine, really. Thanks.”

The words came out fast and nervous, and Draco cursed himself for being an obvious liar on top of being a potential fairy. He wasn’t sure which of the two was more horrifying at the moment, and the urge to cry from frustration was overwhelming, but he truly didn’t want Harry seeing that!

Harry shrugged and headed down the hall, much to Draco’s relief.

“Alright. I’m off for the shower. Soon as I’m dressed we’ll work on the last of your wounds. Maybe a quarter hour or so. Relax, you look like you overworked yourself. You’re not going to get any better if you keep pushing yourself too hard.”

Draco barely heard the words, mumbling polite agreement without thinking, as his mind was still reeling, and it was a conscious effort just to hold down the food he’d taken in. He wanted to get well, he wanted to be healed, and he wanted to help Molly, but how could he stand being in a room with Harry if something like that happened? He didn’t have any money, or a wand, or even anywhere else to go…so leaving to avoid complete humiliation wasn’t even a realistic option. Things were completely fucked, and he’d almost dared to feel happy until this morning. The Calming Draught was all that was keeping him from breaking into a complete fit, and the world suddenly felt like the horrifying place he’d nearly forgotten it could be.

Molly entered the room and whisked away Draco’s tray with the flick of a wand. Her eyes missed nothing, and Draco knew she saw the empty potion bottle on the counter. Her face resonated with sympathy for Draco.

“I’m sorry, dearie. Rough morning? We’ll see if we can’t turn that around. You’ve nothing to worry for here.”

The words were comforting, but Draco’s tension didn’t subside. Molly couldn’t know about this. He uttered a few vague statements about bad memories, which was perfectly true, and left out the specific details. Somehow, telling the wonderful woman who gave him sanctuary in her home, ‘Oh, by the way, I’m a fucking poof and a bender, and in spite of everything that’s happened, I’m having inappropriate thoughts about the man who is practically your adopted son. Aren’t you glad you let me in the door?’, just didn’t seem like a good way to explain his mood.

Blessedly, Molly took him at his word, and let the subject lie while she went through the potions and a list of recommendations from Poppy Pomfrey.

“Good news, love. No more potions to prevent re-infection means you’ll be feeling fit to walk about in just a couple of days. Terrible side effect, that, but it’s the most effective remedy against infections that we know of. Just a few bits on your upper back and we’ll be finished with the healing proper, and then we can concentrate of getting your scars sorted out. I’ve laid up a fair supply of salve, and I can make a bit more if I must. Some of the older ones may take repeat treatment, and Poppy warns that powerful Dark curse scars may be especially slow to heal, but I’m sure we can manage. You’ve done remarkably well already. I’m quite proud of you, you know. None of my boys were such perfect patients. It was a fight to get as much as a teaspoon of potion down their throat, and goodness, keeping them abed for more than an hour took almost every spell I knew, including the Full Body Bind!”

Draco stiffly smiled at her kind words. “I…I can handle this. I’m okay. Today I want to make it to supper…at the table. I’m just…anxious.” Draco shifted to a whisper, since he could hear that the
shower had stopped. Harry would be here soon.

“I have some ideas on getting Harry to talk about things. I’ll try them while we do the healing. I need the distraction anyway, it’ll keep my mind off things.”

Molly nodded soberly, and loudly changed the topic, hoping to ensure Harry’s continued ignorance about their little conspiracy. They nattered a bit about other things, deliberately killing time until Harry arrived, still damp from his shower, but thankfully (for the sake of Draco’s nerves) fully clothed.

Draco knew what was coming, and given the location of his wounds, and the events of this morning, he was uncomfortable about being half naked in front of Harry. Thank the gods it was his back they were working on! Heaven forbid it had been his hips and thighs! He’d been too potion-addled and exhausted to respond to any unnatural urges then, but now, apparently, it was a different game. Half just to distract himself from that train of thought, and half to delay the inevitable, Draco opened his conversation with something he’d mulled over for the last couple of days.

“Harry…Molly, there’s something I need to say before we start. I couldn’t think very clearly for awhile, but I know what I want to say now. May I?”

Harry nodded assent, his brow only lightly furrowed with interest. Molly held her breath, hoping that at least Draco’s opening gambits wouldn’t fall apart. The boy was her last hope of awakening Harry’s conscience about his actions. Harry seemed nonplussed.

“Sure. What’s on your mind?”

Harry nodded assent, his brow only lightly furrowed with interest. Molly held her breath, hoping that at least Draco’s opening gambits wouldn’t fall apart. The boy was her last hope of awakening Harry’s conscience about his actions. Harry seemed nonplussed.

“Sure. What’s on your mind?”

Draco took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and started.

“I didn’t want to say this until I felt well enough to say it right. I’ve said thank you for the things you’ve both done…letting me stay here, healing me, feeding me so well…but there’s something I haven’t said yet, and it’s overdue.

I’m sorry. I’m sorry for all the things I did in school. I didn’t even understand how they could be wrong back then. I know a lot of things I didn’t know then, and I know that I hurt a lot of people, not always on purpose, and mostly not very badly, but I didn’t care about what I was doing or who it hurt, I only cared about me. I’m sorry about Ron and Katie. I’m sorry about Albus. I’m sorry about Greyback and Bill. God, I’m even sorry about Hagrid and Buckbeak. I’m sorry about almost everything I ever said or did from the day I entered Hogwarts until the day I left.

I can’t make any of it go away. It’s done and there’s nothing I can do to change it. I just wanted you to know that things are different now…I’m different, and I’ll never stop thinking about things before I act. I promise I’ll never let myself behave like that again. It doesn’t matter if you believe me or not, it only matters that I mean it and I know it, but it would be good to think that you knew how much I meant this. You’re the only people in the entire wizarding world that have ever done anything for me without a reason or an agenda. I swear I won’t forget it. Thank you.”

Draco opened his eyes. Molly’s lips were pursed while she dabbed at her eyes. Harry looked inscrutable, as if gears were turning in head. Harry finally spoke.

“Well, Draco…you’d better stop talking like that or people will start getting the idea that you’re a decent bloke. For what it’s worth, I believe you…about you being different now. You seem it, and I think you understand that no one will ever forget what you’ve done, but we might just get comfortable with what you’re doing now.”
Molly took up where Harry left off, the tremor in her voice clearly showing the depth of her emotions even though she tried to maintain a sober front.

“You’re so very welcome, Draco. The past is the past, but you’ve got brighter days ahead of you, I’m sure of it. Now just turn about and let’s have a look at your back, love. We’ll see if we can’t get you fixed up right quick, shall we?”

Draco felt apprehension build in his chest even as he turned onto his stomach, pushing the blankets down to his waist. The presence of two people behind him while he was essentially helpless was something that made his stomach churn with panic. Even the Calming Draught couldn’t fully take the edge off of this reaction. But that was where Draco’s plan kicked in. The words were hard to get out, as tense as he was, and they were perfectly truthful, but they served a second purpose. A noble purpose. Molly was clucking about his tensed muscles and imploring him to relax, and that set up his request for a distraction.

“I need to think about something else. I’m sorry, I just can’t…can’t handle this easily. Harry? I know everybody else probably already heard it, but would you tell me about when you destroyed the Dark Lord? I wanted to hear it from you.”

He could almost feel the warring emotions in Harry smoldering behind him. The presence of power and faint anger behind him made him quail inside with fear. He reminded himself that Molly was here and nothing could happen. Nothing…right?

“Why that old tale? The Prophet had most of it right, surprisingly. There are only a few parts that got left out, and some of that can’t be spoken of even now. There are parts that I can’t even tell, and the number of people who knew the whole truth could have been counted with one hand, and a couple of them are dead. The parts that are left aren’t that different from what you’ve probably heard, so I don’t really see the point in telling it again.”

Draco turned his head on the pillow and looked Harry in the eyes.

“You saved all of us that day. There’s no one in this house, including me, who would be alive today if you hadn’t done what you’d done. It wouldn’t just distract me from…you know…it would just be nice to know more about what the whole world owes you for. Please?”

Kindness could achieve things that a swaggering posture and a bullying demeanor never could, as Draco was quickly learning, and this was proven true when Harry grudgingly nodded. Molly set to work in silence, while Draco tried to concentrate on the sound of Harry’s voice, letting himself forget the terrible feeling of exposure and vulnerability that dogged him during these healing sessions.

“It was Ron and me in the end. We’d gone through the cellars while the rest of the Order stormed the main entrance. We made it deeper into Riddle Manor than any of the others, partly because of my Invisibility Cloak, and partly because of a few of Fred and George’s magical inventions. There was a lot of fighting, but we had a special purpose. Let’s just say that Voldemort had certain artifacts enchanted to provide him extra protection. We had to destroy those before he could even potentially be killed.

There was only one left when we attacked Riddle Manor, and everything would have been a bloody waste if we hadn’t succeeded. Nagini, the snake, was one of them. He’d made her a living artifact, and Ron and I found her in the cellars. He pinned her down so she couldn’t strike, and I hacked her to bits. That wasn’t even close to the end of it. We’d already broken the others, and that made it time to find Voldemort and finish the job.

There was fighting everywhere. The grounds, the halls…everywhere. We may have been coming up
from below, but it was like an anthill in there, and we’d been the ones to disturb it. Every time we
turned a corner, we ran into more Death Eaters. Ron fought like a tiger. One came through a
doorway and almost surprised us, but Ron didn’t even blink before grabbing him by the robes and
bashing him into a wall until he dropped. It was the hall before Voldemort’s lair that was the worst. I
don’t know if it was just the number of guards he really kept or if he was trying to soften us up
before he came out in person, but it was wands, knives, fists and boots for longer than I can recall.

I remember being surrounded by bodies, and Ron had been slashed up pretty bad, but he was still
upright and ready to fight. Voldemort stepped out of his room like it was a Sunday stroll. He laughed
at us, and I remember it making me furious. Ron fired off a spell and it got blocked, and he got hit
with a Stunner and went down. I had my Protego up and it missed me entirely. There wasn’t much to
it, but I marched the hall toward him, bouncing spells off each other as we closed. He was still
laughing like a maniac when I got to the last couple feet from him, and then I buried my knife in his
chest, pushed up and twisted.

The look on his face was almost comical, like he couldn’t believe that I’d killed him with a weapon
instead of a spell. When his head lolled back and he slid off the blade, it was like an explosion…pure
force, and it threw me back down the hall. Knocked me out cold. I came to being carried out across
Ron’s shoulder. He’d found me on a pile of Death Eaters, and he just threw me over his shoulder
and fought his way out until he could link up with the rest of our team.

The weird part was this. Dumbledore always used to say that the prophecy’s line about ‘a power the
Dark Lord knew not’ meant love. He thought I’d win because I could love and Tom Riddle couldn’t.
It’s funny, isn’t it? The power the Dark Lord knew not was nine inches of high-tempered carbon
steel shoved through his sternum and into his black and miserable heart. All the mastery of magic, all
that hatred of Muggles, and in the end, a standard issue Muggle combat knife killed him. That’s the
end of it. It wasn’t all magic and speeches and happy endings, but that was how it happened.”

Draco mulled over the tale he’d just been told. It chilled him to the bone, and he’d completely
forgotten about the other matters that would have stressed him. Molly finished up the last old and
ugly wound on his back, and Draco thanked Harry for the tale. Mentally, he was exhausted, and he
begged time for sleep now that they were finished. A hundred new questions were whirling in his
mind, but uneasy sleep crept up too fast to work on framing them. Draco slid into a doze within
minutes, and was only barely conscious of the sounds of Harry and Molly leaving him to rest.

TBC!!!
Harry told Molly that he was dropping by the twins' shop, knowing full well that she’d assume he was checking on his silent partnership in their enterprises. Had she known the full extent of their involvement in his activities, she’d have been furious, but Harry had no intention of ever letting her know how deeply they had been involved.

Fred and George had suffered from the war as much as anyone had, and more than many. George had lost an eye, which had been replaceable with a sleek, new model of the contraption once worn by Mad Eye Moody. George’s, of course, had several extra enchantments upon it. They had taken the murder of Ginny quite personally, and the collapse Ron had suffered after Hermione’s death had been more fuel on the fire for revenge. Throw in Bill’s scars, two attacks on the Burrow, and the assault on their shop that had cost George an eye, as well as what Harry himself had endured, and the Weasley twins were primed to deliver justice in any way they could.

Fred and George had developed a first class system of informants around the country, using their uncommon wealth to make information about ex-Death Eaters well worth passing on. They also discreetly provided Harry with free access to their vast arsenal of traps, tricks, distractions, and devices. These things had proven invaluable depending on the ‘operations’ Harry undertook. Attacking groups was the hardest, and great caution was needed when picking off guards, lest the others scatter before Harry had caught up with them.

A quick departure by Floo, and Harry was in the back offices of Weasley Wizarding Wheezes, coughing out soot and dusting off his coat. Fred and George were in the main office, now that they could afford clerks to handle the store and manufacture the merchandise.

The enterprise would have earned Harry a pretty penny, or a nifty Knut, in any case, but the Ministry contracts for their goods had increased earnings to such a degree that Harry had seen a hundred-fold return on his initial investment. Fred and George kept Harry’s name off the books, simply shunting the money through their own salaries and holdings, then filtering it to Harry’s Gringott’s account as gifts and donations to their favorite wizard and family friend.

The office was a tidy little room, ill-befitting the status of two such wealthy wizards, but the twins really didn’t care about pomp and circumstance, they cared about getting the paperwork done quickly and neatly, and getting on with the business of making new merchandise as much as possible. Harry walked past the secretary, a pretty girl with ash blond hair who waved a distracted hello to him as he passed, and entered the private offices of the wizarding world’s hottest entrepreneurs.

“What have we got? Anything red hot…or is it something that can cook awhile before I move on it? We’ve got things going on at the Burrow you ought to be brought up to speed on, so this trip isn’t
wasted either way.”

“It’s fairly hot—”

“and reasonably solid.” The twins never shook the habit of completing one another’s sentences. It was jarring for most people, but Harry had gotten used to it.

George relayed the rest of what his brother had started. “Yesterday morning, there was a sighting in Leeds. We think it was Kaminski based on the description.”

“He was shopping, Muggle style, and the places he visited indicated that he was making a supply run before dropping back into hiding.”

“You might want to move on it fast. He’s got supplies enough for at least a month, and if he travels inconspicuously enough, we’ll have to wait until he pops up again. Here’s the address.”

Fred handed Harry a slip of parchment. Harry memorized the information and willed the paper to float into mid air, then burst into flame and burn to fine ash. A grim smile was on his face.

“Do either of you know anything from the files on him? I can’t remember his habits. Was he just a foot soldier or was he Inner Circle? Does he torture or kill? Has he been involved in post-war attacks, or has he just been hiding all this time?”

George stared at a filing cabinet with his enchanted eye, and several files popped out and flew to Harry’s hands.

“Kaminski was a minor player. Just cannon fodder, really. He was in on a few attacks on Muggles, but he was never Inner Circle. He hasn’t got any history of doing more than just following orders and raising a little mayhem in Voldemort’s name back in the day.”

Fred picked up the thread of conversation from there. “We do have a couple of statements that suggested he was one of Bellatrix’s goons the day she killed Hermione. That may be why he’s still in hiding. Shacklebolt would put anyone who was involved with that bitch in Azkaban for life. It’s either rot there—”

“or keep running. He chose to run. That makes him fair game in our book. It’s not like they didn’t have a choice. They lost, they should pay, and if they won’t—”

“We’ll help you make them!”

Harry smiled again, just as grim as before. The twin’s devices had saved him time and effort, and their information had made things possible that he couldn’t have hoped for otherwise. Ron had been a great fighter during the war, but after Hermione and Ginny, he just hadn’t had the will to fight. Fred and George had stepped in to take their brother’s place, and they’d proven themselves a dozen times over. He was damned lucky to have friends who would go so far for him, and he bloody well knew it.

When he’d worked alongside the Aurors, he’d been responsible for four captures and seven kills. Whether those kills had been necessary had been a matter of some contention at the Ministry. Since he’d taken up working alone to avoid conflict, the sometimes grotesque and spectacular deaths of ex-Death Eaters had resulted in dozens of surrenders, and the Ministry had captured still more who got careless while fleeing to safer countries. All tolled, Harry had captured or killed more than thirty-eight Death Eaters, and only a dozen or so were left running about England. It wouldn’t be long before he could rest. There were only a few more that needed to be ‘taken care of’.
“Tonight then. I’ll hit this place around midnight. In the meantime, I’ve got word from home. Things have been…interesting. Draco Malfoy is living with us. Under sanctuary.”

The twins shocked expressions were worth it.

“And you haven’t buried him—"

“in the backyard yet?! Harry, Harry, Harry…”

“you’re losing your touch!”

“I wanted to kill him off when he showed up, but your mum accepted his request for sanctuary. I’ll say this, though. He’s been through hell since the end of the war, and he’s come out the better for it. He’s not at all the sniveling, little ferret I remember from school. It’s taken almost a week just to heal the wounds on him, and he’s been a good guest the entire time.”

George’s eye popped out, dangled low, then swung back into place. The gag effects he’s charmed it to perform were the stuff of old Muggle movies, and quite corny, but the wizarding world was full of people who had never seen such pratfall, physical comedy before. Harry chuckled while George recomposed himself.

“Stap me vitals, Harry! It’s hard to imagine Malfoy as anything but a backstabbing little shit. If he can get you speaking well of him—"

“he must have changed!” Fred was just as floored as George.

“He is…changed, that is…and I believe it, or I’d never have left the house while he was there with your mum. I asked about Kaminski’s habits for a reason. Draco was picked up by Death Eater’s. He’s so fucked up he can’t even really talk about it without having a complete breakdown, so draw your own conclusions about what they may have done to him. It may have been one, but I suspect there were several involved. He’s lucky just to be alive. They dumped him off in the middle of Muggle London, figuring he’d die of exposure. I want to know who’s left on the list that might torture someone like him for months, then let them go because they were bored. He might be able to lead me to them, but first I have to get him well enough to handle talking about it. So what have we got?”

George closed his real eye, concentrating with his magical one. He whispered an activation command. The files he’d read appeared in front of his field of vision, only to him, and he read them aloud for the benefit of Fred and Harry.

“Display open case files on Death Eaters still at large. Scroll down. Faster. Okay, stop. We have Kaminski, of course. There’s Morrigan, Chalmers, Hyde-Pratt, MacNair, Rodolphus LeStrange, Farnham, VanHoek, Perliss and Derringer. There may be a few more out there, but without the Ministry’s updated files, we can’t say for sure.”

Fred scratched his chin. “I’d say LeStrange and MacNair are good candidates. They were the most serious bastards in a pack of all the same. They’re the two most wanted ex-Death Eaters in all of England, though, so I doubt they’d rear their ugly faces just to play with a hack like Malfoy.”

Harry thought for a moment, then asked one last question.

“Can you tell me which ones have been sighted in London in the last year?”

“Morrigan was sighted in a park about ten months ago. Perliss…he was supposedly in a pub this summer, but the information was unreliable, and MacNair was seen three months ago, and was
almost caught, but the Auror on his tail was practically incompetent and got punched in the face rounding a corner. Lost him completely. Dawlish hasn’t lived that one down yet. I hear they still mock him in the office by turning out the lights at random intervals.”

Harry kept his thoughts on Dawlish to himself. In his book, the prat should have been a pastry chef instead of an Auror. Still, with Kingsley Shacklebolt in charge, an idiot like that would never wind up with any power, so it was no great loss.

“Alright. Thanks, boys. I’ve got to head back and take care of a few things at home before tonight. If you come to call, don’t call Draco by his last name. He doesn’t even want to be called Malfoy now. Just Draco. I’ll give your mum your love, soon as I get back. Take care.”

“Always a pleasure, Harry, and-”

“we’ll see you again soon enough. Be-”

“careful out there.”

The twins gave him a matched set of somber nods, honoring him with the knowledge that, though they bowed to no one, the one person they respected enough to even come close to it…was Harry Potter.

Harry headed back to the Floo and whisked himself home in cloud of green flame. It was uncommonly chilly in the house, and Harry noticed the draft immediately. Something was amiss.

“Molly?”

Harry saw that front door was ajar, and feeling a faint thread of worry creep over him, he headed for the door and opened it, looking out into the yard. To his relief, Molly Weasley was standing at the edge of the garden, staring at the sky. Harry closed the door properly and walked out to join her.

“Molly? Are you alright? The front door was open. You had me worried for a second.”

Molly turned and looked at Harry like she’d just realized he was speaking to her. A look of surprise crossed her face.

“Oh! Dear. Well, it was too warm in there anyway. I’d made some bread for later and the heat got at me something awful. I just came out for a breather, you know. I must have forgotten to shut the door. Silly me. Let’s go on in then, and we’ll see if we can’t get you a nice cuppa.”

She seemed calm enough, but something felt terribly odd about her speech. If Harry didn’t know Molly better, he’d have almost thought she was covering something up, but Molly had always been bold as brass, and open about everything. If she said she was fine and all was well, then that was just how it was. Harry let it lie, and followed Molly back into the house. Whatever it was, she’d tell him if he needed to know, and surely she’d tell Arthur if it was more private. Over tea and fresh bread and jam, Harry let his mind slip back to more immediate concerns.

Tonight he had a mission. He’d Apparate from the front walk to Leeds as soon as everyone was abed. He’d have to prepare a little, but since this was a lone Death Eater, he wouldn’t need much of his gear from the twins. Those were saved for more complicated jobs. For this, he’d need only a few simple things, and of course, a few powerful items that he possessed and kept for just such occasions.

Harry went upstairs, noting that Draco was sleeping fitfully as always, and closed the door to his room. He spelled open his trunk, and removed a black bag from the bottom. There were several packages inside, and he opened them one by one.
He’d dress in his black combat robes later, but these were what were important. Among the things he laid out on the bed were four small throwing knives, each with a sheath that could be strapped close to his body, and a small variety of toxins he could coat the blades with. There was a garrote wire, strong enough to hold tight under any circumstances, and with a quick twist he could lock it in position and leave an enemy to die, and it would stay as tight as if he were still holding it. There were flashbombs, meant to blind and distract the unready, and several gadgets provided by Fred and George, including one that created the impression that he was standing two feet to the left of his actual position. Another ‘toy’ of theirs responded to curses by creating the illusion that the curse had worked, leaving an immobilized or maimed body in plain sight, while Harry himself was invisible and unharmed for a full thirty seconds. Tricks like these had saved his life more than once.

Finally, there was a small cache from the Black estate vaults, and several artifacts from Dumbledore. Mostly small talismans and protective ornaments that warded off anything but the most major curses and hexes, but one was special. Plain and unassuming, one small amulet, a silver disk with runes etched in a language that was long forgotten, lay waiting for Harry to make use of it.

McGonagall had debated long and hard about whether Harry should have this, but in the end, she followed Dumbledore’s will to the letter. Among the many magical artifacts, books, and other valuables he’d left in trust for Harry, this was the most valuable, and the source of much of Dumbledore’s awe inspiring mystery and power. The Dampener.

It probably wasn’t the amulet’s true name, but it was as close to an accurate description of its effects as one could come. The Dampener caused one’s magical signature to seemingly vanish, so that spells, wards, magical traps, and other attempts to scry, locate or tamper with the bearer would fail. Wards simply ignored whoever wore it, allowing Harry to penetrate magical defenses with ease. In combination with his talent for wandless magic, The Dampener made it almost impossible to track him or trace him to a location where he had struck.

The Dampener had been used by Albus Dumbledore for more than fifty years, and it was one of the keys to his ability to come and go where he pleased, seemingly unperturbed by petty things like death traps and lethal warding spells. The knowledge of its existence had been limited to two people, because an item of such power had to be carefully guarded, lest it fall into the wrong hands. Dumbledore’s last gift, his final bequeath to Harry, had been possession of this artifact, and it made him one of the most dizzyingly powerful sorcerers in existence. With this, he could kill with impunity, and the Ministry could only guess as to whether or not he was involved. To be sure, they knew that when Death Eaters were found dead, it was probably Harry, but they couldn’t prove it, and that was all that mattered.

‘Thank you, Albus. Even from the grave you helped me find a way to make the world safer for everyone. Maybe you would’ve done it differently, but you believed I could be trusted with this, and I’m using it the way I see fit. I’d give just about anything to talk to you again, or to see Hermione or Ginny one more time, but at least you can rest knowing that I won’t sit still while innocent people are getting hurt. Thank you.’

Harry selected the items he’d take with him tonight, and prepared an unlicensed Portkey that would take him home in an emergency. Now he could spend the afternoon as he saw fit, and when midnight came, he would hunt again.

TBC!!!
Molly enjoyed a quiet sit down after lunch. Harry had come home and passed along Fred and George’s love to their mum, Draco had eaten lunch quietly, pre-occupied with thoughts he didn’t seem ready to share, and with a spot of tea and some knitting, the busy part of her day came to a halt…at least until near supper, which was hours off yet.

It had been just the oddest thing, finding herself being spoken to by Harry in the garden. She remembered going out there to cool off, but she hadn’t left a door open in winter in her entire life. Silliness. Awful to think that one might be getting old, but there was only one cure for that, and it was permanent, and not one that Molly was interested in for a good long time. She let the knitting needles occupy her time, since there was just enough concentration involved to keep her busy, but not unable to think idly of other things.

Draco seemed unusually skittish. Perhaps his nightmares were worsening. It was a matter of some concern, since Dreamless Sleep could only be administered for a short time before side effects cropped up, and if any arose, she’d have to wean him off the potion almost immediately. She couldn’t bear the thought of denying the poor little thing the one substance that ensured the healthy rest he needed. If he didn’t recover emotionally, and quick, it would hurt him all the more to suddenly do without peaceful rest.

Harry’s progress, at least on the subject of Draco, had pleased her enormously. He’d been so bitter at first, but she’d had confidence that Harry would see through his past grievances and recognize that someone needed his help, unconditionally, irregardless of past woes. It was a great comfort to know that she hadn’t misjudged Harry, she’d always had faith that, in spite of his actions, the sweet boy who had come to stay with them was still there.

Molly’s roll of green yarn finally ran out, and she rummaged through her knitting supplies for another. It was gone…all gone. She’d used it all up and hadn’t picked up more when she’d had the chance. Sheer stupidity! Horrible, wretched, pathetic asinine…

Molly broke into tears before she could stop herself, and her complexion wasn’t one that mixed well with them, and a wave of hopeless sorrow washed over her, pulling her into a round of tiny sobs. Halfway through sneezing into one of her many handkerchiefs, she realized what she was doing and stopped in puzzlement.

‘Good heavens, woman! Get a grip on yourself. It’s only yarn. You can Floo into town, or Transfigure a bundle of old rags. Nothing to get so worked up about, dearie. I swear, the things I seem to do these days.’

Molly went back to the kitchen and Transfigured some yarn out of rags she’d kept for cleaning, with
Harry brooded in his room. There were hours to go yet, but the anticipation was already eating at him. It had been more than a month since the last time he’d done a raid, and he was more than ready for it. Every second that ticked by was a cruel irritant, and there was nothing for it but to wait. He wasn’t sure why he cared so much about the illusion that he was doing nothing out of the ordinary. Everyone knew what he was doing. It was just an unwritten rule that, if he must commit these acts, he should cover his trail neatly, leaving his friends nothing to worry over. It was ridiculous. A waste of time that could allow killers to get away. Still, the look of sadness on Molly’s face when she had delicately broached the subject had almost been more than he could stand.

He threw himself onto the bed and grabbed a book. Advanced Occlumency and Legilimency were hard subjects, and even harder with no one to practice on. It was mostly theory work, and difficult theories to employ, at that! He’d long since built shields that didn’t crack under pressure, and he had power enough to smash through all but the finest defenses, but there were applications far beyond the questioning of suspects. There were mind healing techniques, calming exercises, lessons on memory storage and recovery. Pages and pages, and this was only one of the texts he’d inherited from the Black and Dumbledore estates. When he wasn’t helping Molly and Arthur, or ‘working’, enhancing his magical skills was his private passion.

As they entered into November, Harry remembered that his estate paperwork for Gringott’s would be due in a couple of weeks. The complexities of estate management had escaped him entirely, but he knew the rudiments, and paid a high price to get the goblins to correct his errors. He really didn’t want anyone but the goblins to see his private holdings, so a solicitor or accountant wasn’t an option he liked. He muddled through each quarter with a hatred that bordered on psychosis, but it was one of those things that just had to be done.

His book held no interest to him at the moment, and he finally laid it down and sighed. He’d tried hard not to think of Draco since his conversation with Charlie and Dula, but it was impossible to keep the subject from his mind. Especially when his sensitive ears could hear the nervous muttering and shifting sheets in the next room. He always heard the sounds of restless sleep these days, and it gallingly reminded him of the boy in the other room.

When he thought clearly of Draco, now, here in the house, it was hard to pin down what affected him so strangely. He could remember when Draco Malfoy had been a source of complete outrage. His smirks and sneers, his smugness and cruelty, and his capacity to hurt others with lies and misdirection, mostly for his own amusement, had been legendary. All these things were clear memories, but they didn’t seem to relate to the boy in the room next to him anymore. Draco’s physical appearance was ghastly, and Harry didn’t feel any attraction to the starvation level physique, or the heavy scarring that marred every second inch of skin on Draco’s body. If he’d liked that kind of thing he’d have shagged the ghoul in the attic by now!

Draco’s mannerisms. That was it. That was the real difference. He couldn’t say with any certainty whether he liked boys as much as girls, but he felt fairly sure that he liked the changes in Draco. Not the night terrors, or the weakness, but the little, hard to spot things. The way his eyes seemed wider, and not slitted with suspicion. The way he tried so hard to help himself and not burden others more than he had to. The guileless, blunt way he spoke what he really thought, even when it made him uncomfortable to do so. The bravery he’d shown during healing sessions, obviously terrified even while doped with potions, but unwilling to let that slow down what had to be done. There was
character there, and a desire to do what was right at any cost. Draco was a better person, and it showed in so many small ways.

Harry was now more than vaguely aware that, even after all that had passed between them, he rather liked that person. His fantasies hadn’t really changed; they were still about intimacy, touching, closeness and even snogging…but now they prominently featured Draco instead of anonymous bodies and half remembered faces from pretty strangers. He wanted to make Draco feel safe, and take the nightmares away for good. He wanted that to be possible for everyone in the world, which was why he kept hunting, preying on the predators, but he wanted to give Draco a happier life in a more direct way than he’d ever felt before.

Frankly, it was terrifying. Feeling these…things…now, was a complete bloody nuisance, and a right pain in the arse! Draco couldn’t possibly cope with a situation like this, since even if he’d been inclined to like blokes instead of birds, the last people he’d been around that were keen on the same sex…well…they’d literally buggered him bloody, the fucking bastards. It was written in stone; Harry could only hope to see Draco safe and healthy, then see if he could pull some strings and send Draco on his way to somewhere else. With a little help from his friends and family, Harry might be able to set Draco up for a nice, quiet life somewhere, and with his new attitude, Draco could probably make friends and hold a job once he’d proven himself to others. It didn’t matter what Harry wanted, which was a situation he was used to, he’d just have to keep mum and deal with things as they came.

The nagging thoughts he’d refused to embrace were out in the open, and he’d relaxed a bit, so Harry took up his book and read again, letting time and worry drift away on a sea of technical terms about theoretical Legilimency.

Draco woke from his after lunch nap, and he could already hear Molly in the kitchen downstairs, making supper. If his nose wasn’t lying to him, a roast was in the making, and he felt his stomach rumble with hunger, despite having been well fed for days.

‘Who’d have thought I could be such a shameless pig when it comes to food? Oh well, when I make it down the stairs, Molly is going to just bust with pride. Where were those clothes again?’

Draco rolled cautiously out of the bed and limped to the trunk at the foot of it. It was unlocked, and he’d seen Molly stow away stacks of clothes for when he was ready. There were thick socks that were clean if a bit worn, and they were a bit large on his feet, but not as big as the trousers, which puddled around his feet and hung ridiculously low on his hips. They’d have fallen off, but a belt had been thoughtfully provided, and extra holes had been punched into it out of consideration for his pathetically slender waist. There were shirts in abundance, and sweaters as well, but most of them were variations of Gryffindor colors. There were many ways in which Draco had changed, but his abhorrence of red, which looked horrible on him, and his loathing for gaudy gold, had not budged. He settled for a rather muted brown sweater that felt wonderfully warm.

A slow but steady trip to the bathroom, and he fixed his hair for the first time in months. It required him to look in the mirror for more than a few seconds, and he was glad he was at least dressed…since he’d grown positively sick of looking at his ruined body. If he never saw another scar again, it would still be too soon. Draco sighed at the picture in the mirror. He looked better, but he could remember when he’d looked amazing, and he’d been proud of it then. Now he was, well, just shabby. A skinny, shabby, scarred up little freak, garbed in leftover clothes that looked half again his size. Damn…why did that seem oddly familiar?
'God! This is pathetic. I’m bitching about minutia when I’m warm for the first time in weeks and I’m headed for supper in a few minutes. Compared to the week before this one, I’m the luckiest bastard who ever lived. Get moving, Draco. It’s going to be a piece of work getting down those bloody stairs. Better start now if there’s going to be food left when you get there!'

Draco limped his way to the stairwell, and gripped the railing carefully. It was slow going, but his balance had been coming back steadily over the last couple of days. He just got winded easily, and straining muscles that hadn’t worked heavily in a week was a bit trickier than he imagined. Who’d have thought stairs could be intimidating?

One at a time, Draco worked his way down, faintly flushed with a pleasant mixture of pride and exertion. It was such a small thing, but he’d learned to make the best of what he could in any given situation, and from where he’d started the week, making the journey downstairs without a spell of Levitation was a major bloody success!

Draco’s heart lurched into his throat when his foot slipped, and as his body pitched to compensate, he lost his rather weak grip on the railing. He didn’t even have time to do more than gasp before a hard looking wooden step was flying toward his face at terrifying speed, and his eyes slammed shut as he prepared for blinding pain.

It never came. Draco opened his eyes, and stared at the step that was two inches from his face. He was floating, weightless and pain free, just above the stair. His entire body shook with the excess of adrenaline-based excitement. All he’d been able to imagine a second ago was waking up as broken as he’d been when he arrived, and how depressing it was that he’d failed to make it down a bloody stair. Then his body shifted in the air, so that he was floating comfortably on his back, and he got a clear view of his rescuer.

Harry was at the top of the stairs, one hand outstretched in an act of silent concentration. Wandless, voiceless magic at its finest. Pure will was holding Draco aloft, and it filled him with a giddy sense of freedom and happiness. Harry walked down the steps slowly, with Draco floating in front of him, until they reached the living room. Draco found himself floating over a chair, and ultimately deposited gently into it, landing so smoothly that it was like he’d sat down of his own will. Harry walked the last few feet and took the chair beside Draco, who was still getting his equilibrium back after experiencing panic, followed by the euphoric sense of weightlessness, and a dash of awe at Harry’s level of power as well.

“Thanks…I guess I…I tried to make the stairs a little too soon. I didn’t think I’d get that dizzy. That was amazing…the magic I mean.”

Harry smiled mildly. “You know I wouldn’t let you fall, right? I wouldn’t let you get hurt…and you’re welcome.”

Draco went crimson, almost to the roots of his hair. There was something utterly matter of fact about Harry’s tone. It whispered volumes at him, and they were volumes he really didn’t want to hear. The knowledge that Harry was dangerous seemed far away, when he was kind and so fucking sincere like this. If he’d known that he’d saved a filthy, perverted freak, who lusted after touching him, Harry would probably hex him back to the top of the stairwell and kick him back down it for good measure. The act of kindness that came so easy for Harry made Draco’s stomach knot and twist with uncomfortable desires.

‘What do I say? What the fuck do I say? Shit! Shit! Shit! Say something, Draco!’

Just then, Arthur Weasley exploded out of the Floo, and ended the discussion completely, glancing up and smiling after dusting his clothes off and peeling off his work robe.
“Draco! Good to see you up and about. Best thing for you. Harry, got a question for you if you’ve the time? Very good, very good. Can you tell me, in specific terms, what a ‘hat rack’ should or should not do?”

Harry was smiling widely. Draco had seen his amusement over the predicaments at the Misuse Of Muggle Artifacts Office before, and it looked like one of those occasions was at hand again.

“You just put hats on the hooks when you come in the door, and then you pick them up and put them back on when you get set to leave. It should just sit there by the door, waiting for you to put hats on it.”

Arthur nodded sagely. “So…you’re certain that, in the normal course of things, they should never charm hats to stick to your head permanently?”

“Yeah. I’m certain. Hat’s should come off exactly the same as they went on.”

“Got it then! We were fairly certain that it shouldn’t animate and batter guests about the head and face, but we weren’t quite sure about how Muggles like their hats. No sticking! We’ll have that sorted out by tomorrow. Thanks, Harry. Do I smell a roast?”

Arthur strolled toward the kitchen, and Harry and Draco both chuckled when they heard Molly’s voice rise to clarity a minute later.

“ARTHUR WEASLEY! If you put your filthy hand in my oven ONE MORE TIME…I swear it will be the last! SHOO! Take your tea and wait until I’m finished! Off with you! GO!”

Arthur stumbled back into the room with tea in hand, and sat down in his favorite chair with a hint of pomp, still licking a bit of meat juice off of one finger.

“Mmm. Trust me lads, it’s going to be delicious.”

Draco let himself get over his shyness and speak. Something about the Weasleys invited comfort and familiarity, and he felt safe making a bit of conversation here.

“I wouldn’t tempt her wrath if I were you. She sounds like she’s a hair from throwing spells.”

Mr. Weasley gave a broad wink and leaned in conspiratorially. “Nothing to worry over, lads. If I’d been afraid of going after things when I want them, I wouldn’t be happily married with children after all these years. Let that be a lesson for the both of you!”

It was waggling eyebrows after that comment that broke up Harry, who almost got a stitch in his side, but Draco just smiled, biting back laughter that threatened to well up. He was out of practice at laughing, but he was getting the idea that it wouldn’t be hard to pick the habit back up around here.

TBC!!!
Dinner was quite pleasant at the Burrow that night. Molly had been in rare form, setting the table with a perfect roast, meat sliding off the bone and soaked in its own juices and a few of her spices. Vegetables had browned along the edges of the pot, and all the flavors had soaked together. Draco was in heaven, and against all expectations he might previously have held, heaven looked a great deal like Molly’s kitchen.

Harry was quiet, but polite, all through dinner, obviously preoccupied with thoughts of his own. Arthur practically glowed with pleasure, devouring his meal with abundant good cheer and joyful glances in Molly’s direction. For her part, Molly took great satisfaction from the busy sounds of people enjoying their meal with gusto, and dined with a self-satisfied air about her the entire while. Draco savored every bite, but felt his heart stop when a glass of red wine was poured for him. Sweat broke out on his face and lip, and he felt a faint and fast growing urge to run. He stared at his plate, pretending the wine wasn’t there, and forced himself to concentrate on the delicious food in front of him.

The stuff sat there, taunting him with fleeting visions and ugly memories he desperately wished to shake off, all through the meal. The food was magnificent, and the atmosphere was calm and convivial, but Draco’s heart was pounding in his chest.

“Do try the wine, Draco. It’s a very fair vintage.”

‘Enjoy the wine, Mr. Malfoy. It’s a quite remarkable vintage.’

“NONONONONONOO!”

The explosion from Draco halted the meal entirely, and he was suddenly cognizant of having slipped into memory instead of reality. Flushed with humiliation, Draco stared at the floor and stammered apology.

“M’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I…I just forgot…where I was for a moment. I should…I should go-”

Arthur broke in quickly. “Draco, there’s nothing wrong with all that. Enjoy your meal. We’re just happy to see you down here and looking well. A few meals like this will set you right in no time.”

A wave of Molly’s wand, and the wine floated through the air, dividing itself between the glasses of the others, while the glass returned to the sink to be washed later.

“There you go, dearie. Not to worry, love. If you don’t want a glass, you can just tell us. No one will be offended if you ask for something else. Now take a few deep breaths, and remember that
everyone here is glad to see you at this table tonight. Alright, love?”

He felt ridiculous. A fragment of memory reduced him to an idiot at supper, when he should be grateful to be here. It was hard to resist Molly and Arthur’s relaxed attitude, and Draco took a few breaths, felt a shred of calm return, and tucked back into his supper.

Only Harry watched in silence. Unlike the others at the table, only he knew what it meant to feel the lines between the present and the past blur before his eyes, and seeing Draco experience the same thing troubled him more than he liked to admit.

Dinner passed easily enough, after Draco’s single outburst, and in the aftermath, they sat and spoke of lighter things. Arthur informed them of Percy’s recent promotion to Second Assistant Undersecretary to the head of the Department of Magical Creatures. Percy had fallen from grace alongside Cornelius Fudge, and had been thoroughly investigated by the Aurors when Death Eater corruption and influence within the Ministry had been uncovered a year later. His inflated sense of self-importance, and his ridicule of his own family, had come to a screeching halt after Kingsley Shacklebolt, during his first weeks of employment as the new Minister of Magic, delivered a thundering rebuke to Percy, explaining that his continued employment was entirely due to the superb record of his father, who had been lauded as a hero of the war against Voldemort. After being ruthlessly grilled by Shacklebolt, Percy came home with tail between his legs, the perfect prodigal son, and begged forgiveness, which was quickly given.

Percy was quite competent in his own right, and had finally worked his way up in his new department, and had mellowed considerably since the shattering of his ego two years ago. Even Harry had to admit that Percy’s visits were fairly enjoyable. He was perhaps the most cerebral of the Weasley family, and Harry found conversation with him more enjoyable than it had been years ago. Mostly, he was just glad that the ugly rift between Molly and her son had been healed, since it had been damned hard to see the pained expression on Molly’s face each time Percy was mentioned. Good news for Percy was good news to Molly, and Harry rather enjoyed her happiness.

Molly stood to put away the dishes and such, and Harry helped as always. Draco stood up awkwardly, not sure what to do, and started picking up small things, like the cutlery, to ensure he wouldn’t drop anything precious or breakable if he got shaky. Molly turned from the sink and looked at him in confusion.

“Draco. That’s very kind, but you needn’t do a thing. You’re our guest, we can’t have you worrying over all that truck. Go sit down with Arthur and relax, and Harry and I will have this done in just a few minutes.”

Draco paused, then limped to the counter and deposited his handfuls of silverware. He raised his chin just a little defiantly, and looked Molly directly in the eyes.

“I want to help. I can’t do much, and I haven’t a wand, but it would make me feel better. Please? Just tell me what I can do.”

Molly’s smile was a reward in itself. As it turned out, Draco hadn’t the faintest idea how to handle doing dishes largely in Muggle fashion, but he caught on quickly enough, and by leaning on the counter he was able to stay upright through the entire affair. It was nice to engage in a task of simple repetition, which cleared his mind quickly of ugly thoughts, and so clearly pleased his hostess.

Harry had a curious and amused expression throughout, watching Draco fumble with concepts like drying plates by hand with a clean towel, and at least his looks were all vaguely approving, if a trifle surprised. The small reserve of energy that Draco had left was exhausted before it was all finished, and he was grateful for the soft chairs in the living room, and for the cup of tea Molly handed him.
before they rested.

A fire was crackling softly in the fireplace, Molly was knitting, and Harry and Arthur were playing a game of wizard’s chess with passing skill. Draco watched the scene quietly from his chair, and felt a certain casual lassitude creep upon him. His mind drifted, observing the surreal tableau of normalcy before him, and wondering over how he could ever have become a part of it. Even tea couldn’t keep him awake, and Draco felt his eyes drag shut several times before sleep claimed him.

Some time later, Harry was celebrating a rare victory over Arthur, who had taught Ron everything he knew of wizard’s chess, and Molly interrupted with a hushed request.

“Poor thing. All worn out by a trip down the stairs and a few dishes. Harry, dear, use a spot of magic and see him off to bed will you. Haven’t the heart to wake him.”

Harry nodded agreement, and with an outstretched hand, lifted Draco from the chair without disturbing him. Draco floated along behind him, breathing softly, sound asleep all the way to his room. A quick gesture and the sheets and blankets had sorted themselves out, and Draco was tucked in without so much as a hand laid upon him. Harry stood by the door for a few minutes, staring at the wee slip of a thing that rested quietly a few feet from him.

’What the hell am I thinking? He really is…he’s fucking beautiful like this. I never thought I’d use the word innocent for Draco, but that’s how he looks. Innocent. Good. Peaceful. I wish he’d always been like that. God, I wonder if I’d have wound up in Slytherin...if he’d just been like this when we were kids. Would we have been friends? Would I have kissed him? If he’d been thoughtful, and sweet, and kind...I think...I think I could have fallen for him. It wouldn’t have been so bad, being a poof, if I could have been one with him. I guess that’s all shite now. He can’t even be touched without panicking, and I doubt he’d look at another bloke after all he’s been through, even if he were bent to begin with. Fuck all. Isn’t that the way it always goes with me? This close to something I want, and still a million miles away. Sleep well, Draco. I’ll make the bastards that did this to you pay someday.’

Harry returned to the living room downstairs, and sat up with his tea, feigning tiredness while his mind whirled with plans for tonight. Hours passed, and Molly and Arthur headed off to bed, leaving Harry to his own devices. He returned to his room and began to dress himself for his chosen work.

Black robes slit at the thighs for ease of movement, belt and sheathed knife in place, and throwing knives and garrote wire safely placed. Flash charges were pocketed, and charmed jewelry slid into place around wrists and fingers. At last, Harry placed the Dampener around his throat, tucking it into his shirt, feeling the cool silver of the amulet glide against his skin. All that was left was to wait. Let a little time pass for Molly and Arthur to properly fall asleep, and then he could leave.

Harry calmed his mind and stilled his thoughts with the precision of an accomplished Occlumens. Here, in the silence of his mind, nothing could distract him from his goal. Flickering possibilities caromed through his mind. Possible choices to make during his attack. Ward matrices, means to cut off escape, spell choices to quickly immobilize or in other ways render his enemies helpless before he exacted their final payment for their crimes. The clock ticked softly and slowly beside him, and just as midnight came, Harry stood calmly and headed for the door. As he passed Draco’s room, his tranquility was shattered by a small voice that addressed him quite directly.

“So it’s true…what The Prophet said…what all those people said about you. It’s true.” Draco’s voice sounded genuinely rueful.

Harry bit back a growl, and answered curtly, still staring down the hall to the stairs while the muscles in his neck tensed.
“Go back to sleep. This is none of your concern.”

“It’s wrong.”

Harry turned and let his eyes bore into Draco’s, and Draco flinched first, ducking his head. He could almost feel danger hanging in the air around him, and no matter how kind Harry had been lately, the very real fear that he might be hurt crept through him.

“You. You’re telling me what’s right or wrong? Somehow I don’t feel obligated to justify anything to you.”

The contempt dripping off Harry’s voice stung, but Draco pushed a little further, keeping his head low and his body passive. He didn’t want to give any impression that might spur violence, and his past had taught him well to placate predators.

“If anyone ever knew what ‘wrong’ is, it would be me. You…you shouldn’t be doing this. You’re supposed to be a hero…not a murderer.”

The last words came like a whisper, but Harry felt red rage overtaking him, and he was over Draco in a heartbeat, hands flexing while he fought, as best he could, his own urge to strangle silence from Draco. Something dark and horrible loomed in the front of his mind, and Harry needed a vent for that anger before he exploded. Draco whimpered and closed his eyes, waiting for the inevitable.

“You defend them? After what they did? You should be cheering for this. I can make them all pay. They’ll never hurt anyone again. Unless…unless you want them out there, killing, maiming, raping. Are you still owned by that fucking stain on your arm? I could find out. I could open that mind of yours and see for myself. You’ve got names, faces, places, details you haven’t shared. Are you hiding them? You want them free? Tell me who they are, and what you remember that would help me find them, or I guess I’ll just have to peel open your brain and pick for memories until I find what I want!”

The threat of being Legilimized was worse than any threat of physical violence could ever be. Draco quailed and broke into muffled tears.

“Don’t! Don’t do that. I…you can’t see…I’ll do anything you want. Anything! Please, please don’t do it. Anything but that. I’ll tell you whatever you want. I’m not hiding anybody. I just don’t…I don’t want to think about them…I want to forget! They belong in Azkaban, Harry. It shouldn’t…it shouldn’t be you…doing this. It can’t be you…it’s wrong…it’s wrong…it’s wrong.”

Draco had curled into a fetal ball, tangled in sheets, holding his knees to his chest while lying on his side, squinting through tears and flushed with terror. He remembered Harry with his knife, just after he’d arrived, but this…this was a colder, crueler Harry than he could possibly have imagined, and it was just wrong. It shook his view of the world right to its core.

Harry stood, wide-eyed and nostrils flaring, hovering on the brink of violence while he watched Draco come unglued. Only the fact that he was in his own home, and the keen awareness that Draco was not a threat, kept him from striking out with mind or body. Harry spun on his heel and walked out.

“I’ll deal with you later. I have somewhere else I need to be.”

Soft steps down the stairs were all that were heard in the Weasley house, and Harry was gone into the night, leaving Draco to shake and cry alone, terrified by what he’d gotten himself into.

--------------------------------------------------
In a cheap motor lodge in Leeds, a man of middle years, once plump, but now gaunt from more than a year of privation, dithered with a few possessions and a knapsack. One place was just like another, and it was time to move again. This time he’d Apparate to Brighton, then perhaps to Glasgow. Never the same place, always a place large enough to hide in.

He held his knapsack close, and willed himself to Apparate. Nothing happened. He tried again, but the results were the same. A chill sweat broke out on his face, and the hairs on his neck stood up. Something was terribly wrong. Anti-Apparation Wards had gone up around his room. He made for the door with wand ready.

The door literally exploded inward, flinging him to the foot of the bed, covered in flinders. Before he could roll upright, a whirlwind of black was above him, and a booted foot slammed into his chest, knocking him back to the ground even as he struggled to rise. He scrambled for the wand he’d dropped, chest aching from the kick he’d received, and a heartbeat later the cruel shadow whirled above him and a steel-toed boot connected with his jaw. The pain of it was blinding, and he rolled back with a moan.

“Mercy. I…I surrender.”

“It’s too late for that.”

The voice that answered him was a furious hiss, as frightening as the hiss of his old master, the man that had branded him for life with the Mark that made him unredeemable in the eyes of the world.

“You had no mercy…then. Now you beg? There was time for begging, but you wasted it. Now you’re nothing but a lesson for the others to witness.”

Moonlight through the window showed a silhouette in robes, an enormous blade in one hand, leaning close. Twin flickers of red, and his arm ached as it hadn’t in more than a year. As the blade slashed once across his throat, and a fountain of red descended, Kaminski’s last words were spoken in abject terror.

“Mercy…my Lord.”

TBC!!!
“Shall I read this for you, Minister Shacklebolt?”

Kingsley’s secretary addressed him politely, clutching the latest Daily Prophet nervously, knowing full well that he wouldn’t enjoy hearing it any more than reading it.

“Go ahead, Alice. Might as well get this part over with right now.”

Kingsley rubbed his temples while he leaned forward on his desk. He simply assumed the worst these days, since over the last year, he’d learned the hard way that the best, or even the acceptable, almost never happened.

“In a cheap hostel for Muggle travelers, located on the outskirts of Leeds, former Death Eater Viktor Kaminski, age 53, was found dead early this morning. The death has officially been declared a murder, but as is typical of the Ministry, no statement has yet been given.

The precise cause of death is as yet unknown, but an undisclosed source has informed us that the body was decapitated after death, with the head used as a grisly display, visible upon entry to the room. The words ‘No Mercy’ were scrawled upon the walls with the blood of the victim.

Mr. Kaminski, widowed, is survived by his son, Milo, age 33, his daughter-in-law Sasha, age 32, and two grandchildren. Milo Kaminski could not be reached for comment.

This is the eighteenth unsolved murder of a former follower of Tom Riddle, deceased, once known as the self-titled Lord Voldemort. As with previous cases, no magical evidence has been recorded, and no specific spells can be traced to the scene of the crime. It can only be confirmed that magic was at least used, and in considerable amounts, at the scene during the last twenty-four hours. No arrests have yet been made in the case, and despite Ministry assurances regarding investigation into these murders, not one suspect has yet been named.

This reporter respectfully suggests a connection between this plague of gory murders, and Harry James Potter, also known as The Boy Who Lived. It is well known that, after the defeat of Lord Voldemort, Harry Potter briefly worked alongside the Auror Service, apprehending members of Lord Voldemort’s corps of followers, long known as the Death Eaters. A series of questionable ‘field kills’ occurred, all at the hands of Harry Potter, who severed ties to the Auror Service shortly after Ministry inquiries began. Since that time, eighteen uncaught, untried men and women have been brutally murdered, all of them former Death Eaters.

It is past time for action, and a competently led Ministry of Magic would certainly have more to offer in the face of this crisis than simple platitudes and refusals to comment. A Ministry that cannot be trusted with even the thorough investigation of a highly public suspect, clearly cannot be trusted with
much of anything else. Minister Shacklebolt should offer prompt and public explanation regarding
the Ministry’s efforts to resolve this crisis, or step down, and appoint a pro-tem Minister who can
serve adequately until an election can be held."

“It’s listed as having been written by a ‘staff writer’, so only the editor could say who might have
written it, but it has the tone of Rita Skeeter all over it. Shall I send an owl to The Prophet, sir?”

Kingsley steepled his hands, and sighed. This job got worse every day. The Ministry needed a
leader, but he hadn’t even imagined that it would be like this.

“Send two. One politely worded request to the editor, informing him that slander is still a crime, and
offering up an accusation like that without actual evidence IS, by definition, slander. Second,
announce a press conference for tomorrow morning. They’ll love that, the bloody scavengers. Also,
before you send those owls, do you know which Aurors were assigned to the casework on the
Kaminski killing this morning?”

“Hart and Dawlish, sir. Shall I send for them?”

“Mmm-hmm. Just send Dawlish please. That’s all.”

“Will you be contacting Mr. Potter?”

“Leave that to me, Alice. I’ll see him in person tonight, but start the paperwork to revoke his Ministry
Free Agent License.”

“Yes, sir.”

Alice sprung into action, a flurry of robes and paper, Firecalls and owled messages. She was the
finest secretary Kingsley had ever seen, and if it hadn’t been for her uncanny ability to guess his
needs before he made them known, there’s no telling how much harder his job would be.

Kingsley examined this morning’s event reports, scanning the pages for anything serious enough to
merit his intervention. Other than Kaminski’s death, and the series of murders it was included in,
very little troubled the wizarding world. In truth, Kingsley had reduced corruption, streamlined
management, slashed expenses, balanced the budget, and increased the number of Aurors on the
streets. Somehow, he’d imagined that someone would notice some of that, but dead bodies made
good news, or at least big news, and that was all he saw in the papers these days.

Harry was hip deep in this, and even if there was no proof, Kingsley had been an Auror long enough
to trust his gut instincts. Potter had been dangerous enough after the war to leave people wondering
about his sanity, but things had only gotten worse after he quit working alongside the Auror Service.
It all came back to Potter. Motive, means, power, and past activities all shouted his guilt, and even
Kingsley’s subtle attempts to delay or divert attention from his young friend were starting to fail. If he
intervened any further on Harry’s behalf, he’d likely wind up in disgrace. It was time to confront
Harry directly.

Auror Dawlish walked into the room, taking a seat with a smile that suggested he was awaiting
promotion for his superb service on the Kaminski case. His current partner was a newbie, and
supposedly bright, but Kingsley reminded himself to talk to Hart’s superior about training new
arrivals alongside veterans who had better records.

“Dawlish. What time did the investigation this morning end…officially?”

“Six-thirty, Minister. We got the call to go in at five after six, and we were there and had the entire
matter cleaned up in less than twenty-five minutes.”
“Very good. Very impressive. Sooo…what time did you return to the Auror offices then?”

“About five after seven, sir.”

“That time between the finish and your return…how was that spent?”

“We had breakfast at a little pastry shop down the street. It was still very early, and we hadn’t had breakfast yet, so we stopped for a bite to eat. We made it quick, too, and I have the bill with me if you need it, sir!”

“Oh, good. Very good. Thanks ever so, Dawlish. Say, by the way, did you discuss the case while you were dining? You know, going over details and such after the fact.”

“Well…yes. Compared a few notes and such. Why do you ask, sir?”

Kingsley flopped the copy of The Daily Prophet down in front of Dawlish, page open to the article in question, and waited while the junior Auror hemmed and hawed.

“The next time you accidentally leak ANYTHING…it better be enough blood to excuse your absence from work, because I’ll be stalking the halls, looking for your ASS! You’re on leave, as of now! I’ll let you know when we need you back. You never know, we could need someone to thoroughly investigate the contents of pastry shops! Jackass! Get out of my sight!”

Dawlish hightailed it out of the room while Kingsley reigned in his outrage. It was still ten in the morning, and the day had already gone pear-shaped. Minister Shacklebolt opened his next folder full of problems, and went back to work, cursing frequently under his breath.

'Enjoy the wine, Mr. Malfoy. It’s a quite remarkable vintage.’

Draco tossed and turned in the grip of his own nightmare. He’d wept himself to sleep, sobbing until his chest hurt, after Harry had left. Slumber came slowly, and even that was punctuated by flashes of sudden terror, as Harry’s wrathful glare came back to him.

The man he’d met in Diagon Alley had invited him to a supper among other refugees from the Ministry’s justice. His stomach had been growling in anticipation, and he’d agreed to come here with almost no hesitation. Hyde-Pratt Apparated them both, and that had been that.

‘Here’ had turned out to be an abandoned estate, overgrown with ivy and out of control hedges, somewhere that felt a bit like lowland Scotland, but he couldn’t be sure. Once they were inside, it was actually quite pleasant, and the place had been cleaned up very handsomely. He was greeted by the sight of two familiar faces. MacNair, the hulking brute of the two, looked upon Draco coolly, showing neither distaste nor favor, and Rodolphus LeStrange stood and smiled, leaving Draco with the impression that sharks could, in fact, catch rabies.

“Why Mr. Malfoy, this is an unexpected pleasure. We’ve been adrift for some time without new company, and your arrival is most welcome. Do take a seat and warm yourself by the fire while Hyde-Pratt prepares our evening’s repast.”

Rodolphus LeStrange was slightly taller than average, and fit for a man nearing his middle years. His hair was thinning gracefully, shot through with streaks of gray that merely seemed distinguished. His every movement was calculated, and adept, displaying an implacable calm and a sense of diffident boredom. Only his toothy smile and occasionally sparkling eyes hinted at emotion, and Draco took that as a warning that he was dealing with a man who lacked compunction, and could turn dangerous
at any second.

It turned out that the three of them had been together almost since the end of the war, safely hidden here by LeStrange’s prowess in magic. This location had been rendered Unplottable, and with the exception of occasional journeys for supplies, they had lived quite comfortably for some time. Hyde-Pratt seemed to be the most domestic of the three, running errands and attending to household needs. MacNair was obviously the muscle. There was no question that Rodolphus LeStrange was the brains behind this motley crew, so Draco centered his attention on keeping LeStrange amused. He had no intention of offending his hosts until he had a good meal in his stomach.

Their calm and pleasant demeanor seemed a fraud, and Draco suspected agendas and motives just behind their eyes. He kept his hand from reaching for his wand, and made up his mind to Apparate out, however poor he was at that skill, at the first opportunity after supper.

Whatever his faults, LeStrange insisted upon keeping a good table, and there was no want of good food here. After relating highly censored accounts of their respective activities this past year, they took their seats in a rather sparsely furnished, but still vaguely grand, dining room. Draco stuffed himself well, enjoying second and third helpings of everything available. There was no telling when his next meal might be.

“Enjoy the wine, Mr. Malfoy. It’s a quite remarkable vintage.”

If he hadn’t been starved. If the food hadn’t been incredible. If he hadn’t been exhausted almost to the point of collapse. If…if…if.

Draco drank the wine. Nothing tasted amiss. In fact, it really was a remarkable vintage. Five minutes passed before his eyelids were sagging. He felt pleasantly detached from reality, as well as terribly tired, but his vision kept blurring and slipping completely out of focus. Panic threaded its way through him, and he intended to push himself out of the chair and reach for his wand, but his efforts only resulted in his slumping to the floor. The floor was polished wood. He remembered the pattern so very clearly.

“Alas. I’m afraid Mr. Malfoy has had too much to drink. See him to the ‘guest quarters’ will you, MacNair.”

And then there was nothing.

Draco muttered fitfully in his sleep. His body twitched at random, fearful of touch even in slumber, and his breath came in short and ragged gasps.

“I see you’re awakening, Mr. Malfoy. I hope you’ve enjoyed our hospitality. I’m afraid the wine didn’t agree with you, but it appears that you slept the better for it.”

Draco felt utterly strange. His body thrummed with weird energy, and his imagination tore off on flights of fancy at random intervals. It was hard to concentrate, and everything seemed as though it was far away…even voices…and yet, he did feel vaguely good. Completely relaxed, peaceful and a little giddy, even though his rational mind screamed danger.

He was lying upon a small bed, a single sheet covering him. He realized that, beneath the sheet, he was entirely naked, and a blush stole to his cheeks when it occurred to him that his hosts must have undressed him. He was suddenly distracted by the way the sheets felt against his bare skin. Sheer, warm and fine, and every time he moved against them his body thrummed with alien pleasure where cloth met flesh. Forgetting his purpose, he simply mumbled with pleasure while he rubbed the cloth of the sheet against himself.
“You know, many Muggles your age use illicit substances to enhance or alter their state of mind. I consider Muggles to be mere cattle, Mr. Malfoy, but that does not mean they have no use. I’ve made a study of their pharmacology…their potion-making techniques if you will, and I found quite a number of helpful substances. You’re enjoying several of them right now. Ecstasy, also called E or X, is the primary ingredient you’re experiencing at the moment. You appear to be enjoying it.”

Draco giggled a little, then stared at his hand, enjoying the way the fingers of it fluttered, even though he didn’t think he was actually moving them. LeStrange stepped forward and sat down on the bed beside him, while Draco largely ignored him in favor of continuing to gaze at his own hand.

“Let us see what lies inside that pretty little head of yours, shall we? In this state, you won’t feel a thing.”

Piercing brown eyes, flecked with gold, bored into Draco’s skull, and images flickered in his head, but it certainly wasn’t painful, or even worrisome. Memories and fragments of inner thoughts flashed and drifted, and Draco melted peacefully among them, enjoying the show.

“Snape. He was the spy all along, but even you didn’t know that. Hmmm. Not a killer are you, boy? I somehow thought not. You haven’t your father’s nerve. How fortunate for you...that you have his looks. Potter. You envied him, feared him, hated him, but you could scarcely stop thinking of him, could you? How interesting. Weeping over the cabinet. Such a sentimental little thing, you are. The Parkinson girl…your first kiss. How very sweet…cloying, actually. I see you scarcely enjoyed it. Your father seems to loom large in your memory as the source of fear, anxiety…and a fierce need for approval. My, my. You scarcely know yourself, my dear boy. The pleasures you could know, the dizzying heights of ecstasy, all denied you by the fear your father filled you with. Nonsense. I know your every desire, and I shall grant them to you.”

A hand slid beneath the sheet, brushing slowly across Draco’s chest, and every where that warm skin contacted his own, his body seemed to throb and tingle with desire for more. A nipple was gently kneaded between a thumb and forefinger, and Draco sighed, barely cognizant of his body’s fairly obvious reaction.

There were many parts that Draco couldn’t remember clearly, but they were overshadowed by a general sense of floating, punctuated by the skillful caresses that Rodolphus lavished upon him. Fingers, hands and tongue labored gently to please him in ways he couldn’t have conceived of until this moment. He had no fear, and his father’s harsh words had fled from his mind, scoured from him by a rising tide of pleasure. He couldn’t count the number of times or ways he came to orgasm, but each felt unique and magnificent, a tribute to the sensual.

“So responsive. My dear Draco, I wouldn’t squander your virginity on some pathetic night of mindless rutting. Such a thing deserves to be surrendered to the gods with a certain flair. Be still…I promise that you will enjoy this.”

Rodolphus did not lie. Long before Draco was granted the satisfaction of entry, he was aching for it in ways he hadn’t imagined. Fingers had elegantly awoken a place inside of him, their passage smoothed by the adept use of a silken tongue, and his cock was rigid with need despite having been sated several times already. He was quite audibly keening with need when he felt the pressure against his entrance, and, utterly relaxed as he was, he allowed it prompt ingress. The sensation was exquisite, combined with his altered state of consciousness, and his amplified sense of touch. Every movement within him left trails of stars exploding across his eyelids, and waves of desire rippling through his mind.

He couldn’t recall anything in his entire life feeling this good. The cock inside him left him panting, weeping, begging incoherently for more, and Rodolphus gave. The older man’s body was lean and
fit, and his every move was controlled and planned, aimed to extract the highest level of pleasure from Draco. Cooling trails of seed dripped down Draco’s stomach and ribs, mingled with the leavings of each new orgasm. He was no longer even erect, but the sensations inside him spurred him to yet another orgasm that rendered him a shuddering and utterly wanton ruin.

Reality came to him only in the aftermath, sated and limp, half-asleep by Rodolphus’ side. He was aware of a gentle and precise hand, stroking his chest, and his eyes flicked open, taking in the lean and tawny gentleman who had shown him pleasure beyond even the wildest of dreams.

“How very beautiful you are, my dear Mr. Malfoy. Not at all your father’s son. Far better in fact.”

Draco felt his cheeks flush. Even though he scarcely remembered how this had all come to pass, he remembered enough to know that he should be grateful to anyone who had lavished so much effort into pleasing him…and so successfully as well.

“Thank you. That…that was…it was incredible. It was perfect.”

Draco stalled, unsure of what else to say, hating himself for feeling so terribly awkward. Rodolphus LeStrange smiled wickedly.

“Your accolades are welcome, but sadly misplaced.”

His host rose from the bed and slid into a long day robe, plucking a glass of wine from the counter.

“It would have been such a waste, to exercise the whole of my skills upon you, without first giving you a glimpse of the heights of pleasure. Without that knowledge, what meaning would the depths of agony actually possess?”

Rodolphus waved a hand while Draco blinked in confusion, still drug-muddled, sleepy, and pleasantly sore. He found himself Immobilized in an instant. As Rodolphus opened the door to the small room they had just shared so intimately, MacNair and Hyde-Pratt entered with feral smiles upon their faces.

“Gentlemen. He was as delightful as I expected, moreso even. Now hurt him as you please, and do take your time. When you’re finished, deposit him in the dungeon. I have some new ‘experiences’ I wish to begin work upon in earnest tomorrow. And MacNair, see to it that you at least heal him enough to survive your putting that monstrosity you call a penis into him. With that, I shall leave you to your pleasures. Have a pleasant afternoon, Mr. Malfoy.”

And Draco entered hell.

Draco screamed in the night, bolt upright and drenched in sweat. He pulled the blankets into a pile, dragging them along the floor as he fled for the corner, cocooning himself in them and hunkering down as he had in the cell that had taken almost a year of his life away. Each breath that emerged came with a short, sharp cry of panic. Even the spells of the others that came to him, even the potions they poured down his throat, couldn’t dim the anguish in his half-waking mind.

TBC!!!
DISCLAIMER: Warning! I make no claim to any property of J.K. Rowling's, and am in no way profiting by this. I do offer her my sincerest thanks for allowing us this garden of the mind in which we play. Further Warning! This story...and likely any I ever write...are dominated by gay themes and characters. That's how it is, if this in any way makes you uncomfortable...do not read further.

Redeem Me…by Samayel

Chapter 17: Facing The Music

Harry brooded, far from the Weasley Burrow, painfully aware of the complications he would have to deal with upon his return. His task was complete, for now, but the Burrow had always seemed a haven from worry and trouble...until now. Now he had Draco to think of, and Molly’s concern over his actions as well. Every time she read another Daily Prophet, and a killing made the front page, Harry heard about it. His return would herald a string of attempts to force him to stop his personal vendetta, and he had no particular desire to hear such things right now.

He wasn’t particularly amused by Draco’s sudden growth of a spine either. Being lectured about the evils of killing Death Eaters by a former Death Eater who had spent a year as their victim just boggled Harry’s mind. It was unthinkable that Draco could have no desire for revenge. Unnatural, that’s what it was. Bloody unnatural.

Harry looked at the rising sun on the horizon. He’d sat out all night, on a hilltop at the edge of Ottery St. Catchpole, cold be damned. He was oblivious to discomfort, partly due to his own hardy constitution, and partly due to a spell that kept his clothes dry despite the damp chill in the late fall air. He’d thought of nothing for the first few hours, just allowing his mind to drift while he calmed down from the mind searing rush of action that accompanied each raid he undertook. Now he had the leisure to think calmly of other things, and Draco was at the forefront of his mind.

‘Fuck. I didn’t mean to lose my temper like that. He...he interrupted me...challenged me...ignored me when I tried to make it clear that it was none of his business. What the hell did he think he was doing? It was like covering himself in bacon grease and slapping a starving wolf across the nose with a rare steak! I just...I lost my temper. I didn’t mean to scare him that badly. I wouldn’t...I wouldn’t have really done that to him...would I?’

He’d threatened Legilimency, and in the red haze of his memory, he suspected that he’d meant it then. He wouldn’t do such a thing in a calm state of mind, but Draco had a lifetime of pushing Harry’s buttons working against him. Harry changed his train of thought, uncomfortable with the notion that his impulses weren’t under his control.

Molly and Arthur would sleep late, this being Arthur’s day off, and Harry let the sun finish rising, setting the snowy hills in the distance afire with blazing caps of gold. It was time to go home and get some rest.

Harry stood and Apparated to the end of the walk at the Burrow. He looked about, thinking of how he’d first seen Draco here, and lost his temper so quickly he’d nearly killed him. It was just barely a week since Draco’s arrival, and he’d gone from naked hatred to...to...well, something better. Lust? Admiration? Sympathy? Maybe. Maybe some of each, or not quite any of the above. Something had changed...was changing...about the way he thought of Draco, and it made Harry as nervous as hell.
‘I like him…more than I did. I thought he’d understand better than anyone why I do this, but against all the fucking odds, he doesn’t! Eight years, a war, everything about our lives is different now, and he still drives me absolutely fucking scatty! Damn it to hell!’

It was past time for a little well-earned rest, and Harry made the journey down to the Burrow and slipped quietly through the front door. Molly Weasley suddenly emerged from the kitchen and advanced on him like the Hogwarts Express at full steam! Harry backed up a couple of steps and found his back pressed against the door, blocking further retreat. He stared down, wide-eyed, at the furious, plump little woman looking up at him…and quailed with terror.

“Harry James Potter!” Molly’s voice was just above a livid hiss, more dangerous than Harry had ever heard before. “How dare you! How dare you leave in the middle of the night! Draco’s had a fit, Dreamless Sleep can’t seem to snap him out of it, Arthur and I have been up for hours trying to bring him around, and our spells just aren’t strong enough. When I look for help, from the person who PROMISED me he’d be there to help me, he’s gone! Out off to who knows where in the dark of night! You think I’m a sweet, old fool, all bluster and no charge, but let me tell you this, Harry, and you listen close! If you don’t get up there and help us help that boy…this minute!…it will be a cold day in hell before I have a kindly word for you again! Now MARCH!”

Harry hustled, taking the stairs three at a time, painfully aware that he was in a houseful of completely awake people, still dressed in his fighting robes, armed to the teeth, and practically caught dead to rights coming back from a mission. Worse, what Molly didn’t know, and what filled Harry with a sick kind of dread, was the gnawing fear that he’d been responsible for Draco’s collapse. He’d threatened to Legilimize Draco, and he remembered Draco’s near-complete loss of reserve at the mere threat of it.

Harry entered the room, and an exhausted looking Arthur Weasley, in a rather tatty old bathrobe, was consulting a battered tome and testing spells one at a time on Draco, muttering incantations to himself quietly, then aloud as he attempted them. One look at Draco confirmed Harry’s worst suspicions. Draco was almost as gray as ash, lying motionless and wide-eyed, practically catatonic. Harry knew the terms from his Occlumency studies, and he knew the maladies and conditions of the mind well enough to recite passage after passage. Spells and potions could affect Draco’s body, heal his wounds, and see to his physical needs, but they could not reach his mind.

“Wait, Arthur…I think I know what I need to do. I just need you to be ready with an Immobilizing Spell when I finish, and something to let him sleep. He might react badly to me pulling him out of the state he’s in, and he could hurt himself if we let him run about. Ready?”

Arthur dropped the book and readied his wand, looking askance a moment at Harry’s combat garb.

“Let’s have at it then…I’m ready.”

Harry concentrated and reached out with mental hands. In the flash flood of panic that was Draco’s overwhelmed mind, Harry effectively slammed on the brakes, jerking Draco back to full consciousness in an instant. Draco sucked in an enormous breath of air, sat bolt upright, and began to scream like a freshly pulled Mandrake Root. Arthur cast his spell, and Draco flopped back onto the bed, limp as a rag, breathing heavily even in forced slumber. Harry followed up with a string of spells that were all beneficial, or at least he hoped they would be, and Arthur gave a deep sigh of relief while Draco’s face slowly returned to its normal color.

“Well done, Harry! I was at my wit’s end. Couldn’t seem to get him out of that stupor. Poor thing woke up screaming in the middle of the night. Potion wore off or some such, next thing I know, we’re fighting tooth and nail to get him into the bed, and he went rigid-like, all silent as the grave, then started convulsing. Sicked up all over the place. Didn’t think a wee thing like him had that much
in him. Good thing Molly’s a dab hand at Cleaning Spells! Likewise, thank Merlin it’s my day off. If you’ll keep an eye on him, I’ll see how Molly’s doing and catch a cup of tea… I’m at a perfect loss until I’ve had my morning cuppa.”

“I’ve got him, Arthur. He’ll be fine. Go ahead and let Molly know it’s alright. I’ll... I’ll just sit here a bit and watch him.”

Harry’s tone was distracted, and Arthur was already shuffling off toward the kitchen, yawning mightily as he reached the stairs. Harry sat down in the chair beside the bed, looking at what was likely his handiwork from last night. Dreamless Sleep was not a cure all, and it had limits to its power. It granted temporary oblivion to those haunted by nightmares, but Draco was haunted by memories. The potion could take the edge off of his dreaming mind’s ramblings, but it couldn’t erase what had actually happened. Draco would suffer the after effects of his past torment until he made his peace with it all, and that could be a long time in coming.

He’d terrified Draco when he’d threatened to invade his mind and take information by force. Apparently, Draco feared having his memories seen by another, and not without good reason. Harry could see that. He shouldn’t have been so hasty when he was angry. It had only taken one outrage-fueled threat to send Draco spiraling into panicked and despair-filled memories.

Harry took Draco’s limp hand in his own. It was paler by far than his, and the contrast was striking. His own hand was calloused, sun-darkened, and muscular. Draco’s hand was as slight and pale as the rest of him, with long, elegant fingers and a strange softness that came of never having labored as Harry had. He felt closer and more intimate with Draco, just by holding his hand, and it seemed almost stupid to do so, but Harry bowed closer and whispered. There were things he felt he just had to say, and it would only be harder to say them when Draco was awake.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it. I won’t… I wouldn’t do that to you. I was wrong to even say it. I’ll make it up to you… I promise. I’ll find a way to fix this. I… I don’t know what to do, and I hate it. I hate feeling like... like I can’t set things right. I spent my whole life getting pushed and shoved into things I could barely handle, and making it up as I went along. I just hate feeling like I don’t know what’s next. Would you understand that? Could you... even if you were awake? I’m all alone here. Even with people all around me, I’m always alone, because there are things I know that I can never share, and I think you know what that feels like. I’m tired, and I didn’t mean to hurt you, but I swear I’m trying to do what I think is right. I can set things right… I can, but I just need more time. I need more time.”

Harry trailed off, the aftermath of adrenaline leaving him suddenly exhausted. He hadn’t slept since the day before, and his exhaustion was complete and absolute. Between the scene with Molly downstairs, and his own nagging guilt over Draco’s condition, he felt raw and utterly wrung out. Sitting in the comfortable old chair beside the bed, Harry fell asleep, Draco’s hand still held gently in his own.

Molly and Arthur sat at breakfast, still drowsy and sluggish from several hours of tending to Draco. Molly had needed almost an hour before she was even willing to speak Harry’s name. She knew full well what he’d been up to, and the thought of it was enough to fuel a towering outrage in her. The nerve! Dashing about the countryside with mayhem on his mind, when they needed help here. As if killing people was more important than his own home and the people who cared about him most. It was shameful! Arthur eyed her from across the table, and a small smile was on his lips. She frowned crossly and gave him a look that demanded he explain himself.
A Knut for your thoughts, love. That’s all.”

Molly sighed deeply. “I don’t know what I’ve done, Arthur. Draco needs help, very serious help, and I’m trying, but I’m not sure I haven’t bitten off more than I can chew. And Harry! Harry is supposed to be helping me, but he’s haring off about England doing Merlin knows what, none of it good, and I can’t do it all alone. I’m at the end of my rope, Arthur, the absolute end of my rope! And what on earth are you smiling about, you daft, old fool!”

Arthur leaned forward, chin up defiantly and eyes sparkling.

“I’m smiling because I remember when we had a houseful of children, and we scarcely had a pair of Sickles to rub together, and there didn’t seem to be enough hours in the day to get everything done, and we wouldn’t have made it…if it hadn’t been for you. We’ll get this sorted out yet, love. You haven’t let me down in almost thirty years, and I’m not even sure you could. It might not be easy, but we’ll make do just as we always have. Just breathe easy, Molly. Drink your tea and we’ll have ourselves a good nap a bit later to catch up on the rest we need, and then we’ll worry about all the rest, hmm?”

Molly melted in her seat. There was no wondering why she’d married Arthur Weasley. The man had a good streak a mile wide, and for all his dithering and fussing over Muggle knick knacks and office hi-jinks, he was a good and faithful man at heart. She held his hand across the table, trying to maintain a little composure and not cry over breakfast. She felt good enough to look in on Harry and Draco in a bit, but it could wait until she’d finished her tea with her husband.

Arthur eventually toddled off for a late morning shower, and after cleaning up the kitchen, Molly brought along a few bites and a cup of fresh tea for Harry. She composed herself before heading upstairs, hoping to contain any emotional outpouring that might try to escape. When she rounded the corner and stood at the door to Draco’s room, she stopped cold, thankful she hadn’t dropped her tray and woken them both.

Harry looked as innocent as the child she remembered, sleeping quietly in the chair, one arm stretched, his hand clasped peacefully over Draco’s. Draco slept a spell-forced slumber, unmoving save for the slim chest that rose and fell softly, and the entire scene held an air of complete peace.

Molly turned and left for the kitchen. It was hard to stay angry at Harry for long, and she’d just been reminded of why. He was nineteen, a veteran of a war that started before he was born, a killer, and sometimes thoughtless, but he loved, he meant well, and he protected the people he cared about the best he could. She didn’t see anything amiss in Harry’s gesture. To her, it meant that Harry had finally added another person to the flock that he guarded, and as far as Molly was concerned, that was all for the better.

It was a day of many owls that day. Every time Molly tried to do something with her day, be it knitting, housekeeping, or napping, another owl dropped post at their step. First it was The Prophet, with news she didn’t dare to read. The headline was more than she could stomach already.

DUMBLEDORE’S REVENGE STRIKES AGAIN?

She left The Prophet aside, meaning to leave it on Harry’s bed, the unspoken message being her deep disapproval. In the meantime, she tried her best to accomplish her knitting projects, which needed finishing before the holidays, and was interrupted by yet another owl!

Kingsley Shacklebolt would be visiting tonight, and since the letter wasn’t Ministry sealed, it was a private visit from an old Order member, not a work-related visit. It was all for the better in Molly’s mind, since she rather approved of Kingsley, and thought he’d made an exceptional Minister, likely
Molly’s attempt to clean the house properly for company was disrupted by two further owls, and these were happy news as well, at least mostly. Ron was coming to visit this week, as he’d gotten a one game suspension from the Cannons for pummeling another player senseless, and he’d decided to drop by home while he had the time off. Ron drank quite a bit more than Molly was comfortable with, but he managed himself well most of the time or he wouldn’t have done so well with the Cannons. Still, it would be good to see her baby boy again.

Charlie and Dula were coming to visit in just two days, and that gave Molly a happy heart on the spot. Charlie was so far away that they rarely saw him save on the holidays, and whatever some people may have thought about his relationship with his ‘friend’, Molly adored Dula, who was everything she’d tried so very hard to get her sons to be. Quiet and polite, sophisticated without being snobbish, cultured and eloquent, and most of all, civilized around company. For the scion of one of those rather spooky, old, continental wizarding families, Dula was as fine an addition to the family as any daughter-in-law would have been, and Molly enjoyed every visit thoroughly. A little laughter was just what this house needed.

Molly took a short nap at two, feeling a bit dizzy and terribly warm, but the morning had been a hard one, and it didn’t surprise her a bit that she was tired. Harry and Draco had slept the morning and afternoon away, and when Molly woke, it was with a faint panic when she realized she hadn’t set dinner and such for company, and there could only be a few more hours before Kingsley arrived. She hurried, flustered, into the kitchen, only to find Arthur half finished with making a pot of beef stew.

“Stop all that fretting. It’s my day off, and you needed the rest, love. I just let you sleep. You can take over if you want…I haven’t got your way with spices, but it’s mostwise ready to cook right now.”

Molly felt relief wash over her. Thank Merlin Arthur had things in hand. She hadn’t napped the afternoon away like that in years.

“Oh! Good man, Arthur, dear. Have a look in on the boys and see if they’re up yet, will you. Thank you, love.”

Molly fumbled with her spice jars, hurriedly dropping pinches and sprinkles into the simmering broth, and sniffed to see if Arthur had left anything out of the mix. She loved her husband, but he’d been known to forget things in the kitchen, like main ingredients, from time to time. This time he appeared to have been at his best, and Molly sighed with relief again.

Arthur nipped upstairs cheerily, feeling like the day had passed better than expected, given how rough the morning started. His footsteps on the stairs were what finally woke Draco from his initially spell-induced slumber.

Draco was conscious of heavy footfalls on the stairs, and his eyes were fluttering to open, but were gummy and crusted with the residue of tears. His next realization was that a hand was closed around his own. He turned his head and pulled his eyes open, blinking blearily, only to find Harry next to him, still asleep in the chair, one dark and calloused hand around Draco’s own. As Arthur stepped into the room, Draco pulled his hand away as if scalded, too rattled to even think about the vague sense of comfort it had produced, if only for a half-conscious second. Arthur’s head popped around the edge of the door, peeking to see if they were up, but Harry still snored softly.

“Hullo, lads. Good to see you up, Draco! Feeling a bit better, I hope?”
Draco didn’t trust his voice, since his throat felt raw again, and he nodded quietly. Harry started to wakefulness, and peered about, confused and edgy, then realized he was sitting next to Draco, still dressed in his combat robes.

Arthur told them dinner would be ready in perhaps a bit more than two hours, and that Kingsley Shacklebolt was coming over to join them. Harry’s eyes flickered a moment, but outwardly he seemed perfectly calm. After all, Kingsley was an old friend, right? As soon as Arthur was gone, Draco turned to Harry, shuddering in spite of himself. His voice was a subdued rasp, still raw from screams he could barely remember uttering, and didn’t want to. He stared at the blankets while he addressed Harry.

“I’m sorry…I shouldn’t hav-”

“No. You have nothing to be sorry about. Don’t apologize. I lost my temper. I don’t understand you, or why you’d want them alive, but I was wrong to say what I said. I…it won’t happen again. You don’t have to tell me anything if you don’t want to. Just…just try to get well, okay?”

Draco blinked, no longer sure of what to think. Harry seemed genuinely contrite, and it was a shift of situations Draco couldn’t handle while barely awake. Harry broke the tension by standing and heading for the door.

“Look. I have to change, Kingsley is coming over…I’ll be back in a few. Just need a shower and a change.”

“Harry.”

He stopped and turned back. Draco’s hands fidgeted nervously, and even bleared by sleep, his eyes were hauntingly serious.

“About…about what you don’t understand. I’ve seen…things…no one should see. I know what evil is, or at least I think I do. I know what people are capable of, things I never could have done, or even thought of, and I’m sick of them, Harry. I don’t care about…about what happened…to me. There’s too much killing, too much wrong, too much vengeance going back and forth. I don’t want to see it, or cause it, or be any part of it…ever. I just want to forget. I’d like to be…okay…someday. I don’t think I could do that, if I wanted revenge. They belong in Azkaban, Harry. My uncle, Rodolphus LeStrange, that horrible ape MacNair, and Hyde-Pratt. They deserve to rot forever in a stinking cell until they die of old age, but they belong in Azkaban. Do what you have to, but I just want them stopped…not killed, not murdered for revenge. Can you understand that?”

Harry bit his tongue, breath stopped in his chest.

“Yeah. Yeah, I think I can understand that. I won’t promise anything I can’t deliver, but…I’ll see about it.”

“Thank you. I…you’ll come back when you’re finished, right?”

Harry nodded and left for his room, gathering clothes, stowing away his gear and readying for a shower. Draco sat in silence, and finally reached up to the table and took a potion for his sore throat, as well as a dose of Calming Draught.

Too many things were going through his mind, and it was hard to sort them. He liked Harry…when Harry was…rational. He was sweet, and good, and strong in the ways that Draco wasn’t. He felt…safe, but only when Harry was rational. He half-hated himself for feeling so odd around Harry, even in the face of Potter’s black and terrifying rage. It was wrong, and sick, and the kind of thing only a
weak, pathetic excuse for a person would want, even when they knew they shouldn’t. But he couldn’t make it stop.

His left hand still felt weirdly warm, like some echo of Harry’s desire to guard and comfort him was still with him, even after the man had left the room. There was something good there, and somewhere inside, Draco ached to see more of it, feel more of it, and live in a world where that feeling was a part of his life. Harry might never return that feeling, and Draco knew full well that he wouldn’t know what to do if anyone ever did. Probably run like hell. The entire thing was just fucked, but…but it was nice to dream about something…instead of nightmares…wasn’t it?

TBC!!!
His gear and clothes from the night before were carefully stowed away, the shower had washed away any trace of his disheveled state from that morning, and Harry had groomed himself as best he could for Kingsley’s visit. The issue of The Daily Prophet that had been laying on his bed confirmed his awareness of Molly’s lingering outrage, and Harry hoped frantically that she wouldn’t do anything to compromise his cover while Kingsley was here. He honestly didn’t think she would, but she’d been terribly upset earlier, and she still hadn’t spoken to him yet.

Harry stepped out of the bathroom and headed down the stairs. Molly met him at the bottom of the steps, wearing a look that hinted at calm and a modicum of forgiveness. That alone was enough to make Harry’s heart leap. The idea of causing Molly pain or sorrow bothered him a lot, and it was not a thing he’d choose to let happen. She hadn’t understood why he was doing the things he did, or why Harry had no intention of stopping, but if there was a way he could make it up to her, or remind her that the Weasleys were more his family than any other had ever been, he would do whatever was necessary to show that he cared.

He needed a break anyway. There was a lot to be seen to here at home, with Draco topping the list, and he could use the time off to study, help Molly more, and think about some of things that had been gnawing at the back of his mind this past week. He’d executed a raid nearly every month for the last year, and if truth were told, he was just a little bit tired of it. Whatever Molly had to say was fine by Harry.

“Harry. When Kingsley gets here, we’ll speak no more of this, but I need you here. I want you to tell me that, as long as Draco is our guest, I can count on you being here to help. I pray that Kingsley isn’t coming with bad tidings, but I doubt we’ll be so lucky. You’ve shaken a hornet’s nest again, and we’re all reaping what’s been sown. I’m sorry I yelled at you earlier, love, but I must draw a line somewhere. I need help, and you need to stay out of trouble! Tell me honestly, Harry…can you do this?”

Her tone was that of a woman tired, and Harry chewed his lip a moment, torn between binding himself by swearing to something he might not be able to keep faithful to, and hurting someone he loved. In the end, there was only one real choice to be made.

“Aye. I’ll do it. I’ll stay in until Draco is well. I’m sorry, Molly. I know I…I let you down. I didn’t mean to, and I didn’t know Draco was going to need that much help last night. I’ll deal with…other things...another time, but for now, I’m here.”

Molly softened immediately, patting Harry’s arm.

“Thank you, Harry. I need your help more than I even know how to say. I just can’t do this alone,
and he needs you, too. If you’ve paid a lick of attention to him, you’d know your opinion of him means the world to Draco. I think you might very well be the key to getting Draco on his feet and facing the world again. Please, Harry…I’m begging you, don’t disappoint me in this. I need you.”

Harry hid his surprise well, and promised his complete support, all the while picking apart the implications of Molly’s statement. It made sense, when he stopped and thought about it, but aside from seeing himself as a mingled threat and source of protection to Draco, Harry hadn’t realized that Draco considered him important in any meaningful way. It was a heady feeling, and altogether weirdly pleasant.

Molly tottered off to the kitchen, taking control of the meal from Arthur, who had a tendency to snack while he cooked. Arthur took his tea and settled in the living room, and Harry slipped back up the stairs. Draco awaited him, looking haunted, tired and pensive. He also seemed ready to talk, and Harry had had just enough time to think of a few things he wanted to say.

“Hey. I know you know Kingsley’s coming over tonight, but I don’t know if you heard about later this week. Ron is coming by for a night or two, and Charlie and Dula are coming over for supper about the same time, give or take a day. It’ll be a bit busy around here for awhile.”

Draco shuddered a little, as crowds of people weren’t really something he looked forward to. It was already difficult adapting to being so close to Arthur, Harry and Molly. Ron was not Draco’s favorite person from memories gone by, and he wasn’t holding out much hope that Ron would be as forgiving as Harry had been (and Harry had damn near killed him!) Charlie he’d only glimpsed a couple of times, and this Dula that Harry mentioned was a complete mystery.

“Dula? That’s not a Weasley…sounds foreign. Who’s Dula?”

“Oh…Dula is Charlie’s lover. Really nice fellow…you’ll like him. Pureblood from an old, European wizarding family. Great manners, very witty…he and Charlie make a pretty sweet couple. Molly just adores him. What’s wrong?”

Draco was staring at him like he’d just grown a second head. His eyes looked like they were trying to search out whether Harry was serious or not, and he looked like he was about to recoil with automatic disgust.

“You mean they’re…they’re…faggots?! That’s sick! Molly is alright with that? In her home? It’s just…just wrong! I can’t believe that.”

Harry couldn’t have known how much Draco loathed himself, even as the words left his tongue, almost unbidden. Draco pulled away from Harry automatically, recognizing the early warning signs of Harry’s anger quickly surfacing. Harry’s face was already darkening, and his jaw was clenched tight even while he spoke.

“They’re also some of the best friends a person could ask for, and I’d trust them with my life! SO…if you have anything else to say about them, get it out now, because if you offend them while they’re here, they might go easy on you, but I’ll give you something worse than nightmares to worry about! Just remember…you’re the guest, and the rules here say that they’re welcome! Is that clear?”

“Y-yes. ‘kay…got it! I’m sorry…sorry, Harry!”

Draco kept his eyes low until Harry stormed out of the room, painfully aware of the sweat forming fast on his brow and face. The entire conversation had been a horrible accident, and his face was burning with what he knew was shame. He’d misjudged everyone in this house, thinking that as purebloods, they’d share a view common with other purebloods, like his father, and he’d humiliated
himself in front of Harry, which didn’t sit well at all. Even so, the very notion of people who…who did those things with each other…voluntarily…was just vaguely sickening, and it threw memories in his face that he wished fervently could be erased.

It was wrong. If he hadn’t been doped, if he hadn’t had to, he would never have done those…those fucking horrible things! Not for any reason! He wouldn’t have felt that way around Harry if he hadn’t been screwed up from the things he’d done. It was LeStrange’s fault! He wasn’t a fucking bender…he couldn’t be! Rodolphus had said those things to make him go along with it, and the drugs could have made anything feel good. What MacNair had done…that was reality…that was what it was really like. Hurtful and sick and wrong and evil.

Draco felt himself starting to hyperventilate, panic breaths coming faster and harder. He fumbled with the bottles on the counter and uncorked a Calming Draught, taking a long pull before he resealed it. He could actually feel the magic creep through him, slowing his pulse, leveling out his mind, and allowing deep slow breaths that stopped his head from spinning. He wasn’t fit for company like this. Kingsley Shacklebolt scared the hell out of him, and frankly, Draco had no urge to sit across a table from the man, biting his tongue and worrying over supper.

He made up his mind to stay up here tonight. Now…if only he felt comfortable with the notion of sleep, he could do something about the exhaustion that was overtaking him, but he couldn’t fully calm his mind, and in slumber the nightmares and memories that taunted the edge of his conscious mind would grow bolder and show themselves, and Draco shivered, afraid of what he knew would come when his will unclenched and sleep claimed victory over him.

Kingsley Shacklebolt arrived just before six, dressed sharply in his working robes, having left the office mere minutes before his arrival at the Burrow. Molly fussed over him as if he wasn’t a leader of the wizarding world, and Arthur was a dear friend, who had never played upon his time in the Order to advance his career, and had never in the memory of others done more than try to do his job well, content to be a family man through and through. These were people that Kingsley trusted thoroughly, and he wouldn’t have traded them for a thousand votes. Some things just didn’t have price tags, and friends like these were just such a thing.

Politics had taught Kingsley a few things, though, and one of them was how to smile when deeper thoughts were crossing his mind. There was tension in this house, and it was almost palpable, taking on a life of its own. Harry, Molly and Arthur all looked tired, careworn and frayed about the edges, as if all their nerves had been battered of late, and Kingsley didn’t fail to note this. He asked after their well-being, genuinely curious about their health, and he was surprised to learn that the younger Malfoy had gained sanctuary here. That certainly explained some of the tension. He’d expected it to be a by-product of Harry’s nocturnal pastime, but harboring a convicted and released Death Eater threw off his theory about Harry completely. The only Death Eater he could imagine near Harry was a dead one, and doubly so for Malfoy!

Dinner was served by seven, and after state dinners and rich foods he’d never seen the like of, a good beef stew and fresh bread and butter was a nice change of pace. Plus, Molly’s knack for spices hadn’t failed her yet, and Kingsley thought back to the hard days of the Order, operating out of 12 Grimmauld Place, fueled only by a desperate hope for survival, and Molly Weasley’s cooking. There should have been an Order of Merlin for her at the war’s end. Molly had kept dozens of bellies full, running a kitchen almost eighteen hours a day for most of a year. He’d come to miss seeing these once familiar faces, and it embittered him slightly that he’d been forced to come with ill news, some
of it penned by his own hand.

Harry was the real enigma here, and no clear sign indicated that anything was amiss. He seemed quiet and pensive, but that was just Harry, and he’d been a solitary, thoughtful boy back when Kingsley had first met him. There was a faint hint of nervousness when Kingsley asked for an introduction to Draco, even though he’d met the boy before, but that could be read as meaning no more than mild surprise at Kingsley’s interest in someone he’d interrogated over a year ago.

He made the journey upstairs, tea in hand, and found Draco sitting alone in a bed that seemed large only because of the younger Malfoy’s now slender frame. The scars that coated his bared shoulders caught Kingsley off guard, and Draco had a gaunt, hunted look about him, like an animal that had been brought indoors to be a house pet, poorly adapted to suppressing survival instincts that had been necessary for too long, and wouldn’t vanish quickly. The boy stared edgily at him, fidgeting with the sheets nervously.

“Hello there, Mr. Malfoy. Quite a surprise to find you here. I hope sanctuary here in the Burrow is treating you well.”

Draco flinched visibly at the use of his surname.

“Please, sir. It’s just Draco. Please. I’m…I’m getting better. Thanks to them.”

“I see. You look like you went through a bit of a rough patch. You’re lucky to be under Molly’s care. I can’t think of anyone I’d rather have look after me when I’m under the weather, and I’ve missed her cooking for over a year.”

Draco looked stuck between nervous tension and an urge to speak. His eyes flicked down, avoiding Kingsley’s. Auror instincts said that guilt was at play, but Kingsley suspected a bit more.

“I…rough patches happen…when you have nothing to offer anyone. Molly’s wonderful. I’d have died if she hadn’t taken me in.”

That comment vaguely chastened Kingsley, who was well aware that the Malfoy holdings had been stripped by the Ministry. The profits had helped settle war debts, and along with other property of former Death Eaters, had been instrumental in balancing the budget this year.

“Hmm. True enough. You know, Draco. There’s no reason you have to stay a stranger to the Ministry. You were sentenced, and your debt to society is paid. No further action will be taken against you. Anyone who did something like that would be a vigilante, and we don’t approve of that kind of thing.”

He phrased his comment carefully, placing the bait in a way he’d mastered as an Auror. Draco looked piercingly at him, wheels rather obviously turning in his head.

“Really. Welcome me back with open arms, would they? Jobs galore thrown at me feet? I wouldn’t think anyone would feel like holding a parade for my return to wizarding society, especially since they were more interested in kicking me while I was down just a month or so ago.”

Bitterness dripped from the blond boy, and Kingsley chose his next words with care.

“It’s not as though you had a record of heroism, Draco. No offense intended, but if you’d had some public record of service to the wizarding community, people might have reacted differently. Perhaps information that might speed justice along, or help apprehend at-large suspects. You’d be surprised how fast people make allowances for a person with a few spots on their record, as long as they’ve shown a clear willingness to change.”
“Just what do you mean? You think if I’d had names to name instead of spending the war in a safe house with Snape, I’d have a job and a life instead of being pelted with trash? Is that what you think?”

Kingsley hadn’t really expected such vitriol. He’d been Minister just long enough to get used to being treated with the utmost respect, but Draco had obviously grown a bit of nerve since they’d last met, and he’d probably figured out that this wasn’t an official visit. Kingsley laid his last card on the table.

“Not at all. I’m just telling you point blank that, if it were widely spread about that you helped bring criminals to justice, the right kind of press could help you get a new start.”

Draco looked utterly repulsed, and folded his arms across his chest, revealing still more scars, and Kingsley wondered where they’d come from. No answers seemed forthcoming, and Draco’s final words sealed the matter.

“I’m not a Death Eater. The only thing left from my life before this is the fucking Mark, and if I could cut it off, I would. You said I don’t owe anything more…my debt is paid…and if that were true, I would have seen some proof of that by now. If you’d wanted help, the Ministry wouldn’t have raped my brain for three months after Snape brought us in, and if helping me had been that important, you wouldn’t be staring at the fucking scars on me. I might spend the rest of my life getting by and steering clear of the Ministry, but if the building collapsed tomorrow, I couldn’t be bothered to spit on the rubble. Sell your deals to someone who still believes in them.”

Kingsley nodded amiably, rather admiring the boy’s guts. Whatever had happened to Draco Malfoy, he wasn’t the shell-shocked brat that had accompanied Severus Snape out of hiding at the end of the war. Frankly, the changes were impressive, if a little disturbing. Kingsley stood to leave, offering a brief nod respect.

“Well. You’ve made your feelings plain, but if you ever change your mind, you know where to reach me. It’s your life, son, and good luck with it. I mean that. Perhaps we’ll see you again sometime, Draco. Good night.”

Draco gave a petulant huff, and remained silent even as Kingsley left the room and headed back down to see the others. Malfoy either had nothing of real worth to share, or he was genuinely too embittered by his experiences to strike any deals with the Ministry. Kingsley still had a long chat to have with Harry, and the letter in his pocket seemed to burn, demanding attention. This was the part of the night he dreaded most.

A polite request and a stroll around Molly’s backyard began, Harry a pace ahead of him, a wry smirk plastered onto his face, quite out of place on the boy he’d known years ago. Harry had changed in a lot small ways, during the war and after, and it showed now.

“Malfoy looks like he’s been put through a grinder. Any idea what happened, Harry, or is he not sharing the details with anyone?”

“Death Eaters, Kingsley. You know…the ones the Ministry can’t seem to catch. Some of them get bored just hiding out for months, so they murder and torture others just for kicks. You might want to deal with that sometime soon.”

The irony in Harry’s little speech was not lost on Kingsley.

“Harry, you know the Auror service is doing what it can, and doing it better than they used to. These things take time. A year after the war and out of more than a thousand Death Eaters and
sympathizers, there are only two dozen cases left on the docket. We picked up VanHoek just last week. If you’d join in with us, sign on as an Auror proper, we might be able to pick the rest up before another year goes by. I was hoping you’d bring your talents back to the team, Harry.”

Harry snorted mildly. “No offense to you personally, Kingsley, but the Auror service couldn’t catch a cold while running through London naked in January. Most of the people you processed turned themselves in because courts could still be easily bought back when you first took office. I won’t say you haven’t cleaned things up…you really have, but it’s still a rotten system, and even you can’t fix it. A lot of the others only turned themselves in because Azkaban is survivable. They don’t fear the Ministry, or justice…they see it as an alternative to dying. You’re their one hope of escaping the debt they owe, and that’s all that keeps them coming to you. You know why I quit working with the Ministry and the Auror service, and it was final.”

“T’m sorry you feel that way, Harry. I know what you’ve been doing, and no matter how you paint it, it’s still wrong. The Prophet is past hinting at it, and when even they can figure something out, it means a problem has reached epic proportions. Do you understand me? I’m out of time and excuses, Harry. I can’t cover for you anymore. I know you never asked me to, and maybe I was kidding myself that you were doing some good, but it’s gone too far.”

Kingsley handed Harry the sealed parchment he’d brought with him.

“Harry, your Free Agent License has been revoked. I can’t have bodies turning up in the streets, and I may not have any solid proof that it’s you, but I have to do something. There will be a press conference tomorrow, and I’ll be citing you as a ‘person of interest’, and announcing the suspension of your license during investigation, but nothing more. You haven’t left me any choices, Harry. I’m asking you, as a friend, to let it rest, and let the Ministry handle things from now on.”

Harry’s smirk never wavered. His look was one of amused disinterest. He let his will float the paper into the air between them, and let it burst into flame and slowly convert to ash.

“Revoke my license…I’m retired, after all. That won’t stop your killers. Remember Jacoby? The one I arrested…the one who bribed his way to freedom…then killed two Muggle girls before he was captured again? Another glowing success of the Ministry’s, wasn’t he? The Ministry is broken, ineffectual, and ultimately unworthy of the trust people have in it. You’re the captain of the sinking ship, not me. Apparently, the will of the people is that certain killers should go free, and others shouldn’t. Sometimes the people are wrong.”

“Damn it, Harry! I’m not here to talk politics with you. I’m trying to warn you about what’s coming. It isn’t your job to decide innocence or guilt, and it damn sure isn’t yours to decide the punishment, either! The wizarding world is run by democracy…and I happen to believe in it.”

“Well maybe you shouldn’t. If it doesn’t work, if the many can’t act quick enough to protect the few, then maybe someone who can…should.”

There was a dangerous gleam of zeal in Harry’s eyes when he spoke, and yet he looked at Kingsley with a quiet and curious expression on his face.

“Merlin, Harry! You’re talking about despotism. No one person is fit to rule the world, and you sound like You-Know-Who when you say things like that. Do you have any faith in me at all? I’m trying the best I can, fixing the system one broken rule at a time, and I won’t last much longer if I keep covering for you! I’ve said what I have to say, and I’m done discussing this. I just hope you don’t force a confrontation neither of us would want!”

Kingsley trudged back toward the house, and Harry’s last comment made his legendary self control
fluctuate for just a second.

“You should hope so...because it would be terribly embarrassing for the Ministry to lose against one man...and you...would...lose.”

Kingsley wished a terse farewell to Arthur and Molly, and returned to the end of the walk. He stared at the Burrow a moment, kicking himself for being a sentimental fool. These people were friends, but a cancer was growing here that would someday have to be excised. He no longer had the luxury of thinking of people as individuals...he had a nation’s worth of wizards and witches to think of. It was a lousy end to a hard day, and tomorrow wasn’t looking any better.

TBC!!!
Bad Luck And Bad Dreams

DISCLAIMER: Warning! I make no claim to any property of J.K. Rowling’s, and am in no way profiting by this. I do offer her my sincerest thanks for allowing us this garden of the mind in which we play. Further Warning! This story…and likely any I ever write…are dominated by gay themes and characters. That's how it is, if this in any way makes you uncomfortable...do not read further.

Redeem Me…by Samayel

Chapter 19: Bad Luck and Bad Dreams

‘Just my luck. I’m under investigation by the Ministry, Molly is furious with me, and she wants ME to apply Scaradicate Salve…to Draco…the first person I’ve been attracted to in more than a year…and he’s a fucking homophobe! Now if Voldemort will just pop out of my ass and Crucio me, my day will be perfect!’

Harry stood at the bottom of the stairs, holding a fresh pot of salve and chewing his lip. Molly was housecleaning and arranging rooms for her soon-to-be visiting children, and Arthur was back to work, so that left Harry to tend to Draco. At least Molly had seen to breakfast for him, but she'd hovered on the brink of scolding him all morning. Only Harry’s hasty surrender on the subject of treating Draco’s scars had prevented a morning meltdown of legendary proportions.

He’d found Draco already awake in the morning, and the blonde boy had taken his meal in bed, still tired from the fit he’d had yesterday morning. Harry blamed himself for this fix. If he hadn’t stayed out so late, or scared the hell out of Draco to start with, this state of affairs never would have come to pass. He hadn’t even meant to argue with Kingsley, but the man’s tone had just set Harry’s teeth on edge, and harsh words had come out before he even realized what he was saying.

Molly had been freshly outraged when Kingsley stormed off, and she had only spoken to him this morning out of necessity. All in all, Harry’s head was spinning from the number of problems on his plate, and the day was only starting. As it was, he had only one advantage in his corner this morning. He’d wanked in the shower for the first time in days.

His libido had been pre-occupied for several days, ever since it had shocked him by responding to thoughts of Draco. This morning he’d finally acknowledged its insistent call, and had one off while the shower was running. It had been long overdue, and this time he’d let his guard down and just enjoyed the flickering images of Draco that slipped through his mind’s eye.

He could remember what Draco looked like during their last year at Hogwarts, before everything had fallen apart, and war had rocked the wizarding world. In retrospect, with the anger he’d felt then distant and meaningless, Draco had been beautiful. Lean and sleek, fair and full of vitality. Only the cruelty in his smirk, and the barbed tone of his voice, had spoiled his presence.

Comfortable in a haze of steam, Harry indulged himself in memories of Draco during their time at Hogwarts. Walking, sitting in class, or soaring above the Quidditch pitch, and then he let his imagination take flight, transforming the images into things that had never been. Closeness that almost smothered, hungry lips working against one another’s, and dark, calloused hands against velvet soft, pale skin, unmarred by war and the savagery of others.

It hadn’t taken long, given that it had been days since his last wank. Harry had stifled a groan, eyes
clenched shut, and spilled his seed onto the floor of the tub, letting the pouring water rinse the small blobs of white down the drain. He’d leaned against the wall to catch his breath, and lamented that his fantasies were hopeless flights of fancy that were just never meant to be. Then he dried and dressed himself, took a short jog around the property, after making sure that Draco was awake for breakfast, and returned less than a half hour later, only to receive instructions from Molly, who wasn’t brooking any opposition from him. Apply the salve to Draco’s scars.

Dark, calloused hands against velvet soft, pale skin…

Somedays, even being the most powerful sorcerer of recent times couldn’t stop a day from being a complete wreck. Harry trudged up the steps to meet his destiny, footfalls as heavy and rueful as the slamming doors of crypts.

Draco hovered on the brink of consciousness. He’d tried to stay up all night, warding off nightmares of the like he’d had the night before, but after breakfast, which had been delicious as always, the nervous edge that hunger brought evaporated, and it got harder and harder to remain awake.

During the night, he’d mulled over so many things. Questions he had for Harry had crossed his mind a hundred times. He’d wondered if he’d been right to reject Kingsley so quick, and he wondered if the flash bastard had been subtly fishing for information about Harry, as well as former Death Eaters. The notion that the Weasleys, especially Molly, weren’t sickened by the idea of homosexuality had played heavily in his mind as well. Now he languished on the borderland between dreams and the waking world, and without a fresh dose of Dreamless Sleep, the worst of his nightmares took root and grew like a wildfire.

It was always ‘Mr. Malfoy’ now. Never Draco. MacNair came the most often, glutting his darkest lusts on Draco, who had long since given up hope of struggling, and he had learned that the greater his show of discomfort and pain, the sooner MacNair would finish. Not that it was hard to act his part, since every encounter with the hulking and brutish MacNair was terribly painful already, and always ended with Draco being dragged back to his cell, sometimes by his hair, and flung onto his straw pallet, where he was left to whimper, ache and bleed, MacNair’s recently spent seed still trickling from him, mingled with his own blood.

Anti-Apparition Wards were in place, and his wand had been snapped in front of him, for Rodolphus’ amusement. He was left no implements with which to free himself, and his cell had become his only refuge. Hunkered in a pile of straw and wrapped in the same stinking blanket he had since he’d been first confined here, this was the one place that had come to symbolize rest, and the brief end of torment. He’d tried to kill himself several times, only to wind up being healed and revived by his captors, and after the punishments he endured in the wake of those attempts, he abandoned even that final desperate hope of freedom.

Rodolphus himself came only infrequently, but his softer steps terrified Draco far more than MacNair’s booted stomp. Rodolphus was never satisfied with mere pain of the flesh, and his every visit heralded a new horror for Draco, another hell of the mind that would only stop when his uncle grew bored. Rodolphus had studied more than one Muggle art. Aside from a familiarity with their drugs and a natural gift for abusing psychology, he was also fond of the crudities of Muggle medicine…most particularly, the scalpel.

Enervated, helplessly awake and horrifyingly conscious, Draco had often watched his uncle calmly commit vivisection, opening and displaying portions of Draco’s body, while Draco was forced to
watch. All the while, Rodolphus would quietly discuss the past, speaking of Lucius, and of Narcissa, and of Bellatrix, who had died by Harry Potter’s hand months ago. Some of the sessions had lasted hours, and Draco would have preferred Hyde-Pratt’s penchant for whips and hot irons, or MacNair’s savage rapine, rather than face his uncle’s cool demeanor and dismissive tone of voice during mind-shattering torture again.

It never stopped. Once, after a week of being deliberately starved, he’d had the most beautiful dream. He was taken from his cell, found himself bathed and dressed in finery, his hair no longer matted and stringy, but as long and fine as his father’s had once been. He was guided to the dinner table by Hyde-Pratt, who pulled a seat back for him as a gentleman would for a guest. MacNair sat at one end, dining peacefully, Rodolphus sat at the other, sipping wine. A vast feast was set upon the table, and all he had to do was take his fork and spear some food for himself, and his starvation would be ended.

He touched the fork…and the world pulled away from him. He was Portkeyed back to his cell, and the glamour that had made him whole and beautiful again simply ended. It hadn’t been a dream. It was just Rodolphus’ idea of a joke. The soft, elegant steps of Rodolphus LeStrange were echoing faintly as he approached Draco’s cell, and though he always cringed, and feared the approach of the others, only his uncle’s approach caused him to break completely down. Begging had done no good, and Draco had wept until he couldn’t do so any longer. All that was left to him were screams, and the sound of his uncle’s approaching steps.

Harry’s boot steps on the stairs and in the hall snapped Draco to wakefulness, and he was past the point of screaming after dreams like this. He lay paralyzed with fear, soiling himself unconsciously, muted whimpers all that he could voice. He wasn’t truly conscious, even if he was awake, for in Draco’s mind, he was still in a stinking cell, waiting for a person whose art was inducing pure terror, and Draco was his chosen medium.

Harry entered the room, and found Draco in the same state he’d been in the morning before. A pitiful hibernation of the mind, which Harry knew he would have to break. It took only a moment to force Draco’s mind to full consciousness, but it took a series of spells to bring Draco to a state resembling sanity. Only then was it plausible to give him potions that would calm him, and Harry sat quietly while Draco sobbed for the better part of half an hour.

The part that really stung was not being able to reach out and touch him. Harry could clean him by spell, rescue him from the realm of nightmares with the force of his mind, and cast the spells that would make Draco able to function again, but he couldn’t hold him, or even touch him, without sending Draco into a panicked fit. It was frustrating, and helplessness in the face of a problem was not something Harry handled well. He propped his elbows on his knees, and placed his head in his hands, listening to the sounds of sorrow that came from Draco.

‘Fucking helpless. All the power in the fucking world and I can’t make this better. I can’t touch him. I can’t tell him how I feel about him…I don’t even know what to fucking say! I can kill a Dark Lord, and finish off his minions by the score, but when I finally need to help someone for real, someone who deserves it, and it makes me sick to see them like this…I can’t do a bloody thing! Fucking pathetic!’

Harry let his hands run into his hair, and felt his face burn. His eyes stung, and he almost laughed when he realized that he was crying. He hadn’t cried in years, and he certainly wasn’t crying like Draco was, but it was a shock to him that he still could. He’d wept himself empty after Sirius had been killed, and Dumbledore’s murder had taken the last of his tears. Even the loss of Ginny and Hermione hadn’t brought new tears to his eyes, but his inability to help Draco had. Wasn’t that something?
Draco had wept himself out, quietly crying into his pillows, and when he finally risked a humiliated glance upward, he saw Harry holding his head and occasionally wiping his eyes. Harry Potter—the Boy Who Killed—was crying. It was utterly surreal. Especially since it was sometimes hard to tell if Harry actually wanted him alive or dead.

“What…why are you…you know?”

The words came out with a soft croak, and Harry sat upright and leaned back, staring at the ceiling with red-rimmed eyes.

“Because, Draco…I hate seeing you like this…and knowing I can’t help. I wish…I wish there were a spell for this, but there isn’t, and all I can do is watch. If I could make it all go away, I would. You know I’d do that for you if I could, don’t you?”

Draco stared at Harry in quiet surprise. He’d been the honest one so far, saying how he felt with no hesitation. It was the first time Harry had been so open with him. Harry’s anger was always quick to show itself, but he hadn’t let anything else show in front of Draco, and the subtle realization that Harry cared was stunning. It hurt Harry to see him in this state. Why that knowledge made his heart leap in his chest, despite the way he felt at the moment, he couldn’t say, and didn’t dare examine, but it felt good.

Harry looked down when Draco’s hand rested on top of his, catching him utterly off guard.

“You do enough just by saying that. Thank you.”

Draco kept his eyes closed, and held onto Harry’s hand while he let himself drift to sleep, feeling oddly safer, the warmth of Harry’s hand in his own driving away darker thoughts while potion-induced slumber overtook his senses.

Harry sat, unwilling to move an inch while Draco rested peacefully, a vice-like grip in place on Harry’s hand until he’d fallen completely asleep. Harry made himself as comfortable as he could, and mentally penciled a nap into his day’s plans, content just to quietly watch a pale hand, with soft and slender fingers, twined around his own tanned and careworn ones.

TBC!!!
Molly Weasley drifted through her home in a bit of a daze, pre-occupied with the imminent arrival of her children. There were bedrooms that needed straightening, sheets and blankets that needed freshening, dust to be gotten rid of, and more. Harry wasn’t quite in her good books, especially since he’d managed to get Kingsley all riled up, and the man had left in a hurry, fretful and clearly frustrated. Then there had been this morning’s Daily Prophet, highlighting accounts of Shacklebolt’s public address this morning. The press conference had gone well enough for Kingsley, but it left suspicion resting upon Harry, and those suspicions were well warranted.

Molly paused by the window in what had once been Ron’s room. Her skin felt ridiculously tight, and itched something awful in this terrible heat. She hadn’t the faintest notion how the house had gotten so warm this time of year, but it was quite unbearable. She stepped to the window and opened it, letting the cool draught revive her. It was actually quite cold out, and November in England didn’t promise to get any warmer, but at the moment, the cool was refreshing and pleasant. Molly Weasley caught her breath, let herself have a moment of rest from the many worries nipping at her heels, and then closed the window and got on with her day.

She found Harry asleep in the chair by Draco’s bed, pot of salve unopened, and she was on edge of having harsh words…and then she saw their hands, linked just as before, and the faint flutter of hope awoke in her chest. Something was happening between them…something important…and good. She felt vindicated, seeing such proof that her wild notion of near a week ago was working. The earlier scene she’d witnessed could not be dismissed as a fluke now. Harry seemed to care for Draco, and even if he grudgingly undertook chores, and pretended otherwise, Draco mattered to him, and that in itself was a victory. Perhaps, just perhaps, if Harry could forgive one old enemy, then perhaps he could forgive the rest, and ultimately beat his sword into a plowshare, as the rest of the wizarding world had done. Molly moved on, unwilling to interrupt such a scene of peace and hope for the future, and she quietly moved from room to room, preparing for visits from her now grown children.

Draco slept uncommonly well that afternoon, finally awakened by a bladder that demanded immediate attention, and by dreams that, while pleasant enough, were quite discomforting in their own right. Point blank, he woke up with an erection rubbing into the sheets, hanging on the precipice of orgasm. He hadn’t had a wet dream since he’d worked out the fundamentals of masturbation years ago, but he hadn’t had any sex drive to speak of for almost a year, until this week. The result was irritable confusion, and considerable embarrassment. At least he’d woke before anything had gone too far. It would have been far more humiliating to explain stained sheets and pajamas!
Draco slipped his hand away from Harry’s, hoping Harry would remain asleep while he slipped off to bathroom. Harry was breathing steadily and faintly, and Draco felt a weird tinge of regret when he untwined his hand from Harry’s and slipped out of bed.

It was bloody vexing, thinking about things like this when he really wanted to let his mind drift to safer topics, but his mind and body seemed determined to betray him at every turn. Given that this had happened several times in just the last couple of days, it was becoming glaringly obvious that, unless he was willing to endure the embarrassment of nocturnal emissions, which he had no wand to clean up after, he would have to take up masturbation as a means of sexual relief. At the moment, Draco wasn’t really comfortable with either plan, and privately wished that he could forget about all things sexual until some later, unspecified, date. Alas, it didn’t seem like that would come to pass.

Draco worked his way down the hall and into the bathroom, taking heart in the fact that, without potions diminishing his balance and energy, he could quickly walk a straight line for the first time in days. His need for the toilet was pressing, and the ability to move with haste was a blessing. Unfortunately, once he got there, his erection was still in place, preventing him from relieving himself in a timely fashion.

‘Fuck! It was better when I didn’t get these at all. What’s a good turn off? I need a way to get rid of this, just for now. McGonagall in tartan lingerie? Old Hagrid in a French Maid costume?’

Draco chuckled as his penis deflated rapidly. Some things never changed. He’d used notions like those to keep from having hard-ons in the middle of class, and the old standards still worked. As soon as his bladder was empty, Draco walked down the hall to his room, and noticed that Harry had already left. It was well past lunch, and most of the way to dinner. Molly must have let them sleep. She’d had to have seen him holding Harry’s hand. What would she think? He hoped she hadn’t thought it meant more than it did.

Harry was, in spite of all the anger at the surface, a really decent and soulful fellow, and when he wasn’t furious, he made Draco feel strangely safer just by being in the room. When Harry said that no one would hurt him here, it was true because he would back those words with the very real threat of his power, and his willingness to use it on those that threatened his home. Harry couldn’t fight dreams, or memories, or nightmares, but Draco had slept better for a few hours, just by knowing that Harry was there. The hand in his had been a link to his sleeping mind, a constant reminder that he was watched and guarded against all comers, whether they meant fair or foul, and it had felt good.

He mulled the problem over while he pulled on some new clothes. He’d had more time to pick through Molly’s selections, and found a few smaller items that hadn’t seen daylight since her younger boys were in school. Mostly Percy’s cast-offs, since he was the most slender of the lot.

Fuck knows he didn’t ever want to see Harry’s bad side directed at himself again! This wasn’t to say that he thought Harry was seriously dangerous to him, but Harry was a live wire, and more powerful than he’d ever suspected years ago. That much power held risks for everyone near him. A moment of extreme anger held the potential for destruction in a way that most wizards couldn’t possibly prepare for. He was thankful that Harry had so far only threatened mayhem, rather than openly venting his rage, as he had at the end of the walk that first evening. It showed that Harry was very serious about meeting Molly’s expectations about Draco’s treatment as a guest, and his willingness to hold Draco’s hand spoke volumes.

Draco reassured himself that there was nothing ‘poofy’ about it. He’d had a bloody awful time of it that morning. It was really decent of Harry to have watched over him, tolerating Draco’s pathetic shite, and then letting him cling to Harry like some poncy leech. Maybe he wouldn’t throw Draco out of the window for being sick, and fucking deviant, and all the rest, but that was all it was. He
was just lucky he was in a house were they’d look the other way regarding his weaknesses…if they found out about them at all.

He was still fussing over his shirt, and worrying over his own fallibilities, when Harry walked back in and picked up the pot of Scaradicate Salve that was sitting on the small desk by the bed. He took a deep breath before speaking, which set Draco’s nerves on edge at the implication of bad news.

“Look…um…Draco. Molly wanted me to…well, she kind of ordered me to…oh, bugger all. I’m supposed to apply this stuff to you. Today. I kind of forgot about it because we were both tired after…you know, but I really, really don’t want to upset her, so if you’ll tell me where you’d like to start, we can just do a few scars and call it a day, right?”

Draco stared numbly, hoping that this was some horrible prank. Based on Harry’s flushed face and uncomfortable shuffling, he was dead serious, and Draco felt the first faint trace of nausea creeping up on him. Molly actually expected Harry to…to touch him? A tiny fluttering portion of his subconscious found the thought…interesting, but the rest of Draco’s psyche rebelled loudly.

“You’re kidding. She…she wouldn’t…I…”

Draco trailed off, unsure of what to say while stared at the pot of salve in Harry’s hand.

’FUCK! FUCK! FUCK! He’ll know! If I show any sign of liking him touching me…he’ll fucking know. Maybe they don’t hate queers in this house, but what about fucked-up ex-Death Eaters who have fucking filthy, sick thoughts about Harry Potter?! I could probably survive a fall from a second story window, but I don’t think I could still run fast enough to dodge curses.’

Harry interrupted his panicked train of thought.

“Hey. It’s alright. Take the Calming Draught first, okay. Here, drink it down and get a grip on yourself. If you want, I can cast a Cheering Charm or two. We can start on your arm. All we have to do is make a little progress, and Molly will be happy with the results. I know it’s not easy for you, but you can do this. You’re stronger than anyone would have guessed. I know you can do this, Draco.”

Draco grabbed the potion like a drowning man going after a last gasp of air, and downed three doses worth in one long pull. Calm suffused his being, and his heartbeat slowed in seconds, taking the edge off his panicked mentality almost immediately. Draco breathed deep, looked Harry in the eyes, and started unrolling his left sleeve.

“Right. Strong. Do this. We’re good, right?”

Monosyllables were about the most complex answers he could muster, and Harry took his seat in the chair while Draco sat back on the bed, thankful that he was still fully clothed. He laid his bare arm off to the side so that Harry could easily reach it without difficulty, and closed his eyes while he tried to think of something, anything but what was happening. With a little luck, maybe he wouldn’t humiliate himself completely in front of Harry.

He heard the scrape of the lid being removed from the pot, and he could almost sense Harry’s hand dipping into it. Surprisingly, Harry was a soft touch, almost ridiculously gentle, and he rubbed the stuff carefully into Draco’s skin with two fingers, so hesitant that it seemed like he was more nervous than Draco was! It gave Draco a certain tenuous confidence, and he exhaled loudly, having held his breath at the start of it.

Just being touched was still unnerving. He’d felt better when he was the one doing the touching, and
it felt like conscious choice, rather than this, where he was subject to another’s actions. Being touched by Harry held a few complications beyond normal, but Draco had to admit that, with the Calming Draught, it wasn’t as bad as he had feared. He was also far too tense too feel any ‘excitement’, and that was a great relief.

Calloused fingers massaged the salve into his skin, and a pungent mix of herbs was in the air, while vague warmth trickled through his arm. He opened his eyes, and watched the scars fade, leaving behind healthy, if a trifle pale, skin in the wake of the magic. Harry was keeping his eyes on his work, and never looked at Draco’s face while he applied salve to each ugly mark on Draco’s flesh. Draco steeled himself and braved a little conversation.

“Did you read this morning’s Prophet? Minister Shacklebolt had a press conference. It didn’t sound too good. I don’t think they were satisfied with his answers, but I think he managed to keep the press at bay for a while. What do you think?”

Harry snorted. “I think Kingsley is doing the best he can, but you can’t really argue with stupid people. You can try, but it doesn’t do any good. They’ll print any garbage they can come up with, and if it had been left to them, Voldemort would have been running the country before they noticed anything was out of place. Morons, the lot of them. How’d your little chat with him go last night?”

“It wasn’t really that bad. He tried to hint that he could get the Ministry to help me out…if I had information that was useful to them. I really don’t have any, but even if I did, they were complete bastards to me when Snape first turned us both in. I don’t have any more knowledge now than I did then. Besides, the reason I was finally dumped off in London was because they were changing locations to steer clear of you. Hyde-Pratt thought he got recognized in Diagon Alley while picking up supplies, and they packed everything up, shoved me into a seat in the back of a Muggle auto, and then took off. Next thing I know, MacNair is shoving me out of an open door, and I was face down in the gutter. End of story. Just names, no places, no details to share that would be of any use. That’s probably the only real reason I’m alive. If I’d known something really dangerous to them, I know they’d have killed me. Fucking bastards.”

Harry’s touch trembled a little. “They…they let you go…because they were afraid of me?”

“Yeah. I remember a little of it. My uncle was furious with Hyde-Pratt. He said it was ‘much too soon for a meeting with Mr. Potter.’”

Harry’s hand stopped moving, and Draco looked up, curious. Harry was staring intently at him.

“Too soon? Does he actually think he can take me on? He’s delusional as well as a complete prat if he thinks he has enough firepower to stand against me for more than a few minutes. Any idea what he was talking about?”

“Not really. I was pretty out of it by the time we got to London. I couldn’t even say how long it took to get there. I half believed it was a dream anyway. I hadn’t been outdoors in almost a year.”

Harry pulled away from Draco’s arm and they looked at his handiwork. The lighter scarring had all but vanished, and even the heavier scar tissue was fading noticeably. A second treatment, and the lower half of Draco’s arm would look like he’d never been hurt. Draco smiled in amazement. He flexed his hand, watching muscles move beneath healthy skin, and rolled his sleeve down.

“Good enough for today? Molly should be starting dinner soon. You feel well enough to come downstairs tonight?”

Harry waited patiently for his answer. Draco sat up and took a deep breath.
“Yeah. Yes I do. And…I think I can handle the stairs…but it’s nice to know you’re watching out for me. Thanks.”

Harry blushed. Why Draco found that adorable was beyond him, but it was kind of heartening to think that he could make the most feared man in the wizarding world blush. Perhaps the famous Malfoy charm wasn’t dead and buried after all.

They left Draco’s room behind, and headed down the stairs. Watched, and secure in the knowledge that no ill would come to him, Draco made it down without even breaking a sweat. It seemed like such a small thing to be happy about, but he’d take his happiness where he could find it. The fact that Harry looked as happy for Draco as he himself did wasn’t lost on him either.

TBC!!!
Molly had made fresh biscuits, and had tea at the ready, since lunch simply hadn’t happened. A word of invitation and the boys took their seats quickly enough, and seemed to enjoy themselves thoroughly. Molly fretted her way about the kitchen, until she’d put away all that could be put away, and cleaned all that could be cleaned. It was time to sit down and discuss a few matters, and there was no more putting it off.

Molly took her seat at the table, and poured herself a cup of tea before addressing Harry and Draco, who were still passing her compliments over the fresh biscuits, and Draco showed off the newly healed skin of his left arm, citing Harry’s work as excellent. At least their moods were good, and that helped with the news she had to deliver.

“Oh, you’re both welcome, boys. I’m just glad for a reason to make biscuits again. I wanted to talk to you both today, since this ultimately involves all of us. Draco, the waking nightmares you’ve had…the ones where you can’t wake up from them properly? They’re from taking Dreamless Sleep all week. It’s meant for emergencies, and we certainly had one, but it was never intended for continual use. I talked with Madam Pomfrey, and there’s no proper substitute for natural sleep. Your body needed the rest so badly that it was no threat for awhile, but now your mind needs rest, too. It has to dream just to be healthy, and you haven’t been dreaming, except as the potion wears off. It isn’t healthy for you anymore, and I haven’t any choice but to stop administering it. The side effects only get worse, and I hope you understand that we’ll try to do as much as we can to make the nights bearable. Are you alright, love?”

Draco was listening, half-numb from surprise. He hadn’t expected this, and he didn’t know much about Dreamless Sleep, but he knew enough to be frightened by the nightmares he’d had, and he certainly didn’t want more of them. Fortunately, he was still calmed by the potion he’d taken earlier, and the news didn’t frighten him so much as concern him.

“I…I understand. I know you mean the best for me. I guess we’ll just, you know, make do. See how it goes, right?”

He tried to smile and feign a little enthusiasm, but he couldn’t help but appear apprehensive. Harry turned to him and offered his support, and that was a cheering thought.

“Look, that potion isn’t the end all and be all of magic. There’s got to be a few other spells or potions that are helpful, and I’ve got a pretty decent research library of my own. Nothing like Hogwarts, mind you, but the few I’ve got are all higher order studies. There’s bound to be something useful among them. We’ll do whatever we can to make it easier for you, okay?”

“Thanks. I mean it. Both of you are…well, you’re very kind. I appreciate it, but I think I might have
to get used to dreaming again, no matter what we do. I don’t want to kid myself with false hope, it probably won’t be easy. Just don’t feel bad because you can’t change it, okay? I know you’ll try, but I guess I just have to start getting on with it.”

Molly listened to Draco intently, and his resolve in the face of what was coming broke her heart completely. Things had been overwhelming her a bit lately, and this was another of those times. Before she could stop herself, she was blubbing and wiping her eyes with her apron, words spilling from her between sniffs.

“That’s a brave lad. We’ll be fine…just fine. I’m so sorry, love…if only…no substitute.”

Harry was giving her a hug before she knew it. The moods that came over her these days, really! It was just embarrassing the way she fell apart anymore.

“Hey…Molly…Mum…it’s alright. I swear it is. We’ll get by just fine, alright? I’m sorry…about yesterday, but that won’t happen again. I’ll be here, and we’ll find a way. You’ve done just great, and there’s nothing to worry over. I promise. Are you feeling alright?”

Draco sat and watched the entire display nervously, feeling terribly sheepish, since he was sure he was the cause of Molly's anxiety. It shamed him, that the woman who had shown him so much kindness could be in such a state because of him.

“Harry’s right. You’ve been wonderful to me. Please don’t cry. I’ll deal with whatever I have to. Things will work out…you’ll see. Harry will think of something, and I’ll just…just have some dreams until then. It’ll all work out…really!”

In truth, he was a bit more skeptical about what his nights would be like, but he’d have said anything to make Molly feel better at that point. He just hoped he sounded believable. At least Harry was looking back over Molly’s shoulder with an air of approval. Even if he didn’t believe himself, he must have said the right thing. Molly came around in just a minute or so.

“Oh…I’m sorry, boys. You shouldn’t have to see me in such a state. Nothing to worry over, really. Just an old woman’s prattling. I’m well enough to get on with the day. Almost time to start supper, anyway.”

Molly patted Harry’s arm and busied herself pulling out pots and pans, and readying some of the food to be served later. It was probably a bit early for it, but she obviously needed a way to shift attention from her momentary lapse. Harry took her at her word, and simply assumed that the stress she was under was partly his fault. That was enough to drive home the point that, at least for the time being, he really belonged here.

Draco offered his help in the kitchen, which wasn’t much, but at least he could fetch things and take on the simpler tasks. Harry announced that he was going to start checking his books for spells, and drifted upstairs.

The work went well enough, but Draco tired quickly. He hadn’t been on his feet for more than an hour in almost a week or more, and even though he had his balance back, his body was still unused to putting forth prolonged effort. Molly noticed fairly soon, and shooed him off to the living room with a cup of tea and a few biscuits, as well as a few kind words for his help.

Draco walked through the living room, nibbling his biscuits, and looked about properly for the first time. The Weasley household may not have been rich in what people traditionally thought of as wealth, and the services of an interior designer had probably been needed for a century or more, but it was a house rich in history, and certainly rich in love. Everywhere around him were reminders of
the past; mementos and trophies of their children’s accomplishments, antiques passed down from generations before, and wizarding photos and Prophet clippings that held fond memories.

Most impressive of all, the Weasley clock stood proudly near the entrance, heralding the well-being, location, and status of every member of the family. There on the face were the hands of the clock, each name prominent and easily read. The work column was practically full at the moment, this being Monday afternoon, but Molly and Harry were listed as home.

‘What a beautiful old thing. We’d never have had anything like this in the manor. I don’t think there was anyone my parents cared enough about to worry over. It would be nice…to have people feel that way about you. Worry when you’re gone, and need something like this just to know you’re alright. I wish…’

There was no point in wishing. Not really. Wishes were a thing for children, and there was nothing childish left in Draco. He had friends, and that was more than he could have imagined a few years ago. That was enough to be grateful for, wasn’t it?

One of the clock hands moved. Ron was traveling. Draco turned to head for the kitchen, when green flames leapt from the fireplace. Ron Weasley bounced out with a confident step, shaking ash from his coat and whispering a spell to clean up the mess he’d just left on the floor. He looked up with a smile, and it vanished when his eyes landed on Draco Malfoy.

“Malfoy.”

“Please, it’s just Dr-”

That was all he managed to get out before a fist the approximate size of the Isle of Wight dwarfed everything else, and after a brief, bright flash of pain, the world went peacefully dark.

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“RONALD WEASLEY! JUST WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU’RE DOING?!”

Molly Weasley was crimson with simmering outrage. Ron looked at her, dumbfounded.

“But, Mum…it’s Malfoy! I thought he was up to no good.”

“ARMED WITH TEA AND BISCUITS?! I owled you and SAID he was here! I told you to behave.”

“I’d had a few drinks that night. I ’member getting a letter back, an’ it said you were looking forward to me getting home for a bit. Must ’ave forgot the other part…sorry.”

Molly advanced on Ron, who cringed and was already stepping backward before her wrath.

“He’s under sanctuary! You violated it in less than a minute! You’re an embarrassment to our entire family line! If I didn’t know better, I’d swear a blockhead like you couldn’t possibly have come from either side of this family! You listen close, and mind this, Ronald! If you so much as touch a hair on that boy’s head, I’ll…I’ll…WELL, YOU’LL SEE! Don’t think I’ve forgotten how to cast that Paddling Jinx I had to use on Fred and George! I can use it on you, grown or not!”

A poke to the solar plexus from Molly’s wooden spoon dropped Ron onto his bum, and he stammered apologies.
“Bloody hell! Not that one, Mum! Fred and George had to invent a Bum-Numbing Charm just to get out of bed the next day. I said I’m sorry, Mum! It was Malfoy…what was I supposed to think? It won’t happen again, ’kay?”

“YOU’RE RIGHT IT WON’T! Now you get in the kitchen and see to the veggies for tonight. I’ll get Draco fixed back up. You absolute oaf! Now GO!”

Ron rolled to his feet and hurried off, stifling a yelp when Molly’s spoon cracked across his backside.

Harry came down the stairs, taking them two at a time, and looked at the scene. Draco looked like he had a broken nose, and he was out cold, but bleeding steadily. Molly leaned down and whispered, “Episkey”. The cartilage of Draco’s nose re-aligned with a soft crunch, and she took a look up at Harry.

“Harry, take him upstairs and clean up his face. See if you can spell away any bruising before it takes root. I’ll see to Ron in the kitchen.”

Harry spelled Draco off the floor, and headed back to Draco’s room, Draco in tow behind him. He didn’t dare cross Molly’s temper by defending Ron’s initial reaction, which must have been bad, judging by Draco’s face. Mostly, he was irritated that Ron had just undone a bit of healing that had been taken care of a week ago, and Harry may have understood bearing Draco ill will, but still, Ron should have known that if Draco was here, in the house, wearing Percy’s clothes, that he was bloody well welcome!

Ron was a situation just waiting to happen. The press called him ‘The Breaker’, since as a Beater for the Cannons, he’d smashed more brooms with Bludgers than any player in league history, and had put more players into the care of Healers than anyone playing Quidditch today. His violent temperament on the field was only excused because he stayed inside the rules of the game as much as possible, but he still wound up suspended now and again.

Most recently, he’d missed a swing at a Bludger, and connected with a Chaser from the rival team, breaking the man’s jaw and sending him tumbling to the ground, fortunate to be caught by the referee’s spells. It was all ‘above the board’ as an accident, but given the rarity of Ron missing a Bludger, it was more likely that he’d just decided to thin the other team’s numbers a bit.

He’d been a mess after Ginny and Hermione had been killed. Harry had spent a lot of time getting him functional again, and when the war had ended, Ron had seemed a lot better, especially since he’d won an Order of Merlin, First Class, alongside Harry, for his role in the final battle. Only those close to him would have noticed the difference in his behavior since then.

He hadn’t been such a drinker until well after the war, and Ron never seemed to make new friends these days. Even his team mates gave him a fairly wide berth, wondering if he’d take his temper out on them if they said something wrong. Harry knew full well that Ron usually drank whenever there wasn’t a game coming, and when Ron drank, it was always too much. He wasn’t a classic alcoholic in the sense of having a dependency on booze, but he was a chronic binge drinker, who never stopped once he started, and had little or no self control once he was intoxicated. More than once, Harry had wound up holding Ron’s head over a toilet or a waste bin, while Ron alternately vomited and cried over what he’d lost.

It always came back to Hermione. As well and functional as Ron may have seemed most days, he hadn’t let go of Hermione. In school, he’d always planned to ask her out, and in the end, she’d practically had to lead him word by word into finally dating. She’d complemented Ron perfectly, strong where he was weak, and the two of them together had been more than the sum of the parts…
perfect relationship. He’d meant to propose to her, after the war, when death wasn’t hanging over their heads, but he’d never gotten the chance.

They’d been hunting for the fifth Horcrux, and after the lot of them nearly getting killed in the search for the fourth, Ron had gone through a screaming row to make Hermione stay behind. She’d only acquiesced because Ron broke down and admitted that he was terrified of losing her. Harry and Ron had left, and after a week in the field, they came home only to learn of Hermione’s murder. Ron had been suicidal for weeks, and the young man that emerged from his room was a grim and implacable enemy to the Death Eaters, and he’d saved Harry’s life several times over in the process. Only after it was all over, and there had been time to rest, had any sign of real damage shown.

Harry remembered all of this, and it wasn’t easy to stay angry at Ron, knowing what really ailed his good friend. Harry tucked Draco into bed by spell, cast a few little charms to clean him up and staunch the blood flow, and then cast a few more to guarantee there wouldn’t be excessive bruising. He cast a final Enervate, and woke Draco up, reassuring him that he was safe and Ron had just exploded the way Harry had, and that it wouldn’t happen again. For his part, Draco found a book and decided it was safer to just stay up there and read, rather than antagonize Ron just by showing back up. He could wait until dinner to make an appearance.

Once he was sure that Draco was well, Harry headed back downstairs to see Ron, hoping his mate would have his wits back about him again. If Ron was here more than one night, it could easily turn things more tense than they’d been before, and that was saying something!

TBC!!!
Dusk And Dawn

Dinner that night was a subdued affair, with simmering tension hanging in the air around them. Molly was still livid about Ron punching Draco. Draco was as quiet as a mouse, barely showing any appetite, and generally keeping to himself. Harry was trying to soothe things by engaging Ron and Draco in conversation, but he was failing miserably, and Arthur was privately lamenting that, just this once, nothing remotely amusing had happened at work. Not precisely the ideal mood for a family gathering, but there it was.

When it was over, Harry dragged Ron off for a chat, and Draco volunteered to help Molly clean up in the kitchen. Arthur fetched things back from the table, Molly washed them with her traditional thoroughness, and Draco cheerily dried them, rather enjoying feeling like a part of something normal. It was oddly satisfying, doing something menial, even the Muggle way. At least there were clear results to his efforts…and he didn't feel like such a bloody leech on the Weasley family’s backs. There was one other perk to it as well. Molly seemed a bit less distraught after watching Draco appear to enjoy himself more than he had during the actual dinner.

While the kitchen was busy in its own right, Harry led Ron off into the backyard, and pulled him into an overdue chat.

“Merlin, mate. Was it really necessary to knock him out a minute after you were in the door? I mean, damn it, he had tea and biscuits in his hands. Not exactly a serious threat to the household.”

Ron snorted. “It wasn’t so much about suspicion, as it was a general sort of response to Malfoy…on principle. Near death from poisoning can cause that, or so I hear.”

“Trust me, mate. Draco’s on the up and up. He was half dead when he showed up, and to give you a break, I admit I tore into him at the edge of the wards. Your mum let him in, and I think she was right…at least I do now. He’s nothing like the prat I remember from school. Just promise me you’ll keep an open mind long enough to watch how he acts now, and you’ll see he’s different.”

“Well, I can promise that…mostly because Mum’ll bloody kill me if I have at him again, the wee shite. You know, the thought of him without all that money, wearing clothes he used to sass us for wearing…fucking makes me want to laugh out loud. I fucking love it.”

Ron slipped a flask of Ogden’s Firewhiskey from his pocket, then took a deep pull. “Ahhh. Better. Draco Malfoy living in the Burrow calls for some mental anesthesia. Want some?”

“Nah. Not my style. You know I can’t hold more than a few Butterbeers before I can’t see straight. I can’t believe you drink that stuff. You could slow down the drinking a little and still have room for fun, you know?”
Ron shrugged and pulled from his flask again, staring at the stars and watching his breath turn to puffs of white fog.

“That would defeat the purpose. I’ve got a little time off from the Cannons, might as well take advantage while I can. Drinking without getting drunk is like…breathing without getting air…what the fuck’s the purpose, right?”

“Well as long you’re determined and know what you want…pass me a splash.”

Ron handed over the flask, and Harry took a solid gulp, hoping to reduce the amount of alcohol that Ron took in, by drinking it himself. The taste of the stuff really complemented the name, and his throat and mouth immediately burned as if they were on fire. Harry coughed a moment, gasping for air, then got his bearings again while Ron chuckled.

“You really are an amateur at this, mate. Finally, the Boy Who Lived has a weak spot, and it’s whiskey. Hey…heard you did in Kaminski last week. Nice bit with the head. Here’s to one more murderous fucking bastard in the ground!”

Ron raised the flask and took a shot. Harry sighed. He never felt particularly proud right after a kill…or very angry either. Mostly he just felt empty and calm. It was always right before one, and during the act itself, that he was a bundle of nerves, and full of wild pride and a savage need to make them pay. Today…today it just felt like hollow words, but he answered anyway.

“Yeah…I suppose it was. I wasn’t even really thinking at the time. I locked the place down with Anti-Apparition wards and hit it like a monsoon. He was done before he knew what hit him. The head was just a message to the rest of the bastards. That and the words on the wall. I barely remember doing it…”

“Hmm. Still, one more down, mate. Here’s to a world with no fucking Death Eaters in it!”

Ron pulled another gulp of whiskey down, and handed the flask to Harry, who followed suit, choking on the fiery liquid.

“Yeah. You know, that’s who got hold of Draco. Mark or no, they got their claws into him and ripped him apart for fun…for months…most of this year. He’s got more scar tissue than the both of us combined. Hard to believe, but iss true.”

Harry suddenly noticed that he’d slurred a word. His regimen of exercise and magical practice did not include breaks for imbibing alcohol, and the Firewhiskey was hitting him fast and hard. Ron chuckled.

“I can’t believe you just slurred a word, mate. As for Malfoy, that’s a pretty irony there. Fucking Marked, gets Dumbledore offed, loses everything, and gets torn up by his own people. Fuckin’ beautiful.”

“No, mate. Nothing beautiful about what they did to him. Nothing at all. Your mum and I needed most of a week just to heal him up, and we only just started on the scars. He hasn’t slept without a spell or a potion since he got here. He’s got nightmares…like us…right after…you know.”

Ron pulled the last of the flask down, and drew another flask from his pocket. He stared at the sky again.

“Yeah. I know. Like that, huh? Poor bastard, then. Still, we got ours fighting for something better than murdering Muggles and Half-Blood wizards. ‘S too bad he got hurt, but ‘s what happens when ya fuckin’ cozy up to the Dark.”
And so it went. They walked the length and breadth of the backyard of the Burrow, and eventually took a bit of shelter in Arthur’s workshop. A few fumbled Heating Charms later, and they got the temperature right and proceeded to get seriously pissed. Harry hadn’t drunk this much in his entire life, and half the time he wasn’t sure what he was saying, but Firewhiskey suffused his being with warmth, and it was good to see Ron again. There was no one else who remembered the things that he and Ron and Hermione had done. They were the last two living people who understood what it had taken to defeat Voldemort. It was an insoluble bond, tying them together as veterans, and brothers, forever.

Molly and Arthur had grudgingly gone to bed, though Arthur had nipped out to the workshop just to make sure the boys were alright. Draco had gone to bed as well, but the gnawing fear of what his dreams might hold had kept him awake. The stumbling footsteps on the stair had captured his attention just as surely as the slurred voices that failed to remain as quiet as they hoped they were. He hadn’t really meant to listen in, it was just better than drowning in his own ugly thoughts and fears. The noises from the bathroom were fairly hard to miss, too.

“I…I kild’er…Har…Harry. Sh-she shoulda’…ben wi’ us. T’gether. I-”

Ron’s voice was interrupted by the sound of vomiting, and the noisy racking sobs that followed. Then Harry’s voice came through.


Draco bit his lip, which was still faintly sore from the hit he’d taken earlier that night, and looked at the faded Mark on his arm. He didn’t know what a Horcrux was, but he knew what pain sounded like.

‘This is what that the war did. This is what Katie Bell’s parents would have felt like, if she’d touched that amulet just a little more. This is what Harry feels about his godfather…the one Aunt Bellatrix killed. I was part of that…or at least I used to believe in it. Ron doesn’t want to die because someone hurt him…physically…like me. She wasn’t just a Mudblood to him. They killed the woman he loved more than anything else in the world. It would have been kinder to kill him.’

Draco looked at the Mark on his arm, and wondered if he shouldn’t have just let himself die in London. Maybe Molly was wrong. Maybe…maybe Harry should be killing people that wore that Mark, and if that included him, so be it. Some things were just so terrible that they needed to be expunged…removed completely from human memory, never to be seen again. Voldemort, his fucking Mark, and all his minions were such a thing. Harry’s voice suddenly interrupted his musing.

“Ron…m-mate, we hadda do it. Ever’body…ever’body could’a died…if we didn’ des-destroy…the Hor…cruxes. She…she’da ben proud ‘f you…she lov’d you, Ron. She’da want’d ya to li-live on, mate. I…I know…I know I do.”

They quieted from there on, the loudest noises being retching, and more muffled sobs, while Draco sat in his bed, still and quiet, with so very much to occupy his mind through the night. He had more strength now…enough to fight sleep if he had to, and tonight he most definitely had to. He hadn’t been one of the powerful players of the war, but he’d had his part. His part in ruining lives…stripping from others their innocence and happiness, and making a ruin of their futures. Molly, Kingsley and Harry could say what they wanted, but Draco was horrifyingly aware that, no matter what others claimed, his debt would last the rest of his life, and still never be paid.
Morning found Draco earlier than the others, since he watched the first hint of dawn in the sky, and followed its every step until sunrise came at last. The sounds of Molly and Arthur stirring were comforting, since the night had been exceedingly lonesome, with just his thoughts to keep him company through ‘til dawn. He’d made up his mind to ask Molly about Horcruxes sometime soon, but he thought he’d rather help with breakfast first.

He knew enough to set water to boil in the kitchen, and he knew where the tea was kept. He wasn’t sure enough about portions to risk making it, but by the time Molly came downstairs, Draco had everything she needed ready for her, and she tousled his hair and gave him a drowsy smile.

“What’s got you up so early, love? No complaints though, dearie…since you’ve nearly set morning tea for us.”

Molly yawned and stretched. Draco decided that a casual approach to the truth wouldn’t hurt, and just told Molly how he really felt.

“I didn’t really feel like sleeping much. I just thought I’d come down early and help. Not really ready for nightmares just yet.”

Molly frowned immediately, but not a frown that suggested disappointment in Draco, just a grimace of sorrow that showed sympathy and regret for Draco’s situation. She hadn’t intended for him to give up sleep just for want of the Potion of Dreamless Sleep.

Molly chided him gently, and promised to sit up with him if needed, then handed him a cup of tea strong enough to wake him up right and properly. Arthur came downstairs before he could tell her that, in truth, he’d rather hoped Harry would sit up with him, but he thought better of saying it, and changed the subject to helping her with breakfast.

Dawn moved to morning, and Arthur left for work, leaving Molly and Draco alone in the kitchen, cleaning up the left overs and preserving two plates of food for Harry and Ron, who likely wouldn’t be up any time soon. Somehow, morning in the Burrow seemed a lot more hopeful than the night that had passed, and Draco let some of his uglier musings fade away as afterthoughts. It wasn’t easy, living, but there was only one known alternative, and he wasn’t sure he was ready for that just yet.

TBC!!!
Bent And Broken

DISCLAIMER: Warning! I make no claim to any property of J.K. Rowling's, and am in no way profiting by this. I do offer her my sincerest thanks for allowing us this garden of the mind in which we play. Further Warning! This story...and likely any I ever write...are dominated by gay themes and characters. That's how it is, if this in any way makes you uncomfortable...do not read further.

Redeem Me…by Samayel

Chapter 23: Bent And Broken

It was almost noon before Molly finally broke down and sent Draco upstairs with two very strong Hangover Cures for Harry and Ron. It went against her better judgment to reward stupidity with easy relief, but she wanted them up and coherent sometime this week. Draco had a small tray with the two potions, and two cups of hot tea as well, balanced in his hand while he made his way upstairs.

The door to Harry’s room wasn’t actually closed, and a nudge from his foot opened it the rest of the way with a loud creak. The scene within was fairly predictable. Harry and Ron were still wearing their clothes from the night before, and the odor of vomit and whiskey hung in the air around them. Harry was draped halfway across his bed, with glasses askew, mouth open, and drool sliding down his chin, leaving a spot on his blanket. Ron was curled up on the rug in front of the bed, snoring like a hibernating dragon. All in all, it was a fairly disgusting sight.

Draco let the tray rattle a little when he placed it on the desk, hoping he wouldn’t startle Harry when he spoke. No need to risk harm by surprising a veteran hunter, after all. It was to no avail, since both boys remained entirely unconscious. Sterner measures were called for. Draco cautiously tugged at Harry’s sleeve.

“Harry…Harry. It’s almost noon. Time to get up. Come on, Harry. There’s tea…and breakfast downstairs. It’s still hot. Wake up already!”

One red-rimmed, green eye opened, and fixed Draco with a glazed expression of confusion. Harry grimaced, and closed the eye again. His voice croaked when he finally spoke.

“Dead. Dead people don’t…don’t need breakfast. Jus…just bury me.”

Draco held the Hangover Cure out, waiting patiently for Harry to look again.

“Molly made potions that will make you feel better. Hangover Cures…one gulp and you won’t need a funeral. All you have to do is wake up and try it. Please?”

Harry grumbled beneath his breath, and Draco unstoppered the potion and handed it to him, fighting the urge to laugh at Harry’s bed hair, which was admittedly hilarious. Growing it long had reduced its tendency to run out of control, but at the moment, it looked like an entire family of owls could have nested in it. Harry drank the potion down with a wince of disgust, then grabbed for the tea a second later, desperate to get the taste of the potion off his tongue.

“GOD! That’s bloody awful. I almost preferred the misery over that thing. Why does anything good for you have to taste like the backside of a Blast-Ended Skrewt?”

“I don’t know…but I’m wondering how you know what a Blast-Ended Skrewt’s backside tastes
like. Eww! Can you wake up Ron? I’m pretty sure that, if I’m the first thing he sees with a hangover, he’ll wind up in trouble with Molly again…and I like my nose with this shape. Sound like a plan?”

Draco had delivered his comments with a convivial and pleasant tone, and no hint of his old mean-spiritedness, and Harry smiled and chuckled a little, surprised at the idea of Draco being amusing. It wasn’t a situation he was prepared for, but he rather liked it.

“Yeah. I think that’s a safe bet. Tell Molly we’ll be down in a bit. Tell her I’m sorry about both of us being ‘out of it’ last night, but Ron really needed a friend’s company. Hey! Wait a minute…how did you sleep last night?”

Draco looked away, sheepish, not wanting Harry to feel guilty about leaving him alone last night.

“…I didn’t…sleep that is. Didn’t feel like it…and…”

“Merlin! I’m sorry, Draco. I would have kept a watch over you for nightmares…honest. I forgot, what with Ron needing to bend my ear and all. Shite. Tonight, okay? I’ll sit up tonight. You need to get some real sleep.”

The attention to his needs made Draco horribly uncomfortable. Thankfully, or perhaps unfortunately, depending on how you looked at it, Harry removed the subject from Draco’s mind by changing shirts, and the sight of Harry’s bared torso emptied Draco’s brain entirely. Draco turned away, hoping his cheeks hadn’t pinked while Harry could still see him, and started his way to the door in a hurry.


Draco was gone and down the stairs in seconds. Harry pulled on a clean T-shirt, idly wondering if sleep deprivation was driving Draco scatty faster than expected.

‘Titchy little thing, he is. Wonder what was…OH! Damn it! The last time he saw a guy peeling off clothes he probably got fucking raped! Jesus, Potter! Why not just whip the knife out in front of him again? How could I forget this shit? First he can’t sleep because I got drunk last night, then I scare him off when he brings me a Hangover Cure and tea…I’m a complete prat!’

Irritated with himself beyond reason, Harry threw a dirty sock onto Ron’s head. Ron snored one last time, pulling in a deep breath laced heavily with the scent of Harry’s foot after jogging a mile. The snoring abruptly ended in a fit of coughing. Ron rolled over and spat the sock away.

“Oooh-bloody hell, mate. Wha-what was ‘at for? Me fuckin’ ‘ead hurts something awful. Don’t need ya to ruin my lungs too!”

“It’s noon, mate. Your mum’s got food waiting…and she made Hangover Cu-”

“GIMME! Ow…my head. Mustn’t shout, right…gimme the bloody cure. C’mon.”

Harry handed the other bottle over, and Ron sucked it down like it was the sweetest nectar known to man. Then he belched and flopped back onto the rug while the potion did its work.

“Fuckin’ ‘ell. That’s better. Much better. Noon, huh? So be it, then. Let’s get a bite.”

“Draco brought tea as well. It’s on the tray. That’ll get that potion taste out of your mouth before breakfast.”
“Malfroy brought it? And you drank it? Did you check it by spell first, or do you just like living dangerously?”

Ron eyed the remaining cup with unveiled suspicion. Harry shook his head.

“Get over it. He’s not evil, Ron. I’m not even sure he ever was. Not that he didn’t try back in the old days, but face it, he never quite managed to be anything more than mean. And it’s Draco now…not Malfroy. He doesn’t even want his last name anymore. Hates it. Do me a personal favor and just call him Draco, okay?”

“If you say so, mate, but I’d rather call him Ferret-boy. Just not where Mum can hear me.”

Ron drank the tea, sipping carefully before he risked anymore, then decided it was safe enough and downed the rest with gusto. They made their way to the kitchen and tucked into the plates of food that had been left for them. A decent meal did a lot to take Harry’s mind off his lingering guilt over spooking Draco, but he resolved to make it up to him tonight.

Molly sniffed at them with an air of disapproval while she made lunch for herself and Draco, but didn’t tear into Harry or Ron over their conduct the previous night. Harry had been prepared for the worst, but he suspected that Molly knew why he’d let himself get drunk with Ron. Some things simply had to be shared, and Ron couldn’t have even spoken about Hermione if he hadn’t been full of whiskey. Harry had never been drunk before…tipsy maybe…but never drunk. He hadn’t really liked it much, but he also couldn’t have mentioned certain memories without the hazy fog that the alcohol had given him. He didn’t remember all of it, but he remembered both of them crying over Hermione and Ginny. It hadn’t been pretty, but in an odd way, it had been necessary. Molly had a keen eye for matters of the heart, especially when her children were involved, and this was no exception. The mere fact that she wasn’t shouting was a form of grudging acceptance.

Draco peeked into the room nervously, and took a seat at the table to wait for lunch, eyes flicking back and forth between Harry and Ron, unsure of what to say. Harry broke the tension.

“Thanks for bringing all that up. It’s late already, and with Charlie and Dula coming I should have been up hours ago.”

Ron perked up noticeably.

“Oy! Charlie and Dula are gonna show up? Great. Haven’t seen them in months. Not since the Quidditch season started. I wonder what they’ve been up to. Last I heard, they’d just got that female Spiny-Backed Bluescale to breed. Hope it took this time. She’s one of the last three females of breeding age for that species left in the world.”

Draco finally took a gamble and spoke up.

“Sounds amazing. So they don’t just tame dragons, they also do species preservation work?”

Ron hesitated a moment, his instincts at war while he contemplated the insane reality of breakfast conversation with Draco Malfroy, then he answered.

“Um…yeah. Anyway, Charlie got named a Conservator for an entire preserve last year. Loads of status in that. Youngest Conservator working today. Dula probably would have been named for it, but his family is really powerful in those parts of the country, so they picked Charlie instead. They didn’t want anything that looked like a political favor to a powerful family. Not fair really. Charlie’s qualified and all, and he’s the best when it comes to crisis handling or a direct intervention with a dragon, but Dula has a lot more savvy with people and government. The two of them together make
a great team.”

Harry chipped in next, feeling a bit more comfortable once Ron showed signs of being civil with Draco.

“You wouldn’t think politics would be such a big thing when it comes to dragon handling, but it’s the same as anywhere else. Even so, they really put everything they’ve got into the preserve, so it’s a real treat to see them for more than a couple hours. They don’t get a lot of time off. They usually can’t even stay more than a day or so during the holidays. It’s a shame, too, ‘cause they’re great fun.”

Draco had been interested in the dragon parts of the conversation, but too much talk of Charlie and Dula was beginning to wear on his nerves. Likable or no, at the moment, the subject of anything or anyone queer was not to his liking.

“So, how about those Cannons?”

Ron looked confused, which was reminiscent of their school days, but he took the change of subject in stride.

“Fine. Good enough, anyway. If it hadn’t been for that tight-arsed ref, I’d still be playing in tomorrow’s game. I’ll be there for show, of course, but I’ll never make it onto the pitch. They pulled in Wilson from the second string to play for me. He’s got a good arm, great really, but he loses his wind if the game runs too long…he never holds back enough energy. Seen any games lately, Mal- I mean Draco?”

“No. I…I was…I was out of circulation for awhile. It’s nice to catch up. Who’s at the front of the league these days?”

“The Falcons, the smug prats, but they lost their Keeper last week. Some kind of botched spell at home. He’ll be in St. Mungo’s for another week yet. Their next couple of games might take them out of the running if they can’t hold to the same level of play they showed at the start of the season. If they lose a game, and the Cannons win tomorrow, we’ll have a shot at the lead in a few more games. Keep your fingers crossed for us.”

“I used to be a Falcons fan…at school, but since you’re the only person I know who actually made it onto a professional team, I suppose I could cheer for the Cannons. Were the try-outs as tough as I heard?”

Draco became aware of the fact that he was actually interested in the conversation. He hadn’t thought about Quidditch, except in the fleeting fragments of dreams, since he’d taken shelter in Snape’s safe house. Ron became more animated as he continued, gulping down breakfast between sentences.

“Bloody brutal! They had us in the air for hours, all positions, constant change-ups, the works. Then when everyone was completely knackered, they made us play a full length game against the current team. Only me and Banford made the team…out of more than twenty prospects. The practices are pure hell, too, but I love it. Endurance is my edge. I already have a powerful swing working for me, but I have to work to keep my precision at peak. There’s a few players I can think of right off that have better form, but they can’t play a two hour game and keep their edge…that’s when I own the pitch!”

“I used to dream about pro Quidditch. I miss it. Do you ever get tickets to give out? I haven’t seen a game…live…in years.”
Ron suddenly realized that, despite the good time he was having, he was a breath away from giving free tickets to someone he’d hated for seven years, and not without a few good reasons. He was silent a moment, then answered hesitantly.

“Yeah. We do. Sometimes. I’ll see what I can do and get back to you on that.”

The terse tone in Ron’s voice killed the conversation, but Draco didn’t complain. He’d been surprised by getting along this well. Molly served lunch for herself and Draco, and they chatted lightly, mostly of recent wizarding news that didn’t involve Harry, until Draco excused himself to take a shower. Mostly he just wanted to get away from the awkwardness of sitting with Ron, but he also wanted to look acceptable for company, since he hadn’t slept properly, and it was a newfound pleasure to take showers without a chair. Taking a proper shower made him feel like he wasn’t a bloody invalid, and that would set his mood right if nothing else would.

Draco took along fresh clothes, the ones that fit best and still looked half decent on him, and set the shower to heat while he stripped.

In the mirror before him, his own image taunted him cruelly. He’d always liked the way he looked when he was in school. Now looking in the mirror made him wince. At least his ribs weren’t quite so easy to count, now that some flesh was beginning to reappear. He’d probably gained ten pounds in just the last week or so. He privately thanked Molly for being a saint, because her meals were at the root of his recovery right now. The scars were depressing, but at least one arm was beginning to look better. Molly had applied salve that morning, since Harry was clearly incapacitated. His skin color was much better than before, but he’d still be pale until he could get some decent sun next year. Maybe then he’d start looking a little like the person he’d once admired in the mirror.

The shower was steaming the room up, and Draco quit his maundering, stepping into the stream of hot water and just enjoying the scent of the clean soap he was using. It was good just to clean himself, or even be clean at all, again. He was attending to the cleanliness of his private parts, when his groin responded to the attention by swelling inconveniently.

‘Shite! This again. It can’t wait forever. It’s either deal with it or face stained sheets and shorts. Might as well get it over with.’

Draco gingerly tugged at the head of his penis, woefully out of practice, and lacking real enthusiasm for the task. His body responded anyway, since it hadn’t actually experienced pleasure for a very long time. He tried to keep his thoughts neutral, just concentrating on the once-familiar feeling of his own hand, but it wasn’t working particularly well. His mind flicked back to snogging sessions with Pansy Parkinson, and that almost killed the mood. It had been fun enough then, but it lacked luster in hindsight, and it had really just seemed like ‘the thing to do’ at the time.

Try as he might, Draco couldn’t bring himself to a level of excitement that would make an orgasm possible. The effort was beginning to make his hand and wrist sore, and the entire matter was beginning to annoy him. He hadn’t wanted to do this in the first place, and it would have been nice if his supposedly needy body would just cooperate with him.

He took a break, shaking his hand and wrist to stop the faint cramps in them, and leaned forward, resting his head against the shower wall.

‘You know what you have to do.

It would have been comforting to say that his inner voice wasn’t his own, or that the idea came from somewhere else, but Draco knew perfectly well what would excite him. It was just a matter of allowing himself to think of it. In the meantime, his rampant member was bobbing eagerly in the
shower, waiting for his absent hand to return to work. Draco put one hand against the wall to steady himself, closed his eyes and sighed, then wrapped his hand around his stiffened penis once again.

Harry’s hand was in his, calloused and warm. Harry was gently rubbing salve into his skin. Harry was doing sit-ups in his room, perspiration dripping from his brow, tanned skin shining while wonderfully defined muscles flexed and strained. Harry’s shirt was coming off, sliding up past an abdomen carved from stone, over shoulders that were handsomely broad, but not at all bulky. Harry was smiling. He was smiling at Draco, relaxed and happy, and it was a smile that showed off a face that, when the glasses were gone, was stunningly handsome, oddly serious, and yet genuinely open. He wondered what Harry’s lips would feel like…

Draco’s groin pulsed and exploded, and his entire body shuddered to match his pounding heartbeat. Hot come trickled down his fingers, spattered against the tiles and fixtures, and drained away as the shower continued to pour water down his shoulders and back, and ultimately to the floor of the tub. Draco had bitten his lip so hard that it was bleeding, and his vision was swimming wildly. If he hadn’t had a hand on the wall to steady himself, he’d have fallen over for sure. He flopped against the wall, panting, then slid down, sitting in the tub while the stream of hot water still ran down and onto him. Then Draco quietly cried, periodically scrubbing his face to let the tears wash away, mingled with droplets of red from his bitten lip.

‘I’m a fucking queer. No wonder those things happened to me. They took one look at me and knew what I was. I’m not even just queer. I’m worse. I’m queer for Harry Potter. I should ask Molly for some clothes to keep and try my luck again in Diagon Alley. Or maybe Shacklebolt could help me even if I don’t have any real information…if I just act nice and cooperate with them. I can’t just…be here…like this…with him. I’m sick. Fucking sick…and bent. Father would puke to look at me now. If my mum could still speak she’d fucking curse the day I was born. I’m shite! Nothing but worthless shite!’

Draco cried until he’d emptied his head of tears, and until the water had developed a noticeable chill. Shivering, he shut off the shower and fetched up a towel, drying himself quickly and avoiding the sight of himself in the mirror. He dressed and groomed himself with his back turned the counter, not willing to look himself in the eyes, knowing he might very well crack if he did. Company or no, he decided he might just as well stay upstairs tonight, and keep to his room with a book or two until sleep took him. He didn’t want or need any more reminders of his ‘condition’, and the company coming tonight would be nothing but that.

Draco slipped down the hall and into his room, grabbed a book and sat down. It might be a long evening, waiting for others to come to bed before he dared to sleep, but it was better than facing what awaited him below. Draco took a few deep breaths to calm himself, then opened a book and started to read.

TBC!!!
The Man In Black

Dula and Charlie arrived shortly after Arthur had gotten in from work. Ron hugged his older brother fiercely, and hugged Dula only a little gentler than that. Arthur and Molly made the rounds next, and finally Harry exchanged embraces with Charlie and his lover. Cider was passed about, and Molly headed for the kitchen to set the table for supper, wondering if Draco might come down after all. She’d been up there earlier, and so had Harry, but Draco complained of feeling a bit ill and panicky about company, so they relented and left him be.

Arthur launched into a lengthy description of a cursed automobile, a Muggle bank executive, and several thousand pounds in fines for illegal parking. Apparently, the vehicle in question had been cursed to move itself to the nearest illegal parking space, shortly after its owner had left it. It had taken an entire team of Curse-Breakers all day to set things right, and many a Muggle policeman had been Obliviated before it was all over. There was a fair amount of laughter, but overall, the mood was subdued and peaceful.

Dula inquired after Draco’s health, polite to a fault, and was disappointed to hear that Draco had decided to stay abed. Harry shrugged, acknowledging that he was confused about Draco’s shifting moods as well.

“What a shame. I’d rather hoped to meet your houseguest.”

Dula tactfully avoided mentioning Harry’s earlier conversation with them, and simply segued to lighter topics. Ron challenged his brother to a round of wizard chess, and was busily trouncing his sibling. Arthur, Harry and Dula soaked up cider and chatted amiably, and Molly had dinner set before they knew it. Dula politely excused himself, and headed for the bathroom, while the others made their way to supper. In the upstairs hallway, there was only one room with light coming from beneath the door, and Dula knocked lightly.

“It’s open…come in.”

Draco looked up from his book and gaped openly at the man who had just entered the room. Dula was dressed entirely in black, but unlike the dull matte of Harry’s combat gear, these were fashionable dress clothes of exceptional quality. His hair was unbraided, and hung more than a foot and a half below his hips, straight and smooth as black silk. His bearing was aristocratic yet relaxed, the artless art of the nobly born, and given the man’s slightly darker complexion and sparkling brown eyes, he looked and carried himself like a youthful reverse image of Lucius Malfoy, dark where Lucius was light. His smile was disarming and vaguely amused, and his presence was towering, despite being only an inch or so taller than Harry. When he spoke, his accent was detectable, but his English was more than merely fluent. Draco couldn’t seem to do anything but listen, staring at the stranger that had just dominated the small room.
“And you must be Draco Malfoy. We came so far, and Charlie and I have little enough time away from work. It seemed a tragedy to miss a chance to meet the guest that Harry spoke of so kindly.”

Draco stared in shock as the gentleman in black sat in the chair across the bed from him, and offered a hand to shake in greeting.

“I am Dula, and it is a pleasure to meet you, Draco. It is customary to shake hands, when you meet someone for the first time, is it not?”

Draco snapped back to reality, closed his book and held out a hand, albeit with a certain nervousness, but he reminded himself that anyone who meant harm wouldn’t be in a house protected by Harry.

“Please…it’s just Draco now. Good to…uh…meet…you. You’re Charlie’s…umm…friend, right?”

Draco stumbled over words, flushing almost crimson with embarrassment while Dula took his hand and shook it twice, then returned to a relaxed and elegant sprawl in the other chair.

“Yes. I am that. As well as somewhat more, though that is, as they say, neither here nor there. Molly’s dinners are a rare treat, and I should say that it would be a pity to miss even one. Are you certain that you don’t wish to join us? They seemed worried for you, but you look well. It appears that they’re quite fond of you. You would be missed, you know.”

Draco sat, dumbfounded by Dula’s statements. He hadn’t been here, how could he say such things with that tone of certainty? All Draco had wanted was to be left alone…but…what Dula had said first, about Harry.

“Harry? What did he say about me? When did you talk to Harry?”

It came out like a challenge, mingled with the anger he felt about being interrupted, but in his heart it was almost a plea. Dula was utterly nonplussed, and smiled warmly.

“He came to our home for dinner last week. We’re only really a Floo trip away. I believe it wasn’t long after you’d first arrived. He was quite impressed with you. He found it more than a little confusing, since I’m told that you were not the best of friends in school, but he remarked that you were very brave, and that you were stronger than he’d ever imagined you were. Harry killed a Dark Lord at the height of his power…twice. I should take being called brave and strong by such a man as Harry…well, I should take it as high praise indeed.”

Draco swallowed heavily. It was like someone was dangling a magnificent illusion in front of him, and he desperately wanted to be hypnotized by it, but he didn’t have any room for illusions left in him, and anything resembling blind faith or idle hope had long since been beaten and buggered away.

“He didn’t say that…those things. You’re lying. What do you really want? Why did you even come up here?”

“Draco. I have nothing to gain from lying to you…and there is nothing you possess which I desire. Any words I offer you are merely my thoughts, and in the case of Harry’s words, my memories. I understand that you might have issues of trust, but it is unseemly to call a man a liar without just cause. Have I given you offense? I only wished to meet you, and inquire as to whether or not you would take supper with the rest of us. The matter lies completely in your hands.”

Dula’s logic was impeccable, and Draco crumbled while his instincts warred with his rational mind. He didn’t want to be forced to think, and he was already desperately tired, but he’d been raised an
aristocrat, albeit a spoiled one, and his upbringing told him to act more like one now.

Draco raised his chin. “I’m sorry. That wasn’t called for. I shouldn’t have said that. You haven’t given offense. If anything, you’ve been too kind. Dula, they said your family are wizarding nobility in Europe. If I may ask, what is your surname?”

“You may ask, but I no longer use it. You are not the only wizard who has a last name that no longer serves him well. My grandfather served a Dark Lord, and was high among his counselors, but when that Dark Lord was defeated, by Albus Dumbledore, my grandfather was sentenced to Azkaban, and ultimately, to the Kiss. My father labored for many years to restore our family name, but the tarnish remains despite his wealth and connections. My father and I disagree about many things, and we have made a sort of peace, but I left behind everything…to be who I am now. I do not need wealth, for he who has love is wealthy beyond measure. I do not need influence or power, for I have power over myself, and no one can take that from me. I do not need the shelter of a name, because it has no value save that which people give it. I am simply…Dula, and by some reckonings, that is more than enough.”

Draco listened, enraptured despite his earlier apprehension. Dula’s family had been in the service of a Dark Lord…and Draco understood perfectly what that felt like. The subject was of very immediate relevance to Draco’s current situation, and he found himself comfortable as long as he didn’t think about Dula’s ‘preferences’.

Draco unrolled his sleeve. The faded Mark was still quite visible on his pale skin. Draco stared at it a moment before he spoke.

“I wish I could leave that behind. Names you can drop, this…I’ll have this as long as I live. I can’t get away from my past that easy. People will always see this before they see me, and I don’t think it matters what I do, I just can’t change it.”

“Draco. People will always see what they choose, Mark or no. Those who are looking clearly enough, like Molly, or Harry, will see who you are, not who you were. I make no pretension about it being easy. In Prague, there are still doors that are closed to me, even two generations after my family’s disgrace, and that is regardless of the fact that my lover is a man.”

Draco winced at the comment, and Dula looked at him curiously, then spoke with a very sober and serious tone that pulled Draco’s attention to him unerringly.

“You are discomforted by such things. My apologies. I should have known. Harry only said that you were hurt by others, but he would not share confidences that were not his own. I did not realize that the subject would cause you concern. I think, perhaps, that you will not like what I say to you next, but it is something I think you need to hear, and I hope that you will listen with an open mind.”

Draco paused with apprehension, simply nodding nervously, wondering what Dula had to say that was so important.

“Draco, I do not know what you see when you look upon people like Charlie and myself, but I suspect you have seen things that bear only the most superficial similarity to our lives. I hope you will look deeper than the surface of things, and see that people who love one another, whatever their sex, are no threat to anyone. Those who are motivated only by lust or hate…they exist in great numbers, and you cannot judge the many for the actions of such a despicable few. Those who look upon your Mark, and do you an injustice by believing they know you by that alone, are arrogant fools, and they have missed a chance to see the person you really are, or the friend that you could be. It is their loss. Do not cost yourself opportunities for friendship or for happiness as they have. Anyone who has impressed Harry so, deserves better than to conduct themselves that way.”
Draco turned his head away toward the window, hoping the blush that just risen on his cheeks wouldn’t give him away completely. Dula waited in silence, the stood to leave. Draco built up the nerve to finally answer.

“Thank you. I…uh…I have some things to think about. I’ll…I’ll see if I feel like coming down for dinner later. I don’t know. It was nice to meet you…Dula.”

Dula bowed gracefully. “As it was to meet you, Draco. If I do not see you again tonight, do remember that Charlie and I are only a Firecall away. Good night, Draco.”

And then he was gone, and Draco was alone, sitting in a chair with a half read book that he couldn’t remember even being interested in. Dula was…well, kind of overwhelming. It was kind of like being near a volcano, and Draco was still reeling from the experience. It did make him a bit envious, though. Dula carried off the attitude that he’d tried to emulate in school, but where Draco had come off as a spoiled brat, Dula seemed like a polished prince…and a friendly one at that.

‘He was nice. Where does he get off acting that cool and wise? Bet he drives Charlie crazy, acting like that at home. Harry…if Harry said those things about me, he must at least like me a little. Enough not to throw me through any windows if I look at him wrong and can’t help it. I hope he comes up here tonight. He promised he would. I don’t want to be alone.’

The scent of dinner wafted through the open door to Draco’s room, and his stomach growled immediately. Despite being well fed for more than a week, Draco’s appetite was still ferocious. Draco made up his mind. Dinner wouldn’t be that much of a torment, even with company, and he didn’t want to fall asleep and disturb them with his nightmares during their supper, did he? How better to stay awake than to just join in for awhile?

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Arthur looked at the assembled persons at the table. Molly was just to his left, with Charlie and Dula beside her, and Ron was at his right, with Harry just after him. It was a pity Draco hadn’t felt well. Molly always outdid herself when the any of the boys came home, and he’d nearly gotten himself hexed trying to pinch a few bites before supper. Still, it was good to see Charlie and Ron again, and Dula was always excellent company. The food was perfect, and for the middle of the work week, he couldn’t have been happier. The corner of his eye glimpsed blond hair, and Arthur looked up, and everyone’s eyes followed his.

“Ah! Draco! I was afraid we wouldn’t see you at the table tonight. Sit down…sit down. There’s plenty left, and none of it bad. Our Molly was at her best again. There’s a chair by Harry. Whatever you do, don’t miss a helping of the ham. It was worth risking my fingers to get an early slice, and it’s even better now! Enjoy.”

Draco sat down quietly, failing to prevent a blush that was stealing its way across his cheeks, and when he looked up, Dula was smiling. Harry leaned in and whispered to Draco suddenly.

“Sorry about last night…really. I’m glad you made it down. Go on, tuck in, mate…everything’s delicious.”

Draco nodded his assent, not trusting himself to say anything without gushing like a complete sissy. Harry had called him ‘mate’. His heart was pounding in his chest while he took helpings from each dish and filled his plate, but when he looked in Dula’s direction, he saw that Charlie’s lover was smiling at him, and ever so discreetly, gave a nod of approval that was barely perceptible to anyone.
else. Draco looked back at his plate, and let himself enjoy supper with the rest of them. He felt somewhat less out of place than he’d imagined, and it wasn’t long before he was talking with the others.

Ron was on about getting back to practice after the game tomorrow, and Charlie was telling his mother about the rare dragon that had been confirmed as pregnant, and required additional care. Dula told gently mocking stories of Charlie’s exploits while handling dragons, and Charlie took them in stride, while his parents and brother laughed.

Dinner passed easier than Draco had imagined, and he wondered why he’d even worried about it at all. Charlie Weasley was likable enough, but the small gestures between him and Dula didn’t escape Draco’s notice at all. The brief, but warm, looks from across the room, or the way their fingertips brushed against each other’s, all registered with Draco instantly. It was painfully easy to see that these two people loved each other, doted on each other, and that each lived to see to the other’s happiness. If their relationship had a dark side, it was hidden well indeed. Draco knew it was wrong, but a sick jealousy filled him when he saw these things. Things he hadn’t had, and likely would never have. It hurt to see such things, knowing that, even if he’d dared to hope for something like that, the very thought of it was ruined for him now. It was easier to turn away, and force himself to not witness these things, but the knowledge that they were possible could not be erased, and it left a feeling of emptiness in him when the initial jealousy faded.

They’d moved to the living room after dinner, and Charlie was seated comfortably on the couch with an arm thrown around Dula’s shoulders, and Dula had a hand on Charlie’s leg. Draco decided to help Molly in the kitchen, rather than face any more disconcerting reminders about his need to think over a few long held beliefs and ugly fears, and Molly welcomed his company.

Draco picked up the silverware, plates and other dishes, fetching them to the counter beside the sink for Molly to start washing. Then, Draco took his place beside her, drying things as Molly finished them.

“I’m so glad you came down after all, dear. It just didn’t seem right, all of us together and you upstairs. I hope you enjoyed yourself…”

Molly gasped as Draco, exhausted from lack of sleep, let a knife he was drying slip and open his palm up quite badly. Blood dripped down the hand and onto his wrist and cuff, while Draco stared at the gash in complete surprise, too stunned to feel pain just yet.

Molly rushed to her wand on the table, urging Draco to hold still. Just as she turned with her wand in hand, her eyes became vague, and her face flushed quite suddenly, then she went terribly pale.

“Oh…oh dear. Dr-draco. Help me…help…I…”

Molly tumbled to the floor in front of him, collapsed in an ungainly sprawl, and Draco felt like his heart had just stopped cold. A second later, he screamed for help, and fumbled for the wand she’d dropped. He knew a few diagnostic spells, having heard them so often over the last week, and he prayed that she wasn’t seriously ill.

Ron reached the room first, only to find Draco standing over his fallen mother, holding her wand in one hand, and blood dripping from his other, spattering the floor with droplets of red. Draco tried to get words out, but the look on Ron’s face paralyzed him with terror, and the last thing he remembered was a roaring, red-haired giant crashing into him at full speed. This time, the world did not immediately go dark, but after a flurry of blows that made the ribs in his chest heave and crack, blinding pain in his chest stole his ability to even speak, and breathing was rapidly becoming difficult. He remembered retching and gasping for air, and he saw the bloody foam he coughed up
spat upon the kitchen floor. His last conscious thought as his eyes closed, was a swift and silent prayer for Molly, and a frantic hope that, if he was dying, Harry would know that he’d only meant to help.

TBC!!!
Ron was howling curses between blows, screaming incoherently as the others rushed in. Charlie grabbed Ron by the scruff of the neck, and despite being a hair shorter and somewhat lighter, he hauled Ron off of Draco’s limp body with scarcely any effort, and pinned him to the floor, still struggling and spitting curses through his tears. Harry was at Draco’s side, and Arthur and Dula were checking Molly over. A hasty Enervate, and Molly’s color returned and her eyelids began to flutter. She seemed confused, and was too clearly too disoriented to speak just yet. All the while, Ron was shrieking in the background, half insane with the notion that his mother had just been killed or maimed. Harry turned from Draco to Dula and called out in desperation.

“Dula! Help me, please! I don’t know the spells for this! He’s got multiple broken ribs, and his lungs are punctured…he’s dying! Please! You have to help him…now!”

Dula and Charlie had been trained to deal with severe medical ailments, as dragon handlers often placed themselves in the path of danger, and routinely needed serious healing while taming their saurian charges. Dula rattled off spell after spell, and crackling bone and cartilage could be heard inside Draco’s chest. Draco began to cough, and vomited bloody froth, clearing his lungs of matter. A deep breath later, Draco passed back out, breathing softly, and Dula finished with just a few spells to finish the job and ensure a very swift recovery.

“Harry. Take him upstairs and put him to bed. He’ll need the rest. I’ll be up soon to check on him.”

Arthur spoke worriedly as Molly began to come around. “That’s a girl, Molly. How are you, love. You alright, Molls? Say a little something for us, love. Let me know you’re well. Dula? What happened?”

“I am uncertain, sir. All that I can tell for sure is that she fainted, and the spells I used all indicate that she is quite healthy. It is to my regret that I am not a trained Healer, however much I must know for my trade. She should see a professional medi-witch for a more thorough diagnosis. They may know what I do not. I can only assure you that nothing of great or immediate danger has occurred. Charlie, my love, can you quiet your brother? It is difficult to concentrate.”

Ron was still hysterical, and Harry was having trouble getting past the spectacle on the kitchen floor with Draco in his arms. Charlie solved the matter neatly by drawing his wand and Stunning Ron right on the spot, then dragging him out of Harry’s way.

“I’ll take care of Ronald, you just look after Mum. Da, can you Floo Madam Pomfrey this late? She’d know what’s going on if anyone would.”

Charlie lifted Ron over his shoulder and headed for the front door, trailing along behind Harry, who was headed up the stairs with Draco, who, at under a hundred and twenty pounds, was scarcely even
a burden. Charlie got Ron out the door, closed it behind them, and unceremoniously dropped his younger brother to the ground. Then he removed the spell.

Ron snapped back to life, immediately crawling towards the door. His voice was down to a thick croak.

“Mum…mum…”

Charlie pinned his brother again, this time quickly holding him close, binding Ron’s arms to his chest.

“Easy there, brother mine. Mum’s fine. No one’s even hurt but Draco, and you did that, ya fuckin’ prat. Take a deep breath. Get it all out, mate.”

Ron broke down entirely, going limp in his brother’s arms with relief, and weeping quietly.

“I…I fuckin’ thought…I thought he’d…killed her. Mum’s okay? You’re telling me true?”

“Draco had a cut on his hand. Mum just fainted. You nearly murdered him, you complete fuckwit! What the hell is wrong with you?!”

Now that Ron was calm and relatively coherent, Charlie let go of him and stood up.

“The press has you figured right. You’re a complete wanker. I don’t care what you’ve been wrestling with, Ron, but you’d better get the fuck over it…and soon. When Mum finds out that you mauled a guest under sanctuary just because you panicked, you’d better not be within wand range of her!”

“He…he had her…wand. What was I supposed to think?”

“THAT’S JUST IT! YOU WERE SUPPOSED TO THINK! For more than a half second! I’m sick of it! We’re all sick of it! You’re drinking yourself into your damned grave, and all you do is run at things, and people, with your fists up and swinging! This is long overdue, little brother. The war is fucking over! There are people here who love you, and they fucking need you…now!”

“But…but…”

“HERMIONE IS DEAD, RON!”

“DON’T! Don’t you fuckin’ say that!”

“Hermione is dead! It wasn’t your bloody fault, and even the people who did it are dead and buried, too!”

“NOOOOO!”

Ron lunged at Charlie, and was tripped and thrown to the ground easily, then pinned so adeptly that he couldn’t so much as twitch.

“You can’t punch your way out of this, Ronny! Accept it! No more running away! Hermione isn’t coming back, and you’re killin’ yourself because you won’t let go. If you’d acted like this while she was alive, she’d have dumped you just on principle! If you love her like you say, then fucking live like she’d have wanted you to!”

Ron flexed and tried to twist free, spitting curses and gnashing his teeth with helpless rage. After several long minutes, the storm broke, and Ron collapsed into a sobbing wreck, weeping into his
brother’s shoulder. Charlie patted his younger brother’s back, and let his grip slacken, knowing that the worst was over. The rest would be up to Ron, and all he could do was throw as much support Ron’s way as possible.

He wasn’t sure how long he sat in the snow, holding Ron, and listening to his youngest living sibling weep, but eventually, Ron began to stir, and simply laid back in the snow, staring at the stars. Ron sniffled and wiped his nose with his sleeve.

“She was going to be my wife, Charlie. We were gonna have kids…lots of ’em. Little Weasleys that Mum an’ Da could dote on. I’m a fuckin’ war hero…an’ I play pro Quidditch like it’s nothing. She was the other half of my dreams. I can’t get it back. It’s all gone. She’s gone forever. That’s a long fuckin’ time, mate. Whatta I do?”

Charlie laid back in the snow and took a deep breath.

“Fuck if I know, Ron. Do it day by day. Go to work, see your friends and the people who love you. Stop trying to kill damn near everyone who gets in your way. Oh…and lay off the fucking whiskey…it’ll kill your game and then where will you be? There must be a million girls looking to meet you. Date them, one at a time, and some day you just might find one you like. Don’t look for another Hermione…you won’t find one, and you’ll never be happy. Look for one who’s good just as she is, for who she is, and love her like she’s the only woman in your world. Maybe I’m wrong…an’ all that’s just what I think…but you can try that for starters. If you need to talk, I’ll be there for you. So will Harry, or any of us for that matter. Just try, mate. That’s all we want to see.”

Ron wiped his nose again.

“Yeah. I…I can do that. If Mum doesn’t have my head first.”

Charlie chuckled.

“Can’t help you with that, mate. You’re well and rightly fucked on that one, and no mistake. I say we head back in, check in on Mum, and then we see about you telling Draco you’re sorry. Did you even see the poor wee thing? Ya broke half his ribs, and he was spitting up blood left an’ right. You owe him more than some mumbled apology, Ron. You’ve got a real debt to pay there. You ready to go in?”

“Aye.”

Charlie sat up and gave Ron his hand, and hauled his brother upright. They dusted the snow off their clothes, and headed back in to face the music.

Harry placed Draco in his bed and pulled the sheets and blankets up to his chest, then sat nervously, listening to Draco’s slightly rattling breaths. He could hear the Floo activating downstairs, as Arthur summoned Madam Pomfrey. Draco’s eyes fluttered open, and he pulled in a breath and coughed violently, still spitting small flecks of blood out and onto his hand.

“Har-Harry. Molly…I didn’t…I swear I was…”

“It’s okay…you don’t have to say anything, just lay back and rest. I know you wouldn’t hurt her. Ron saw her down…and blood on your hand…and he just went barmy on the spot. It’s not your fault…not any of it. It’s a good thing Dula was here, or we’d have been in a real fix. With Molly
down, no one knew how to reset your ribs and heal your lungs. If he hadn’t been so quick with the spells you needed, we wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

“Molly, Harry. Is she okay? She has to be okay…please!”

“Dula said she was alright. She just fainted, but he didn’t know why. Madam Pomfrey is coming, and she’ll sort this out so fast it’ll make your head spin. Trust me…she’ll be fine.”

Draco closed his eyes and exhaled roughly.

“Harry…I…I’m okay. Go check on Molly. When Pomfrey’s done, let me know how she is then, okay? I’ll be waiting. I just want to know she’ll be alright.”

Harry looked a bit confused, unsure why Draco was so needy when he should worry for himself first, but he relented and headed back downstairs. It was the first time since arriving that Draco had used Slytherin guile for anything less than completely noble. As he rose from the bed, wincing at the slowly fading pain in his chest, he knew what he had to do, and without a wand, there was only one way he knew to do it.

Draco limped down the hall and into Harry’s room. There on the work desk was an enormous black knife in an equally black sheath. He fumbled with strap that held it in place, but finally pulled it free and knelt down. His hands were shaking far too much to trust himself holding the thing, and it was weirdly heavy for a knife, but then he’d never really held one before. He propped the hilt between his knees, the edge pointing away from his body.

’I don’t belong here. No one will ever really believe in me…not enough to matter. They’ll always see the fucking Mark, like Ron. I’m a fucking charity case, wandless, and a fucking ponce as well. I should have died back then. I shouldn’t be alive…Snape should have killed me, or Dumbledore should have let me fail…let the Dark Lord kill me. I don’t belong here. I’m just so fucking tired of this. Maybe there’s an afterlife, or maybe not. I don’t care. I just…I just want to rest. Never have to think these things…again. I have to go, or this will never stop. It’s the only way.’

Draco held his bared wrist near the bottom of the blade, and biting his tongue and clenching his eyes shut to hold back tears, he jerked his arm upward, letting Harry’s razor-sharp blade cut deep. The pain was bracing, and he gasped despite trying to stay silent. His blood flowed quickly, and the knife slipped down from between his legs and clattered to the floor, while Draco stared in shock at what he’d done. He could see through skin and muscle, almost sure that he saw the white of bone. He tumbled forward as his vision blurred, and he was still conscious of the lancing pain in his arm as his sense of reality slipped away in a cloudy haze.

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Madam Pomfrey had arrived in due hurry, more than willing to come for an emergency. Hogwarts was still working toward its re-opening, and she’d had little to do but care for the staff. She found Molly laying upon a couch in the living room, Arthur at her side, listening to her slightly hysterical pronouncements about her good health.

“Molly, dear. Please just relax and breath slowly. Don’t get yourself all worked up. A few spells and we should know a little more. If you’ll excuse me, please.”

Arthur moved out of the way, letting Poppy work unhindered, but he paced nearby, fretting terribly, and refusing to speak, half afraid he’d babble like an idiot in front of the entire family.
Harry came back down the stairs as Poppy began her diagnostic spells, and watched quietly and intently while she worked. Poppy frowned at first, then rattled off a second series of divinatory spells, nodding sagely to herself when she was done.

“Good news, Molly, dear. There’s nothing wrong with you. You’re a picture of good health for a woman of your age. This is nothing that can’t be taken care of with a little work.”

Arthur frowned, obviously confused by the seemingly contradictory statement.

“How can you say that? Our Molls fainted dead away...what do you mean by ‘she’s in good health’, when she’s falling down like that?”

Molly spoke up. “Shhh, Arthur, dear. I’m alright. It was just a dizzy spell. I’m just fine. Go on, Poppy. There’s nothing I wouldn’t want Arthur, Harry or Dula to hear.”

“I didn’t say that you haven’t anything to deal with, merely that you’re in excellent health. You’ve started menopause, Molly. Hardly a serious thing, unless left unattended. There can be complications when this isn’t treated, and they can be serious, but not often, and we’ve twiggled to this quite early for you. We have potions for this that don’t need to be taken terribly often, and some simple spells that will keep the symptoms quite mild. Eventually, your body’s hormones will adjust to their new levels, and you’ll be just right as rain. It’s exceedingly unlikely that further pregnancies are in your future, but that’s perfectly acceptable to you, I’m sure, with so many wonderful children in your family and all.

I’ll have a potion, and the recipe for it, owled to you by morning, and we’ll discuss some spells before I go. I expect to see you again next week, and we’ll see how you’re doing then, but I can assure you all that this is a perfectly natural state, and that with the exception of the usual symptoms of menopause, Molly is the very picture of good health. I might suggest taking a day off and having yourself a good sit down for awhile, though. You might feel better after I get that potion to you, but until then, don’t push yourself so hard, Molly.”

The room was full of an atmosphere of unconditional relief, and Molly looked a bit addled and surprised. She’d idly worried that something worse was wrong, and hadn’t dared mention a thing for fear of worrying others while there was so much to be done. She felt positively giddy with relief to hear that she was fine after all. Arthur flopped into his chair, looking like he’d been pulled through a wringer, and smiled at Molly with unbridled near worship. There couldn’t have been anything more terrifying for him than the notion of losing his wife, and he couldn’t remember feeling happier than he did the moment he’d heard she was alright. He mopped his brow with a handkerchief, obscuring from others the hidden task of wiping small tears from the corner of his eyes. Dula patted him on the back.

“It makes such sense now. I am glad it was nothing more than this, Arthur. Your wife is a most uncommon woman, and I cannot tell you enough how it pleases me to see that she is well.”

Arthur reached up and patted Dula’s hand.

“Thank you, lad. That sentiment speaks well of you. I’m just glad you were here. It might have been a tragedy tonight if you and Charlie hadn’t come, bless you both.”

Harry headed back up the stairs after quickly letting Molly know how relieved he was, and he knew Draco would be happy to hear it was nothing serious after all. The door to Draco’s room was open, and the bed was empty. Harry turned back down the hall and peered into the bathroom.

“Draco?”
There was no answer, and the bathroom was as empty as the bedroom. Draco was a bit ‘out of it’, and he might have wandered off…but where? Harry walked back down the hall, prepared to check room by room. He was prepared to find Draco crying. It had happened before. He knew Draco hadn’t had any sleep that past night, either, and he might very well have been overwrought and could have fallen into unconsciousness quite easily. He wasn’t prepared at all for what he found when he opened the door to his own room.

Draco had slumped sideways, eyes glassy and open, staring at the far wall. Harry’s knife was at his knees, crimson stained and fallen after use, and Draco’s arm was laid open to the bone and bleeding sluggishly. Draco’s face was half soaked in the pool of his own blood that had spread more than two feet around his wounded arm, and he looked almost as ghastly pale as he had when he’d first arrived at the Burrow, cooling tears still drying on his cheeks.

Harry had seen a lot of death, and had even been covered in gore after particularly difficult raids. Nothing could have prepared him for seeing a person he cared for hanging on the edge of death, having inflicted their wound upon themself. Harry froze for an instant, too horrified to even find his voice and call for help. Time and the world slowed down to a mere crawl, and Harry stood and stared at what Draco had done to himself. He’d seemed so strong, after so many things had happened to him, that it hadn’t seemed possible for Draco to actually break. It was a horrifying irony that, having come to this place to be healed, he’d finally been hurt beyond his ability to hunger for life.

Reality snapped back into place, and Harry sucked in a deep breath and screamed for Dula. He flung every small spell he knew for the closing of wounds into Draco’s arm, and watched the flesh slowly heal, but there had been an enormous amount of blood lost, and he hadn’t a spell for that. Dula took over a heartbeat later, casting spell after spell over Harry’s shoulder, quiet and determined, while Harry knelt in front of Draco’s body, stroking Draco’s expressionless face. The skin was clammy and yet almost feverish, and Harry lost track of what was taking place around him, only cognizant of following Draco as he was Levitated from the floor and floated back to his bed, wrist newly healed and faintly red.

He sat and watched while potions were administered by funnel, since Draco was unconscious and would remain so for awhile, and he knew there were voices around him, and people were coming and going and saying things to him while he nodded, but he wasn’t sure what was being said. There was a loud argument downstairs, albeit a brief one, and then the sound of the Floo being used at least twice. None of it mattered to him. His entire world had shrunk, and consisted of only a small room with a bed and two chairs, and a small, terribly pale, blond boy whose eyes were closed, and whose breath came in small and inconsistent rhythms.

‘What can I do? How do I make him want to be alive? Can you tell someone you’ve only really known for more than a week that you love them? Would he even take something like that the right way? I’m sorry I yelled when he said those things about Dula and Charlie. He was just a little freaked out…I overreacted…again. I should have sat up with him last night, but I forgot about him while I got drunk with Ron. I shouldn’t have left him alone. How is he supposed to know that anybody cares about him when we keeping putting him aside ‘til later? When he said that he’d kind of hoped I’d kill him, it was scary enough, but I didn’t think we could make him try to kill himself. What the hell do I do?’

Death was permanent, and Harry knew that better than most. He couldn’t escape the thought that, despite meaning well, he’d partly been responsible for letting Draco think it was alright to do this to himself. He’d only just gotten used to liking his former rival, and getting used to seeing him each day had been strange, but pleasant. Now, a world where Draco would never be there, never make a sly comment, never shyly speak up and ask a question, and never smile, seemed like a hollow, empty place that he wouldn’t want to see. It was a far cry from the blind urge to kill he’d felt when he first
saw Draco, almost a fortnight ago.

Harry sat in the old chair beside the bed, and let tears stream down his cheeks unchecked. Draco would have to come first from now on. There could be no distractions, and no cruel words when he was out of sorts. No telling himself he’d see to Draco’s needs later, and no speaking or acting without thinking of how it would affect Draco first.

He had so much blood on his hands, and none of it by accident or from a person innocent of any crimes. Draco had been so right. It was still wrong to end a life. Killing Voldemort had been an evil made necessary by the Dark Lord’s unrelenting appetite for terror and destruction. There had been no justification for the things he’d done since. Some of the people he’d killed hadn’t done that much more than Draco had, and had only continued to flee in fear for their lives. Others were irredeemably evil, like LeStrange and his crew, but they deserved to be caught and contained, never allowed to wreak further harm. Butchering them like cattle made Harry almost worse than Voldemort, because Voldemort had never claimed to be other than what he was…a Dark Lord, steeped in evil and bloodlust. What then was Harry’s excuse?

Harry wept until he fell asleep. Tomorrow…things would be different.

TBC!!!
The Long Night Through

DISCLAIMER: Warning! I make no claim to any property of J.K. Rowling's, and am in no way profiting by this. I do offer her my sincerest thanks for allowing us this garden of the mind in which we play. Further Warning! This story...and likely any I ever write...are dominated by gay themes and characters. That's how it is, if this in any way makes you uncomfortable...do not read further.

Redeem Me…by Samayel

Chapter 26: The Long Night Through

Ron Weasley stepped from the Floo, walked across his sparsely furnished flat, and flopped onto his couch, holding his head. He hadn’t been drinking, but he dearly wished he had. At least whiskey would have made it possible to forget what he’d just done. He sat back up, and massaged his temples for what felt like hours.

As soon as they’d come back in, he and Charlie had checked on their mother, and learned that she’d only been suffering the early symptoms of menopause. That had been sweet relief, but what came after had been sheer hell. Molly Weasley had inquired after Draco, who had only had a cut on his hand the last time she’d been conscious. When she learned that Ron had assaulted Draco again, this time nearly killing Draco in a blind rage, she had nearly snapped, and had to be restrained by Arthur and Charlie.

That had been bad enough…but then Harry found Draco upstairs, wrist slashed open to the bone, in a pool of his own blood. The others hurried upstairs to help, leaving Ron alone with his mother. The words still rang in his ears, despite his mother’s low and quiet tone of voice. The calm was more frightening than anything else…it made it clear that Molly Weasley was far past mere anger.

‘Ronald Bilius Weasley, I hope you’re proud. You have just shamed our family for generations. That boy did nothing to me, or you, and you almost killed him. Our guest, to whom we granted sanctuary. Every person who as ever borne the name Weasley must be rolling in their grave with shame and disgust. Your hot head may have killed him this time. Draco has only just started to think that there are people he can trust to care for him, and you’ve ruined this house for him. He must have believed that there was no safety or comfort to be found here, or he would have done no such thing.’

“But…I’m sorry, mum! I’ll apologize to him…and I’ll make it up somehow. Please! Charlie and I talked about some things…I’ll change…I’ll be better…you’ll see, mum!”

“Not another word, Ronald. I’ve prayed ever since Percy’s foolishness that I would never have to live through something like that again, and you left me with scarcely any other choice.”

“Mum! NO! Please?!”

“You are not welcome in this house, Ronald. Take the Floo to your home, and stay out of my sight. Write letters if you will, and mind if you do, to write one to Draco, as well the rest of us who were here tonight, apologizing as best you know how, and we’ll see if you’ll earn the right to be a member of this family…by acting like one. Get out.”

He’d stood stock still, pale with shock and trembling like he wasn’t a grown man.

“Mum…I was just…”

“Get out, Ronald. Before I say something that cannot be taken back.”
“Bu-”

“OUT OF THIS HOUSE! NOW!!!!”

Slumped in defeat, he’d returned here, to the flat he’d let last year. It wasn’t a home, really. More a place to occasionally pass out and store his gear. Bottles were everywhere, and he hadn’t cast the usual cleaning spells in weeks. Not all of the bottles were empty. There were a few full ones in the kitchen, calling out with a siren’s song that promised sweet oblivion, crashed upon the rocks of sweet and fiery alcohol.

Ron walked to the kitchen hesitantly, shaky in his stride for the first time in memory. There was a bottle of Old Ogden’s Finest, Special Reserve Firewhiskey, sitting by the sink. It was bottled in 1911. It sold for several hundred Galleons a bottle. It was one of the smoothest whiskeys known to man.

Ron pulled the cork. The aroma was magnificent. You could actually smell the faintest hint of the peat that had fired the mash as it cooked. This would soothe any ache…this would chase away any pain.

Ron turned the bottle upside down, and winced while it washed down the drain. The rest of the lesser Firewhiskeys went next, then the top shelf gin and vermouth. The rum, tequila and vodka followed, quickly chased by the cider, beer and a couple of bottles of half decent wine.

Finally, there wasn’t a drop of booze in the whole damned place, but he needed to get rid of the bottles…the reminders weren’t doing him any more good than the actual booze had. He settled on Transfiguring them, since the trash wasn’t due to be picked up for some time. The Transfigurations were simple at first, but got boring quickly, and he had lots of time to kill, now that sobriety was written into his future. Ron upped the ante a little and tried a few more complex pieces. He’d made small mammals into wine glasses before, and it was easier to shift a shape than it was to change a material. Glass to glass Transfigurations left him plenty of room for creativity, and he made small animals and large, complex ones and simple ones. Nearly past midnight, he found himself with only one bottle left, the Old Ogden’s. It took a fair while to get it right, but the mottled green glass that had held one of the world’s finest known whiskeys had become a small, green dragon, complete down to the very scales.

Ron sat up, suddenly more tired than he’d realized. The room was littered with tiny glass sculptures, trophies from his long night of sobriety. He had one last thing to do, before his courage wore thin. Ron went back to the Floo, and used just enough powder for a Firecall.

His head popped out of greenish flames in the home of his team’s coach and daily supervisor.

“Coach! Coach? It’s Ron. Ron Weasley. I need to talk to you. Are you up?”

A man of middle years with a slight paunch and heavy jowls emerged from the hall wearing a bathrobe. He looked in the fire and scowled.

“Merlin, Weasley! It’s past one in the blessed morning! What is it? And it better be important!”

“Coach. I’ll be ready to sit the game tomorrow, but I want an appointment after the game…with the specialist you told me about. You know…after I put those two fellas in the hospital during that match three months ago? I want an appointment as soon as I can get one. Okay?”

“Alright, alright, alright. Done deal. Now GO TO BED! The rest of us have a game tomorrow. Consider the appointment made. Good night!”
“Thanks, coach!”

Ron headed for bed. He didn’t sleep any more or less soundly than before, but he woke lighter hearted than he could recall feeling in months.

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Harry was largely asleep, despite being upright and cramped in the chair beside Draco’s bed. When Draco came to consciousness, somewhere near four-thirty in the morning, Harry came awake also.

Draco woke with a gasp, panicked by nightmares that had finally begun once his mind was conscious enough to handle them. His head was pounding, and he was soaked in cold sweat. He remembered last night instantly, and turned to find Harry staring at him in the relative dark of the room.

“Harry. What…what are you doing here? It’s late.”

“You think I’d leave? After last night. After…I mean…Merlin, Draco. You fucking…”

Draco flopped back onto the bed and clenched his eyes shut. He couldn’t look at Harry and still say these things.

“I…I know. Why did you stop me? I want to leave, Harry. I’m tired. I’m tired of nightmares, of people hating me for what I did to them years ago, all of it. I don’t have a future even if I get well. I’ll leave here and fall right back on my face. No one wants me, and I’m not fit to want, so it’s just better if I leave this shit behind.”

It was impossible to deny that Draco had it bad, and Harry stumbled over what to say. He sat up and folded his hands, trying to sound calm and rational. Mostly he wanted to grab Draco and hold him, and fighting that urge was exhausting. He’d never imagined being so happy to hear Draco’s voice. If someone had told him two weeks ago that he’d feel this way about Draco, he’d have laughed ‘til his sides split.

“Look, Draco. Ron’s an idiot…he was completely out of line and everybody knows it. Molly just has menopause. She’s fine. Nobody thought for a minute that you did anything to her, and we want you here.”

Draco choked back a sob. Harry didn’t get it at all. There were things he hadn’t dared to say, and wouldn’t have voiced if he’d had even a faint grip on his emotions.

“It hasn’t got to do with Ron! He’s just a part of it all…and not even a big part! Don’t you fucking understand?? I’M SCARED TO EVEN CLOSE MY FUCKING EYES! It’s too…too fucking much, Harry! I won’t ever be well. I can’t sleep without waking up screaming. I can’t stop thinking of…of things that happened. All the time. It never stops. You can make scars go away…but you can’t fix my head! There…there are moments…when I…I want to hold someone so badly my teeth ache, but their touch makes my skin crawl…and I wind up wanting to scream! I can’t take this anymore…being alone. When I was in London, there were drugs that made me forget, and when I was still sick, I was so feverish and numb I couldn’t think of anything…I don’t even have that anymore! Even if I get well, and the scars are gone, and I find somewhere to go…what will I do? NO ONE LOVES ME! And even if they did, I couldn’t let them touch me. Ron just made me realize it, and there’s nothing…nothing I can do to fix this! I’m sorry, Harry….I’m sorry…but I want to go. Please just let me go…please?”
Draco had broken down completely, letting his rambling explanation pass between small sobs and hysterical gasps. Harry’s hands were clenched together. He was dangerously close to just grabbing Draco, fears be damned, and pulling him close until he just understood that he was wanted and cared for. Harry drew a gasping breath, dropped to the edge of the bed, adopted a stance almost appropriate for prayer, and spoke as slowly and calmly as he could.

“I want you to listen to me, and I want you to let me finish before you say anything. I hear you…I heard what you said, and I know it looks like that right now, but you’re just wrong. You’re all wrong about this, and I’ll tell you why. We all care about you. Molly, Arthur, me…even Dula and Charlie. Ron was an idiot, and yeah, that’s a small part of things, but there’s more. Draco…I swear that, if I thought for one second that it wouldn’t scare you, I’d hold you until you felt ready to stand alone. Talk to Molly, no one here will throw you to the curb until you’ve worked out a way to get by. You can stay here as long as it takes to get well…in every sense…not just your body. I’m sorry I left you alone last night, I shouldn’t have, and I won’t from here on. I’ll be right here, for anything, if you need me. Draco…you were right. You were right…the night I went after Kaminski. I know it now. If you’ll just stay with us, I swear I’ll stop hunting. Just please don’t go. Don’t hurt yourself because we didn’t try hard enough to help you. We’ll find a way for you to sleep…we just need some time. Just a little time…please, Draco.”

Silence hung between them. Harry stared up at Draco with eyes that shone and pleaded, and Draco looked back, tentative and sniffling, unsure of what to say after such a display. Harry Potter…was begging him, on his knees, to stay…and to live. It was heady and intoxicating. Harry’s words felt better than any soothing balm or Calming Draught ever had. He’d begged sanctuary, and received it against all odds, but this was different. Being asked to stay here, being pulled from death’s door, and being told in no uncertain terms that he was wanted and cared for was more than he could wrap his mind around at the moment.

“You…you mean that?”

Harry exploded from the tension.

“Fuck, yes! Do you have any idea how much it hurt to find you like that…in my room? I don’t want you to die! I want you to be okay! I’ll do whatever it takes. I’ll research until my brain boils over, I’ll pull strings with whoever I have to…but I’ll find a way for you to sleep peacefully again…and if I can…I’ll find a way for you to be comfortable touching people too! Anything, Draco. I said it, and I knew what it meant, and I meant it when I said it! You’re not who I thought you were in school. I don’t know that person anymore. I know you…and I…I…I like you. I want you to be able to call you my friend…if you’ll let me.”

Harry was stumbling over the words at the end, and Draco’s eyes were the size of saucers. Hearing things like this, coming from Harry’s mouth, had been more than he’d ever hoped for. He wiped his nose and eyes with an oversized sleeve and stifled himself in mid-sob.

“I…I believe you. I just…I just can’t believe I believe you, you know?”

Harry snorted, flooded with relief, and laid his head down on the edge of the bed as he let out a sigh.

“I know. There’s a lot of that going around. Ha! Thank you. Thank you. I hope you’ll forgive me, for the things I said and did to you. I won’t let you be hurt anymore, and I’ll do whatever it takes to make sure you have a normal life again.”

Harry stiffened suddenly. A hand was in his hair! Draco…Draco was touching him! He relaxed when it seemed like Draco was going to pull away, terrified of offending him. The hand returned to idly working its way through his messy curls. Now that his hair was longer, it was easier to control,
but it still curled at the top, and Draco was running a hand through it, sniffing every so often. The sensation was…well…pleasant, but hard to define. He knew it was all that Draco could do just to touch other people. Holding hands had shown that, when he needed to, Draco could bring himself to touch, but this was…something more, and Harry could feel the difference.

“Harry…if I asked for something…and you didn’t like it, would you promise me you wouldn’t…get upset?”

Draco’s hand was very still, and Harry didn’t even pause before answering.

“I promise. You have my word.”

“If…if I stayed under the sheets, and you just…just laid on the bed. Could I…would you let me hold you. I don’t think…I don’t think I could take someone touching me…but I could touch someone else. It’s been a long time. It would…help. I think I could sleep better…it if I could hold someone. The only person I want to hold is you. Just tonight. Please?”

Harry’s pulse was pounding in his eardrums. Was Draco…gay? He didn’t dare take the request as more than it was, and if being a passive human teddy bear was a chance to be close to Draco, and help him, even if only a little, then it was enough. Harry didn’t answer with words. He stood up, pushed off his shoes, and climbed onto the bed, which was never intended for two. He stayed as close to his side as possible, and laid perfectly still, on his back, with his arms at rest by his sides. Draco shifted about, keeping the sheets between them like some last barrier to maintain a sense of dignity, but a sheet and blanket covered arm slid across Harry’s chest, and the warmth of closeness permeated him despite the layers of cloth between them.

Draco was curled on his side, facing Harry, breathing as slowly as he could bring himself to while his heart pounded erratically. He’d never been this close to anyone. Not Pansy, certainly not anyone since he’d left school, at least not in any innocent or healthy sense. That Harry would do this for him spoke volumes, and Draco relaxed into the hazy warmth that close proximity brought, suddenly aware of the different scents that Harry brought to the bed. Harry seemed stiff, reserved, and vaguely nervous, but right now Draco just didn’t care. He’d lived a lifetime without ever having been so close to another human being without pain and humiliation being involved, and this was easily the best thing he’d felt in years. This, this was almost what sane, normal people felt like, and it was a breath of fresh air in the stale and frightening confines of his mind.

Draco shifted again, a little closer, and rested his head on Harry’s arm, breathing softly and evenly. The faint aroma of Harry’s soap came to him, as well as faint hints of sweat and something like new mown hay. He let those scents cloud his mind, while sleep crept upon him again, at last, and stole all worry from his mind.

TBC!!!
In The Morning Brighter

DISCLAIMER: Warning! I make no claim to any property of J.K. Rowling's, and am in no way profiting by this. I do offer her my sincerest thanks for allowing us this garden of the mind in which we play. Further Warning! This story...and likely any I ever write...are dominated by gay themes and characters. That's how it is, if this in any way makes you uncomfortable...do not read further.

Redeem Me…by Samayel

Chapter 27: In The Morning Brighter

The magical alarm they had set the night before woke Charlie and Dula from their slumber. In an unfamiliar bed, Charlie had wound up with his face at rest on Dula’s long, black braid of hair, and Dula started awake at the sound of the alarm, only to grit his teeth as he realized that his head was still effectively pinned to the bed.


Charlie flicked his eyes open and yawned when Dula poked him gently in the ribs. He smiled immediately after, and lifted his head so that Dula could pull away the hair he had carefully braided before turning in the night before. Dula sat up, relieved, and waved a hand at the buzzing wand they had spelled to wake them last night. It was just before six in the morning, since they needed to return home by Floo, and the work of dragon handling was a task for those who rose early in the day. Dula leaned back down and kissed his lover softly, parting quickly, since they did not have time for more, and either of them teasing the other would result in lateness.

“G’ morning’, love. Mmm. Sorry ‘bout the hair.”

Charlie rolled out of bed with a groan, and began pulling on clothing, a mournful look on his face. Dula winced to see it, knowing that Charlie had ached inside for his youngest brother’s pain, and had been greatly saddened by Ron’s ejection from the Weasley household. The attempted suicide by Draco, and the sudden ailment of his mother, had also worn on Charlie’s nerves. He should have been able to take a day off, but as the Conservator of one Europe’s largest dragon preserves, no such luxury was available to him. Dula, on the other hand, had a certain amount of flexibility, and that was what had crossed his mind the night before.

Dula rolled across the bed to where Charlie sat, tugging on his socks and then his boots. He sat behind Charlie, and rubbed his lover’s shoulders, eliciting a moan of pleasure from the muscular redhead in front of him.

“It worries you…to leave here while things are this…complicated. This is true, is it not?”

“Yeah. There’s nothing to be done for it, though. Got work to do. I can write Ron a few letters, and maybe check in by Floo now and then. It’ll have to be enough.”

“I have a thought, love. You must return immediately, but I could remain…if only for a day. Molly is most distraught, and it grieves you to see her sad, as it grieves me. Harry’s young friend needs more help than either of us could have guessed. He is very broken inside. Very afraid. I thought, for a moment, that I had reached him, and that he might open himself up a little to Harry and to Molly, but the events of last night say otherwise. I wish to say more to him, as well as to Harry, and I cannot leave in good conscience, knowing that I could have done more. I would be home later tonight, since
I too cannot leave my work for long, but I could leave it aside perhaps a little longer than you. What do you think of this, Charlie-love?"

Charlie sighed with relief. “It’s bloody brilliant. I’d stay myself, but I’m the boss, I can’t leave on short notice. Do it. Merlin’s Name, do I love you.”

Charlie turned and slipped his hand across Dula’s cheek, pausing before kissing Dula one last time. Then he stood and pulled on his shirt and coat, and headed for the Floo.

“See you when the long day is done, love. Take care of them, will you? Everyone here is family to me, even our ‘little dragon’…if Harry cares for him. I’ll see you when you get home.”

“Very well, love. I shall see you tonight. Take care.”

Charlie left, and Dula leaned back against the pillow, giving careful thought to what he would say to Charlie’s family and friends during the day. There was much to be smoothed over, and much that needed healing, and desperately little time for him to spare. Whatever he did, it would have to be surgically precise, sufficient to bring them hope, and move them to think deeper, if he was to be of any use at all. This would not be an easy day, even if he wasn’t at his proper work for once, but what cause was greater than the healing of hearts that ached?

Dula slipped out of bed, and pulled on his slacks, settling for just these while he headed for a shower. Perhaps he could prepare morning tea for the others, and let the subtle magic of morning open the doors of possibility.

It had been very hard last night, indeed. So much healing magic was exhausting, and seeing Molly beside herself with self hatred, for barring Ron from the house, had been draining. Madam Pomfrey had finally administered a Calming Draught, then sent her off to bed with Arthur, shortly after she finished helping restore Draco to some semblance of good health. At least the spells for Molly had been imparted, and the potion and recipe for her condition would arrive today.

Dula passed by Draco’s room on the way to the shower, and paused in complete surprise at the spectacle before him. Draco was thoroughly covered in blankets, while Harry was fully clothed and laying above the sheets. Draco had wrapped himself around Harry’s left arm like it was a lifeline, and seemed to be sleeping peacefully enough, although his face sometimes grimaced while he dreamed. Perhaps, just perhaps, he had not done so poorly yesterday, if such a thing as this could come to pass.

Harry looked stern and innocent in his sleep, his head tilted toward Draco’s, while Draco looked like a pale ghost next to Harry’s tanned face. Such a contrast they made. It possessed a certain unearthly beauty, and Dula was momentarily tempted to shed a tear at the sight, but he had cried all his tears out long ago, and there was nothing to weep for here. Dula continued on his way, and showered with pleasure, letting the occasion peel away the haunting echoes of last night’s tragedies, and usher in this new day’s hopes.

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Arthur and Molly sat quietly in bed for quite a while longer than usual that morning. The past night had been a hard one, and they weren’t entirely in agreement about how to deal with Ron, but they did agree entirely that their youngest son had been out of line for far too long. Arthur wanted to stay home from work, despite being the head of his office now, and Molly had dismissed it as unnecessary, but a sweet thing to think of nonetheless.
“I don’t have a thing wrong with me that a potion or a wee spell won’t handle. Harry will be here if I need a hand, and even if I spend the day just having a breather, I can sit and chat with Draco while I knit. I’ve still got Yule Solstice presents to finish.”

Arthur clucked his tongue and begged to differ.

“I know you too well, my Molly-O! You won’t be able to hold yourself still, left to your own devices with two boys who’ll let you have all your own way. I should stay, set up a proper breakfast and tea for us all, and make sure you actually sit down and relax a bit. When was the last time we took a little time off together, hmm? Egypt? Fine trip, but it’s been too long since. Just let me do a few things today, and when we have your potion and the recipe, I swear I’ll let you be.”

“Oh! Hmmph! I never thought I’d see the day! You…telling me what to do…like some common housewife! Arthur Weasley, I ought to—”

“Ought to know when someone needs a day off because he had ten years scared off of him by finding his wife fallen over in a dead faint! Especially if that someone is your husband through three separate decades, and he can’t so much as bear the idea of waking up someday and not finding you next to him, because you wouldn’t give in and give yourself a rest, even when you needed one! I love you dearly, Molly Prewett Weasley, but I swear I’ll hex you where you stand if I catch you doing a lick of work today! Are we understood!”

Arthur was almost as red as his thinning hair, holding back tension that had dogged his dreams all night, and Molly’s ire faded in the face of what she’d just heard. Molly deflated, and laid her head on her husband’s shoulder, sighing quietly.

“Well! If you put it that way…very well, love.”

Arthur could Firecall the office later, and secure the day off, but right now, there was no where else on earth he wanted to be.

Draco’s eyes flickered open. He’d been dreaming. Some of it had been very unpleasant…memories of Muggle London, needles and the drug haze that followed, the kindness of the Muggle outcasts that had sheltered him, and the cruelty and pettiness of the people they dealt with daily. It hadn’t all been bad dreams though. There had been moments, brief and pleasant periods of peace, where he’d dreamt of warmth and comfort…and closeness. Touching someone, holding them to him, and not feeling utterly isolated and alone. It had been nice.

He was wrapped around Harry’s arm.

Harry was in his bed. He’d asked him to stay last night, and Harry had done just that.

His nose was pressed against Harry’s shoulder. Even after sleeping in his clothes, Harry smelled clean and good, like soap and the healthy sweat of exercise. Draco felt his stomach twinge.

‘He’s good. Under all that anger, all that stubborn Gryffindor pride, he is so good. He said he likes me. He has to know I’m queer, with me begging him to stay in my bed with me. He did it anyway, just because I asked. He promised he’d help me anyway he could, and I actually believe him. Why shouldn’t I? He’s more powerful than the Dark Lord ever was. If he says he can help me, he’ll find a way. It’ll be okay. It has to be. Someday I’ll be able to sleep like this on my own, and I won’t wake up because of what I see when my eyes close.
Maybe…maybe I’ll never have a lover…but if I don’t hurt these people…if I show them how much they matter to me, at least I’ll always have some friends. Not like the ones in school, who acted sweet but waited for any sign of weakness before they betrayed me, but like Harry, who’d let me hold him in the night, just because I need to remember what it’s like to be a fucking human being for awhile.

I don’t care if it’s wrong. I don’t care if it’s sick and evil and bad. I want this. I want to feel just like this. Safe. Good. Close. I deserve it, don’t I? After so much shit I can barely stand waking up, shouldn’t I be allowed to feel good about one fucking thing? I want this. If he knows what I am, and he’d still do this for me, he’s a bloody saint. I could wish for so much more, but this…this is more than I’d hoped for. I have to help him. Not just for Molly…for him, but Merlin, I hope he can keep those promises he made.’

Draco closed his eyes, not caring what time it was, and went back to sleep without having budged by more than an inch. Yesterday had been a terrible day, but Molly was alright, and Harry was right here, and he could get up a little later if he bloody well wanted to. His dreams weren’t things of beauty, but they weren’t quite the same night terrors he’d experienced before, and he could live with that.

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Arthur stumbled downstairs to make his Firecall, and immediately smelled the unmistakable scent of fresh tea and breakfast in the air. He wandered into the kitchen, rubbing his eyes and wondering who was up this early, and found Dula finishing up crepes, fruit and sausages, periodically tossing tidbits of breakfast into the air and catching them in his mouth.

“Well, bless my cotton socks! What are you still doing here, lad? I thought you and Charlie had to be back to the preserve. Not that I’m complaining, mind you. Mmm! Crepes! Molly will love these!”

Dula chuckled at Arthur Weasley’s optimism. “I thought I would stay here this afternoon. Charlie has too much to do, and could not stay, but I have a little more freedom perhaps, and I wanted to help. It would give me a chance to see Harry and Draco again before I go, and I can also assure Charlie that Molly received her potion and was well. Making breakfast was simply a way to pass the time. We get up so early…I am unused to sleeping late.”

Arthur nibbled a bit of fruit and poured a cup of tea. “I’ll carry up Molly’s breakfast as soon as I Firecall the office. Thank you, Dula, you’re a godsend.”

Dula smiled somewhat sheepishly. “Perhaps not so much, but I thank you just the same.”

A hasty Firecall later, Arthur had informed his assistant that he wouldn’t be in…and warned him sternly to stay on task. That settled, he took a tray with plates for himself and Molly, as well as tea for two, and headed back upstairs. He’d been too bleary to notice before, but as he passed Draco’s room, the situation within became apparent to him, and he nearly dropped the tray in shock.

‘Well isn’t that something! Our Harry…and young Draco…humph! Will the wonders never cease? I’d never of thought it of the two of them…but there you have it…plain as day. I do hope Harry knows what he’s doing. That poor boy is scarcely in any shape to start something more complicated than a decent friendship, and our Harry has enough on his plate. Well, what can one do, but hope for the best. Good luck, lads…you’ll need it.’

Arthur wandered down the hall and back to Molly, who was napping soundly enough as he walked in. He set the tray down and her eye peeled open…quickly followed by the other as she looked at
what he’d brought.

“Arthur? Crepes? And so quickly! How on earth did you-”

“Dula decided to stay here this afternoon. Had breakfast ready for the lot of us before I even made it down the stairs.”

Molly bloomed instantly. It had been a perfectly horrid night. Humiliating herself by falling all to pieces in the kitchen, then poor Draco had taken the worst of Ron’s awful temper, and he’d nearly done himself in thinking there wasn’t a soul in the house that genuinely cared for him. It still shocked her that she’d thrown Ron out of the house. She hadn’t really meant to at the first, but his hemming and hawing had set her teeth on edge, and she’d forgiven his loutishness too many times before. It had all been so awful much. Breakfast in bed after a night like that sounded like heaven.

“Arthur, love, did you get a chance to look in on Draco? Is he alright? The poor thing needs looking after and-”

Arthur flushed crimson and coughed delicately to hide his embarrassment.

“Ach. Hmmph, ah…there. Um…yes…doing fine, love. Harry’s looking after him. Needn’t worry for a thing. They seem to be getting on better these days.”

“What are you hiding, Arthur Weasley! You know perfectly well you couldn’t lie to save your life, Merlin bless you for it! How are the boys? Really!”

“Did I mention there were crepes for breakfast?”

“Arthur!” Molly’s voice had raised a notch in volume, and lips were as thin and tight as ribbons.

“Well…they’re fine and all. It’s just…well. Nothing indecent, mind you, just…they’re in bed together. Sheets separating them, but together…and Draco looks like he’s sleeping better, but he appears to be…well…he looks like he’s…he’s holding Harry’s arm.”

Molly looked pole-axed and remained silent, wide-eyed and surprised. That wasn’t something she’d expected to hear. Not with regard to Draco, and CERTAINLY not with respect to Harry.

“Oh.”

“My thoughts exactly, love.”

Arthur sat down at the edge of the bed and took a few bites from his own plate, waiting for Molly to stop staring mutely at the wall.

“You don’t really think they’re…like our Charlie…do you?”

“I can’t say if they are or aren’t, love. I suppose if that’s what is…then that’s what is. Bit too soon to tell. I suppose we’ll know if they’re making calf-eyes at each other over breakfast, lunch and dinner, but I suppose I’m not too worried by it. I just thought it might be a bit hasty for them.”

“Oh course it is! They couldn’t possibly do something like this and have it work out well. They’re neither of them ready for anything of the sort! What do we do?”

“We don’t do a thing, Molly. We don’t do a thing. Could be nothing to worry over, could be a disaster, could be the best thing that ever happened to either of them, but that’s the way of it, isn’t it. Our parents were full of the same talk all those years ago. ‘We were too young, we hadn’t any idea
what we were in for, we’d never make it last at that age’…all bosh! We knew best after all, didn’t we, love.”

Molly blushed and smiled, picked up her plate, and still flustered by her husband’s smile, set about eating her breakfast. It might be the first of many strange days to come, but they’d find a way, just as surely as they always had.

TBC!!!
Harry slept fitfully, even while his body remained still. His dreams slid into a red haze of memory, a phantasmagoria of killings past and new alike. The feel of his knife sawing through bone. The soft rip of flesh that tore more easily than he’d imagined. The weird and muted colors of internal organs that were never intended to be seen outside of the human body. He knew these intimately. He’d made them happen.

His dreams segued again, as they sometimes did, and the dead were lined up like Inferi. War victims paraded past him in an endlessly long line, each pair of eyes silently pleading for justice...for vengeance. There was no ignoring them. The dream wouldn’t end and wouldn’t change until it was ready. The dreams came when he didn’t kill, and they came more often the longer he waited. Some rational part of him railed against this spectacle. He knew he’d sworn off killing, given up the hunt that eased his sleeping mind, but he also knew that it would get harder the longer he waited. Hermione was there, as silent as the rest, shuffling by, body slashed horribly by the curse that had taken her life. Farther off was Ginny, intact from Avadra Kedavra, but pale and listless as she stumbled on. This was eternity. This was what waited for the un-avenged, for the restless souls that would never know peace while their killers lived and prospered. Harry could make it stop. He could make it easier for them. Give them rest.

But he would have to kill.

“NO!”

Harry sat bolt upright, soaked in sweat and pulling in a sharp breath. Adrenaline was coursing through him, and his heart was pounding like he’d just run a mile. He took a deep, slow breath, and calmed himself, then realized where he was. Draco was on the floor in the corner, wide-eyed and shivering, wrapped in blankets he’d taken with him, staring at Harry in fear.

“I…I’m sorry. I didn’t mean…I know you aren’t…don’t…fuck! Harry, I’m sorry. Don’t be angry…please…please don’t be angry with me?”

Harry took another slow breath, then rolled off the bed and tried to go to Draco, who was obviously frightened. When Draco curled into a ball in response to Harry’s approach, clearly expecting to be struck, Harry stopped, face burning from sudden shame, and knelt.

“Draco. It’s alright. It was a nightmare. What happened? I didn’t mean anything. I’m not angry at you. I promised I wouldn’t hurt you…I meant it. I have nightmares sometimes too. Not…not like yours, but bad enough. I just woke up scared. Please...believe me…I won’t hurt you!”
Draco sucked in a panic breath, biting back the urge to cry, which would be more humiliating than panicking over Harry’s shout. His body slowly relaxed while his breathing slowed. Harry sounded calm, rational, and as gentle and concerned as the person who’d climbed into the bed last night, and Draco’s brain slowly accepted that he was in no danger.

“I thought you…you were mad about…me. Touching…your arm. I didn’t mean to. I was just…I slept better. It was nice. I didn’t mean to give you nightmares.”

Harry looked crestfallen, and sat down on the floor beside Draco, careful not to touch him or make any sudden moves.

“Honestly…Draco…you didn’t give me any nightmares. I just have them sometimes, alright? From the war…and…and the things I did after. I get nightmares, and I wake up a little spooked…that’s all. I swear it. It wasn’t you. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

Draco leaned his head back against the wall and closed his eyes. Yesterday’s events were flooding through his mind, and it was almost too much to deal with at one time.

“Shite. I’m sor-“

“Stop! You have NOTHING to be sorry for. I spooked you, and it’s my fault. Don’t apologize to me, Draco. I should be telling you that…I’m sorry I didn’t tell you that those happen to me sometimes. I…I’m going to take a shower and get some clean clothes. When I get done, we can check in on Molly and grab some breakfast, then work on using the Scaradicate Salve for awhile. I’d like to start the research for your dreams today, too. You’re my only priority here…understand?”

Draco nodded hesitantly.

“So, if I take a shower, and I’m gone for a few minutes…you won’t…”

“No! No…I wouldn’t. I feel…weird, but better. Last night…it was just too much. I hadn’t slept, and…and I told you what it’s been like. I’m tired…I’m still tired, but I’ll get better. I know you’ll help…if I can stop panicking whenever anyone makes a fucking loud noise or a fast move.”

Draco said the last with a sad little grin that hinted at sarcasm, or at least brutal honesty, and Harry smiled back, shrugging his shoulders as if to say, ‘What else can we do?’

Harry stood, and held out his hand, offering Draco help to get himself standing, and Draco took it, savoring the weird shiver that ran down his spine when Harry’s hand was around his own. Harry headed for his shower, and Draco picked out some clothes for after his shower, musing over the night that had passed.

Everything had seemed hopeless last night. Waking up after Molly’s collapse, and Ron’s…explosion. The look on Ron Weasley’s face had been a vicious echo of the looks he’d gotten in Diagon Alley. Loathing, mistrust, outrage, and naked hatred. It had been the look that had hurt him far more than the blows that came later. The knowledge that, no matter what he said or did, people would always see him as a Death Eater and a coward, and assume the worst about anything he tried to do. That had been more than he could bear.

Now, Harry had scared him half to death first thing in the morning, and he couldn’t bring himself to care. He hadn’t even realized that Harry had nightmares. It made sense. Harry had done…questionable things…during the war and after, and it was normal to have nightmares after things like that. Draco admitted that he, himself, was a slightly different case. His were memories more than dreams, and they were things he didn’t dare speak of while he was awake. The look on people’s
faces when they heard what had happened to him was almost as terrible as the memories themselves. Knowing what had happened to him changed the way people looked at him and treated him, and Draco wanted more than anything to have something like a normal life.

So far, that particular wish had gone unanswered.

Draco laid out a clean shirt and other garments, and waited for Harry to finish in the shower. Footsteps on the staircase told him that someone was coming, and given the time, it was probably breakfast. Draco’s stomach rumbled with hunger, and he looked up just in time to see Dula enter, carrying a tray with enough food for two, as well as tea.

“Good morning, Draco. I made breakfast for everyone, since you and Harry seemed tired, and not without good cause, and because Molly should rest until the potion arrives for her. I hope that you enjoy.”

Draco took the plate that was offered to him hesitantly, uncertain about why Dula was still here, and he’d meant to ask about that, until he saw the contents of the plate.

“Crepes! My mum used to ask the house-elves for these all the time! I haven’t had crepes since I was, like, fifteen! Thank you…Dula.”

Draco put the fork to use and started wolfing down bites of crepe, mingled with tidbits of fruit, and gulps of tea. Dula sat at the edge of the bed and smiled.

“I have spoken to Arthur, and Molly will be resting today, but she is quite well, and you will see her in an hour or so. I understand Harry will be applying Scaradicate Salve today, but there was something I wanted to talk to you about first. Will that be alright?”

Draco looked up from his plate. “What? What’s wrong?”

Dula looked more than a little uncomfortable, which was strange given his usual calm confidence. He did not look Draco in the eye, but spoke with his head half turned.

“About what happened last night…”

“I…I don’t want to talk about that. I won’t do it again. I just want to forget about it.”

“You mistake my meaning. I do not wish you to tell me of last night, unless that is what you want, but rather, I have something I wish to tell you. It is very personal, and Charlie is the only person I have told before. It is not a thing I share, but you would understand better than most. I must ask your confidence. Please do not share what I tell you here.”

“I can promise that. I know why some things are private…believe me.”

Dula nodded soberly, then began.

“I attended Durmstrang, like my father, and his father before. I was the eldest child, and my parents only son. I was an heir. When I was at school, I met a young man I thought was very fair, and very handsome. We became lovers, but we were very young, and very foolish. Perhaps…I am a romantic, but I thought it would last forever, and there would be no other for me. My father found the letters my lover sent me while I was home, and his outrage was…exceptional. He informed the headmaster, and my lover’s parents removed him from school. I never saw him again. I did not dare stand against my father’s wrath, and what had happened was quickly known to all in our school. I was alone, terribly ashamed, and I saw no future that would be acceptable to me then.”
Dula rolled back the sleeve of his black shirt, exposing a slender, pale, pink-gray line that ran the length of his arm, up from the wrist almost to the elbow.

“My problems were not like yours. I make no pretension of thinking that I understand them. I do know what it means to think there is no hope for the future, and I know what it is to leave behind everything you have known for a new life. It was fortunate that I lived, for though I did not meet Charlie until four years ago, I could not have imagined then that my life could hold such happiness this day.”

Dula rolled his sleeve back down, looking Draco in the eyes, and his gaze was intense enough to be nearly hypnotic.

“Do not squander your life. All else can be taken from you, and there is hope for a better day to come, but life…of that, we each have but one. You are a bright and gifted young man. There are many here that are fond of you, and would grieve if you were lost to them. I hope you will give thought to how much is yet possible, and not despair. I can promise you nothing. To claim that all will be easy and good would be a lie, but I can promise that much is yet possible, and I can promise that you would be missed. This much is clear to me, and I have known you for but a day. If Harry, who was once your rival, can think so well of you in so short a time, how much more is possible? Think on these things. I must return home tonight, but I will be here today if you wish to speak with me. You may consider yourself a friend to both Charlie and myself, and you may Firecall us if you wish. Now I must go…I have a kitchen that Molly should not see soiled by my efforts, or she will surely try to clean, and Arthur would be most upset. That I cannot allow.”

Draco sat quietly, fork frozen in his hand, absorbing what he’d just heard. A question bloomed in Draco’s mind, and he asked it aloud before he even thought twice about it. His voice wasn’t much above a whisper, and his eyes told Dula that he sincerely wished to know.

“The scar…you could have healed it. There are salves and spells….why didn’t you?”

Dula paused, looking pensive and thoughtful before he answered.

“The scar exists inside me, as well as outside. It does not matter if it is healed, it cannot be forgotten. I did not see the point in healing it, and I am not ashamed of what I have learned from it. I am stronger and wiser for what I have seen, and what I have lost. To change what has passed, would change what is today…and I assure you, I would not change my present for a thousand more beautiful yesterdays. Does this make sense to you?”

Draco nodded. “I’ll see you after lunch, right? You’ll still be here, won’t you?”

“Yes. I will see you again then. Enjoy your breakfast, Draco.”

“Thank you, Dula.”

They both knew he wasn’t speaking of the crepes, but Harry had just emerged from the shower, and anything more private could no longer be said. In Dula, Draco saw someone who would not look at him differently for what he’d seen and done, and that…that was something even Harry could not give.

“You are most welcome, Draco.”

Harry saw Dula in the hall and smiled.

“Hey! I thought you and Charlie were headed back home…you guys staying ‘cause of last night?”
“Only I remained. My Charlie has too much to do, and many people to oversee. I left a plate for you in Draco’s room...if you wish to take your breakfast with him. Arthur remained home today as well, and I made it to the kitchen ahead of him this morning. Enjoy, Harry.”

Harry glanced at Draco’s plate. “Crepes! Yum. I’ll be right back after I change clothes. Thanks, mate. Glad you decided to stay a bit longer!”

With that exchange, Harry bolted to his room to change, and Dula gave Draco a farewell smile, and headed down the stairs to the kitchen. It would be an interesting day to say the least, and Draco appeared willing to speak to him in greater detail later. Dula congratulated himself on having made the right choice. It had worried him, sharing something so essentially private, with a young man as riddled with problems as Draco, but his instincts had not been wrong, and the groundwork for more important conversations had been laid. Dula was not immune to doubt or worry, but he had learned to hide it well. Charlie had an uncanny knack for recognizing when he was tense, even when others thought him to be at ease. It was one of Charlie’s more endearing, and sometimes irritating qualities. Ah, well. He would do what he could do, in the time that had, and that would simply have to be enough...for now.

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Molly’s package arrived just a half hour later, and Dula fed some choice tidbits to the Hogwarts owl that had delivered it. The recipe was a simple one, and Madam Pomfrey’s notes included complete instructions and a reminder that the potion in question was also commonly sold in Diagon Alley. A further reminder insisted that Molly come to Hogwarts late in the week, and let Poppy give her a thorough and complete check up.

Dula delivered the package to Molly, who was curled up in bed with her husband. Molly promptly took the potion, and decided to spend the day knitting and chatting with the lot of them. A day off her feet really didn’t sound so awful, and she had several knitting projects underway, and was oddly grateful for the time to work on them.

Harry and Draco stopped by Molly’s room shortly after they’d both finished eating, chatting lightly about Ron along the way, and Molly seemed in better spirits, if slightly worn about the edges. Harry assured her that Ron would come to his senses soon enough, and apologize properly, and Molly reluctantly admitted that she could scarcely wait for it, and meant to welcome him back as soon as he gave her sound reasons to do so. Her estrangement from Percy had been one of the most stressful times of her life, and given the loss of Ginny, Molly was in no mood to push away another of her children, no matter how misguided. If Ron showed a willingness to respect her decisions…and apologize suitably to Draco, she’d put the entire matter to rest as quickly as possible.

Harry broke out the Scaradicate Salve and Calming Draughts, and Draco took off his shirt, but wore a slim, cotton undershirt that left his arms easy to treat, while preserving his modesty. It still rankled, allowing anyone to see the ruin that was his body, even if it was the only way to heal it.

His right arm was the subject today, and Draco was still in an oddly good mood, which still seemed strange in and of itself. He wasn’t used to feeling good, and the faint ebullience that buoyed his spirits confused him. In spite of the horror of last night, it felt like a storm had broken, and the sun had come out, and Draco hadn’t seen that metaphorical sun in a long time. Harry accomplished more than usual during their session, and the majority of Draco’s right arm was finished before they were done. With the Calming Draught, Draco had been fairly comfortable while Harry worked his way along, scar by scar, and he’d kept his mind occupied by talking to Harry all the while.

The topic had rambled and shifted, but he’d managed to squeeze a few stories from Hogwarts out of Harry, comparing notes about their experiences in school. It was bizarre to think of things from
Harry's perspective. The press had treated Harry abominably…if one knew the truth behind the stories, and Draco had never guessed at some of the truths, and in fact, he had never even tried. He'd simply assumed that Dumbledore’s prize pupil was every bit the spoiled and deluded attention seeker the press had claimed.

Harry had known that war was coming to the wizarding world long before Draco had been made aware of his father’s Dark alliances and servitude. He also heard tidbits from Harry that made almost no sense at all. He knew Harry had been raised among Muggles, but while Harry avoided details, the impression was clear that he had not been welcome among them, and had no love for the people who had cared for him until he came to Hogwarts. It just didn’t fit Draco’s image of Harry. Harry seemed generous and grateful to the Weasley’s for their hospitality, and yet he appeared to hold the Muggles that raised him in contempt. It was a complete conundrum, but he didn’t press for details that Harry didn’t want to give. As it was, he was happy to have a small window into Harry’s life, and to let words carry him away from the tension that Harry’s touch brought.

When it was over, Harry packed up the supplies and excused himself to fetch his books. He would be spending the day studying texts that he’d inherited from Dumbledore. Draco wandered downstairs and found Arthur, Dula and Molly lounging in the living room, all equally happy to see him after his treatment. He grudgingly displayed his arms, showing off Harry’s work, and he couldn’t help a glance at Dula, who smiled and nodded meaningfully.

Dula was right. The scars were really on the inside, but for Draco, there were so many, and they were so disfiguring, that physical healing seemed more sensible. He’d looked this way for so long that it was strange to look at his arms and see healthy skin instead of infected burns and cuts, bruises, and puckered red and gray streaks from older, poorly healed wounds. The scars would always be there, but at least they wouldn’t frighten or shock others anymore.

Harry came down and settled into his studies, and Dula took interest when he learned that Harry's research was rooted in a desire to help Draco sleep properly. Dula knew an old spell to ward off modest nightmares, but it was brief in nature, and would not last the whole night through. It did offer a small measure of hope, and allowed Draco the promise of nights that would grant him at least partial peace, and that was more than he’d had in days. The best he’d slept yet had been while Harry had been at his side, and even then he’d woke restless and edgy, made so by memories his sleeping mind could not bury.

Draco sat, reading a book of his own, poring through the lists of Charms, Jinxes, Hexes, and Wards. He looked up, and became aware of the setting around him. Every person in the room, even Molly, had taken one of the books that Harry had brought down. The entire Weasley household, Dula included, was busy researching a way to help Draco sleep better. Draco felt his throat grow thick, and his face was beginning to burn. Crying now was out of the question, since he'd been the cause of more than enough drama lately. He’d already had a shower that morning, and he needed an excuse to get out of the room. Draco stood up and put his book down, trying not blush crimson while he did so.

“Uh…hey. I haven’t been out of the house, or taken a walk down more than a hallway in a long while. I haven’t been outdoors while dressed for it properly either. I just thought I’d take a walk…get some air, and enjoy some sun for once. Is that okay?”

Everyone focused on him suddenly, which made Draco more tense than he’d been before. Molly broke the brief silence.

“We’ve some good coats and boots in the cloakroom, and mind you put a decent sweater on before you go out. There’s a miserable chill in the air this time of year, and we don’t want your lungs to
suffer for it, but go on ahead, dear. You needn’t ask permission for such a thing, Draco…but if I catch you out there without decent clothes on your back you’ll have me to answer to.”

The warmth of Molly’s smile took the edge off of her words, and Draco thanked her and hurried upstairs for extra clothes. The sweaters were all too large, but they would just have to do, and the boots barely stayed on his feet, but with extra socks, they felt fairly comfortable. The coat was a travesty, since his hands barely stuck out of the sleeves, but it was warm, and with the spare scarf and cap that he’d found, he was already too warm indoors. Draco made his way outdoors with a few comments to the assembled crowd in the living room, and sighed with relief as soon as he was out the door.

‘Dula was right. How could I have not seen it? Merlin, I love them. Look at them…a day off and all of them trying to help me! They care about me so much, and they only let me in less than two weeks ago! How can anybody be that good? In my family, they’d have been researching ways to kill me without leaving a trail that led back to them. It’s like a fucking dream when I wake up, and I’m here, and it’s only a nightmare when I close my eyes and leave for awhile.’

Draco’s thoughts were interrupted by the sound of the back door closing. Dula had stepped out onto the back porch, and took a seat on an old chair that was lightly dusted with snow. He gave Draco a smile that clearly implied knowledge of what was going through Draco’s head, and then he spoke.

“Now you see it too, do you not?”

Draco smiled back, gulping back the urge to cry, but his eyes were shining when he answered, his words turning into icy puffs of moisture in the winter air.

“Yeah. Yes I do… and thank you for helping me notice what was right in front of me all along.”

TBC!!!
Draco and Dula walked through the Burrow’s backyard, chatting as they went. The garden was under a few inches of snow, and leafless foliage peeked up through the snow everywhere. They spoke of small things at first, until Draco felt more at ease, and dared to venture into subjects that had once frightened him too much to mention. Dula seemed capable of hearing anything without turning judgmental, and Draco spoke his mind more freely than he ever had.

“Dula, I don’t want this to sound rude, but I don’t know how else to ask this.”

“Simply ask. The worst that will happen is I will tell you I cannot answer.”

“What’s it like…being with Charlie…you know…like you are?”

“I take it that you mean…what is it like, to be gay, at least for Charlie and myself?”

“Well…yeah. Why…why would anyone choose that? You could have been an heir…if you wanted to be one. What was so important about…about being…different, that it was worth giving that up?”

“Draco…people know who they desire. Even those who wish things were otherwise, they know in the silence of their hearts, the one who makes their pulse race, and makes their words come haltingly, who makes them feel most alive, by sight alone. It is not chosen. All that is chosen is whether to follow one’s heart, or not. It is a simple thing, to lie, and honesty opens you to hurt and loss, but if you endure, it also makes possible a contentment that cannot be built upon falsehood. My life with Charlie is no better or worse than the lives of people who prefer the opposite sex. We simply are, though I admit that I am happier with Charlie than I could have imagined four years ago. It is different with everyone, and has much to do with how much effort two people put into their relationship…the genders make no difference.”

Draco walked for awhile, scuffing his feet, mulling over Dula’s words. There were other things he wanted to ask, and more that he just wanted to say, but he didn’t quite dare to voice these things. There were ways to get at the subject without being too obvious, but Dula was clever…he’d have been a Slytherin for sure if he’d gone to Hogwarts. Draco didn’t hold out much hope that his intentions would remain unclear for long.

“If…if I told you something…like the things you told me…you’d keep it a secret, wouldn’t you?”

Dula nodded calmly.

“If you tell me something in confidence, I would not betray your trust. I have already given you knowledge of things I would have kept to myself. It would be unkind not to give you the same trust in return. Say what you will.”
Draco stopped walking, and started fidgeting, first with his mittens, then with the buttons of his coat. He couldn’t really bring himself to even look Dula in the face while he spoke.

“I like Harry.”

“That is plain to see. There is much there to like. He has troubles of his own, as all people do, but Harry is a most remarkable person, and well worth liking.”

“No…you don’t understand! I like Harry. A lot. The way…the way you said. About pulses and words and…everything. I think…I think Harry is who I like. What do I do?”

Draco felt his cheeks burning. He still couldn’t believe he’d gotten the words out. He took a few deep breaths while Dula was thinking, and waited impatiently for an answer.

“You do not have to do anything, but you are very brave for having said what you feel. There are many people much older and supposedly wiser who could not have said what you did. Harry is still a good person for you to like, and I commend your choice…although…I admit I am biased in favor of red-headed dragon tamers, but that is just me. Do what comes naturally. Enjoy his company, spend time with him, get to know him by speaking openly of the things you think and feel. I cannot read Harry’s mind, any more than I can read yours, but I can tell you that he would welcome your friendship, and he would not hurt you for feeling as you do.”

Draco felt his stomach knotting up, and grimaced, miserable over the problems that surrounded the very notion of trying to get closer to Harry.

“Other people…they had school friends and girlfriends and normal lives. Dula…I didn’t get those. I don’t know what to do. I had a war and…and things went badly…and I never had those things. I was in the service of a Dark Lord or running for my life when other people were figuring those things out. What if I do something wrong? What if I screwed this up like I screwed up the rest of my life? I don’t know what ‘naturally’ is…I don’t even know how to fake it!”

“Relax. Breathe easy, Draco. Do not distress yourself. There are no guarantees, Draco. Either you will take the risks that everyone takes, or you will not. No one…no one knows what they are doing…until they have done it at least once. Someone who cares for you equally will understand that you are unique, and they will not be offended if you say or do things differently than others might. That is the way of things. Do not feel that you must push yourself to do what you are unready for. No one would expect that…certainly not Harry. Just take your time and let yourself become comfortable with him. I knew Charlie for half a year before we began seeing one another, and it was another half year before we did more than the most elementary of things together. You have much to deal with…and more than is fair or just…and it would likely be better for you to deal with making yourself healthy, and then concern yourself with other things.”

Draco sat down on an old tree stump, sniffling in the chill.

“Yeah. I guess. It’s just…there was a long time where I couldn’t feel anything…except afraid…and now…now everything is hitting me at once. I’m still getting used to being able to feel at all, and then I start thinking about Harry that way…and I just want to run screaming from the room. It’s too much. I’m supposed to be helping Harry…”

Draco trailed off. He wasn’t sure what Dula and Charlie knew about Harry’s ‘activities’. Did they know that Harry was a killer? Did they approve or not? It was hard to imagine Dula supporting murder, but they did seem to be Harry’s close friends. Draco opted for caution.

“I’m supposed to be helping Harry and Molly with a few projects. I’ve had so much on my mind
I’ve barely gotten anything done, and I hate feeling useless, especially since I haven’t even got a wand. Hey…Dula? You went to Durmstrang, so you’d know a lot of things that Hogwarts didn’t teach much about, wouldn’t you?"

Dula smiled wryly. “Yes. I suppose I would. They are very different schools, Hogwarts and Durmstrang. Both good in their way. Why do you ask?’”

“Well, I ran into a word I don’t know, and I could hardly believe it, since I used to be fairly good in school. I just assumed it was something that Hogwarts would have covered in my seventh year, but I never got to go back. What’s a Horcrux?”

Dula, who possessed a naturally dark-complexion, suddenly blanched almost white as a sheet. He whirled on Draco and his eyes were wide and serious. His voice, and body language, shouted that he was no longer calm, confident and in control of himself.

“What!? Where did you hear of such a thing? Tell me!”

“I…I just over heard it somewhere. I didn’t know what it meant, but…”

“Draco! The thing you speak of is unutterably evil! That you even know the word puts you in danger! It is an enchantment of the blackest kind, rooted in death and destruction. You imperil yourself by even speaking of it aloud! I read of it in an old book, many years ago, and when I asked my father what the word meant, I was beaten for even speaking that word in our house! The book was taken from our library and destroyed, as well it should have been! Where did you hear of this terrible thing? Where!?“

In a frenzied outburst, all semblance of calm completely lost, Dula had grabbed Draco’s coat by the lapels and pulled him face to face. Draco panicked, scuttling backwards and shoving against Dula, and wound up stumbling backwards and falling in the snow.

“Let me go! I’m sorry! I don’t know anything else…I swear it! You’re scaring me!”

Dula paused breathing heavily, and realized what he’d done. He knelt on the ground in front of Draco, and not daring to reach for him, clasped his hands like he was begging.

“Draco…I am very sorry, I…I overreacted, but I am not speaking in jest! What you have spoken of is a dreadful secret, better left forgotten by all. If you are involved in something related to this, you are in peril of your life, and even your very soul! You must not speak of it aloud…and it is better if you forget that such a thing ever crossed another’s lips. I beg this of you, for your safety, and for the safety of wizards and witches everywhere. Bury that word, and never again dig it up. I did not mean to frighten you, but you must…you must understand how serious this matter is! Only grief will come of such a thing, and I would spare you such a fate. Do you understand, Draco?”

Draco nodded nervously, still frightened by the way Dula had responded so suddenly to a simple word. Dula stood, and offered Draco a hand up, a pained look of worry on his face. Draco took the offered hand warily, and let Dula help him right himself. They dusted the snow off of their clothes and walked back to the house. When they were near the door, Dula turned and faced Draco with a look of shame.

“I am very sorry, Draco. It is rare that I am frightened by anything, but today I was given good cause for fear, and I did not handle it well. Fear is the dragon of the heart, and I have not tamed that dragon yet. I did not mean to grab you, I only wished to convey that this was a grave matter. It was a foolish thing to have done, and I beg your forgiveness. I should like to count you as a friend to Charlie and myself, and you may Firecall or write to us if you wish, but I will understand if it is hard for you to
forgive my mistake. I only feared for your safety, and the safety of this house, which holds many people who are dear to me.”

Draco was of two minds at the moment, and his heart was still racing from the rush of adrenaline that had coursed through him after his fateful comment had been made. Dula was nice, and seemed wise and good, but having just been frightened by him, Draco wasn’t eager to forgive much of anything.

“Apology accepted. I…I need to go to my room. Excuse me.”

Draco stepped inside and peeled away his coat, cap, mittens and scarf, and headed upstairs, ignoring the glances of the others as he fled for the newly familiar haven that was his room. Once the door was closed, Draco peeled off the heavy boots and sat on the bed, his head still whirling with the information he’d taken in. Some things fit, but they only raised more questions, and none of those questions were easily answered, especially the one that had frightened Dula so badly.

According to Molly, Harry had turned to killing after the War was over, sometime after killing the Dark Lord. He’d even been violent during his first months alongside the Aurors, and that had forced him to work alone. Harry had nightmares too, leftover from his losses, and actions, during and after the war. The snippet of conversation he’d overheard between Ron and Harry had implied that they had hunted for Horcruxes, at least five of them, and likely a few more from the sound of it. What Dula had said rang darkest of all, and suggested that Harry and Ron had been tampering with magic so black that a student from Durmstrang was terrified of the mere mention of it.

Draco remembered Harry’s edited description of Voldemort’s demise. Harry had said that there were parts he could never tell, parts that only a few people alive today could ever know. What were his exact words?

‘There are parts that I can’t even tell, and the number of people who knew the whole truth could have been counted with one hand, and a couple of them are dead.’

Who would know the things that Harry had dared not speak of? Ron for certain. He’d been at Harry’s side through the entire war. Hermione had to have been another, and she’d been killed while Ron and Harry had been out searching for ‘the fifth Horcux’. Something more nagged at Draco’s memory. Harry had said it during the tale of Voldemort’s death.

‘There was a lot of fighting, but we had a special purpose. Let’s just say that Voldemort had certain artifacts enchanted to provide him extra protection. We had to destroy those before he could even potentially be killed.’

If the artifacts were Horcruxes, that would explain why Harry never spoke of them, and said it was necessary to edit the story. He hoped that Harry hadn’t actually used that kind of black magic in the war, and that only Voldemort had, but there was no way to be sure without talking to someone who had been there at the time, and who knew the innermost secrets of Harry’s wartime activities.

Who was left that Harry would have trusted? Molly seemed to be in the dark about the entire subject, and she was as close to Harry as anyone other than Ron. Ron wasn’t likely to be a font of information…plus he wasn’t even allowed in the Burrow anymore. Who did Harry trust implicitly back then?

The answer struck like a lightning flash, and Draco knew what he would have to do, even if it involved a measure of risk, and a terrifying level of personal discomfort.

He would have to go to Hogwarts. Draco would have to face the only remaining fragment of the man whose death he’d helped to cause. Albus Dumbledore.
Harry would have trusted Albus Dumbledore more than anyone alive, and the former headmaster was surely now a painting that hung in the office that had once been his own. A painting in the office that held the only clues that Draco could easily access, and might very well be the only way he could move forward in his search to piece together what had happened to make Harry an angry and remorseless killer, haunted by nightmares that still plagued him.

It wouldn’t be easy, but Molly was supposed to go to Hogwarts later in the week to see Poppy Pomfrey. Draco needed to tag along, and if Molly understood why, she might very well let him accompany her, and use her influence to help him gain access to Dumbledore’s portrait. In the meantime, he could take a little of Dula’s advice, and just spend time with Harry, coaxing tidbits about the war out of him, or maybe asking what his nightmares were about, no matter how sensitive the subject was.

He wanted to pause and think of Harry more, but the topic left him nervous, even when he was alone. It was very discomforting, finding himself…’excited’…at the thought of touching Harry, or kissing him, and Dula had been right about Draco’s state of readiness. He was woefully unprepared for anything more complicated than talking to Harry…or holding his hand, but he wanted those things and more, just the same.

Draco let a mournful sigh slip out, and then headed back downstairs in his stocking feet. It would be a long week, waiting for his chance to see Dumbledore’s portrait, but at the moment, he had no other clues.

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The evening passed quietly at the Burrow, with Dula serving both lunch and dinner before returning home by Floo. Arthur and Molly had spent the day chatting and planning various details for the Weasley family gathering come Yuletide, and Harry had been engrossed in research, only taking a break when Draco challenged him to a playful game of wizard’s chess. Draco was quite out of practice, and Harry won, but not without difficulty. Draco promised himself more time downstairs, and if more of it was spent across a table from Harry, who was very handsome when he had that stern, serious look on his face, then it was all for the better.

Late that evening, a final owl arrived, and a bundle of letters were attached to its leg. After feeding the bird, Molly looked flustered when she saw the handwriting on them clearly. They came from Ron.

There was a letter for Arthur, a letter for Molly, one for Harry, and one for Draco. Molly passed them around without comment, and the tension was so thick that it could have been cut with a knife. Draco watched as the others read, then opened his own.

To Draco,

I owe you an apology. I guess I owe you a lot more than that too. I really hated you in school. I won’t say I didn’t have reasons, because I’d be lying if I did. What matters right now is that, as of last night, I’m forgetting everything I used to know about you, and starting over.

Harry swears you’re alright, and his word is gold in my book. Mum and Dad, Charlie and Dula, they all say you’re pretty decent, and I know they’re not stupid, or easy marks for a con. If they say you changed, then you changed, and that’s all there is to it.

I think I blamed you for things you weren’t any part of, except for a Mark on your arm. The war is over, and that Mark doesn’t mean a damn thing anymore.
You tried to help my mum, and I thought you’d hurt her, and there’s no way I can make up for what I did. All I can do is tell you that I know I was wrong, and hope you forgive me for disgracing my family last night.

I sat the bench today, watching the game. Cannons won, 170-10. It was damn close, and it was mostly our Seeker who made it a quick game. The fellow who played in my position today did brilliant, because the game stayed short, and he really put his all into it.

Anyhow, the long and the short of it is that, with a couple more wins, we’ll be in the race for Cup, so people will really be watching these next few games. Tickets are selling fast, but I already booked the Minister’s Skybox seats for you and Harry, for the home game in two weeks, if you still want to come.

I understand if you don’t want to, but you’d be welcome, and I’d love to see some friends at the game. Practice is only going to get harder, with a Cup race in the offing, so I wouldn’t be able to get much time at home anyway. The tickets are in Harry’s envelope, along with VIP Passes that will give the both of you access to the post-game dinner and celebration. Hope you make it.

I’m genuinely sorry I wronged you. It won’t happen again…you’ve got my word on that.

Sincerely, Ron Weasley

Draco looked up at the others in the room, Molly was wiping tears away from here eyes while she read hers, and Arthur was smiling and beaming, looking as proud as Draco had ever seen him. Harry was silent and folded his letter and tucked it away in his pocket, looking relieved and content. Who’d have imagined that the drunken brute that’d almost killed Draco, a single day ago, could have made such a turn around.

It turned out that, from what Draco could piece together from the others, Charlie had ‘dragged Ron through the coals’ while Draco was unconscious, and Ron had been forced to face some things he hadn’t dealt with since the war. Apparently, Ron had given up drinking, found a hobby to occupy his time, made appointments to see a counselor through his team, and made up his mind about making some changes in his life, all because of his outburst the night before. It was mind-boggling, but Draco hoped that it was all true.

Harry held out the tickets and passes, smiling widely. Draco stared at them in shock. He hadn’t been to a live game of Quidditch since he’d been fourteen years old. The idea that Ron Weasley was the reason he’d see one again was staggering enough, but not as much as the sudden realization that he’d be going…to a game…with Harry. It would almost be like a date. In public…with Harry. He couldn’t honestly say if he was elated…or scared to death, but either way, he wasn’t going to miss a chance like this.

“How do you feel about seeing the Cannons?”

Draco grinned giddily and shrugged.

“Sounds like the best thing to happen to me yet, since coming here. You’ll take me?”

Harry nodded soberly, and his smile never wavered.

“It would be an honor.”

‘Dreams aside, I must be the luckiest bastard who ever lived. I’m gonna see a Quidditch game, in a box seat that even my dad only sat in once! Life might be a bitch, but she’s looking pretty good from where I’m standing.’
TBC!!!
The days that followed treated Draco quite well. Although he was restless, and more than a little worried about his upcoming trip to Hogwarts, there was much to be cheerful about. Molly had agreed to take him along, on the condition that he saw Poppy Pomfrey for a more complete check-up, and then he could see Dumbledore’s portrait. If she had to intervene to help Draco accomplish this goal, she would, and that was a relief. He was nervous enough as it was. Seeing Dumbledore had been a superb idea, but the reality was growing more and more terrifying. Tomorrow he would be there, and the notion of speaking to the image of the man he’d betrayed would become an immediate and terrible reality. Thank Merlin so many other things had gone right.

First, the spell that Dula taught Harry worked passing well, and while it couldn’t suppress nightmares completely, Draco could usually count on at least three or four hours of uninterrupted, if somewhat restless, sleep per night. Harry had taken to sleeping in the chair beside Draco’s bed, at least until the middle of the night, when he applied a second spell that would last Draco until morning. The effect of having consistent sleep worked wonders on Draco’s attitude, and he hadn’t realized until now how much of his former malaise was tied to the lack of healthy sleep.

Second, Molly’s cooking was working its own magic, and Draco had noticed the hollows under his eyes slowly disappearing, his skin’s color was still improving, and his ribs were becoming difficult to count, all of which made seeing himself in the mirror an experience that no longer made him want to cry. To his dismay, however, his stomach had gained a certain softness. Nothing like Neville Longbottom, to be sure, but it was very off for Draco to have even the slightest hint of fat…and he swore a stack of oaths to himself that he would take up some exercise other than housework.

Harry had worked with Draco and some Scaradicate Salve every day that week, finishing up Draco’s arms and making considerable headway on Draco’s lower legs. At this point, had it not been winter, Draco could have left the house wearing a sleeveless shirt and shorts, and no one would have seen anything amiss, save that he was a bit skinnier than was generally considered healthy, and he still bore the faded remnant of Voldemort’s Mark. Scaradicate Salve could not erase that, and nothing ever would, but at least the sight of his body wouldn’t send people screaming into the streets.

Best of all, he’d managed to engage Harry in conversation daily, and while he hadn’t gotten any specifics about the war or Horcruxes (which he didn’t dare mention), he had developed a certain vague comfort around Harry. It had made the last few days pass quickly and pleasantly.

He’d beaten Harry once at wizard’s chess, after less than three days of practice, but Arthur had defeated the both of them with startling ease, reminding Draco that Ron Weasley had come by his skill at the game honestly.

Truth be told, Harry was charming when he was calm and comfortable, and he hadn’t shown any
signs of being the kind of person who could cold-bloodedly execute and mutilate others. Draco had wondered if his suspicions were realistic, and if more investigation into Harry’s past was really even necessary. He didn’t want to offend Harry at some point by pushing for too many details, but Harry did have another nightmare just the night before, stubbornly reminding Draco that there was some remaining legacy from the war.

Draco had come awake somewhere near three in the morning, stirred half by his own nightmares, which were just taking shape, and by the sounds that Harry was making in his sleep. Draco hadn’t been able to make out the first part, but once he’d come awake and heard Harry’s muttering more clearly, and seen the twisted grimace on Harry’s face, he’d understood that Harry was in the grip of a nightmare not that different from Draco’s own.

He’d heard Hermione’s name several times, Ginny’s, and Sirius Black and Dumbledore, too. That was when Draco knew that Harry was seeing the dead in his dreams, and he’d sat in silence, afraid to touch Harry in his sleep, knowing almost instinctively that Harry could be dangerous if he wasn’t in conscious control of himself. He’d tried calling Harry’s name a few times, but it hadn’t done any real good. The nightmare ended only when Harry snapped awake, breathing hard and wild-eyed, and then apologized for waking Draco before casting the Nightmare Wards on both of them. That had been the end of it, but it was all the reminder that Draco needed about Harry’s state of being. Even if things weren’t as bad as Draco feared, Harry still needed help, and he meant to find a way to give it.

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Harry rummaged through the closet, looking for some things he knew Draco would really enjoy. It had been a hard week, even if the last couple days had been fairly good, and as far as Harry was concerned, Draco deserved to have some fun, and it would be a nice change of pace from being stuck in the house all the time. Harry shoved piles of old coats and boots out of the way, and finally came across the very items he’d been looking for.

‘Jackpot! One matched set of Comets. It wouldn’t be fair to ride my Firebolt and rub his nose in it, and these will keep us evenly matched! I’ll bet he hasn’t been on a broom since he left Hogwarts, and if these don’t cheer him up, nothing could.’

Not that Draco had been in a horrible mood or anything, but he had seemed preoccupied lately. He was always staring off out of windows or sitting quietly at odd times, just thinking of whatever was on his mind, and his face was always so serious, except when they were playing wizard’s chess or something of that nature. Draco’s sole victory over Harry had put a smile on his face, and Harry had found that smile a pleasure to look upon. He hoped this would provide some more.

Harry knew full well that Dula had talked to Draco during his stay, but Charlie’s enigmatic boyfriend had refused to reveal anything from those conversations, saying that he had been told things in confidence, and would never betray them. It was a bit frustrating, since Harry couldn’t help his curiosity over Draco. All he’d managed to get out of Dula was an insistent claim that he should ‘be patient and let things take their own course’…whatever that meant.

Several days of applying salve to Draco’s skin had worn on Harry’s nerves a little. It was embarrassing to admit, even to himself, but he now wanked exclusively to thoughts of Draco. His imagination still centered on the types of things it always had...touching, closeness, kissing and the like...nothing particularly hardcore, but it was always Draco, and Harry’s mind had mapped every line of Draco’s body, from top to bottom, and was becoming adept at imagining how those parts would feel pressed against Harry. It may have been a bit distracting, but on the bright side, his
orgasms were noticeably more intense lately, even though his style of masturbation hadn’t changed in the slightest.

Harry stopped his musing over that subject when he realized that his cock was beginning to twitch to life in his pants, and he was fairly sure he didn’t want to hold out a broom and ask Draco if he wanted to ride…while sporting a full erection!

He took the brooms and headed upstairs. Draco was lounging in a chair in his room, poring over a book titled ‘Magically Induced Slumber And Counterspells For Same’. He looked up when Harry stepped into the room, then looked quizzically at Harry when he noticed the pair of brooms.

“These were Fred and George’s when they were in school. Haven’t seen action since they left home and started their business, and when they really want to fly, they have brand new models at their place. I just thought we could bundle up and play Seeker’s Tag for a bit. You know…get out of the house, get some fresh air, have a bit of fun. Besides, you need the exercise. It’s not healthy to be indoors all the time. Feel like a flight?”

Draco’s smile was easily worth the effort it had taken to unearth the twins’ old broom. Draco stood up silently and took one, getting a feel for its weight and balance, and then he smirked like they were in school again, eyes glinting dangerously.

“Thank you…and prepare to have your ass soundly kicked, Potter. I can’t believe you thought of this. I may be a fair hand at wizard’s chess, but even after a couple years on the ground, I can still make you eat dust on a broom! Let’s get some coats!”

Harry took the bravado in stride, and watched with discreet amusement as Draco grabbed his cold weather clothes with barely contained excitement. It was easy to tell that, no matter how carefully Draco was hiding it, he was very happy to get a chance to fly again, and Harry congratulated himself on making a good call.

They didn’t have a large pitch, or anything resembling equipment, but for Seeker’s Tag, which involved tapping each other’s brooms, you only needed two people and two brooms. Even in the November chill, it was still enormous fun. They flew until their faces were numb, back and forth, through trees that had lost their leaves weeks and weeks ago, and around the house more than a few times. Hours blurred by without their paying attention to anything more than the bundles of twigs on the end of their brooms, their arms constantly outstretched to ‘tag’ the other flyer. An incoming owl, which was frightened off its flight path, finally brought their attention back to home, and they both suddenly realized that they had long since missed lunch, and were half frozen to their brooms despite heavy clothing.

They landed a few feet from the door, panting, each watching their breath turn to mist in front of them, and unbeknownst to each other, they were both quietly admiring the way they each looked with cheeks flushed and reddened by cold wind and exertion. As far as Harry was concerned, it was the healthiest Draco had looked in two weeks…and probably in almost that many years.

Draco caught his breath and quipped, “Not bad. You’re lucky that owl threw me off, or I’d have had you…again. You’re as out of practice as I was!”

“Yeah yeah. It was an even game…but I made you chase me half an hour for that last tag. Tell me that wasn’t good flying…go on…tell me with a straight face that you didn’t flinch when you saw that dive I did. I dare you.”

They walked to back to the house while Draco laughed.
“Fine. Okay, already! The dive was good. I can’t believe you did that on a Comet! You could have killed yourself trying to drag a wreck like one of these up at the last second. If you were going to fly like that, why didn’t you pull your Firebolt out of retirement?”

Harry paused a moment, just looking at Draco, wondering if he should tell the truth.

“Draco…I thought you’d figure it out. I don’t even care who wins, but it wouldn’t have been fun if it hadn’t been fair.”

Draco hadn’t the faintest idea what to say to that, and he stopped in his tracks and stared at Harry rather intensely for almost a minute before he could even speak.

“I wish I’d known you…like this…in school. It would have been fun, wouldn’t it? Just flying for fun…or talking to each other about things. I think I would have liked you a lot…if things hadn’t gone pear-shaped between us…on the train during first year. Can you believe it was just eight years ago?”

Harry sat down on the porch, suddenly feeling the serious turn of the conversation, and shrugged.

“Barely. So much happened to me, so quickly, that I barely had time to get used to one thing before another changed. You know I was intimidated as hell by you…in Malkin’s…first year. I was shite poor, had no idea how much money my parents left me, and scared half out of my mind after leaving my aunt and uncle behind. There you were, and you talked to me like a regular person while we were getting fitted, but you just shouted money and class. I didn’t know what to think. When you introduced yourself again, on the train, you insulted Hagrid and Ron in less than a minute, and they were the only other people I’d talked to. After that, you were a complete shit to me every time we crossed paths. Don’t think that I don’t wish it had been different. I do. Really. I still wonder if we’d have gotten on alright if I’d at least shaken your hand.”

Draco took a seat on the porch as well, and stared at his feet, still winded as hell.

“Maybe. But I was a right bastard when I was little. I didn’t even know how spoiled I was until the war was practically underway. It was the first time I had anything more important than my status to worry over. I guess you wouldn’t have had anything to do with me even if we’d shook hands, but I probably wouldn’t have gone out of my way to be a pain in your ass so much. You have no idea how much it stung to be snubbed by you, and thrown over for Ron Weasley. Back then, I still thought money made a difference.”

“Maybe. Maybe maybe maybe. Too many maybes. Let’s go in and get a snack. It’s still a long way to dinner, and Molly wouldn’t let us starve, especially if we look at her with sad eyes and apologize for missing lunch. C’mon, mate.”

Harry stood and headed into the house, Draco following along behind quietly, still savoring the sound of the word ‘mate’. A letter waited on the kitchen table, addressed to Harry, and it bore the seal of Gringott’s bank. Harry was already cursing when he tore it open.

“Bloody hell! I forgot about my estate paperwork! Not that I was really fucking excited over it in the first place. It’s due in three days, and I just had so much on my mind that I put it off. My next couple days just got booked up. Don’t worry, though. I’ll still sit up with you and all. Just, don’t be surprised if I spend the next couple of days face down in a pile of paper, cursing the day I was born.”

Harry slumped at the kitchen table, peeling off his scarf and cap, and ran his hand through his hair in frustration. Draco, on the other hand, looked a little confused.
“Seriously, Harry. You don’t mean you have trouble managing the standard Gringott’s forms for your property and vaults? You can’t be serious.”

Harry looked up with irritation, but bit back the sharper comments on the tip of his tongue. He knew he was just pissed because he was facing a task he hated. No reason to take it out on Draco.

“Hey. Raised by Muggles here, remember? Plus, everything was handled by Gringott’s until I was seventeen. Then they dropped this stuff in my lap, and it’s more than you think! I inherited the Black estate, and portions of Dumbledore’s estate, and I have business investments and dividends to report. It’s not as easy as it sounds, believe me!”

“You want help?”

Draco didn’t want to make it sound too dismissive, but it was obvious that Harry was in over his head, and only his stupid Gryffindor pride had kept him doing this alone for this long. Harry replied with a snort and a startled look.

“What? You know about this stuff?”

“Hello! Formerly the heir of one of the largest magical estates in England! I was taking summer courses in etiquette, genealogy, and estate management every summer after I was thirteen. Maybe I never finished all the courses, but I can do this. Lead the way!”

Harry was muttering amazement under his breath while they went upstairs, and he pulled all his files for Draco, who promptly began to re-sort them before even starting the Gringott’s forms.

“I can’t believe you let them get this bad. Couldn’t you use a filing technique more sophisticated than ‘that pile over there’? Really!”

Harry was grumbling excuses when Draco got a look at some of the figures on the papers, and he was adding them up fairly quickly.

“Fucking Merlin, Harry! Do you even know how much money you have?! Have you even looked at these.”

“Honestly? Not lately. You tell me.”

“Assuming I have all the paperwork available, and I’m not sure I do, you crossed the million Galleon mark back in August! Harry, you’re almost as rich as any of the old pureblood families ever were. My family was an exception…we always had more than almost anyone else, but for a nineteen year old who said he was ‘shite poor’ when he started school, you’re one of the wealthiest wizards in England! And what the hell is this? You have a separate vault for practically everything, at Gringott’s prime rates, when you could request consolidation and save quite a bit in fees. There’s even a whole separate account here that I don’t even see the purpose for.”

Harry leaned forward, then slapped his head.

“Damn! You weren’t supposed to see that, but if you keep it to yourself, I’ll tell you what that one’s for.”

Draco hesitated, mulling over the possibilities, then gave in.

“Okay. Silence guaranteed. What is it?”

“It’s Molly and Arthur’s retirement fund. Charlie, Bill, Percy, the twins, and Ron all make
contributions, along with me. We’ve been doing it since Ginny died. Money was tight for them at the time, and even though things have gotten better, we made a pact to start laying aside something for them as often as we could. In about ten more years, it’ll be enough for the interest on the account to make a real difference for them, and Arthur will be able to retire while he’s still young for a wizard. If you spill this, it’ll ruin the surprise we’ve been making this, and believe me, you’d piss off the entire lot of them, so not a word about this, right?”

Draco was biting his lip. It was the most decent thing he’d ever heard of anyone doing…second to granting sanctuary to a known Death Eater. It occurred to him, and not for the first time, that it was a miracle he’d come to this place, with these people in it.

“What a deal. Not a word. It’s fucking brilliant, and I wouldn’t spoil it for all the gold in Gringott’s.”

Harry nodded, and they got back to work, and instead of days being wasted while Harry fumbled through his paperwork with ham-fisted desperation, Draco carved his way through the swath of forms with the ease of someone born to it. Harry just answered questions every so often, and helped sort his jumbled piles of reports, and Draco worked a few miracles of his own, this time with nothing more than a quill and some ink.

TBC!!!
Getting To The Heart Of The Matter

That next day, Harry had been sent on a supply run to Diagon Alley, while Draco and Molly left for a discreet journey to Madam Pomfrey’s offices at Hogwarts. Harry had been informed of Molly’s intention to take Draco along for a proper check-up, but they had left the subject of Dumbledore’s portrait entirely unmentioned.

Draco was more tense and skittish than he’d imagined, and what had seemed brilliant a few days ago looked terrifying now that it was approaching. Dumbledore had always frightened him, looking at him with eyes that seemed to cut through all pretense and bored into his heart and soul, weighing and judging, and no doubt finding him lacking. If he’d just listened, or confessed, or asked for just a little help, so many things would never have come to pass.

Dumbledore could have made things right. He could have saved Draco’s mother, hid them both from Voldemort, and let them ride out the storm of the war in safety. Draco never would have repaired that cabinet, no one would have been hurt, he’d still have a wand, an estate and a future in wizarding society, and most of all, he never would have found himself in the clutches of LeStrange, MacNair, and Hyde-Pratt. How different things would have been, if he’d just listened to one old man, instead of conspiring to kill him, however reluctantly. Portrait or not, Dumbledore was a bitter reminder of every wrong decision that Draco had ever made, and ultimately paid for so dearly. It wasn’t a meeting he looked forward to, assuming he could even manage to arrange one.

Molly and Draco entered the fireplace, and with an enormous rush of green flame, they emerged, coughing and blinking, in Madam Pomfrey’s waiting room. Madam Pomfrey had no one waiting save for Draco and Molly, and she quickly ushered Molly off to an examination room. Draco sat nervously, fearing that, alone, if someone walked in, he might be accosted before Molly or Poppy could explain his presence in the castle. Fortunately, with Hogwarts still in the process of re-opening, there were no other visitors to deal with, and Draco sighed relief when it was his turn to enter the examination room.

Madam Pomfrey still seemed as stiff and formal as she had always been, and there was no malice or lingering ill will in her tone as she coolly instructed Draco to answer her questions, while she cast a rather lengthy series of diagnostic spells. After jotting down notes and casting a few rather complicated sounding spells, she sat down and turned to Draco, while he fidgeted, waiting for her conclusions.

“Congratulations, Draco. Your recovery is almost complete, and I daresay the credit is largely Molly’s. There are, of course, a few things yet left to deal with, like the remaining scarring, and I’d like to take a moment to discuss them.

First, you are still underweight by at least some fifteen pounds, and I hesitate to call you ‘well’ until
you’ve put those last few pounds on.

Second, prolonged malnutrition and forced inactivity has caused a certain amount of muscle atrophy. I strongly recommend a regimen of exercise, especially for your arms and legs, to build new muscle where the old was lost. There is nothing magical I can do for you regarding this, so do try to follow my advice on this…or it may be a long time before you have the strength and vigor a young man of your age and size should possess.

Last, there are several scars that were caused by Dark curses, and I am afraid that we have no cure for those. Repeated treatment may diminish their size, but they will always be at least partly visible.

If you apply yourself, you may very well be in peak condition before the new year arrives. I certainly hope you appreciate the efforts that Molly Weasley has undertaken on your behalf. Many would not have done as she has.”

Draco listened intently, promising himself he’d start exercising regularly, and winced a little at Madam Pomfrey’s chill reminder of his low standing in the eyes of the wizarding world. He looked her as directly in the eyes as he could, and answered with perfect sincerity.

“I do…appreciate it, I mean. All of it. I wouldn’t be alive if she hadn’t let me stay, and I know it. Please don’t think that I don’t. I made a lot of mistakes, but I won’t ever dishonor her kindness.”

Poppy Pomfrey’s face softened, and she broke the tension by nodding approvingly and putting away her notes.

“Very well. Good luck to you, Draco. I hope we won’t be seeing you for treatment anytime soon. Do take care of yourself.”

There was a faint warmth in her tone that Draco had never heard before, and it surprised him, given that Madam Pomfrey had always viewed him with slight distaste, having long ago witnessed his childish inclinations to malinger, find fault, leech sympathy, and cast blame. It occurred to Draco on the way out that, despite what he had thought only days ago, despairing of hope after nearly killing himself, Harry had been right. People were sensing that he had changed, and they were treating him accordingly, once they’d had time to see that it was a real change, and not another in a long string of plots or schemes.

Molly was waiting alongside Minerva McGonagall, now the Headmistress of Hogwarts, even though its halls were still empty of children. Next year, come summer’s end, Hogwarts would open again, and a little of the damage that Draco had done would be laid to rest once and for all. The headmistress looked down her nose at Draco, clearly uncomfortable, and spoke with a crisp and irritable Scottish brogue.

“Mr. Malfoy. Mrs. Weasley has spoken very passionately in your defense, or I would never even consider such a request! You betrayed a school that nurtured your talents, and that betrayal resulted in the death of our headmaster, the injury of various persons, and the closing of the school for almost three years. I am not telling you these things because I think you do not know them…I am sure that you do. I am saying them because I cannot idly allow you entrance without holding you to personal account for the crimes you were only reprimanded for, and which have damaged this school nearly irreparably.

Mrs. Weasley assures me that you have a sound purpose for your request, and further insists that you have changed in many ways, and endured more than a few trials. I certainly hope this is true. The harm you have done can never be undone, and no one has prospered from it…so let us hope that you have gained some wisdom, else all that happened here will have been for naught.
Before I admit you to the office in privacy, I will require but one thing. You will discuss the reason or reasons you wish to see Albus Dumbledore’s portrait, with me, and you will answer my questions to my satisfaction. Is this clear?”

Draco’s lips were tight, and his face was an impassive mask. The scorn burned, like it always did, and he had known he would feel this, confronted with what he did in his last days here. He nodded his assent, then took a deep breath and began to plead his case.

“Professor… I wouldn’t be here if this wasn’t more important than the way I feel about being here. I’m sorry about more than I can even say, and there’s nothing I can do to make it right, but I need help. We need help… for Harry. You’ve read the papers, and Molly trusts you to keep this confidential. The rumors about Harry are true. Whatever happened to him during the war scarred him, and there are times when he… he doesn’t seem… right. I don’t think it’s just stress, or bad memories. I think it’s more… maybe even from exposure to the Dark magic he had to fight to defeat Voldemort. I can’t prove it, but I think Dumbledore might have been the only person Harry trusted enough to share all of the details. He might be able to help us help Harry.

I know you remember us not liking each other in school, but we get on fairly well now. Molly had her suspicions about Harry needing help, and I managed to piece together a few things on my own, but we need more information… badly. Molly saved my life, and I’ll do anything… anything to make it up to her.

There is one other reason for coming here. I want to talk to Dumbledore personally. I know he’s just a portrait, with the memories he had at the time the spells were cast to prepare it, but I have things I need to say to him. You probably know he tried to help me… but you don’t know how much I wish I’d accepted it.

That portrait is the only part of him that will ever get to know how much I wish I’d let him help me. I don’t have much of a life left, and I’m kind of starting over from scratch, and all I really want is to make it a better one. I want to tell him I’m sorry… in person, and I want to help Harry get well. I don’t care what I have to do. I’ll take Veritaserum if you want. Anything. Just please let me see him, and then let him decide if he wants to talk to me. Please?”

Minerva wasn’t quite sure what to make of Draco’s outpouring. It certainly seemed more sincere than anything that had crossed young Malfoy’s lips years ago. Draco had been a notorious liar, a cheat, a bully, and a coward during his school days, and Minerva’s memories were at war with the image of the person in front of her. The image won. This Draco bore almost no resemblance to his younger self. He was too slender by half, and he had no shred of vanity left, wearing old clothes and sporting less than perfectly cared for hair. His speech lacked any trace of haughtiness, and there was a thread of desperate eagerness to prove himself, and a frantic need to accomplish a goal that might involve subjecting himself to scrutiny and scorn. No… this boy was not the Draco Malfoy of years ago. Minerva had no further questions, and in the face of Draco’s humility, she felt a weird tinge of shame for her earlier harshness, however warranted it may have been.

“As you wish. Follow me to the office, Draco.”

It was his first time walking through these halls since he was sixteen. The more than two years since had been bitterly hard, and there was a part of Draco that looked at the school and almost wept with the desire to return. It would have been nice to know what the day would hold, or to have a regimen of classes, and nothing more to worry over than grades or social status. Now he had no real status speak of, as well as no wand, and no way to get one. The only thing Draco was reasonably sure he had, was a house full of people that had, for whatever reason, taken a liking to him, and were willing to help. If seeing Dumbledore would help Harry and bring peace to Molly’s home, then so be it.
Dumbledore’s office was the same as he remembered it, and that suggested that, for reasons unknown to Draco, the Headmistress had not yet made any changes to it. The portraits that Draco remembered had all been shuffled by one position, and in an ornate frame facing the enormous desk, Albus Dumbledore was resting quietly in the large chair he’d enjoyed at his desk during life. A small bowl of candies was on the desktop in the portrait, and it might well have been a perfect image of him during life. He appeared relaxed and not ravaged by time, not at all the tired-looking, frail man that offered Draco a way to freedom then. Dumbledore’s image came to immediate alertness as Draco entered the room, looking intently at Draco, then Minerva, politely waiting to be spoken to before addressing either.

McGonagall cleared her throat politely, then spoke to the portrait.

“It would seem that you have a visitor, sir. Draco Malfoy was quite adamant about seeing you, and I believe he wishes to speak with you privately. I shall leave it to you to decide if he can be trusted in here without my supervision.”

Albus Dumbledore looked down at Draco again, and smiled warmly.

“Alas, I’m afraid I cannot shake your hand, Mr. Malfoy, though it is a pleasure to see that you are still well. Could you enlighten me as to the nature of your visit?”

Draco had his back to McGonagall, and risked everything by silently mouthing the word ‘Horcrux’ just before answering.

“I have two reasons for coming. The first is to see you and apologize for…for…a lot of things. The second is Harry. He hasn’t been right since the war, and I think you know more about what he was doing then than anyone else. I need help if he’s going to get better. Harry deserves to be happy…and I assumed that you would want that.”

The image of Dumbledore looked utterly nonplussed, but lifted its head and addressed McGonagall a second later.

“Ah. Headmistress? I believe young Mr. Malfoy has matters of sufficient import, and nothing but good intent. I should think we will be just fine if left alone for awhile. Thank you, Minerva. Do take a seat, Mr. Malfoy.”

McGonagall nodded assent to the portrait on the wall, and with a last look at Draco, stepped out of the room and into the hall. The Dumbledore image turned its full attention to Draco.

“I’m so terribly sorry, Draco. I failed you, and at the time when my intervention was most needed. Harry tried to ensure the safety of everyone, as well as stop you from bringing the war into Hogwarts, and had I listened, or acted sooner, there was much that could have been done. Alas, old men sometimes forget the details…in the search to understand the ‘big picture’. It appears that however exceptional I may have been in my arts, I was subject to that fatal flaw as well. You have my most sincere apologies.”

Draco sat in the chair, mouth agape. Of all the things he’d expected to hear today, that was not one of them. Albus Dumbledore was apologizing…to him!

“But…but I…I got you killed. You didn’t…you couldn’t…”

“Draco…I did and could. Do you think I did not know that you bore the Mark? I knew before the summer was over. Severus warned me of every detail he possessed, Harry passed along others, and I had means of gaining knowledge and insight that you could not have known of. It was my intention
to offer you safe harbor, but I did not expect you to achieve success before I returned to Hogwarts that night. I know now that had I acted sooner, more lives than my own would have been protected.

Severus would have been a hero, and not my killer, Harry would not have been forced to see my death, Bill Weasley would never have been maimed…and you…you, Draco, would never have been forced out into a world at war with only Severus to guard you.

I assure you, Draco, that if you came seeking to pay debts, you have none, save what is owed you. Instead, I implore you to look in your own heart, and grant me your forgiveness. Perhaps you erred, and certainly you did wrong, but how much greater is the wrong of a man who could have prevented it, knowing what was to come, and did nothing. I wronged you, Draco. Can you forgive a foolish old man for his mistakes?”

Draco’s throat was too thick…his eyes were tearing up quickly, and it was more than he could cope with. Overwrought, Draco let himself cry quietly for a few minutes, while Dumbledore spoke a few quiet and comforting words from above him.

“There is a handkerchief atop the desk, if you have need of it. There is no shame in feeling, Draco. Only the unfeeling have something of which they should be ashamed. It would appear that you are a better man, if somewhat thinner, than you were a boy those years ago. When you’re ready, I should like very much to hear what passed.”

Draco fumbled for the handkerchief, and wiped his eyes and nose, thinking that it was amazing that even Dumbledore’s picture had so much power and wisdom. For a mere image to be so wise, it bespoke to him the kind of power that Dumbledore must have held while still alive.

“It’s…it’s been hard, sir. Really hard. I had no idea what was coming. I thought I did, but I didn’t…not really. Professor Snape hid me for as long as he could. Then he turned us both over to the Ministry when the war was over. Harry told him to leave the country or else, even though the Ministry tried us and released us after a few months. No one would take me in. I…I wound up with a pack of other Death Eaters…I thought they’d take care of me.”

Draco gave sick little laugh, blurry-eyed and weirdly relieved to say this aloud.

“They took care of me, alright. They fed me slop and scraps, tortured me while they were bored, and raped me when they weren’t. They showed me what it really meant to wear Voldemort’s Mark. I was never a real Death Eater. I thought it was a pureblood’s dream, an order that would make wizards powerful again. Now I know that everyone who wore that Mark, wore it because it gave them the chance to hurt and kill, and if there had been no one else to abuse but other purebloods, they would have still found ways to hurt people. That’s all that mattered to them. Voldemort just gave them a wider range of victims by declaring it a war. I was an idiot, and believe me, I paid enough for it.

They dumped me off because they were afraid Harry was going to catch up with them. He’s been hunting Death Eaters since the war ended. He’s captured a few, but mostly he just kills them. They left me in Muggle London by the side of the road. I worked my way to Diagon Alley, and took the Knight Bus to the Weasley’s. I guess I thought that Harry would kill me or save me, and at that moment, I was alright with either choice. Molly stopped him from killing me, and gave me sanctuary. That’s why I’m here. Most of the time, Harry is alright, but there are times…when he’s terrifying. He’s got so much power, and when he’s angry…”

Draco shook his head a minute and cleared his thoughts.

“Molly says that he was normal until just after the war ended, and most of the time he still acts it. He
hunts and kills Death Eaters, and there aren’t that many left, but he still does it. He lost his Ministry license, and the press knows he’s behind the killings. He swore he’d stop killing as long as Molly and I needed his help…getting me well again, but I’ll be healthy soon, and I’m afraid that, if I can’t find a way to make him let go of the past, he’ll start killing again, and the Ministry will come after him. I don’t want him to get in trouble…I don’t want him to kill anymore, and I only have a few clues.”

Dumbledore interjected politely. “Such as the one you mentioned without actually speaking? Harry’s behavior is disturbing. It does not sound like the young man I knew. Harry was many things, and very dear to me, but he was never a murderer, and he should not have become one since, were things as they were supposed to be. Tell me what you know, and I shall see what we can do about Harry.”

“I got Harry to tell me a little about the war, and I had to fill in the blanks with some things I overheard by accident. I’m just guessing about parts of it, but…here’s what I know so far. Harry was on some kind of mission, with Ron, and Hermione before she was killed. They were searching for artifacts that Voldemort enchanted to protect him, and they didn’t tell anyone else because Dark magic was involved, and their own friends might have tried to stop them if they knew.

Sometime after Hermione Granger was killed, the final assault on Riddle manor was launched, and they found the last artifact there, and destroyed it. Then they fought off Voldemort’s Inner Circle, killed most of them, and Harry killed Voldemort. Ron carried him to safety afterwards, and the war was over. Harry worked with the Aurors until they tried to stop him from executing Death Eaters, and after that he took up working on his own, and he’s been killing people ever since.

I tried to talk him out of it, one night before he left the house, and I thought he was going to kill me for it…he got so angry, it felt like he was on fire and I’d just burn up from being too close to him. Most of the time…he’s wonderful. He’s patient, and polite, and helpful. I just know he’s really a good person…I can feel it, but I’ve seen him when he’s ready to kill, and it’s even more terrible because it’s so wrong…so not him. I think he was exposed to Dark magic, or had to use some that was too powerful for him, and it unbalanced his mind.

The only other clue I have is a word I don’t understand, but I know it scared the hell out of the one person I mentioned it to. He told me I shouldn’t even say it aloud. Harry and Ron got drunk one night, and while they were talking, they mentioned hunting Horcruxes during the war, and that it was necessary. That’s the only clue I have. If the Horcrux things were the artifacts Harry was destroying, could he have been cursed or made crazy by what he was dealing with?”

The image on the wall looked very grim, and Draco felt a very faint tremor of fear, even though he knew it was only canvas and paint, animated by magic, staring back at him.

“Draco, this is more serious than I could have imagined. First, I shall require an oath of secrecy from you. What I must share with you cannot be told to others. The knowledge of it places them at risk, and I will not have more lives despoiled by my foolishness. You already have enough knowledge, and the desire to do right with it, to merit being told the rest, but I must have your sworn word before I tell you more.”

“I swear to tell no one what I learn here, unless it’s the only way I can acquire aid for Harry’s sake. That’s the only stipulation I want. I don’t know if I can do this alone, and if I need help, I won’t pick anyone I don’t trust completely. You’ll just have to believe me, but I don’t want to fail Harry, no matter what the price.”

Dumbledore nodded, then stood and paced the length of his frame, looking more tense than any painting had a right to be.
“You are correct about the Horcruxes, Draco. They are artifacts of Dark magic, crafted then by Voldemort, and Harry and the others were hunting and destroying them. It was the only route by which Voldemort’s defeat could be assured. As long as a Horcrux remained, Harry could not have defeated the Dark Lord, and all would have been lost.

What you did not know, and what scarcely anyone living, save Harry and Ron, can tell you, is that Voldemort made the Horcruxes in an effort to achieve immortality, by splitting his soul into eight pieces, and storing seven pieces in the artifacts. A Horcrux is a means to store a portion of one’s soul, thereby making a return from death possible, as long as a new body can be found. To make such a thing requires enormous power, and that power can only be achieved through the death of others. This is why Horcruxes are the darkest of Dark magics. One cannot be made without death and suffering.

Voldemort crafted seven Horcruxes during his life, and hid them well, some even in plain sight, since none but himself knew their nature. I started Harry on the course of seeking out and destroying them, and we had only just returned from such a search the night I died. Harry continued the task I set for him, and Minerva informed me when Voldemort was defeated, and the war was won at last. I took heart at the knowledge, but I fear that we celebrated prematurely now.

Draco…you said that Harry killed the Dark Lord in the final battle. Did he say how he accomplished this?”

Draco felt a creeping sense of dread. His skin prickled and the downy hairs on his arms and neck were beginning to stand on end.

“Yes. He killed Voldemort with a knife to the heart. They threw spells at each other while Harry got close…then Harry stabbed him in the chest. He said there was an explosion, then he woke up with Ron carrying him out of the building. What do you think happened?”

Dumbledore’s image looked paler and more serious than Draco had ever seen the man himself look.

“Draco. My worst fear…all our worst fears have come to pass. Draco, Voldemort…Voldemort is not truly dead.”

TBC!!!
Dangerous Revelations

Draco sat gobsmacked, past the point of being able to respond. Dumbledore’s painting could be insane…couldn’t it?

’He can’t be. It can’t be. This isn’t happening to me. It’s a dream. Wake up…wake up, Draco! Not real…not real…not real!’

“It…it can’t be. Harry killed him. The body was in the basement of Riddle manor. Harry put a knife through his heart…he has to be dead! What would this have to do with Harry anyway?”

“Draco…you mistake my meaning, though the situation is no less grave. I did not say that Voldemort is alive. He is not alive, but neither is he truly dead, and he is still a danger to us all. Let me explain some of what I know of Tom Riddle, who became Lord Voldemort, and you shall understand what we face.

Tom Riddle was an orphan, the last half-blood scion of the house of Gaunt. There is much that is unknown about his past, but I sought out what was left to others in memory, and passed that learning on to Harry, in the hope that he would better understand his foe. Tom Riddle was a bitter, fearful child, and grew into an implacable and unrelenting young man. He was obsessed with immortality, so that his power, influence, and skill might last forever, rather than fade from history. Many Dark Lords began upon such a path, ultimately corrupted by the quest for eternal life.

Grindelwald was another, though he sought the Philosopher’s Stone, instead of crafting Horcruxes. Tom Riddle’s penchant for killing made the Horcrux an easy choice for him. Alas, that choice has led to our current dilemma.

Harry was scarred by Voldemort’s attempt to kill him, and this is known to all, but what few know is that a prophecy had been spoken not long before, with Harry at the center of it. Voldemort had knowledge of a portion of the prophecy, and he knew that the child of James and Lily Potter possessed the power to someday destroy him entirely. He chose to strike first, and ironically, that choice fulfilled the conditions of the prophecy. When he killed James and Lily Potter, their last thoughts were of their infant child, whom they loved above all things. Lily Potter chose to die in the defense of her son, rather than let him be slain and walk away with her own life. Her sacrifice laid a protection upon Harry that lingered his entire life. Love.

Voldemort’s casting of Avada Kedavra was deflected by Harry, even as an infant, and it rebounded upon him, killing Voldemort’s physical body. He was left a bodiless spirit, and it was more than a decade before he was able to muster the strength to take form and rise again. This was accomplished only because his soul had been divided into many parts, and each part was a Horcrux, of which we then knew nothing. This is how he remained alive, despite physical death, and came to haunt us all.
once again.

The prophecy told that Harry would ‘possess a power the Dark Lord knew not’, and I tell you now that that power is love. Harry was born of love, protected by love, and carries in his heart a capacity for love so strong that it could not be extinguished by all that has transpired. That love is a thing that Voldemort cannot, and never will, understand, and love shall be his undoing. Of this I am certain.

But Harry did not defeat him…not truly. A link was forged between Harry and Voldemort on the day that curse rebounded. As vulnerable as Harry was to Voldemort when young, even then, Voldemort was vulnerable to Harry. I do not believe that link was closed. Harry did not repudiate Tom Riddle…he simply killed him. To destroy him forever, Harry’s capacity for love should have been in play. By killing the Dark Lord in rage, with an act of brutality and revenge, Harry may have made it possible for the Dark Lord to form a crude Horcrux, and escape death once again. He must face the last remnant of Tom Riddle with love, or he will not prevail. Only when the link forged between them is broken can Tom Riddle truly die, as he will have no tether left to cling to in this world.

What you have described makes sense of other matters as well. The assaults upon the Weasley family, and the murders of Ginny Weasley and Hermione Granger. If Voldemort had some insight into Harry’s potential power to destroy him, he may have targeted those close to Harry, killing them to ensure that Harry had no love or compassion left in him, thereby guaranteeing that, should he fall in battle against Harry, he might still survive, and the prophecy would remain unfulfilled. It would seem that he succeeded.

There are several possibilities. Each must be taken seriously until one is disproved. It is possible to make a living being a Horcrux, but I am unsure if such a thing could be done so quickly, and under such circumstances. Harry himself may be a Horcrux, with a portion of Voldemort’s soul trapped inside of him, spreading its influence as best it can. That would clearly explain Harry’s lust to kill. He may be a blend of both, with Harry clearly dominant, but tainted by Voldemort’s capacity for killing, and lust for power. As long as Harry is dominant, his rage and darker impulses will be channeled into uses that Harry deems acceptable…killing those who wear Voldemort’s Mark. Should the influence of Voldemort’s soul take the lead, he could become a power so terrible as to rock the foundations of our world.

A second possibility is the knife. As an object, and an object used for violence, it would be simpler to use as a vessel, and would easily house the remainder of Voldemort’s soul. Harry’s link to Voldemort through his scar, and the proximity of such a thing, may explain his behavior as well. It would be very hard to separate him from such a device, and if he often kills, I am sure it would play a part in those killings.

Last, it is possible that Harry was simply exposed to too much of Voldemort’s dying soul, and the unbinding of so many Dark enchantments acted like a toxin upon him. Surrounded by so much hatred and murderous rage, it may well have infected Harry, taking root in a soul that was already wearied by war and death, and growing with every killing Harry undertook. No matter the source, it must be stopped.

Draco, I charge you with this task, and I name you the successor to my knowledge of these matters. I entrust to you the task of saving our Harry from himself, or from what dwells within him. Any trace of Voldemort’s spirit must be destroyed, and Harry must have no hatred in his heart when he faces this. Only love can conquer evil completely, and in its absence, evil will prosper and strengthen. Draco, I will do all I can to aid you, but there is one possibility you must acknowledge. If Harry turns utterly to evil, he has the power to become a true Dark Lord in his own right, and his knowledge of Horcruxes makes him an enormous danger. If he is lost to evil, and chooses to kill those who are not
wicked, or accumulate power over others at any cost, he must be stopped, and others must know his
weaknesses in order to stop him. I hesitate to say he would have to be killed, but he would certainly
have to be caught and restrained. If you cannot save him from the Dark, you must arrange his
capture, to save his life.

I can offer advice, and I can assure you that Hogwarts' resources are yours if you should need them. I
can also recommend to you certain persons that may be of help, if it is necessary to incapacitate
Harry, for that is no task for a single wizard, and certainly not for you alone. Take heart, for there is
much good in Harry, and if as you say, he shows much of his true self, then he is far from lost. I only
warn of the possibility, that you know well in advance what may be necessary, and know what signs
to look for.”

Fawkes fluttered into the room, landing on the perch by the desk, then flapped his wings and fanned
his tail feathers out, allowing a single one to drop. Draco picked up the nearly foot long gold and red
feather, and stared at it in amazement.

“I congratulate you, Draco. Fawkes but rarely surrenders his plumage, and he does so only when in
the presence of the pure of heart and intention, and only when the need is great. I might mention that
such feathers are powerful ingredients to potions…as well as potent components for the making of
wands. You have been honored.”

Draco smiled and bowed his head to Fawkes, who dipped his beak in return and lifted off from the
perch, returning to the other room.

“I…I’m still trying to sort this all out. I’m flattered that you think I can do this, but I’m still not sure
how. How do I establish what the truth is, and what would I do once I have? I don’t know.”

“Draco, you defeated a thousand year old system of wards, and engineered a route through them at
age sixteen. Do not doubt that you are capable of amazing things. I believe in you, and you have the
same capacity to do good and protect others that you once possessed for harming them or belittling
them. You have gained a wisdom through hardship that few can claim, and you have survived what
would have broken many who called themselves strong.

What I am saying, Draco, is that I am proud of you. I believed in you even then…years ago, and my
faith in you has been proven right. Put aside what you have done, and what you have been, and
think of what you can be, and what you can do. You are stronger than you know, and a better man
than many. Will you undertake this task, and see it through?”

Draco blushed. Dumbledore had never praised him in school, and he’d thought the old man
incapable of showering affection or compliments upon any who were not of Gryffindor. The sudden
praise made him terribly uncomfortable, but he’d known his answer since long before the question
even came.

“Yes. I’ll do it. I’d risk my life for Harry, or Molly. I was willing to risk his anger to get him to stop
killing…for Molly’s sake…and for his. Now I’d do it for two reasons. Because the animal who put
this Mark on me deserves to die…and because the idea of him hurting Harry even now…it makes
me sick. I won’t let it pass. If it takes my life to save him, so be it. I’ll find a way. Thank you. For
everything, sir. I might be back…if I need more information, or help, but I hope it doesn’t come to
that. At the least, I hope I can see you again when it’s all over.”

The portrait smiled kindly, despite a worried expression that remained, and bowed to Draco from
above.

“All our hopes go with you. Harry is dear to many, and he was as beloved to me as a child of my
own, when I was alive. I let him face many dangers, in the hope that he would grow strong enough to face what he had to, and I did not survive long enough to protect him from this last peril to his soul. You are our best and brightest hope, Draco. Go with our blessings…and our love.”

Draco stood, feather in hand, and bowed back.

“Good bye, sir. I swear I’ll do my best. I won’t disappoint you again.”

And then he was on the way back to Pomfrey’s offices, head awhirl with newly gained knowledge, trying to make sense of the impossible sounding theories, and terrifying possibilities, that he’d been handed.

‘Oh, Merlin! I’m the best and brightest hope? The wizarding world couldn’t find a better hope than that? We’re screwed! I need help! Badly! Shite…all this is hanging on a fucked-up ponce who can’t sleep without spells and has a crush on someone tainted by the Dark Lord. Gods! Is that why he excites me? Am I so fucking sick that I get horny for a bloke with a chunk of Voldemort lodged in him? This is crazy…this is sooo crazy. BUGGER! Get a grip! One thing at a time. Go home, work on healing and exercise, work on a plan, get a decent night’s sleep. Repeat until world is saved. Got it?’

Molly met Draco at the entrance to Madam Pomfrey’s and reassured Draco that she was in fine health, and the potion was working perfectly. A few spells every now and again as needed and it would be as though nothing was happening to her at all. A touch more gray about the temples maybe, but not a symptom or side effect in sight.

Draco shared his diagnosis as well, letting Molly know that he needed to gain a few more pounds and start exercising, and he thanked her for the rapid improvements he’d made so far. She fussed outrageously that she’d have him fed up as best she could, and praised his determination about setting his best foot forward in a new life. It was still a ticklish subject, and Draco was relieved when she noticed his perpetual blush and let the subject drop.

They returned to the Burrow and set themselves a lunch, sipping a bit of tea and discussing Harry before he got home. For the first time since his arrival, he was forced to deceive Molly, proclaiming that Dumbledore had only provided faint hints at what might ail Harry, and he didn’t dare mention Horcruxes. Dula had been right. Knowledge of such a thing created the danger that it would spread, and ultimately pass into the hands of someone who would use it for ill. The fewer who knew of Horcruxes, the better. Far better that the Weasley household, which already had two people in it burdened by the knowledge, not suffer another, save Draco himself. Now he, Harry, and Ron were the last known living custodians of the events of the war against Voldemort, and no others should be tainted with that knowledge.

This was not the only thing he had to face today. Before long, Harry would be home, and it would be time for a session of scar reduction and removal. There were no places left on Draco that didn’t involve the removal of clothing and the persistent touching of those places by Harry’s calloused fingers. The notion of Harry’s hand stroking his inner thigh made Draco feel complete and utter panic…not to mention a vague, and then more insistent, stiffness in his groin, and no matter what he did, the matter was only going to get more complex. He wanted to be close to Harry, and he needed to get closer to achieve his goal, but he didn’t feel even remotely comfortable enough to start actively pursuing anything romantic.

Draco retreated to his room, and then to the shower, claiming the need to clean up after having a very emotional talk with Dumbledore. It was an acceptable excuse, and also quite true, but his real motive was the need to relieve the tension in his groin, lest Harry notice his ‘tension’ later.
It didn’t take long at all, since visions of touching Harry’s broad, smooth chest flicked through his mind easily now, and when he slid his fingers back, pressing lightly against the muscles just behind his sac, he came to orgasm hard and quick, and bit his lip trying to stifle any noise. It was better than he remembered it being in school. What had seemed a vaguely pleasurable pastime then was becoming a necessity to cope with his daily proximity to Harry.

Draco cleaned himself thoroughly, and found himself primping in the mirror to his own surprise.

‘It’s a healing session, you prat! Not a fucking date! You’re pathetic, Draco. Spiffing up your scarred up arse for Potter like you think he’d…he’d what? Give you a kiss for being so pretty and good? Do you really think he’d fuck you? Would you even let him? Could you? Stop kidding yourself. Just get back to business. Heal. Plan. Sleep. That’s what you need to be doing…just do it.’

If only it were that easy.

TBC!!!
Draco plucked a couple of books from the pile that was currently being researched and headed back to his room. A little reading might take his mind off of the impending session with Harry, which would only be made more tense by the secret knowledge that he now held. It explained so much, and as sappy as it may have been, his heart simply leapt when he thought that Harry might be in danger. The urge to help was overwhelming, and Draco cursed his own fickle emotions for betraying him and leaving him so vulnerable to a single person.

Maybe it was alright...being gay. Maybe other people with normal lives could live that way with grace and dignity. Like Dula...and Charlie, but not Draco. The notions that crossed his mind when he reluctantly masturbated were both attractive and repellant. He liked Harry...a lot, and that was frightening. Sometimes...just lately...when he thought of Harry, he thought of the reality of sex. There were considerations that came into play, when he thought such things, that were uncomfortable in the extreme.

He’d catch his mind flicking over things like being kissed, passionately, for the first time, by someone he genuinely desired. Harry. He imagined it being a forceful and determined kiss, full of unspoken sentiment and carefully restrained desire. Harry wouldn’t push him...or hurt him, would he? He imagined a wonderfully lean and strong body pressed flush against him, this time far closer and warmer than it had been while separated by mere blankets. What would it be like to touch Harry...there? Hold a stiffened length in his hand, and feel no pressure to service it quickly or roughly? Or...or...Merlin forgive him...feel Harry alive and pulsing inside of Draco’s own body, not plundering and painful, but marked by a desire to please Draco for the first time.

At moments like that, images of the only reality he had ever known came back to him. MacNair, huge and leering, pounding into him so violently that his hips and buttocks had bruised from the force of it. Being flung to the floor of his stinking cell, his body on fire with pain within and without, trickling his own blood and MacNair’s seed. Laying on his side, vomiting up his last meager meal, because he was sickened by what he’d just been forced to endure, and because it simply hurt too much to sit upright, or even walk. Was that what sex was? It was terrible to imagine Harry treating him that way. It seemed silly at moments, but doubt had its claws in his heart, and Draco feared that lust drove men insane. After all, he knew for a fact that Harry had a dark and violent side, however well hidden it was lately.

His uncle had pleased him quite deliberately, only to ensure that when MacNair took him, it would be all the more horrifying, but Rodolphus LeStrange had been clinical, if skillful, and there had been no real passion between them. He knew that, had he been sober and given a choice, he never would have surrendered himself, even if he’d known it would be pleasurable that one incredible time. It had to be better...with someone who actually cared about you...didn’t it?
Draco didn’t have the answers to these questions, but he did dare to ask them, and that was more than he could have borne a few weeks ago. Wanting Harry as more than a friend was fraught with peril, and he could avoid it for now, as Dula had suggested…but not forever. He wanted Harry, more lately than ever, and he couldn’t avoid this endlessly. Someday, he would have to choose.

Draco pored through the tome in front of him, laying across his bed in an ungainly sprawl, flipping pages idly while he waited for Harry to return.

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Harry strolled through Diagon Alley, possessed of the confidence that comes with knowing that even the denizens of Knockturn Alley gave him a wide berth. It was a far cry from his second year, when he’d accidentally Flooed into the wrong shop, and ran afoul of the unsavory characters that populated that notorious place. Now people moved aside when they saw the tall, dark-haired man with the scar walking their way. For a boy who had been bullied and frightened throughout his childhood, it was a heady feeling, knowing that people dared not cross or challenge him.

He purchased yarn for Molly, as well as potion ingredients that were needed before the new moon came, and would eventually become the potion that kept Molly’s menopausal symptoms in check. He needed a few fresh quills and ink for himself, as well as a few things for Draco.

He hadn’t been able to get Draco off of his mind lately. It wasn’t really vexing to him…he rather liked thinking of Draco’s impudent smirk and lively gray eyes, especially when he thought of the game of Seeker’s Tag they’d played. It had been downright intoxicating to see Draco so happy and alive, and the sight of his reddened cheeks and cheery smile after their game had been the stuff of dreams. Now he walked down Diagon Alley and saw nothing but things that Draco would someday need.

Would Draco be offended by being purchased things? Possibly, but Harry’s fingers itched to open his pouch and buy a few things, just to show that he cared. Why should Draco do without, when there were things he clearly needed, and Harry wouldn’t be burdened by getting them? It was bloody annoying, dancing around these questions, when he just wanted to give Draco the help he deserved. He wanted to give Draco everything…everything he deserved.

Deserved.

That was it! Draco deserved some nice things. He’d adjusted Harry’s Gringott’s forms. Saved Harry over fifty Galleons a month in vault fees, consolidated his holdings, and filed his paperwork properly, on time, and without goblin assistance for the first time since had Harry had become an adult. He deserved compensation! If it were a form of pay, for honest work done well, Draco couldn’t say no!

Harry made inquiries in some shops, only gathering ideas for later purchases, but his eyes narrowed when he saw Ollivander’s down the street. Draco needed a wand. His uncle LeStrange had snapped Draco’s wand in front of him, just to remind Draco of his own helplessness. Harry could give him back the one power that marked Draco as a true wizard. Sure, Draco could travel by Floo or make a Firecall, send owls or ride a broom, but a wand was what marked a person as an independent wizard, and this could give Draco his freedom…when he was ready to take it.

It was an unnerving thought, and certain doubts crawled through Harry’s mind as he approached the shop’s window.

‘I trust him, don’t I? He really has changed, and there’s so much he’d be able to do with a wand. But…but…but if he left? He wouldn’t really need me…or Molly…anymore. He hates needing
help—he feels guilty about being unable to do things himself. It would make him so happy, but he might leave…and…and…fuck all! I’d miss him. I think I’d more than miss him. It…it wouldn’t be right to hold him back, though. I can’t keep him trapped just because I bloody perv all over him every time I’m in the shower! Maybe…maybe if he starts thinking about leaving…I could ask him to stay. Molly would let him…I know she would. Sod it. I’m going in!’

Harry set up an account on his own recognizance. Whatever the cost of making a wand to suit Draco’s specifications, the cost would be covered—all he had to do was bring Draco here. Ollivander’s would take down his spec’s and make a wand that was ideal for Draco. It was pricey, but hey—if he thought of what it would have cost him to keep renting multiple vaults from Gringott’s for a couple years, then this was fairly cheap by comparison. Why should the goblins have all that money when Draco could really use a wand?

Harry drifted through the market, picking up small odds and ends, as well as a few items for his own amusement, until he reached Weasley’s Wizarding Wheezes Inc. He took the front entrance, thankful that his long friendship with the twins, and his legitimate involvement in their business, covered his reasons for visiting…just in case.

As always, he was politely led to their slightly cramped back offices, where George was cursing his way through a pile of paperwork. George looked up cheerily as Harry walked in, relieved to have anything to concentrate on that wasn’t fiscal or quarterly in nature. The magical eye he wore spun twice with relief while George sat back and sighed.

“Good to see you, Harry. Business or pleasure?”

“Pleasure today. You look like I did yesterday. I hate bloody Gringott’s. Half-tempts me to store all my gold in the house.”

“That doesn’t work so good for you or us, Harry. We’d wind up with no room for mum to let in guests. Small price to pay for never wondering where the next meal’s coming from, eh?”

“I suppose. You two have it worse than me. Who’d have thought having a bit of money would be such a right pain in the arse? Finally got mine done last night…on time for once.”

“You? Hell, Harry, that’s a personal best for you. Usually a day late and a Sickle short, you are.”

“Not this time…I had Draco helping me. Hell, he practically did it all himself…I just answered questions and signed forms where he told me to. Dead easy, it was.”

George gave Harry a look of incredulity, while his enchanted eye did a series of back flips.

“Go on! Pull the other one, mate! Draco Malfoy did your Gringott’s forms? Now I know you’re taking the piss. Are you sure he didn’t set you up for a fraud charge?”

Harry snorted with amused derision. An idea was germinating in his skull, and it was getting larger and more serious as he went.

“I’m not lying! ’Struth, mate. He’s a bloody genius at it. Took all kinds of summer courses for estate management years ago, and they stuck. There isn’t a form the goblins can make that he can’t decipher and finish in less time than it takes us open them. I’m deadly serious. You ever thought about having someone else do yours?”

“Only every time I have to do them! Just, me an’ Fred, we always wanted to keep the work in the family and all. Never felt right, just letting someone else do it all. We built this place from the ground up, thanks to you and that pouch of Galleons. The rest was all our blood, sweat and tears. Doesn’t
mean we haven’t given it a thought, though.”

Harry had a feeling the hook was in, now all he had to do was land the fish. Fred and George hated paperwork as much as Harry did, and Draco needed to feel like he could provide for himself. There were possibilities here that would allow Draco to still be a part of the family that Harry loved, and maybe even still live in the Burrow. It was an opportunity that couldn’t be ignored.

“Well, your mum is no one’s fool, and she trusts Draco completely. I’ll vouch for him personally, if you two promise to lay off the pranks and forget about his past. Try having him do this stuff for once, and if you’re content with it, keep him on. What’s the harm? Least that can happen is you don’t like the finished work, or him, and you send him home, but I’m telling you he’s a bloody prodigy at this stuff. Saved me enough in fees and penalties to make it worth it ten times over. Give him a decent wage and don’t ride him about school or the war, and I swear you’ll be amazed. What do you say?”

George listened to Harry’s spiel about Draco with amused interest, then gave Harry a piercing glance…made more so by the way his eye flew forward to within an inch or two of Harry’s face, examining him with intense scrutiny before zipping back to George’s face.

“You’re serious…hire Draco to do wizarding accountancy. Bloody unbelievable. We could do it. Just a trial basis, and Fred’ll wanna visit home an’ see mum before we commit to anything, but I think he’d give it a try. We wanted to come by for supper since we heard mum got sick. She Firecalled and said she was fine, but y’ know how it is…just good to see her. We’ve been working too much anyway. Maybe a little help will get us home more often.”

“That’s the spirit, mate…just-”

Harry was interrupted by the hasty arrival of the secretary, bearing a sealed envelope for George, who took one look at it and peeled away the ribbon and wax seal, eager to see the contents. A second later, he glanced back to Harry.

“It’s Morrigan…he’s been sighted in a Welsh fishing shack on the coast. Got the coordinates right here. You want to move on this tonight?”

Harry remained still, but his hand itched for his knife, and he wanted to see those coordinates. He’d made promises…but he’d made promises to himself, too. Morrigan wasn’t Inner Circle, but he was violent…and dangerous. He couldn’t be left running loose.

’I could take him. Some quiet little town, no big wizarding presence. Easy in, easy out. Just gut him and go. All done…one more down. I could do it. After they all got to sleep, I could be back in an hour…maybe less if I move quick. It wouldn’t be like last time. No one would have to know.

It was so damnably tempting, but Harry fought that temptation with all he had. If Draco woke from a nightmare, and Harry wasn’t there, it would all come tumbling down. He’d made a promise…to Molly, and then to Draco. Promises were things to be kept. Like debts to be paid. If Draco left, maybe then he could go back to dealing with these scum on his own…but he could wait. Nightmares be damned…he could wait if he had to.

“No.”

George looked at him like Harry had just grown a second head.

“No? You’re letting one skate? Busy tonight?”

“No…and no letting him skate, either. Use a secure channel to slip those coordinates to Nymphadora
Tonks. She’s the last person left in the Auror business that I still trust to do the job right. She’ll have a squad down there before dawn if you get this to her marked as urgent. Let them handle this one."

“Damn, Harry. If I didn’t know better, I’d say you’re getting soft with age. Not like you to let someone else take one out. Still, if you say so, consider it done. It’s your lead, mate. We just help with the finding. Tell you what, when you get home, tell Draco we’ll give him a fair shot at a job, and tell mum we’ll be by in a couple days, alright?”

Harry sighed with relief. His palm still itched for the comfort of his blade, but the decision was made. He just hoped he’d made the right one. He bade George farewell, and headed back to Diagon Alley to finish his errands.

He was only a few steps past the entrance when a brusque, yet thoroughly annoying, voice accosted him.

“Hold it right there, Potter. Lurking around Diagon Alley? Mysterious trips into different shops on who knows what kind of errands? Let’s see what you’re carrying!”

Harry turned slowly, already feeling his anger beginning to push to the surface, and he recognized the junior Auror immediately.

“Dawlish? Who the hell do you even think you are? It’s called shopping…this is where wizards do that kind of thing. So unless the need for quills and ink is suspicious these days…I’d suggest you F**K THE HELL OFF!”

Dawlish spooked a little when Harry raised his voice, but the little weasel was undaunted.

“We’re on to your capers, Potter. We know what you’ve been up to! Dead bodies popping up with the Mark on their arm…all over England…and now we hear you’ve got that Malfoy punk living with you. Sounds fishy enough for me! You’d be smart to just turn yourself in now, and save yourself a whole lot of trouble!”

Harry’s eyes bulged dangerously.

“Capers? Capers? Who the fuck even says ’capers’ anymore, Dawlish? Were you trained by bad Muggle movies? Fucking hell! You are one pathetic collection of walking clichés! Get the fuck out of my sight before I hit you so hard your ancestors will cry!”

Dawlish moved for his wand, but Harry’s head-butt came faster, crashing into the bridge of Dawlish’s nose and sending him to the ground in a sprawl. He fumbled for his undrawn wand, only to realize that Harry was already twirling it in his left hand.

“Fetch! F**ker!”

Harry pitched the wand down the street, well past Dawlish’s reach. When the man scrambled to crawl after it, Harry’s booted foot crashed into his backside and sent him tumbling forward into a pile of trash at the corner.

“Next time, tell them to send a real Auror! If you piss me off twice, you’ll think this was your fucking birthday! Prat!”

Harry stormed off, leaving Dawlish fuming and bleeding in the alley. He’d had a difficult enough day, worried over too many things as it was, without having Kingsley’s incompetent jerk-offs pestering him. If the Minister wanted to talk, he could bloody well use an owl.
It was obvious that Harry was tense when he returned, and Draco picked up on it as soon as Harry entered the room. The brusque and business-like way he opened the jar of salve. The huff of irritation when he sat on the edge of the bed. All together, it was playing havoc with Draco’s nerves. Harry was radiating anger…like before…and while it wasn’t directed at Draco, he could feel it, hot and ambient, making his skin crawl and his stomach clench with fear. He knew he had to do something.

Draco rolled off the bed and put his book away, fumbling with the stopper for the Calming Draught while he tried to think of something to say.

“Molly’s check-up was good. So was mine. Pomfrey says I need exercise…to gain back the muscle mass I lost this last year. I was thinking…maybe you could help me. You exercise a lot. We could do that…together…if you don’t mind?”

Harry sighed, and he seemed to be trying hard to stifle his general irritation.

“Yeah. That’s a pretty good idea. I like it. We could start tomorrow, if you like?”

“Sure. You seem really tense, Harry. You sure you wouldn’t like a swig of this stuff? Tastes only so-so, but it works.”

Harry sighed again, then leaned forward and rubbed his temples, trying shake off some obvious stress.

Draco took a wild gamble. Something hungry and crazy and desperate took him over for just a second, and he risked everything on a single gesture.

He started rubbing Harry’s shoulders. Harry was motionless from shock at first, barely able to believe that Draco’s hands were gently, if somewhat amateurishly, working the taut muscles on either side of his neck.

“Shut up. I know you want to say something, but just shut up and let me do this. You look like you need it. Let me.”

Harry was obviously stifling words, and a few groans, but he kept still and quiet, except for gasps, or grunts when Draco pushed on sore muscles. After working on Harry for a few minutes, feeling his own breath catch in his throat when he remembered that he was touching Harry (and those muscles felt magnificent in his hands), Draco started to chat, hoping Harry was more comfortable.

“I met with McGonagall today. She let me see Dumbledore’s portrait. I think I needed to face him, but it went better than I could have hoped.”

Harry’s muscles stiffened again at the mere mention of Dumbledore, but his reply was still calm and reasonable.

“Sore subject. You made your peace with him? He never was one to hold a grudge.”

“He said a lot of things. He even asked for my forgiveness…’cause he knew what I was up to, and he knew you were onto it, and he still didn’t stop me when there was still time. If he’d pulled me in sooner, he’d have taken me out of the war before I screwed myself out of a life or a future. I thought he was crazy…to apologize to me after all that, but he did. If he can forgive what I did so easy…I
could certainly forgive him. Look what I got!"

Draco pulled the feather from the desk and held it out for Harry. He stood silent and grinning…
waiting for a reaction.

“Bloody hell! Fawkes. This is one of Fawkes’ tail feathers. He gave you this?”

Draco nodded giddily, and returned to working on the knots in Harry’s shoulders.

“Well that’s it then. You’ll have to take this with you to Diagon Alley. I visited Ollivander’s today. I
set up an account for you…whatever it takes to make a wand to your specifications. You finished my
Gringott’s paperwork, and saved me a small fortune in fees. I owe you. So you’re going shopping
with me tomorrow, and we’ll see if we can get you some fresh supplies…you know, clothes and
such…and a wand. If Fawkes gave you a feather, you’ve more than earned it."

Harry said it all matter of factly, though he sounded very impressed by Fawkes’ gift. Draco had
stopped rubbing his shoulders, and Harry turned to see what was wrong. Draco looked like he was
frozen in shock.

“What? You need a wand. You deserve one…and you’ve earned it. Fawkes even gave you a
feather. If that doesn’t say ‘You should have a wand’, then I don’t know what does.”

“Harry. Wands…wands are worth way more than you saved on fees and taxes. I can’t take any more
from any of you. I know you have it to give, but I can do without until I work something else out.
You don’t-”

Harry cut Draco off abruptly.

“Maybe I don’t…but I want to! If you’re worried about paying me back, here’s something else I
stumbled into today. The twins…Fred and George…heard how much you did for me yesterday.
They want to trial hire you to help them the same way. They’ve got so much business that it’ll be
steady work. You could do anything you want with that money. If the only way you’ll take the wand
is to pay me back later, then fine! We’ll do it that way…but let me do this for you, just for now…
please?”

Draco started to tremble. It was faint at first, then more pronounced. He was still silent and red-faced
when the shuddering started to become so obvious that Harry became worried. What Harry couldn’t
know was that Draco was suffering from conflicting impulses. At that moment, he desperately
wanted to grab hold of Harry…hug him, and even kiss him! A very significant part of his psyche
was completely unready for anything that direct, and holding himself still was ripping him apart from
the inside.

“Are…are you okay? Draco?”

Draco bolted for the bathroom. Harry followed a second later, calling to Draco through the door.

“I’m sorry. Whatever I said, I’m sorry. We can forget the wand. It’s okay…just…you’re okay, aren’t
you?”

A few minutes passed while Draco splashed cold water on his face and regained his equilibrium.
He’d been close to hyperventilating, or a complete breakdown, and he was trying hard to keep the
reins on his emotions these days. Not that Harry made it easy when he did things like this, the big
sap!

Draco opened the door, having brought himself back to a rational state.
“Sorry about that. I…uh…I’m still tense. I should take that Calming Draught after all. Can we talk about…the other things…a little later?”

Harry was still half giddy with relief that there was nothing serious wrong, and he was amenable to almost anything. He really hadn’t imagined that Draco would get so worked up over a wand…and he hadn’t the faintest idea why.

“Yeah…sure. No worries, right? We can talk when you’re ready…not before. As long as you’re okay. Let’s just get you that potion, and get some work done. Your choice…pick a spot to be healed and I’ll get to it, okay?”

Draco nodded agreement and headed for the potion, gulping a double shot to soothe his jangled nerves enough for what was coming. He knew full well he couldn’t handle his upper legs and inner thighs being touched by Harry right now, so he reluctantly peeled off his shirt and laid back on the bed. He still didn’t like turning his back on people…the leftover effect of having been tormented and violated too many times from that position…so Harry could work on his chest today.

The potion wasn’t enough by half. He suspected that Molly had cut the strength just lately, in a good-intentioned effort to wean Draco back to independence from potions. He wished she hadn’t done it, now that Harry was gently rubbing salve across a scar along his ribs. It felt heavenly, but he couldn’t bear to close his eyes and let himself be touched for more than a few seconds, so he had no choice but to watch, torn between desire and revulsion.

Harry’s hand was beautiful. Tanned and strong, clean and yet rough from calluses. There was no meanness in the way he touched Draco, and it was obvious that he was being as gentle as he could, and oddly, that made it worse. Draco clenched the corners of the bed, and he was aware of Harry’s grimace. Harry obviously hated distressing his patient, and that hurt Draco too. Being handled by others, however gently, still evoked a reaction that was instilled in him by almost a year’s worth of utter misery, and he just couldn’t seem to change it…not even for Harry. He wanted to touch Harry back, or apologize for being such a wreck, or something! He wound up settling for letting Harry work as long as he could, then clenching his eyes shut and asking Harry to stop.

Harry put away the jar of salve quietly, unsure of what he could possibly say, while Draco took a series of deep breaths and grabbed his shirt, feeling safer as soon he was clothed again. Harry was on the edge of leaving when Draco finally spoke.

“Thank you. We could…work something out…for the wand. Something fair. But thank you. I’m sorry this is so difficult. I wish it wasn’t. I wish you didn’t have to look at anything this…this fucking ugly.”

Harry paused and turned back, filling the doorframe.

“You’re welcome. Can I ask a favor of you? Just a small one?”

There was something weird and strained in Harry’s tone, and Draco was immediately put on edge by it. He nodded acceptance quietly, unsure if it was safe to disagree with Harry at the moment. He felt the faintest hint of anger in Harry’s tone and stance, and that feeling of standing near fire was just barely present.

“Don’t…don’t ever…call yourself ugly…in my presence…again. There is nothing ugly about you. Nothing!”

Harry waited just long enough to hear Draco’s stammered agreement, then turned and headed downstairs, leaving Draco thoroughly torn…between anguish and elation.
TBC!!!
The sounds of the dying were all around him. A deafening cacophony of helpless despair. All accusing, all consuming. He’d abandoned them…the unremembered, mourned and now meaningless. Ginny, Hermione, Sirius, Cedric, Albus…and even his parents. Their killers, and those who had striven to aid those killers, walked free, hiding from their long overdue debt.

Like wild animals, incapable of reason, the beasts that had slaughtered so many simply needed to be put down. It was just. It was right. It was unfinished. Harry stood as a silent witness, before endless fields of carnage. The maimed, the gutted and torn, the burnt and battered were all before him. They’d died by spell, by strangling cord, by blade and brutal hand. His refusal to mete out like punishment to their murderers was an act of abandonment, and the screams echoed in his skull.

Coward, betrayer, and worse rang in his ears. Harry wept helplessly, in a field of the war’s forgotten, and ached for his waking mind to claim him.

“Harry”

“Harry.”

Harry’s eyes snapped open like shutters. Draco was leaning across the bed, addressing Harry quietly, obviously trying to wake him from his nightmares. He hoped he hadn’t left Draco on his own through a nightmare, but he was glad to be awake nonetheless. Harry seriously considered using Dula’s spell on himself...if it would give him a break from nightmares like that one. Harry rubbed his eyes and gave a faintly grumpy smile of gratitude to Draco.

“Thanks. There wasn’t much of anything going on in my head that I want to go back to. You alright?”

“Mostly. It wasn’t too pretty in my skull either. I was kind of glad you woke me up. I heard you muttering things in your sleep, and it snapped me awake. I was back in Muggle London. Nowhere I want to remember.”

“Mmm. I was seeing people who aren’t with us anymore. From the war. I get that a lot. Hey…I’ll be back. I’ve got a headache cure in my room. This one just left my head pounding. Feels like an army of house-elves trying to work their way out of my head with pickaxes. ‘Kay?’”

Draco nodded and laid back when Harry left the room. He listened quietly, hearing the soft sounds from the room next to him, and followed Harry’s journey by hearing the details. The unsteady, sleepy steps. The pop of a cork. Thegulp of liquid, followed by a yawn and a small burp. Then steps drawing near again...this time surer than before. Draco curled sideways and faced Harry, who flopped back into the chair.
Draco had too much on his mind. Even calmed by Harry’s spell, which would guard against the majority of ill-dreams the rest of the night, he was still full of restless thoughts. The spell couldn’t seem to eliminate Draco’s memories, but it did dim them slightly, keeping the worst of his reactions to them under control. Perhaps he was just growing used to them as well. He hadn’t woken screaming in days, and even getting sleep in three and four hour portions was better than barely sleeping or being rendered unconscious by potions. He didn’t feel much like sleeping at the moment. Too many things were on his mind from the previous day.

“Harry?”

“Yeah?”

“Can I talk to you for a little? I…I’m not feeling that sleepy at the moment.”

“Sure. We’re both up anyway. What’s on your mind?”

“I didn’t mean to…to overreact today. About the wand…and you picking some things up for me. I know it isn’t that much money altogether…but I…I felt like I owe you and Molly and Arthur so much already. It was just too much at once. A wand is a wizard’s freedom…and it means a lot that you’d want me to have one…enough to even buy it for me. It goes beyond money. No amount of Galleons could mean more than what you’d be doing for me. You know?”

Harry nodded, pulling his feet up onto the chair and settling his arms around his legs.

“Yeah, I can understand that. I was…well, I was just afraid you were insulted. I know you don’t want charity…and that’s okay. I don’t think it’s charity at all. I know you’re good for it if you want to pay it back, but I also wish you’d just let me give you something. You know you helped me out a lot yesterday. We all care about you here. People who care about each other give each other gifts. You wouldn’t owe me anything.”

Draco mulled that over quietly.

“Okay. You’re wrong about one thing though.”

“What’s that?”

“I owe all of you my life…and my sanity. Maybe it isn’t something you can count out in coins, but I owe this household more than just Galleons could pay. I’ll find a way to pay it back…someday. I’m still reeling from being offered a job…by the Weasley twins! You are sure the want an accountancy clerk, right? Not a test dummy?”

Harry chuckled in spite of being tired.

“Yes…I’m sure. They’re always at the books, and they’re just as sick of it as I am. They need your skills, and I think you’d get on well enough with them. I told them not to give you too much trouble, but I’d expect at least a prank or two anyway. If you can let one or two slide, I know they’ll be your biggest cheering section after they see what you can do with Gringotts and Ministry paperwork. Trust me.”

“Ahh. I guess I could take a few wisecracks, but can you make sure they don’t…fuck…Merlin…y’know…touch me? I…just…I can’t handle it. I can barely handle you or Molly…and I trust you two completely. I don’t want to embarrass myself. It’s humiliating enough…being like this.”

“Draco. They’re coming for dinner in a couple nights. We can both talk to them, and they’ll understand. Some things…some things they just don’t joke about. I can make it clear for them…what
they shouldn’t do…and they’ll listen. They’re nicer than you think. Wait ‘til you see George’s magical eye! If you thought Mad Eye Moody was able to pull some stunts…George is a riot!”

Draco mumbled agreement, still a little unsure of the wisdom of working alongside Fred and George, whose pranks were the stuff of legend.

“Harry? You’d coach me through some exercises, right? Pomfrey said I needed to get some muscle mass back…and I never had to work out before. You’d show me how, wouldn’t you?”

“I said I would. We can start this morning before breakfast. That’s the first lesson. Work out, take a shower and relax, then eat afterwards. If you eat before you exercise, you’re full of food and slow…and you could cramp. If you work too hard and then eat right after…you could also cramp. So tomorrow we exercise, then we clean up and get some clean clothes, then we grab some breakfast. Then we hit Diagon Alley, and you get anything you want, on any terms you want, as long as let yourself get a wand at Ollivander’s. You earned it. Besides, I like the idea of you having magic at your call again.”

“Really? Why?”

Harry let the next words slip from his tongue carefully. This was something he’d wanted to say since he’d hit Diagon Alley yesterday.

“Because…if you can do magic again, and you stay here, it would mean that you want to be here…not just because you have to be here. I’d like that.”

Draco was silent for a long while, and Harry wasn’t certain as to whether Draco was asleep or not. Then he heard a soft rustle of sheets.

“It’s kind of cold. You know…it’s probably not good for you to sleep on the chair like that for so many nights in a row. If…if you wanted to…you could sleep…like before.”

Draco’s breath was caught in throat. He couldn’t bring himself to ask for any more than that. The other time had so obviously been Harry’s generosity, but this, this would be different. It wasn’t desperate need in the face of nightmares, or comfort in the face of nearly killing himself. This was admitting that Harry was welcome in his bed, for no reason other than that Draco wanted him there. Harry didn’t say a word, and just silently unfolded himself from the chair, slipping the blanket he’d kept for the chair over himself, letting Draco keep the sheets between them as before.

Draco curled close to Harry’s arm and sighed softly with relief. He still had the neurotic fear that Harry would explode into violence if touched, but hearing Harry’s words that evening, telling him so clearly that Harry most certainly did not see him as ugly, had bolstered his courage.

“Thanks…it was a little chilly.”

Draco suppressed a smile.

“You’re welcome. Sweet dreams.”

“Let’s hope so…it’d be a nice change of pace.”

And that was that. In the still cool of a November night, Draco curled comfortably closer to Harry, who remained perfectly still even in his sleep, and let himself drift back to slumber.
Arthur Weasley woke a little early that morning. Just lately, he’d taken to setting the tea up first thing, and letting Molly come down a bit later and set breakfast with a little help from him along the way. She said she was fine, and didn’t need him in the way, but adorably, she didn’t complain half as much as if she’d meant it. He gave her a kiss on the cheek as he rolled out of bed, pulled on his house slippers and bathrobe, and headed for the stairs.

The door to Harry’s room was open, and per usual, Harry was absent…since he was always in that chair in Draco’s room, keeping watch for nightmares like the fine lad he was. Draco’s door, however, was closed, and as Arthur passed it, the most unusual noises drew his attention.

There were grunts, then there were groans, then some huffs and a loud exhalation. Arthur was a bit groggy when he’d just woke, but his eyes snapped wide open when he realized what those sorts of sounds must mean! Then voices, strained from obvious exertion, became clearly audible.

“Ouch! That hurts! I think I need to slow down.”

“Draco…you won’t get the most from this if you don’t loosen up. You’re trying too hard. Pace yourself. Breathe easier and slower. This will pay off soon, trust me.”

“Sure! So you say! You’re not the one on his back and sore as hell! This is more work than I thought.”

“Anything worth the effort always is. C’mon, let’s try this again. I thought you were doing great.”

“Push, push, push! That’s all you do, Harry. I’m the one doing the hard part now. You weren’t kidding about the second lesson were you?”

“No I wasn’t. Loosen up first, or it’ll hurt more later. You wanted to rush straight to the serious parts, and now you’re paying the price. Keep trying.”

“Ow! Oh! Damn!”

Once Draco’s voice was reduced to series of rhythmic grunts and occasional curses, Arthur moved away from the door, shocked beyond his ability to even remember why he was headed for the kitchen.

'Sweet Merlin preserve us! I’d have bet my socks that they’d have taken things a bit slower than that! After all that boy’s been through, I can’t believe he’d…or that Harry would expect him to…never mind! Tea! I need tea!'

Out of sight, out of mind, Arthur was barely able to get the tea ready in a timely fashion. The sound of the shower upstairs was soothing and familiar, and he set out the things Molly would need to make breakfast. A few minutes later, Molly joined him in the kitchen, and it was obvious by her bed robe and hair that it hadn’t been her in the shower. He hoped she hadn’t heard what the lads had been up to! It was their own business if they…well…whatever.

Molly set to making breakfast, and Arthur made himself comfortable with a cup of tea after she gave him his proper kiss good morning. The sound of the shower upstairs was soothing and familiar, and he set out the things Molly would need to make breakfast. A few minutes later, Molly joined him in the kitchen, and it was obvious by her bed robe and hair that it hadn’t been her in the shower. He hoped she hadn’t heard what the lads had been up to! It was their own business if they…well…whatever.

Molly set to making breakfast, and Arthur made himself comfortable with a cup of tea after she gave him his proper kiss good morning. The shower stopped a bit later, then started again a few minutes after that. Draco came limping down the stairs just a little after that, hair slicked back now that it was getting a bit longer, and slightly flushed of face. Arthur maintained a perfectly neutral tone as he cheerily, if somewhat tensely, greeted the young man at the breakfast table.

“Wow. What a way to start the day. I’m already exhausted.”
Arthur’s tremor was only visible if you could see the liquid in his teacup shimmering as he restrained himself from comment. Draco continued, completely oblivious.

“I mean really. Started before the sun was up, and we were at it for more than an hour and a half. We burned a lot of energy. I’m starved!”

Molly handed Draco a plate full of food and complimented him on the glow in his cheeks and his good spirits. Arthur was distracted by the need to stifle himself, and just nodded amiably and smiled, making himself busy with the plate of food Molly had just handed him.

“Harry really pushes hard, but it’s worth it.”

Arthur choked on his eggs.

“Sorry…sorry…little food down the wrong pipe. Just fine…as you were, lad.”

“Oh…okay. Well, anyway…it was harder than I thought, but I think I got the most out of it that I could. I got tired pretty quick, but Harry’s amazing. He just keeps pounding away like it’s nothing. He’s in incredible shape. I hope I can build up my stamina that way soon.”

Arthur suppressed a whimper and winced visibly, nursing his tea. He’d no idea that Draco was comfortable discussing such things at breakfast! Really! What must his parents have been like, for him to be speaking of their…um…activities upstairs, in front of everyone. Still…it was their choice and all. Didn’t want the boys thinking he disapproved or anything. He tucked back into his breakfast as quick as he could.

“You alright?”

Draco had noticed the taut lines of his face no doubt. Curse the luck. Terrible thing being bad at lying. Arthur covered the best he could.

“Sore tooth. Just a twinge. No worries.”

“Oh…okay. Anyhow, Harry’s a real animal. I had no idea he could keep at it so steady for so long. I should have known he had endurance by the way he runs all the time, but this was the first time I’ve ever seen him in action. He seems fine, but I’m sore enough to go back to bed for a week! Still, it went pretty good…in my opinion.”

Arthur felt a vein throbbing near his temple. He wolfed down his food as quick as he could, mumbling amicably, hoping Draco assumed his responses were vaguely approving, and he prayed that they didn’t invite further detail. Then Harry came down the stairs in his bathrobe and sat down with a plate of his own.

“Oy. You did great for a first timer, Draco. You’re too hard on yourself. I feel great. You wanna try a few new things in a couple hours?”

“Oh dear! Lookatthetime! Got to be in the office early today! Better hurry!”

Arthur practically leaped from the table and fled up the stairs. Draco and Harry looked quizzically at each other, then at Molly. Harry voiced their concerns.

“What’s eating him? He seems a bit tense for this early in the morning.”

Molly clucked her tongue, shrugging her shoulders helplessly.
“Oh, don’t worry, boys. He’s always been a bit barmy first thing in the morning. I’m just glad your exercises went so well. Best thing for you! That and a good breakfast and the day’s off to a fine start.”

TBC!!!
A Lesson In Creative Coping

DISCLAIMER: Warning! I make no claim to any property of J.K. Rowling's, and am in no way profiting by this. I do offer her my sincerest thanks for allowing us this garden of the mind in which we play. Further Warning! This story...and likely any I ever write...are dominated by gay themes and characters. That's how it is, if this in any way makes you uncomfortable...do not read further.

Redeem Me…by Samayel

Chapter 35: A Lesson In Creative Coping

All things considered, the day had started well enough, with Arthur hurriedly Flooing off to work, and Draco, Molly and Harry finishing breakfast and starting a little housekeeping to help Molly. A change of clothes later, Harry was hitting the books again, looking for more clues that might calm Draco’s mind, or at least help him cope with the past traumas that still plagued him now.

Draco scoured his room for clothes that fit decently, hoping that he could wear an outfit from Madam Malkin’s on the way home. If they stopped for clothes first, he could enter Ollivander’s with a shred of dignity, instead of looking like Harry’s impoverished country cousin. Not that he despised any kind of warm clothing anymore, but it was all too big for him, in spite of the weight he’d put on lately, and many of the articles of clothing he needed most simply hadn’t been saved in large quantities.

He needed good, clean socks, shoes and boots that fit properly, trousers that would stay on his hips without the use of a modified belt, and shirts that didn’t need the sleeves rolled up. Most of all, he wanted undergarments that were his own and no others. The ones he wore were certainly clean, but there was something slightly offensive about the notion of used underwear. The rather oversized boxers he had on just needed to go!

He was still giddy while he changed. The realization that before the week was out, he’d have a wand again, had dawned on him that morning, and it filled Draco with a reckless confidence that kept bubbling up every time he thought about it. The second source of his giddiness was Harry, who had made his feelings about Draco fairly clear between yesterday evening and that night, and something vaguely like hope was fluttering around in Draco’s chest. Maybe he did have problems, but Harry didn’t seem to let those intimidate him, and if he was willing to deal with a Draco that had issues with touch and rarely slept properly, well that was heartening, wasn’t it? It meant that having something like a normal relationship wasn’t entirely out of the question, and that was more than Draco would have imagined as possible a few weeks ago.

Once he’d managed to dress himself the best he could, Draco sat down and took some time to review his plans regarding Harry. He didn’t dare leave written notes about his observations, so he organized his thoughts carefully, reviewing things the way he once did when dealing with Slytherin House politics.

Harry suffered chronic nightmares, and apparently had headaches after them as well. Were these symptoms of possession, or just the after effects of surviving a war and carrying the guilt that came with having killed? Draco had never actually killed anyone, and the things he’d let happen to others through his actions still haunted him. It could be either case, so that would have to be examined later, if any new details came to light.

Harry’s temperament had changed after killing Voldemort…that much was certain. He hadn’t been given to homicidal explosions of violence, and certainly not grisly acts of mutilation, until after the...
war had ended. Dumbledore had been very certain that Harry’s behavior was tied to the night that he and Ron had broken into Riddle manor and killed the Dark Lord. It was likely that Dumbledore’s assessment of the situation was accurate. He’d told Draco a great deal about Horcruxes, but the exact route to crafting one was still unknown. It involved violence and suffering, in the form of a death, but was Voldemort’s own physical death a workable source for the creation of a Horcrux? And more importantly, could a living person be made into a Horcrux under circumstances like those? That knowledge could easily eliminate some of the other possibilities, and that would make his path clearer in a hurry.

He’d likely need more knowledge of Horcruxes than he had now, and this was a thing fraught with peril. How to acquire that information without terrifying the living hell out of everyone, or winding up running afoul of the Ministry? At least he could use a few of Hogwarts resources…and maybe lean on Dumbledore’s portrait for a little more information if he couldn’t find any on his own.

In Draco’s honest opinion, he had no hope of doing this alone, even with a wand. He didn’t know higher order spells, since he hadn’t finished his seventh year, and much of what he was worrying about was beyond even what Hogwarts taught. He was moving into theoretical magic, and he had no practical experience with that kind of research. He needed help, but his options were severely limited. He couldn’t reveal the secret of Horcruxes to anyone who didn’t already know of them…unless the situation was immediate and dire. That left only two people besides Harry that he could even speak to about this.

Dula had some knowledge, but the subject had sent him into a state of near panic. Maybe he could be brought around if he knew that Harry needed serious help? Then there was Ron Weasley, who had apparently turned over a new leaf, but the notion of Ron trusting Draco enough to reveal secrets from the war…behind Harry’s back…seemed far-fetched at best.

Draco’s thoughts were interrupted by the fiery sound of the Floo in operation. When Harry’s voice became raised, Draco headed down the stairs.

“Damn it, Kingsley! I don’t give a flying fuck if he’s off duty on suspension! If that jackass comes near me with a wand in his hand, I’ll make him wish he’d never been born! The press can kiss my ass too!”

Kingsley’s face was visible from the Firecall, and the normally imperturbable former Auror was very clearly upset.

“Harry! I can’t arrest a man for being an idiot! If we could do that, half the country would be under wraps! I don’t need this shit anymore than you do, but you don’t have to give people the answers that I have to. Dawlish has been ordered to leave you alone, but I can’t waste bodies by assigning someone to keep him at home. The press had a field day with this, and naturally they didn’t mention that Dawlish was suspended. They claimed he was ’off-duty’ when you assaulted him. Think just a little about the image you’ve got already. Do you actually want it to get worse?”

“No, Kingsley! I genuinely don’t bloody care what they think of me, but don’t even think of holding me responsible for what happens if that prat pulls a wand on me again! He’ll be lucky if St. Mungo’s can put him back together!”

“Harry! You-”

Harry waved his hand and the Firecall winked out of existence. He was holding a copy of The Daily Prophet in one hand, and trembling with rage. The air around him felt hot, and Draco felt the faint tremor of fear run through him. He hated seeing Harry like this. It was so hard to imagine the gentle and generous young man of last night with the flushed and furious man standing in front of the
fireplace. Harry turned and notice that Draco was there at the edge of the stairs.

“What?!”

It came out as angry bark, and Draco couldn’t fight the urge to flee. Harry’s green eyes were livid with anger, and Draco ran back up the stairs and shut the door to his room with a slam. His heart was pounding in his chest, an automatic response to the mere threat of violence. Even if Harry hadn’t actually threatened him, the possibility of violence hanging in the air still made him respond with near panic, and he couldn’t help it.

He heard Harry storm off, letting the door to the Burrow slam shut, and then there was a knock on his door.


Draco gulped a deep breath and sat down on the bed.

“Come in. It’s…it’s okay. Harry was yelling at Kingsley. I…I got scared. Something must have happened, but I’m not sure what. I don’t even know what they were talking about. He just looked so…so angry. I had to get away from it. I heard him slam the door downstairs on the way out. Will he be okay? Where’s do you think he’s going?”

Molly clucked her tongue.

“I’m sorry, love. I’m sure he didn’t mean to frighten you. If I know Harry he’s taken an impromptu run about the house. It’s how he deals with stress. Let’s have a peek out the window.”

Harry was indeed running circles around the Burrow, with the loping stride of a long distance runner. His face was red and tight with simmering anger, visible even from the upstairs of the Burrow. Draco moved away and sat down again.

“I hate seeing him that way. Angry. He looked like he could destroy the world, even if it was only for a few seconds. It felt like he was a volcano about to erupt, and all I could do was run. How am I supposed to help…like this? Scared bloody shitless because he’s pissed. What do I do?”

Draco sucked in a few more breaths, trying to dispel the rush of adrenaline that had left him shaky, and holding back the urge to cry from the hopelessness of it all.

Molly sat down in the chair in front of him, sighing.

“I don’t know, Draco. I just don’t know. You’re almost well. I know you’ve tried. I can’t hold you to an impossible task. If you can’t help him face his past, I’ll understand. You’ve more than enough on your plate, just getting yourself well and getting on with your life. If you don’t want to deal with Harry as well, I’ll understand. Don’t think for a minute I’d care for you a bit less for this either. You’re a fine young man, and you’ve been a perfect gentleman since you were able, and you should know that whether you stay or go, we’ll always have room for you here. Understood, love?”

Draco smiled a little. Molly knew just what to say. He appreciated the offer to let him off the hook for what he’d promised, but Molly didn’t know what he knew. He was in much too far to quit now, and more was riding on this than Harry’s reputation for a bad temper.

“Understood. The answer is no. I’m staying, and I won’t quit until Harry’s right in the head. I swear it. Molly…there’s something I…I haven’t told you. I think…I think I’m…”
Molly put a hand up to pause him.

“I know dear. If it’s hard to say, you needn’t say it. I’m not blind, love, just a bit older than I used to
be. I’ve seen how you are around each other, and I just hope you know enough to not get yourselves
hurt.”

Draco sighed with relief. His shoulders slumped as he relaxed. This wasn’t an easy subject for him,
but he wanted to get it out.

“I want to say it. I…I think I’m in love with him. I don’t even know what that is…or what it means. I
just…I can’t think of what else to call it. You and Arthur are so happy together, and Charlie and
Dula seem so right for each other. When I think of something like that, all I think of is Harry.”

Draco gave a mocking half laugh.

“Funny, isn’t it? I can barely stand being touched, but I still want a lover. I didn’t even think I could
feel like this, until it happened. I’m not even sure when. So here I am, and if I can’t help him, and
myself, I’ll never be able to be with him.”

It was sweet relief to let that out, and Draco hung his head and ran his hands through his hair while
Molly replied.

“I’ve nothing much to tell about love, but I know it’s taken near thirty years of my life and made
them as happy as they were hard. I…I suppose I’d want that…for you…and for Harry. I haven’t the
slightest how to bring it about, but it would be a fine thing to try for. As long as you’re careful with
each other's hearts, it might just turn out alright. C’mon then. Let’s have a cup of tea in the kitchen,
and wait for Harry to get back in. I’m sure he’ll set things right once his head’s clear.”

As they made their way to the kitchen, Draco noticed the crumpled copy of the newspaper on the
floor. It was the latest edition of The Daily Prophet. Draco picked it up and carried it along with, and
when he sat down and read it as Molly poured the tea, his heart skipped a beat when he read the lurid
article on the cover.

The way they’d covered it, it sounded like Harry had exploded in Diagon Alley yesterday.
Assaulting an off-duty Auror? Did Kingsley have people following Harry? The paper didn’t say. It
just rambled on in a blatant tirade that made Harry sound like a wild animal that needed to be put
down. If what Harry had said was true, the other man had drawn a wand on him first, but the press
didn’t seem to mention that either. It was grossly unfair, since even if he had beaten the man, the
article still said that Harry hadn’t cast any spells at him. Didn’t they know that Harry could have
done a lot worse?

Draco’s attention was interrupted by the smaller article down in the corner, where he saw a name he
recognized instantly. His cousin, Nymphadora Tonks, had been put in St. Mungo’s last night, after
nearly being decapitated by a Slashing Hex during a late night raid in Wales. The Death Eater they’d
been after had been caught, but not before he managed to nearly kill her. At least she was recovering,
but it occurred to Draco that this might be something else that had angered Harry. Harry didn’t care
about the press, he was probably upset because a Death Eater had nearly killed Tonksy, and he knew
he could finish off people like Morrigan easier than the Ministry could.

Poor Tonks! Draco hadn’t seen his cousin socially since he’d been old enough to start at Hogwarts,
and to be honest, his family had only tolerated the Tonks branch of the family because they were,
technically, family. No one had approved of her decision to become an Auror, but against all odds,
she’d made a brilliant one, and that had been the last Draco had seen of her. She hadn’t been
assigned to his case when the Ministry interrogated Draco and Snape, but he’d heard her name
mentioned now and again. Even if he hadn’t known her well, he still hoped she’d recover completely.

Harry entered quietly through back door, soaked in sweat, looking terribly embarrassed, and still faintly irritable. He saw Draco looking at the newspaper and frowned, then sat down and refused to look up from the table.

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t even mad at you. I… I Firecalled Kingsley about the article, and it went downhill from there. Nymphadora Tonks almost got killed last night. I don’t have a lot of friends left alive, and she’s one of them. The man they were after… he had wards that were trickier than usual…and they tripped them. They were lucky she lived long enough to get Portkeyed back to St. Mungo’s. They aren’t suited for what they’re dealing with. Kingsley doesn’t see that there are other ways… things that could be done. He just thinks signing the right forms will fix things in a few years, but people are getting killed right now, getting maimed today, and paperwork won’t help them. I just…I blew up, and I’m sorry I sounded like that. It just came out wrong. I never meant to scare you. When you took off, I just needed to run before I did anything else stupid. Are you okay?”

Draco took it all in quietly, fidgeting with his tea, and slipping a glance to Molly, who looked satisfied, but gave Draco a look that seemed to say, ‘Tell him what you think.’ Draco answered Harry stiffly.

“I’m… I’m fine… now. Apology accepted. I just wish… I wish you wouldn’t scare me like that, Harry. I know you didn’t mean anything by it, but I can’t… I can’t handle seeing you like that… or anyone else for that matter. You looked like you were almost ready to kill someone, and I was afraid you didn’t care who.”

“Draco… I promised I wouldn’t hurt you. I was just loud… and I wasn’t angry at you at all. Believe me, I wouldn’t hurt anyone in this house, please!”

“Okay, I believe you. So you know Tonks? She’s my cousin. I just read the report on her getting hurt. I kind of thought that might be what upset you.”

“Yeah. She’s the best they’ve got. If she can nearly get killed, they’re dealing with more than they can handle. I… I overreacted.”

There was something Harry wasn’t saying, and Draco immediately suspected that it was because Molly was in the room. If he could get Harry away for awhile, he might get more answers. He was still more than a little upset with Harry, but he decided to steer things in a direction that would get them away from here for awhile.

“Do you still want to go to Diagon Alley? If you don’t… I’d understand… but.”

“Oh… yeah! I still want to go. Hell, at the moment I could use some cheering up, and I think getting you that wand might be just the thing. I’ll go change and be right back.”

Harry took his leave and headed upstairs, while Draco finished his tea. Molly looked approvingly at him before speaking.

“Well done. Don’t let him forget that his temper has consequences for more people than just him. If you can make sure he behaves in town, please do. The last thing we need is more trouble.”

Draco heartily agreed with that, and when they left for Diagon Alley shortly after that, he was still winging prayers skyward, hoping Harry wouldn’t run into anyone else to draw his ire!
Diagon Alley wasn’t terribly crowded, but Draco felt hemmed in anyway. There were too many things he remembered from this place, and more than a few people stared at Harry, and they stared even more intensely as they recognized Draco by his side. Everywhere they walked, Draco recognized corners where he’d scavenged for crusts or clothes, and he also recognized shopkeepers that had threatened him if he set foot near their establishment again. There were no happy memories in this place, and today’s bad press for Harry made things even worse.

Madam Malkin’s came into view, and Draco was never so glad to be off the street. Thank Merlin that Harry had plotted their course according to what Draco wanted first. It was still slightly humiliating to be here, in tow behind Harry, letting someone else purchase goods for him like a needy child, but at least he’d be leaving with new clothes on his back.

Several disapproving glances from staff that recognized him were quickly wiped away when Harry glowered at them. On the heels of the Auror assault, a dirty look from Harry Potter was a powerful motivator. Malkin’s clerks and tailors snapped to attention and led Draco to the fitting rooms, where they oozed forced politeness and made certain that Draco was satisfied with the results.

It was disappointing to find that he had to purchase clothes that were nearly in children’s sizes, since he’d lost so much weight through the hips, chest and shoulders that, even having gained back a little, he was still just about the size he was near his fourth year at Hogwarts. He did manage to get the clothes a half size larger than necessary, so he’d have a little room to grow into them, but that was all he could do about that for now.

At least his feet hadn’t changed, and shoes and boots that fit and didn’t either pinch or threaten to fall off were nice. Somewhat discreetly, he managed to inquire about undergarments, and he was thankful that Harry was in another room while he sorted through things that looked comfortable…and flattering. Not that he planned for Harry to see them or anything, it was just…why not look good if you could? It had been a long time since he’d been able to be vain about anything. Even if he would only see himself in the bathroom mirror from time to time, it would still be nice to see someone who looked a little more like the handsome boy he’d been in school.

Once he had the rudiments of a wardrobe, Draco relented, and decided to buy more after he was working. He really didn’t want Harry to spend more than was necessary. Harry might be willing and eager to buy more, and Draco admitted that shopping was taking the edge off of the sour mood that had claimed him after Harry’s outburst, but he still didn’t want to seem greedy.

Harry paid for the entire lot without blinking, and made a snide comment about the politeness of the help, implying that he didn’t appreciate their attitude toward Draco. Draco already had a comfortable and attractive outfit on, fitted so that he merely looked slender, but fit, rather than appearing to be a wispy waif in oversized clothes. It was refreshing, feeling confident about the way he looked, and though Harry didn’t know it, Draco had seen several of Harry’s appreciative glances from out of the corner of his eye. Harry looked like he didn’t know what to say, and Draco deliberately teased him, fishing for compliments. Although the outfit was all black and deep green, the best way to described it was ‘snug’, which gave a solid description of the way it clung to his body and showed off the few assets he still had. Harry fumbled through some praise, and still red-faced, moved the topic of conversation along while they made their way to Ollivander’s.

The wand shop treated him more or less as Malkin’s had. Their acceptance was grudging, and had much to do with Harry’s presence. Draco found it privately amusing that, when Voldemort had been around, Harry been thought of as a delusional boy, and Draco an upstanding young citizen of good breeding. It showed how much they really knew…which was almost nothing.

The phoenix feather was greeted with interest though, since they didn’t often see them, and his was
the first since the ones that were used to craft Harry and Voldemort’s wands. Draco took a mental note about that as well, wondering if the relationship between the wands changed the dynamic when Harry and Voldemort had met that final time.

Draco used a few test wands, and allowed the staff to take notes, while Harry demanded the best parts and final product that money could buy. In the end, the price was somewhat more than any ordinary wand would cost, but since several ingredients were quite rare, the work would take a specialist, and that justified a certain increase in price. Draco left entirely content, knowing that it would be owled to the Burrow before the week was out, and he would at last be a wizard in every sense of the word.

The smile on Draco’s face did wonders for Harry’s mood. It was a genuine pleasure to see him walk so confidently, dressed as sharp as he had been in his school days, willow-slender and cheerful, but with a more open and happy-go-lucky expression upon his face. Draco’s cheery chatter was music to Harry’s ears, and watching him walk was giving Harry some brief palpitations of the heart…not to mention making his trousers a bit tight near the groin.

Draco glanced ahead of them, slightly confused. An angry looking man with matching black eyes, the telltale sign of someone whose nose had been recently broken, stormed through the crowd with wand already in hand. Given the report in the paper about yesterday’s events…this had to be Auror Dawlish!

“Potter! Stop in the name of-”

The man stumbled spectacularly, flailing about as he hit the ground face first with a force that was only muffled by the pile of yet un-removed animal excrement that lay in the center of the street. They strolled by quietly, while the man groaned into the pile of dung, and eventually passed out, still face down in the stinking mess. Only Draco had seen Harry’s fingers twitch.

“Say…Harry?”

“Hmm? Yeah?”

“An observant person…like myself…might have noticed that, a few seconds ago, there was no pile of animal shit in middle of the street.”

The corner of Harry’s mouth twitched.

“Really? And just what are you implying?”

“Two things. I think you should have been in Slytherin…and you’re officially the coolest person I have ever known.”

“Why thank you, Draco. The feeling is mutual. I think it’s time we headed for home. Shall we?”

“Yes. Let’s.”

And with matching grins, they walked to the edge of town, and Harry Apparated them back to their home.

TBC!!!
The remainder of the afternoon passed peacefully, and Draco subjected himself to another round of Scaradicate Salve with Harry. They did finish his chest, and Draco rejoiced silently that, with his shirt open, he was no longer a sight to sicken people with disgust. It had been a fine time, getting out of the house and walking about with Harry, and Draco had been heartened by Harry’s even-tempered response to Dawlish.

When he asked Harry why he’d gone so easy on a man he’d as much as threatened to maim, Harry quietly asserted that someone had put him into too good of a mood to spoil by ripping Dawlish apart in the street. Draco was flattered accordingly, reveling in the knowledge that Harry genuinely enjoyed his company.

Chatting with one another also took the edge off of Draco’s morbid fear of touch, and smoothed their way through the healing session, but it didn’t prevent Draco from shuddering all throughout, then remembering each touch wistfully after the fact. It was so perverse, to dwell on it, hunger for it, and daydream of it, then recoil from it when it actually happened. While he was looking into ways to help Harry, Draco promised himself he’d try to look for anything that would help his mental state regarding being touched too. Anything that might allow him to feel bolder, and dare to reach for what he wanted, would be a godsend.

Dinner with the twins had been a surprise pleasure. Fred and George had been in good spirits, and had taken Harry at his word, treating Draco fairly courteously, and restraining their impulses with regard to pranks. Mostly, they were just happy to see that their mother was up and feeling fine, no different than they’d ever known her. That was enough to ensure a cheerful tone to the evening, and Draco found that he could get along reasonably well with the two entrepreneurs of the Weasley clan.

Arthur had finally had an amusing day at work, and related to everyone the strange tale of a cursed bookstore, where the shelf in the weight-loss section had been cruelly charmed to move books first up and out of reach, then down to the floor when people reached for them. By the time Arthur’s team had arrived, it had looked like an exercise class, with customers bending and stretching every which way, trying to reach the books they wanted. Fred and George had been envious of the creativity, wishing they could find the culprit and hire him or her before the Ministry caught them, claiming that talent like that shouldn’t be wasted.

Draco found that conversation with the twins was easier than with most people, and once it was clear that they had a certain confidence in Draco’s abilities, thanks to Harry, he felt comfortable going over types of forms, current income, and unusual circumstances that he would need to be aware of to ensure accuracy. It was more complicated by far than Harry’s circumstances, but that was alright, he was more than capable enough to handle the job, since the Malfoy estate, for which he’d practiced years ago, was infinitely more complex than anything Harry or the Weasley’s could imagine.
Before it was done, Draco had secured a trial hire for a month, which he was sure would be enough for the Weasley twins to see his skills in action. It was official…Draco had a job, and not with poor pay either. The twins had been just a little more than fair, but not so much that it seemed like charity. They claimed it was easily worth ten times that much to avoid doing the paperwork themselves, and that Draco was going make it possible for them to get home on time. How could a small price be put on that?

With that settled, Draco relaxed the rest of the night, utterly crushing George in a game of wizard chess, and discreetly watching Harry from across the room, constantly fighting the urge to go to him. Not for any important reason, but just because, when Harry was happy, Draco felt like a moth drawn to the flame of that happiness. If Harry couldn’t easily touch him, then he was going to have to be content to be near him, soaking in the warmth of Harry’s presence, and taking his pleasure from the rare moments that Harry’s mask of convivial calm dropped, and hungrier, more appreciative glances, full of idle dreams and hopes that neither dared to speak, slipped Draco’s way.

‘Merlin. I didn’t even think I had an ego left to stroke. What’s so wrong with liking that he looks at me? At least he doesn’t turn his head away now. He likes how I look…shouldn’t I enjoy that? I know I can’t…I can’t…do much…like other people, and maybe it isn’t fair to him, but damn it…I want him. I want him to like me…and like how I look. Is that so bad?’

Perhaps it wasn’t fair, for either of them, but it was all he could grasp for at the moment, and it was something to hang onto, which, frankly, he desperately needed these days.

When the evening was done, and the twins had gone home, Harry and Draco made ready for bed. Harry went to his room, and Draco changed into pajamas and climbed into bed. He lay there nervously, on his side and facing the door, waiting and trying to remain expressionless.

Harry entered the room, this time in pajamas of his own. Until this night, he had always slept in his clothes, and until last night, Harry had slept consistently on the chair, with only one exception. This night, Harry didn’t say a word when he entered Draco’s room. With a sheepish smile, Draco waited until Harry had slid comfortably beneath all but one sheet, then he curled himself as close to Harry as he could justify, and whispered his thanks in the dark before Harry cast the nightmare wards and they drifted to sleep.

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It had been a good night, by their standards, and their dreams had been mild, as they only sometimes were, but morning still came too soon for their tastes. Draco was terribly sore, since yesterday’s exercise had finally taken its toll, and he griped mightily when Harry insisted that he at least try a reduced workout, just to work out the stiffness from the previous day.

Unbeknownst to either Harry or Draco, Arthur was making his usual journey to the kitchen, and had stumbled afoul of their conversation once again, much to his total discomfort.

“Merlin’s Beard, Harry! You can’t really expect me to do it again so soon. It bloody hurts something awful! I just want to have breakfast and go back to bed…please?”

“Look. It’s for your own good. You need this, Draco. You asked for it…remember? Now that we’ve started we can’t just quit, otherwise there was no point in starting. I know you’re tough enough to handle this. Now stop complaining and let’s just do it!”

“Hmmph! Slavedriver! You don’t care at all if I ache from head to toe, do you? I suppose I’m just
expected to do your evil bidding whenever you want? Sadist! I’ll do it, but this is under protest!”

“It’ll get better once we get going…I promise. Just give me the best you can, okay? I’ve got your ankles…go ahead.”

Draco’s voice trailed off to pained grunts that were ending in small whimpers, and Arthur was crimson with outrage. Consent notwithstanding, it was unthinkable that Harry would…would expect…THAT…from Draco…and after all Draco had been through too! It was unconscionable! Arthur’s Weasley temper finally got the better of him, and he grabbed the handle of the door, swinging it inward while starting a tirade intended to shame Harry into better conduct.

“That is quite enough! Harry! How could you possibly-"

Arthur trailed off as Draco and Harry, still clad in pajamas, looked up from the floor. Harry was holding Draco’s ankles, while Draco had his arms behind his head, paused in the middle of a sit-up. They stared at him in utter confusion.

“What’s wrong? Did we make too much noise arguing? We’re sorry…didn’t mean to wake anyone up."

Arthur visibly deflated, turning crimson with humiliation while Harry apologized for all the wrong reasons.

“Oh…no…nothing wrong at all. Not a thing. Tea…I need tea, and breakfast. See you lads at the table. Right. Well. I’m off!”

Arthur Weasley let himself out, and toddled down the steps toward breakfast.

‘Good Heavens, Arthur. Gone daft in your old age, have you? Exercise. Nothing but exercise. Whew! Nothing wrong with that, is there? What on earth were you thinking. Really, as if they’d have gone so far so quickly. They’re lads and all, but still, the things you let your mind get away with, old boy! Ah well, just a good laugh in the end.’

Draco had managed to get Harry to speak of his frustrations from the other day, and with a little browbeating, he’d gotten Harry to agree to visit St. Mungo’s, and see Tonks, while Draco felt it was past time to see his mother. Not that it would do any good, since the only time he’d seen her, just after his release from the Ministry, she’d been a complete vegetable, catatonic and unresponsive, and that was reportedly still the case. Even so, it was only right that, if they were going, he should see her, if only for a little while. Who knew? Maybe somewhere inside, she’d know that Draco was alive and well, and that would be worth it…if it were true. All he could do was imagine, and hope, and that was all there was for it.

At least Harry had been amenable to the idea. He seemed to be in the best mood he’d been in for quite some while, and Draco flattered himself that he might have had something to do with that. It wasn’t anything that Harry had said, just a gut feeling that hinted that Harry was happier around him, and that was enough to make him all the more pleased with himself…even if the impossible prat had pushed him to keep exercising until his stomach, arms and legs just burned.

St. Mungo’s turned out to be a bit of a mood dampener. They Apparated to the entrance, Draco nervously touching Harry’s shoulder to allow side-along transport, and walked in, only to be halted by a particularly unpleasant looking receptionist, who remembered Draco from past visits. When he’d visited his mother, they hadn’t had a rule against Death Eaters in the building. By the time he’d
been released by Rodolphus LeStrange and found his way out of Muggle London, they’d stopped allowing ex-Death Eaters into the building.

“I’m sorry, gentleman. The Marked are not allowed inside St. Mungo’s, now or ever. Please depart, or I’ll have to call for security, and have you removed.”

Draco flushed crimson. He’d hoped that Harry’s presence would get him in, but alas, it didn’t look like the rigid woman at the desk was going to give any ground. It was a bitter reminder than no matter how clean and well-dressed he was, Dula had been right. Some people would never stop seeing the Mark on his arm. He could only hope that eventually, the majority of folks would see him the way Harry and the Weasley’s did.

Harry leaned forward, then ran a hand through his hair, letting his scar show as clearly as he could.

“I’m sorry, ma’am. I’m not sure you recognized me. I am Marked, and it was by Voldemort, but since the mark on my head meant that I had to fight on behalf of the rest of you, I think you can make a small exception for my guest and friend. Does that sound acceptable?”

Her mouth was set in a tight little line. Obviously this was the kind of person who hated to be challenged by anything dangerous…like a thought. Or a clue.

“Sir! I insist you leave these premises immediately!”

Harry’s neck was getting red, and Draco felt that familiar and frightening heat beginning to rise in the air around him. Harry leaned closer and practically hissed at her.

“You haven’t got enough security to stop me if I want in…and what’s more, I can fill every ward here with the staff, and I could start with you!”

It was a perfect stand-off. Draco would have admired the woman’s courage, if he hadn’t known that it was rooted in near total stupidity. Suddenly, Harry’s body language shifted, and he was all charm. He was staring the woman in the eyes while he spoke slowly and deliberately.

“There isn’t any need to call security. My friend and I are honored guests. I’m sure you wish us a pleasant visit.”

The woman’s flinty eyes became vague, and then she looked a bit startled. When she finally spoke, her tone was distracted.

“I’ve…I’ve no need to call security. After all, you gentlemen are honored guests. I hope you have a pleasant visit.”

She was fiddling with paperwork while Harry marched down the hall, motioning for Draco to follow him. As soon as he caught up to Harry, Draco whispered to him in a panic.

“Harry! Did you just Imperius that woman? That’s incredibly illegal! How could you?”

“I did no such thing. That was Advanced Legilimency in action. I planted a slight suggestion, and she did the rest. It helped that her mind and will were like butter. People who live by rules that desperately, usually need them to shore up their weak mind. Serves her right. It wouldn’t have worked so easy if she hadn’t been an ignorant cow. Besides, you have every bloody right to be here. Tonks is your cousin, and your mum is here too. They had no right to keep you out.”

“Legilimency can do that?! I never heard of that. I just thought it was a way to read minds, or block mind readers.”
“It is, but more is possible if you keep training. That’s the first time I ever tried that. I was half-surprised that it worked.”

“You get cooler all the time.”

“What?”

“I mean…you wouldn’t do that all the time…would you?”

“No! Of course not. But you need to see your mum, and this is a lot neater than me knocking the building down by blasting the staff through the walls, isn’t it?”

“Oh, hell yes! This is much better than that. Is that 14-A? That’s where Tonks is. Let’s go on in.”

Nymphadora Tonks was eating a tray of hospital food, and her face showed a complete lack of enthusiasm. Heavy scarring surrounded her neck, evidence of the near decapitation she’d survived. She lit up as soon as Harry walked into the room, then looked at Draco with confusion, then recognition.

“Harry, love! It’s good to see ya! How’d you get my scapegrace cousin in the door? I thought they-”

Harry raised a finger to his lips, and Tonks stopped speaking, waiting for his explanation.

“They didn’t let him in. I let him in. He’s staying with me at the Weasley Burrow now. Draco came to see his mum, but we stopped in here first. I wanted to make sure you were okay.”

Tonks face softened noticeably. Draco was no favorite of hers, and the Tonks branch of the family held the Malfoys to be the embarrassing part of the family, best not spoken of if not necessary. Still, she didn’t really bear any great malice, especially since Draco had been cleared by the Ministry with only a reprimand and the loss of the rights to the Malfoy estate. As far as she was concerned, justice had been done, and the matter was closed.

“Awww. You’re still a sweet one, Harry. Remus was here all of yesterday. Finally had to head home and clean up. Did you hear that he’s going back to Hogwarts as the DADA teacher again? He’s pretty excited, but that’s to be expected. He loves that school like no one’s business. Too bad you missed him. I know he’d love to see you.”

“Damn. I miss him, too. I’ve been, well, we’ve been busy lately. Draco is starting work for the Weasley twins next week. We’ve been getting out of the house a bit and getting things done before he gets busy.”

Nymphadora finally paused to stare at Draco. There was curiosity there, and she finally indulged it.

“Draco. You dropped off the face of the earth for awhile, cousin. Good to see you back and running with the right crowd, but you should eat more, you look too thin. How’ve ya been?”

Draco answered with a slightly wary tone. Aurors, cousin or no, were not his favorite people.

“Almost dead…several times over, but I got over it. Harry and Molly patched me up fairly well. You’d almost mistake me for human these days. Things are looking up, but compared to a month ago, I could be trapped under a sitting giant jinxed with flatulence and still be better off than I was then. Not that anyone but the Weasley’s and Harry cared.”

Nymphadora Tonks looked very closely at Draco. Her eyes were an Auror’s eyes, missing nothing, watching everything for details that most would overlook. There was a vulnerability in Draco that
she didn’t remember. The arrogance was gone, and only a hint of bitterness remained. Draco wasn’t just skinnier than he was years ago, far more important changes had happened since the last time she’d seen him, and it occurred to her that Draco was starting a new life, and if he was with Harry, then it must be a better one. Perhaps Draco deserved a break.

“Well. Uh…it sounds like you’re going in the right direction, cousin. Stick with Harry and he’ll steer you right.”

Draco smirked with hidden irony, glancing at Harry.

“I wouldn’t mind that.”

This was Harry’s cue to turn pink, coughing a moment while he collected himself.

“Uh…mmm. So…how’d that raid go wrong? I heard it was a complex ward that got tripped by accident. I’m just damn glad you’re alive.”

“You got that right! I’m damn glad I’m alive too! The bloody thing must’ve taken Morrigan a week to set. More bad knots in that spell than a drunken sailor could have tied. We had Anti-Apparition Wards in place, and we were picking it apart as quietly as we could, but we muffed an incantation and tripped his alarms. Next thing, he’s popping out of the shack with wand blazing, and there I am still working on wards. I got hit in the first couple seconds. Woke up here, with Remus watching over me like a big mother hen. He let me know that they brought Morrigan in alive. I heard Pinckney dropped him with a string of Stunners. At least the bastard is off the streets. It’s Azkaban for him, and nothing less than a life sentence. The ones that run never get it easy from the Wizengamot.”

Harry nodded agreement. It was true that, when they did finally catch a long wanted Death Eater, the sentence was all the stiffer for having made the Ministry work to catch them, and there were a lot of men and a few women serving life sentences in Azkaban prison these days.

Draco looked twitchy and nervous, listening to hospital staff in the corridor, so Harry kept the chat short and to the point, making sure that Tonks knew he cared, and that he’d like to see her, and Remus, as soon as they were able to get some free time. Then it was time to move on, and complete the other task they’d come for. It was time for Draco to see his mother again.

TBC!!!
DISCLAIMER: Warning! I make no claim to any property of J.K. Rowling’s, and am in no way profiting by this. I do offer her my sincerest thanks for allowing us this garden of the mind in which we play. Further Warning! This story…and likely any I ever write…are dominated by gay themes and characters. That's how it is, if this in any way makes you uncomfortable...do not read further.

Redeem Me…by Samayel

Chapter 37: Brutal Truths

Narcissa Malfoy lay still and quiet, a pale wraith upon crisp hospital sheets. She never moved, never opened her eyes, and never spoke. The damage to her body had largely been healed, but the harm done to her mind couldn’t even be guessed. The Dark Lord had been well known for his love of the Crutiatus Curse, and he had employed it extensively upon followers that disappointed him. Narcissa wore no Mark, but she had been taken captive promptly after Draco’s spectacular failure at Hogwarts, and when Draco could not be found, the Dark Lord vented his wrath upon her. Whatever had been left of her mind had retreated so far into her subconscious that no spell could bring it forth, and she remained catatonic to this day, more than two years after the ordeal itself.

Draco sat by the bed quietly, while Harry stuck near the door of the long term ward, keeping an eye out for staff that might interrupt. His mother looked very little like the woman of his childhood. There was no air of sophistication about her, and no grace or chill arrogance in play. Narcissa Malfoy was stick slender from being fed by spell and potion, and her hair was a limp and lusterless braid of blonde, kept simple and clean by the staff of St. Mungo’s. She was terribly pale, but she had not moved or been in sunlight in two years, so it was to be expected, but the changes in her appearance were hitting Draco hard.

Harry remained silent, watching while Draco picked up his mother’s limp hand, wishing desperately that Draco could be touched. He’d decided that a lifetime made up of holding onto Draco would be a good one, and it stung bitterly to leave him alone at a moment like this.

Draco cleared his throat, obviously trying to maintain his self control, and leaned close to his mother’s ear, whispering words that Harry couldn’t quite make out. This was Draco’s moment, and as much as he wanted to be a part of all things Draco, it was likely that there was nothing he could offer but his silent and unconditional support.

Draco stood up a minute later, eyes gleaming wetly, and he kept looking away from Harry, uncomfortable being seen in such a state. He’d had more than enough breakdowns in front of Harry, and he preferred to not have another anytime soon.

“Let’s go home…please. I’d just like to go home now.”

“Sure. Whatever you want. Take my hand.”

Draco took the offered hand, and looked at Harry quizzically. There were wards around St. Mungo’s, including Anti-Apparition Wards. With a muted crack, they Apparated home, standing a few feet from the door to the Burrow, and Draco looked at Harry with unabashed awe.

“Fucking Salazar’s Breath! Harry! How did you Apparate through the wards? That’s not even supposed to be possible! How…how?”
Harry shrugged.

“I can’t tell you that. I told you I can do things that the Aurors can’t, and I meant it. I’m the one who let Tonks know where Morrigan was hiding. She went there, and she almost got killed, because they can’t do the things I can. I brought you home this way because I didn’t want you to have to deal with any more paper-pushers and their obnoxious crap. You had every right to be there, and if one more of them opened their mouths, I felt like I was going to knock the building down. I thought it would be safer to just bring you home like this, but you can’t tell anyone about the way I Apparated through wards. Showing you that I can do that…I just wanted to show that I trust you. I know you wouldn’t…use that knowledge against me. There might be things I don’t tell you, but they’re for your safety…not because I don’t trust you. Do you understand?”

Draco stepped away and turned his back on Harry. He started wringing his hands furiously, unsure of what the hell to say.

‘FUCK! Fuck! I’m supposed to be happy about this! I should feel honored…if I wasn’t part of a plot to betray him if he turns Dark! How am I supposed to save him from himself, if I can’t even keep myself apart from him. How could I…be with him…like that…and then turn on him? I can’t do this! I can’t do this! Shit! Say something… or anything…think!’

“God, Harry. This…this is too much. Thanks…for trusting me. I was…I was proud of you today…for not…you know…blowing up at that bitch at the entrance. I felt the same way about what you did to Dawlish. That was just brilliant. You had a lead on that Morrigan fellow they caught, and you didn’t do it, did you? Because…it was because of me, wasn’t it? You made a promise to me, and then she got hurt…I got her hurt…”

Harry intervened quickly and passionately, letting his emotions voice themselves freely for once.

“Stop that right now! I don’t think anything like that! Not at all! It has nothing to do with you, or that promise I made. Now you know I kept it, but what happened wasn’t your fault. I wonder…do you see why I was doing what only I can? I can get through their wards, even the strongest. Aurors are getting hurt or killed, and Kingsley can shuffle paperwork and give speeches until he retires, and it won’t make that big of a difference. Do you see? I can change things…for the better…and all it costs is a few more killers who’d rot in Azkaban anyway. You saw Tonks. Tell me again that there isn’t any reason to do what I’ve done. I trust you enough to talk about it. Trust me enough to tell me what you really think.”

Draco felt panic breaths coming on. Harry was ‘hot’ again, but it didn’t feel like anger…more like…intensity…or passion, and that was a direction that terrified Draco nearly as much as anger! He sat down on the front walk, staring at the ground rather than looking Harry in the eye. Harry could read minds…what if he did that to Draco? What would he do? How angry would he be? It wouldn’t just kill the friendship between them…it might very well get Draco killed!

Harry stood stock-still, upright and unyielding, radiating power and clarity. Like some bespectacled, rebel angel, holding both God and whole of the universe accountable for its wrongs, daring to accuse creation itself for its failures. Draco’s answer was choked and pathetic next to a confidence so potent that it made the very atmosphere around them dense and hazy.

“I can’t! I can’t say it’s all wrong. Maybe…maybe you’re right. But you still don’t have to kill! I don’t care about them! I don’t! They can live or die for all I care! It’s you…I care about you…what it does to you! You have nightmares…and headaches…and you get angry! You think there’s no reason for it? Don’t you think it’s all for a reason? Killing…is always…always wrong. I think, somewhere inside, I knew that even in school. That’s why I…I couldn’t do it, not even to save my fucking family! My mum’s a living fucking corpse because I couldn’t do it! Maybe some people
accept that you have reasons…fuck all!…I accept that too, but it’s no good for you. It’s evil, wrong, and I think it’s hurting you…making you want to do it more. Please don’t ask me to tell you it’s alright. Because…because I can’t do that either. I only care about you. Whatever else you think, just believe that one thing…please! I only care about you.”

Harry’s aura of power flickered away, and he hung his head, watching Draco ball his fists and wipe his eyes, unable to look up out of shame for crying. There was nothing he could say to answer what Draco had said. His mind was on fire with so many things it was just impossible to fix an answer firmly to his tongue.

‘He loves me. He couldn’t quite say it…but I fucking well think he loves me. He only cares about me. He isn’t protecting them, he doesn’t give a fuck about the rest of the Death Eaters…he thinks he’s protecting me. Everything they did to him, after all that horrid shite, he only thinks about what it’s doing to me…killing the kind of bastards that hurt him. How is it that he wasn’t a Gryffindor? I’ve…I’ve never heard another person say anything that decent…that fucking pure. This whole world’s shite, and half the people in it are right bastards, so how does someone turn out like he did? How can anyone here be that good? No wonder. It’s no wonder I want him. I could love him. I mean really love him. I could do it, and anything it took to do it right. All I have to do is stop…stop killing. Control myself. I can’t hurt him. It’d fucking kill me to hurt him. I can do this…if I love him as much as I think I do.’

Harry knelt in the grass in front of Draco, and took a couple breaths before he found the words he was looking for.

“Draco. It’s okay. I’ll…I’ll keep my word. I’ll try not to hurt anyone. There are other ways to deal with things…maybe I can give those a try for awhile, eh? I made a promise to you…and to Molly, and I won’t break them. I can do this…for you. I swear it. Let’s…let’s go on in and get a bit and a cup of tea. I’ll be fine, so don’t worry about me, alright? We’ll be fine.”

The words felt inadequate, even pathetic coming from his lips, knowing what Draco had meant by his statements. It would be cruel, to tempt Draco with love, then watch the boy hate himself for not being able to show it. That was all that held Harry’s tongue. Love. He’d never been in love. Now that he could imagine it as possible, and believe that it was within reach, his mouth hungered to voice that beautiful word. Love. Caring about someone else more than one’s self. Love. Connecting to another person in a way that transcended mere flesh. Harry had loved many people, but he had never been ‘in’ love, seeking a connection between adults, intimate and close on every level.

His parents had loved him, enough to even die protecting him. His mother’s love had given him a protection that had stymied Voldemort for seventeen years. His godfather had shown Harry what it meant to be loved and supported without condition. Sirius had loved Harry just for existing, and hadn’t been ashamed to show or say so, getting himself killed to keep Harry alive. Even Dumbledore. He’d loved that old man so very fiercely. His mentor, his guide and defender. Albus had tried everything he knew to keep Harry alive, and yet let him risk his life to prepare for battle to come, straddling the line between protector and instructor. The hunt for the Horcruxes had nearly killed him, but it had been the only way to secure Harry’s understanding of how to win the war against Voldemort. Hermione had known she would be a target from the start of the war proper. It was obvious that she and Harry had been good friends, just as the Weasleys were. She’d known, and hadn’t cared, willing to stick by Harry even in mortal peril. And Ginny, in her own way, tangled by emotions neither of them could completely control, fumbling and uncertain. She had loved Harry, perhaps as a brother, more so than a boyfriend, and what they’d had together had been short and faintly bittersweet, the hallmark of teenage confusion. She’d been a good friend, in every way that she knew how to, even after it had been clear that nothing could last between them.
Love. Everyone who had ever loved Harry, selflessly, genuinely, had died. They were all victims of a war that Harry caused just by being born. Love had killed everything he cared about, and nearly everyone who’d gotten close to his heart. All that was left to him was around him now. This house, these people…and now, Draco. Draco, who had been the one person he’d hated more than any other. He’d never imagined that feelings like these were possible, or that they could hurt so much to have, until Draco had come here to stay. How terrifying, to open his heart to someone new, all for love, knowing what love had cost so many times before. And still…he couldn’t ignore it. He could stall for time, hunt for the right words, the right deeds, the right time, but he knew it was already too late. He loved Draco, and someday soon, he would have to say it, making it real, and making it more dangerous than any mere thought or notion. The matter was already closed.

They made their way in, and Draco apologized for his outburst, taking a few books and asking for some time alone in his room. Harry relented and took his tea, reading quietly downstairs. It was a tense and quite afternoon at the Weasley Burrow, laden with the aftermath of serious words, and even Molly felt curious about the change of atmosphere. She let it pass, since neither boy seemed angry or even upset, but just restless and edgy. Ideally, she hoped they were working out their differences, with both of them gaining from it, but until one of them would enlighten her, she’d just have to wait and hope that all was well.

Draco sat on his bed, trying to read a book that purported to hold power over dreams, but fell consistently short of what they were looking for. It was impossible to concentrate on research with Harry on his mind. The things he’d said, the way he’d said them. Draco slammed the book shut and threw it onto the chair, then curled onto his side.

The pillow beside him. It held the scent of Harry, soap and clean sweat and something faintly spice-like. It smelled so good. He wanted to inhale it, soaking in it forever, imagining himself surrounded in that scent. Waking next to it day after day, year after year, until the day he never woke again. His body reacted furiously, demanding attention, and he had to shift a little, trying to stay comfortable while his engorged flesh was confined by his slacks and underwear. Thoughts of Harry still flitted through his mind, in open defiance of the inconvenient erection tenting his pants at the moment.

‘It never should have been any of them. It should have been him. He should have touched me first. He would have made it wonderful. He’d have done it because he loved me, because he wanted me to love every minute of it. I know he wouldn’t have hurt me. It should have been him. Touching me, inside of me, making me come like that. Gods, I wish I could stand being touched! It isn’t fair! I want him so much it hurts! If I could…I’d let him.’

His errant dick was throbbing almost painfully, and Draco finally acknowledged its call, removing his belt, opening his shirt up and sliding his slacks down to his knees. The sheets were nearby, ready to cover him if anyone knocked, and he was still fighting the urge to cry while he touched himself, frantically trying to distract himself and make these difficult thoughts depart, losing himself in the everyday magic of orgasm.

How wonderful it would be, to feel Harry pressed hard against him, kissing him with a mouth that hungered as much as Draco’s hungered for Harry’s own. Touching him softly, gently, handling him like something precious and good, never marring his flesh with bruises or welts. Draco half-consciously slipped his left hand between his legs, letting his fingertips brush their way down the cleft between his arse cheeks, ultimately rubbing gently along the surface of a place he hadn’t dared to touch until now. Harry. He’d have been so good, gentle and patient. He’d have tried so hard to please Draco, make it something to remember forever. He should have been first. He would have loved it…it wouldn’t have been a joke to him…it would have been an honor…and he’d have treated it like one. Harry. Inside of him, moving his living and pulsing flesh inside of Draco’s own body, touching places that held the potential for incredible pleasure…and indescribable agony…and
wanting only to please his lover. Harry lost in a haze of orgasm, spilling his seed between Draco’s thighs, the final and ultimate proof of a lover’s satiation, filling him, marking him, claiming him as Harry’s own.

Draco’s manipulations finally reached their climax, and he bit his lip trying to keep silent, while droplets of white spattered across his stomach and chest. It had been the most violent and lengthy orgasm he’d ever brought himself, and only one horrible night with his uncle had ever held greater physical pleasure, and that had been through a drug-induced haze. Draco sat in the aftermath, red-faced and panting, stunned by his own capacity for enjoying the act. It had taken the edge off of his bad mood.

Slytherin’s Breath! If I’d bloody known thinking of Harry would make it that good, I’d have wanked off to thoughts of him since second year!

After the fact, Draco flushed with slight embarrassment, suddenly conscious of the nature and details of his fantasies, now that he was able to concentrate on anything other than the moment.

He hadn’t thought once of being aggressive, only of letting himself go and submitting himself to Harry. Was that really what he wanted? Would he have wanted that before…before this past year had…changed him? Was it even right to want that? It was fairly extreme to think of. Now, rationally, the notion of allowing himself to be…used…that way was frightening. Even sickening. He’d been through it so much. Likely more than anyone his age had any right to have. The physical act was no mystery to him, but the idea of letting it happen…on purpose…of openly desiring it…that was the strange part.

‘I…I’ve got to…talk to someone about this, but…Dula! I need to talk to him anyway, but he’d…he’d say something that made some sense. He wouldn’t tell anybody, or treat me any different if I asked about things like that. I’d better ask him before I even think about mentioning Harry and Horcruxes, though, ‘cause I’d like my answers before he hits the roof! I’ve got to Firecall them, and get a chance to see him as soon as possible.’

Draco looked at his come-splattered torso and sticky hand, then groaned with irritation and flopped his head back onto the pillow.

‘But first…first I have to learn to have a way to clean this up without leaving a trace before I go and just do it. Damn it!’

TBC!!!
Getting The Words Out

Disclaimer: Warning! I make no claim to any property of J.K. Rowling's, and am in no way profiting by this. I do offer her my sincerest thanks for allowing us this garden of the mind in which we play. Further Warning! This story...and likely any I ever write...are dominated by gay themes and characters. That's how it is, if this in any way makes you uncomfortable...do not read further.

Redeem Me…by Samayel

Chapter 38: Getting The Words Out

It was surprisingly easy to arrange a visit to Charlie and Dula’s that night, and Draco didn’t really mind going alongside Harry, except that, at some point that night, he’d need to get at least one very solid conversation in with Dula…alone. On the bright side, it was dinner, alongside Harry, at Charlie and Dula’s, and Draco felt a faint flutter of excitement when he stopped to realize that it might as well be a date…of sorts. For Draco, it was a genuine first, since snogging Pansy while trying not to retch or begging for mercy between screams didn’t really count as experience in that arena. It made him think hopefully of the things he had never done before, and it made him doubly sure that he only wanted to do those things if Harry would be there to do them with him.

Draco made use of his new clothes, making certain that if he was going to have supper elsewhere, then this time he’d be looking his best. The only moment of near trauma he experienced was in the bathroom, just after his shower. The mirror didn’t lie…he really did look better, but the scarring was still present on his upper legs, inner thighs, buttocks and back, and he knew that soon enough, they’d be dealt with…by Harry. Technically, Draco knew the technique for applying Scaradicate Salve, but the stuff was tricky to apply alone. Counter-clockwise circles from the right side of the affected area to the left. Every step was part of a theme of reversal, and while misuse did no harm, it lessened the effectiveness of later treatment, and Draco certainly didn’t want that to happen.

It wasn’t that he didn’t want Harry’s hands on him, it was that he could scarcely stand ANY hands on him...even Molly’s, and the more personal the region of his body that was involved, the less he liked being touched. That complicated things a lot, and made Draco all the more eager to get away for the evening and just enjoy the company of others instead of dwelling on tender subjects. The fact that he had a mission, and Dula might play a part in accomplishing it, was just a bonus...if he could manage to bring the right topics up at all.

When the time came, Molly wished them well and sent along her blessings and some pastries for Charlie and Dula, and Arthur saluted them with his teacup in hand and wished them a pleasant evening. Harry and Draco took the Floo one at a time, and vanished in the traditional puff of green flame, stumbling out into Charlie and Dula’s small home.

Not that Draco thought it unsuitable, since despite its small size, it was both tasteful and understated, utilitarian and yet comfortable. Dula stepped out of the kitchen, smiling broadly, and welcomed them in.

“It is good to see you again. Draco…Harry…please make yourselves comfortable. There is room in the kitchen for all. Charlie and I have only just finished getting our main course into the oven. We have a little more to do before dinner is only a matter of waiting.”

Draco enjoyed the sound of Dula’s always vaguely formal English, even if the occasional syllable was pronounced thickly, and with a slight hesitation as he carefully chose his words. Dula was possessed of an easy going manner that put Draco at ease, and Draco pondered whether that was
what he liked most about the tall, dark-complexioned gentleman. Harry started chatting as soon as he reached a kitchen chair, and Charlie listened while he stirred a dish that Draco didn’t recognize, while Dula relaxed and just enjoyed the warmth of the kitchen.

“Charlie, mate. Your mum sends her love to the both of you, and I left the pastries she sent along on the table in the living room. She wanted to know if you’ll be there on Yuletide like usual. We’ll see you there, won’t we?”

“Ooh, aye. Of course, just tell mum we wouldn’t miss it for anything. Nights off don’t happen often, wouldn’t waste one even if I could. You two look better these days, things well at home?”

Dula interjected quickly. “It looks as though Molly’s cooking is doing what it should. You look very well, Draco. This is heartening. I trust you are both alright?”

Draco answered for the both of them, feeling quite a bit more comfortable here than he had in Diagon Alley.

“Better. A lot better. I…uh…I got a job. I start next week. The twins hired me to do their books for them…and Harry…Harry got me a wand. I ought to have it by the end of the week. I can barely wait. Molly is doing just fine, too. I know it spooked everyone then, but she’s been fine ever since she got the potion and learned her spells. Madam Pomfrey gave us both a check-up, and she got a clean bill of health.”

Harry looked a little surprised by Draco’s urge to speak, but took it as a good sign, thankful that Draco was comfortable enough to be forward for once. Watching Draco sit, wan and silent in the background, whenever there had been gatherings at the Burrow, just hadn’t set well with Harry, and this was an encouraging sight. Harry took a deep breath and savored the strange and yet familiar aromas in the kitchen. The ingredients seemed largely familiar, but he could tell it was a dish he’d never had before.

“Charlie? What’s in the oven?”

“You’re gonna love it, trust me! This is old traditional Czech fare. A little heavy, but so is food back home. It’s called ‘Teleci kyta s vinnou omackou’. One of Dula’s favorites.”

Dula arched an eyebrow and watched hungrily, closing his eyes and breathing deep as Charlie opened the oven and drizzled a sauce onto the food within.

“If you are wondering. In English, that would be a roasted leg of veal in wine sauce, with slivers of bacon buried throughout the roast, and vegetables cooked alongside it. There will also be potatoes, dumplings, and noodles as well. I assure you, no one shall go hungry this night. I would not betray Molly with these words, but Charlie is a very good cook.”

Draco breathed in scents that reminded him of better times, and smiled a little at Dula’s comment. He hoped it wouldn’t be gauche, but not knowing the dynamics of gay relationships, he hoped his question wasn’t impolite.

“Dula? Do you both cook? Or does one of you cook more than the other?”

Dula looked a little sheepish suddenly, then shrugged and answered.

“There are many things I do well. Sadly, cooking is not always one of them. I do not have that art. I have sometimes made meals, like the crepes, but they are never like my Charlie’s. I am better at things such as administration, and finance. It could be argued that I am perhaps a little more subtle than Charlie when dealing with people, but…as they say…the Gods do not place red hair upon a
man for no reason at all…it is a warning.”

Dula delivered the last comment with a sly grin, knowing that Charlie would give him an exasperated glance.

“He always says that when he has an audience. Hmmph! You’d think my negotiating technique was putting people in a headlock until they accept my offer! He’s right about the numbers though. Can’t stand that part of the job. I’d ’ave pulled my hair out by now if it wasn’t for him. The only reason I got good at cooking is that, after I moved here, I was half starved for lack of Mum’s big suppers, so I started working out a few things I could do for myself. Now…here we are…and I could do this kind of thing blindfolded. Dula’s better than he makes it sound. I heard you had his crepes…wonderful, aren’t they? So don’t buy the act he puts on…just because he’s not a chef, doesn’t mean he isn’t brilliant in his own right.”

Dula looked suitably flattered, and couldn’t help staring fondly at Charlie while smoothly chatting with the others. Draco was a keen observer of his surroundings, very much out of past necessity, and he wasn’t blind to the silent looks of affection and humor that passed between Charlie and Dula so often.

‘Merlin. It’s like telepathy. They’re so close they say things with just a look and the other understands it. I wonder if Harry would be like that? Would it take five years to be this way with him? There are so many things I want to ask…how the hell am I going to fit them all into one conversation…especially out earshot from Harry!’

Dinner, when it finally came, was an informal affair that mostly involved clambering for helping after helping, and as fond of Molly as everyone may have been, it had to be admitted that Charlie had easily matched his mother’s talents. Draco had nearly stuffed himself sick, and was leaning back in his chair, finding it very strange to have a stomach that protruded for once. Harry had devoured his fair share as well, and was sluggishly discussing Ron and the Cannon’s performance with Charlie. Dula addressed Draco loud enough for the others to overhear it, and Draco practically sighed with relief.

“Draco…you have never seen the dragon pens here. Would you like a tour? Only those dragons which require close attention and care are near us, but there are still some fine specimens. Also, this will allow me to walk off some of what I have eaten. Charlie has outdone himself again. At least dragon handling is strenuous enough that we need the additional food to keep working as we do, but even I am feeling too full.”

Harry glanced up, and looked pleased by the idea.

“I’ve seen the pens a dozen times, so trust me, you’ll love it. Not quite as impressive as having one chase you when you’re on a broom and dodging fire, but it’s still amazing. Go on! You shouldn’t miss this!”

With Harry’s convenient support, and Dula’s prompt, Draco had a perfect opportunity to get away and talk for awhile, and he thanked his lucky stars that such a chance had come so easily. They bundled themselves in heavy fur coats, and Dula handed him a thick fur hat as well, then they strolled out into the Romanian night.

As it happened, they were far higher above sea level than at home, and the air was crisper and colder than Draco had expected. The heavy fur coat and hat may have been unwieldy, but now he knew that they were also necessary. Dula led him several hundred yards from the house, and cheerfully described the dozing dragons that slumbered in each pen. It was educational, to say the least, but Draco was champing at the bit to speak of other things.
Dragons, as it turned out, were inherently quite lazy, and only appeared energetic when hunting, mating or angered. Left to their own devices, only a few breeds were particularly dangerous. Sadly, throughout history, the dragon’s need for fresh meat led to raids upon docile livestock, earning mankind’s permanent enmity. Hundreds of species were already extinct, and of the few dozen left with solid breeding populations, only a few were large enough to be called secure…the rest were certainly endangered, and that was where the Conservatory fit into the scheme of things. A last attempt to study, train, and preserve the widest possible variety of species into the foreseeable future.

The specimens available were all magnificent, save for small visible flaws like poultices and bandaged wings, since the dragons kept near the house were usually under treatment for reasonably serious ailments. Draco couldn’t help but enjoy the lecture and lesson, despite the pressing need to work the subject back to himself…and Harry. Dula was too perceptive, however, to remain unaware of Draco’s tension, and after a lecture at one the smaller pens, he simply asked Draco what was on his mind.

“All is not well. You are not at ease. What troubles you?”

Draco put his hands on the stone wall of the pen, staring into the enclosure, trying to stay calm while he voiced things he had only kept to himself before.

“I needed to talk to you. Because I trust you. There are…things…I haven’t been able to talk to anyone about…that’s the real reason we’re here tonight. I felt like I had to see you.”

Dula remained still, letting the wisps of his breath curl away in the night air.

“You flatter me, Draco. I am very honored to have your trust. I am only glad you forgave me my outburst that night. I have worried over that since. You did nothing that merited being ill-handled. To see you here gladdens me, that I did not do you such serious insult. You are welcome here, and you may say whatever you will.”

Draco stood silent for a while, chewing his lower lip, unsure of how to ask certain things with any tact. It went against his judgment to blurt out personal questions, but he had very little other choice.

“Dula…I…I’m not well yet. Not really. Not the way I want to be. I have so many things I have to think about…I just don’t know what to do. Dula…I don’t want to ask this of anyone…I don’t want to insult you…but…but…I need to ask you a personal question…or two…or three. Gods! I feel like a prat asking this!”

Draco was shuddering, not from the cold, but from tension, and words were coming with great difficulty at the moment. Dula exhaled sharply, and puffs of white rolled before him, between the heavy bars of the pen.

“Draco. You have nothing to be ashamed of. Not here. If I can help, you must know that I will, as would Charlie. Speak your mind.”

Draco’s answer was hushed, and Dula strained to hear it properly.

“Dula. What…what’s it like…when you…or Charlie…or… Whatisitliketomakelovetosomeone? Is it…does it feel good…or…damn it! Dula, I just don’t know! I wanted to know…what…what makes people want to do that so much. And…and…I…I don’t know what it’s like. I…I never did anything…because I wanted to…before. I can’t even stand being touched, but I think about Harry, and I wish I could, so much that it hurts, but I can’t…I just can’t. Help!”

The last word came out a croaked and mangled ruin, while Draco clenched the metal bars of the pen
and ground his eyes shut to keep from losing his self control.

Dula remained silent and still for a few seconds longer than Draco was comfortable with, and he feared he’d offended his host after all.

“N-never mind…I’m sorry. I—”

“No. I did not mean to worry you. I… I am just terribly sorry. I am sorry that someone so young, and so very handsome, should have such worries. What can I tell you? Should I tell you details that are not all mine to share? Or should I tell you what will give you hope? Perhaps I should caution you that sometimes even things that ought to go well might fail you in the end. I do not know everything…and I would not want to lead you wrong. Please do not put your faith in flesh. What happens between people—it is not governed by simple rules. It is always different…with everyone. I can tell you that Charlie pleases me…and that I take very great pleasure in his company. He is… patient…and still powerful. Vigorous…and gentle. Fierce…and loving. I should be ashamed to ask for…or expect…more. I would risk everything, sacrifice almost anything, to keep this. I still think it wrong to taunt you with these things…because for you it has been different, and it will always be different from what I have known. Is there more you wish to know?”

“Dula…please tell me. When you…and Charlie…make love. What…what do you do? Please?”

“Are you asking what I think you are? If…if you are asking what my ‘role’ is…”

Draco nodded quickly, refusing to look in Dula’s direction, taut and miserable with embarrassment.

“I see. You need advice, but you want to get that advice from someone with practical experience? There is more. I can feel it, but I will give you your answer. With Charlie, and with myself, roles, or positions, mean nothing. There is nothing I would not do with my lover. I hesitate to use the word passive, for we are neither of us that, but if I were to say that, giving, and receiving, is shared without a thought, would that assure that you are speaking to someone who can answer your questions? Again, it is different for everyone, and I can only offer what I know.”

Draco let a savage sigh of relief free and rested his head against the bars. He was still reeling from getting the words out, when the realization that Dula and Charlie…well…took turns, struck him. He’d rather imagined that Dula was the more passive of the two, and he wasn’t even sure why he’d thought that. Perhaps…

‘Because he’s a little like me. I thought it because…because he’s…he’s what I want to be like. Confident, elegant, not a total mess who can barely talk about sex! I didn’t even think that he might be…the aggressive one…sometimes. But that’s the point, isn’t it…I don’t know a damn thing about this stuff…except what I learned…before.’

“I just thought…I thought that…I might. SHITE! This is hard. Dula…I don’t even know the names for things or acts, except for things that are insults. I think I’m…or I would have been…passive.”

Draco let his breath out again in an explosive sigh, and this time a torrent words followed.

“I dream about it. I think about it when I think of Harry. It’s all I seem to want. I…I want to feel him…inside of me…around me…with me in every way. I want to be with Harry, like a lover, but I can’t. I know they didn’t tell you the details about what happened to me. You know I got hurt. You…you don’t know how fucked up I really am.”

Dula shifted his feet nervously. He’d realized long before that Draco had been victimized, and badly, but as much as he wanted to help, a creeping sense of horror was filling him. Draco needed to let
these things out, and he had offered himself as someone who would listen. Now was the telling
moment, and he feared that what he heard might be more than he could handle. His voice came out a
throaty whisper.

“Go on. I will think no different of you for what you say.”

Draco kept his face pressed against the cold metal of the bars, and stared at the sleeping dragon in the
pit below. Iridescent scales glittered in moonlight while the creature below breathed deep and slow in
its sleep.

“I was taken captive. By Death Eaters. One of them was my uncle…by marriage. I lost my virginity
to my uncle…then he gave me to his henchmen. They hurt me every way that a person can be hurt.
They tortured me, and raped me, Dula…for months. I think I’m only sane because my mind shut
down at some point. There was nothing else they could do to me that hurt more than what they’d
done, so they addicted me to Muggle drugs, then amused themselves by refusing me the drugs and
watching me beg for the privilege of being raped. When I had no spirit left, nothing, and I just did
whatever they wanted of me without a word, they got bored and dumped me in Muggle London. It
had been almost a year since I’d been anything but their fucking pet.

Muggles found me. They took me in, got some drugs that helped me heal a little, and some others
that helped me get through being addicted. I wasn’t really aware of much then, and…and I did things
without thinking…just responding to what I’d known for a year. I…I whored myself…because that
was how they survived too, and because I think I believed that was what entitled me to food and
shelter. I don’t think they expected it of me…not anymore, but I didn’t know how else to respond to
anyone…fuck! It took more than a week before I even spoke! I was just happy for a blanket, clothes,
and food. It was easier than anything my uncle and his cronies did to me. I only left because another
Muggle, one that these people were afraid of, found out I was there, and…I think he wanted me for
himself. He waited until the others were gone, then…then he raped me. It was too much. I ran off
afterwards, and found my way to Diagon Alley’s London entrance. That’s how I wound up coming
to the Burrow. They know parts of it, but only you know all of it.

Dula…how do I know if what I feel for Harry is…real? How could I want something like that…after
everything? Am I just thinking of it…because I’m still…still crazy? Or would I still want the same
things, even if none of it had ever happened and I just met Harry for the first time today? I know all
about what people do to each other…but I don’t know anything about this. Please. Please help me
understand it.”

Dula fought the urge to vomit, praying that Draco would not notice, and interpret his disgust at the
actions of others as some form of disapproval. He was well aware that evil lurked in every human
soul, but what Draco had endured, it was more like the work of demons than men. Dula steeled
himself to speak, betraying nothing that might accidentally hurt the young man beside him. Draco
deserved better than to be wounded by a tremulous voice or a careless look.

“Draco, I do not know…if you desire Harry by chance or by choice. I cannot tell you this. I can tell
you that Harry is a gentle soul, and that when he cares for others, he cares for them with great
passion. Whatever has brought you here, right or wrong, the choices are yours now, and you can
make of them what you will. I should tell you this though…to love, you are a virgin. What was
stolen from you was innocence, but you have not given anything in love, and so you still wait to
discover what that means. What…what happened to you at the hands of others…Draco, I promise
you that love is nothing like that. It is better. It is good. Even when it is flawed, as all people are
flawed, there is no comparing the two, save to say that they are as different as night and day. Harry
cares for you very much. I do not think you would suffer at his hands, if he gave himself to you in
love.”
Draco closed his eyes and took a few slow breaths. Saying what had happened, it made it all so very real. The night air felt colder, the starlight dimmer, and the world felt like a larger and more frightening place then ever. It was real. He wasn’t going to wake up in a cellar, on a stone floor, free of any responsibility beyond surviving another day. This…this was life. And it was terrifying.

“Even if he did, it wouldn’t matter. How long would he stay with someone he couldn’t touch. He’d get tired of someone who wakes up screaming, or needs spells just to sleep for a few hours. I know he cares…a lot, but I don’t see how I could ever have what I want, and give him anything he deserves. I just don’t see it, Dula.”

“I have seen you touch him, Draco. It is clear that you do not like others touching you, but do you think he would not accept letting you decide what you are comfortable with? I do not think Harry is so unreasonable, and what he deserves or does not deserve…is that not for him to decide? Do you think perhaps Harry’s happiness lies in more than mere sex? If Charlie and I had no gender, no desire, no spark of lust between us, would I enjoy seeing him beside me in the morning any less? Would I turn away from the warmth of his arms for want of an orgasm? I do not think so. Love is not so simple. You will only know these answers when you speak with Harry. In the end, it comes to that. You must let his part in your feelings be just that…his part. Until you do this, you will always wonder, always doubt, and never know. Talk to Harry. Though I can promise nothing, I do not think you will regret it. It is only my suspicion, but it is likely that Harry is letting you decide what you want, for fear of making you uncomfortable. If he knows of some of what you told me, I think he would keep his silence as best he could, rather than risk hurting you. Given how much he seems to care for you, does this not seem true?”

Draco’s mind tried to wrap itself around Dula’s words. It was more than he could comprehend at the moment, but a seed of hope had sprung to life inside him.

‘I can touch him. I know he doesn’t hate me, and I know he cares about me…a lot. If…I can touch him…some…that would be something for him. I’d…I’d just have to trust him to not expect more. But do I trust him that much?’

“M-maybe. Maybe it is true. That…that’s something. Thank you, Dula. I don’t know what else to say. You make me think things are possible that…that seem too far away to be real right now. That’s why I wanted to talk to you.”

“You are very welcome, Draco. You do not seem to me a wicked person, and I am, at least according to some, a good judge of character. You deserve better than what has been dealt you in this life. If I can help you to find a way that suits you, I will, and so would Charlie.”

The atmosphere around them relaxed, as Draco let himself unwind and push away the tension that had knotted through him. Dula could sense the change, and relaxed accordingly.

“Dula. I have other problems…or rather…Harry has a problem, and you won’t like what’s at the core of it.”

Dula creased his eyebrows with curiosity, unsure of what Draco meant.

“I think it involves a Horcrux.”

And Draco waited for the fireworks, already tensed for Dula’s outburst. An outburst that didn’t come. Dula looked at the ground, sighed deeply, and shrugged.

“I was afraid of as much.”
Draco could have been knocked over with a feather.

TBC!!!
“What…what do you mean…you were afraid of as much? You…you know about-”

Dula interrupted Draco with a calmly raised hand, and sighed before he spoke, looking at Draco with a pained wince.

“I know nothing, but I suspected…from the moment you said that word in front of me. I have prayed that it was only an accident, but a word such as that…it always heralds evil times. Since you first spoke it, I have dreaded that it would be voiced again. There is no smoke without fire, and magic of that kind is never practiced without lasting harm. I did not want to be involved, but if there is something I can tell you that will speed you through your troubles, I will help. I am only hoping that matters are not as terrible as I have feared.”

Draco calmed himself, still shaken by the fear that Dula had known more than he’d said. He launched into what he knew quickly, hoping that Dula wouldn’t think ill of Harry when he heard what had happened.

“You’ve probably heard the rumors about Harry…in the wizarding press…before now.”

Dula nodded soberly.

“I have, but I did not believe them. Harry is very good, and he is our dear friend, though we do not see him enough. I did not think there was any truth to those tales. Are you saying that they are true?”

Draco shivered a little, disliking the sobering knowledge that the rumors were far less terrible than what he knew.

“It’s true. Molly told me at first, then I saw some things with my own eyes. He leaves at night, armed to the teeth, and kills former Death Eaters that are still in hiding. I’m pretty sure the Ministry knows it’s him too, but they don’t have solid proof, and they don’t really feel any sympathy for the people he’s killing…so they cover up as much as they can. Harry and Ron got drunk one night, and they talked about the war. I only heard it because I couldn’t sleep and I was just down the hall. That’s how I heard about Horcruxes. They had to destroy seven of them to defeat Voldemort.”

Dula’s eyes widened at the mention of seven Horcruxes.

“Merlin’s Beard! Seven? Your Dark Lord was far worse than Grindelwald. In my grandfather’s time, Grindelwald sought the Philosopher’s Stone, and was defeated by Albus Dumbledore and Nicholas Flamel. That was far different from this Voldemort, who dared to shred his soul seven times, all for immortality! Seven people died to give him longer life. This is why I told you that magic of that kind is an abomination. You think this affected Harry in some way?”
“Yes. I went to Hogwarts…to see the portrait of Albus Dumbledore that remains. It was the only way I could get more information about what Harry and Ron did during the war…without asking Harry. I knew that if Harry had gone after powerful magic, Dumbledore must have advised him. Well, I learned about the Horcruxes from him, and he told me that Harry failed to kill Voldemort the right way. Dula, he said that a part of the Dark Lord survived, the last piece of his soul, and that’s what makes Harry so violent…sometimes. He’s still Harry, but it’s like he has a compulsion…a need to kill. He has headaches and nightmares, and when he gets angry, you can feel it from a distance. I’ve felt it when I’m near him sometimes.

Albus Dumbledore gave me a mission. He wanted me to save Harry, and help him expel the last part of Voldemort’s soul. The problem is, I don’t know where it is. The knife Harry uses when he hunts Death Eaters could be a kind of Horcrux, allowing Voldemort to stay close to him, or it could be possible that Harry IS a Horcrux. It might still be possible that there is no Horcrux, and Harry is just…tainted…from exposure to Dark magic, and from handling so many pieces of Voldemort’s soul.

I need help, and I swore not to reveal the secret of Horcruxes to anyone who didn’t already know about them. That’s why I have to ask you. Only Ron and Harry know about them, and I can’t risk Harry thinking that we’re against him. He’s volatile, and powerful. If he thought that people were working against him, there’s no telling what he might do. I…I think I love him. I can’t let this go. I have to help him. Do you understand?”

Draco had grown a bit desperate by the time he’d finished, but followed as Dula walked to a stone bench, taking a seat and wringing his hands. Dula shook his head silently.

“It is so much…my head reels. Draco…I can help you but little. I know almost nothing of Horcruxes but the name, and that they are evil. I cannot be involved closely in such a matter, for if it were known, and the wrong conclusions drawn, my father’s reputation would suffer for it. He and I often differ, but I do not wish to hurt him. I can tell you this though. There are spells of divination, legal spells, which will allow you to seek out the truth.

A Horcrux is a thing of enormous evil, even if it can be made from a common item. With the right spell, you could see it for what it is. Since a Horcrux is a piece of a person’s soul, the aura would be very clear, and from this you would know where it lies. As for how to expel such a thing, I do not know anything. You say that Dumbledore told you much, and that Ron and Harry are all who remain that knew of these matters. Who did Dumbledore trust most? Surely he had an aide or a lieutenant during the war…one who would know what to do if anything happened to Albus himself.”

‘Oh, Merlin! Snape! Snape was his closest friend for a decade! Albus let Snape kill him…he must have trusted Snape with everything! I have to find him…somehow.’

“You’re right. There is somebody he trusted…but he might be hard to find, and I’m pretty sure he hates me. I can still try. Can you look for the divination spells for me? You’ve already been a big help to me, and I hate to ask for more, but it’s for Harry, and I have some things I really need to work on. Please?”

“Of course, of course. I would not have offered if I had not intended to help in every way that I could. You should not have to bear this alone. Harry is our friend, and we love him dearly. I would not let him fall into ruin so callously. Had we known, we might have tried to stop him from doing such things. It is small wonder he does not speak of it. I shall seek out the spells, while you find the one who knew Albus Dumbledore best. I will contact you as soon as I have the spells written down and ready for you. Will that do?”
Draco sighed with relief, thanking the powers that be for his newfound ally. His worst fear had been that Dula would not believe him, or would refuse outright to be involved in anything that peripherally dealt with a Horcrux.

“Thank you. Thank you so much. You don’t know how much this means to me. All I want is for Harry to be okay. I’ll do anything I have to…anything…if it means he’ll make it through this and be healthy again. Thank you, Dula.”

“Let us go indoors. The night is colder here than it is where you live. Also, we should not worry Harry and Charlie for our long absence. You are very welcome, Draco. Do not be afraid to speak to me again. I am glad that my words have given you some small comfort. If you have need of me, you should know that I am here.”

They made their way back to Charlie and Dula’s small house, listening to the sounds of sleeping dragons as they walked.

Charlie and Harry had cleaned the kitchen quickly and efficiently, chatting all the while.

“Tell me honestly, Harry. How are things between you and our ‘little dragon’. He looks better, but the way you made it sound, his problems aren’t the kind of thing you can see up front.”

Harry dried a few of the last dishes, stacking them neatly while Charlie cleaned the counters with a few quick swipes of his wand.

“They are better…at least I think they are. It’s so hard to tell. He still hates being touched, but he’s sleeping through the night with only a couple interruptions now. Once Molly stopped giving him Dreamless Sleep, he started having regular nightmares, the kind he can just wake up from, and the warding spells Dula showed me can deal with most of that. He seems like he’s getting better, but I…I just get nervous sometimes.”

“How so? You don’t think he’d hurt himself again do you?”

“NO. Nothing like that! He just seems like he has things on his mind, and he’s worried over them. I’m almost afraid to ask about it. I never know if something I say or do will frighten him, or make him happy. I think the only thing I’m sure of is that, at least for now, he really likes me…I think he’s…I think he wants me…the way I want him. I’m sure of it…but Charlie…he has problems. Big ones. I’m not sure it’s right for me to even think about being with him…and not just because I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing. I already hurt him…several times, a couple of them on purpose, the rest by accident. I don’t want to hurt him. Not again. Not for any reason. If he still wants me after the things I did…can you honestly tell me he’s making decisions that are healthy?”

Charlie let a low whistle go.

“Damn, mate, you really have got it bad for him, haven’t you? Stop second guessing everything you do, Harry. That kind of thing will drive you nuts. And what do you mean you hurt him? If I find out you went after him like our Ron, I’ll drag you out in the snow and pin your ass down ‘til you make some sense.”

Harry blushed and sat down at the kitchen counter, running his hands through his hair.

“Not like that…except when he first showed up. I almost killed him before Molly stopped me. I’m glad she did…now. I just scared him a few times. Once to make sure he’d behave in the house, just after he arrived, then again because I tried to pull his blankets up while he was asleep. He went into a
panic. Last time…I was mad about a Prophet article and the Ministry and some other things…and…
I…I yelled at him. He ran off like I’d had him at wand point. I hate it. I keep trying to show that I
like him, and that I care about him, but I keep fucking up over and over again. I feel like I can’t
control myself anymore. I mean look at him! He’s beautiful, but he’s no threat to anyone. I don’t
know what the hell my problem is! He deserves better than that, doesn’t he?”

“Whoa, whoa…easy there, champ. Stop going so hard on yourself. You act like, just ’cause you
offed a Dark Lord, you’re supposed to be perfect and know everything. Bullshit. That’s my job!”

Harry couldn’t help but chuckle at that.

“Harry, what I’m trying to say is, aside from needing to think just a little before you act, the best
thing you can do here is stop working yourself into a fit and just kick back let things happen as they
happen. Deal with what’s happening at the moment, don’t panic over the future. Draco has every
right to like you. You’re a great kid, and a fit looking bloke on top of that! You like him, and you
want to see him well again, so just work on that. Get him well, then deal with the rest as it happens.
Maybe he’ll want more in the way of a relationship, and be ready for it, after he’s on his feet. Hell,
mate…it’s only been a few weeks, and he’s sleeping better, eating more, able to come here tonight,
with you, he’s got a job starting in a few days, and a wand on the way after they finish it up for him.
I’d say that’s some bloody great progress! You’re just too close to see it clearly. Now cheer up…or
I’ll park a boot in your ass.”

“Hey! I’m cheered! I’m cheered. I’m a bloody wall of cheer, okay? I’m practically rolling in puppies
and bunnies! Got one other problem, though. Don’t…don’t tell this to anyone, alright?”

Charlie’s brow creased with concern, and he sat down across from Harry.

“Okay. I’ll bite. What’s wrong?”

“Charlie…even if he said he wanted to go out with me…even if he wanted to…do more…if I could
touch him…I still wouldn’t know what to do! I mean…fuck all! Charlie…I had a war to fight, and I
didn’t have time to mingle. I’m…I never…”

“A virgin?”

Harry let his head drop onto the countertop while his face flamed in humiliation.

think there’s something wrong with waiting ’til the time is right. I mean, bloody hell, if I’d known
how I’d eventually feel about Dula, back when I was in school, I wouldn’t have been such a randy
little bastard back then. If you need technical advice, it isn’t like I can’t help, but a lot of it’s self-
explanatory…you’ll figure it out as it goes. That’s how everyone else learns. Besides, I’m pretty sure
the last thing Draco needs is a knowledgeable lover. What he needs is a good friend he trusts, and
you’re already that.”

Harry breathed out explosively, then looked up at Charlie with exasperation.

“You’re killing me with the common sense here, mate. Don’t you have any advice that would at least
make me feel like I know what I’m doing?”

Charlie scratched his jaw and looked thoughtful for a moment.

“Be patient. If you feel angry, take a break before you speak. Use lots of lubricant and go as slow as
you can, and don’t plan on playing Quidditch the next day if you’re the one on bottom that night…I
lost two games back at Hogwarts ’cause of that little mistake.”
Harry’s ears were burning, and his face went beet red while Charlie belly-laughed at the stunned look on Harry’s face.

“Hey…you asked for advice, that’s what I’ve got, and I swear it’s all good too! You’re doing fine, Harry. Relax, mate…it’s just life.”

Dula and Draco returned, looking red-cheeked from the bitter winter chill, and peeled away their furs. Conversation drifted a little longer into the evening, but Charlie and Dula needed to wake early, so an end was called while the hour was still early by some standards.

Harry and Draco Flooed home, dusting themselves off and making their way upstairs. Molly and Arthur had already gone off to bed, and they headed for their respective rooms, changing into pajamas in comparative silence, hoping not to disturb Molly or Arthur’s rest.

Harry returned to Draco’s room just a few minutes later, and with no pretense of any kind, simply slipped into place and made himself comfortable. There wasn’t much room on the smallish bed that had once been Percy’s, but Harry tended to sleep on his back, and that worked out well for Draco, who tended to curl up and take up a great deal more space.

Draco cursed his own silent tongue, which felt heavier than ever, as if the things he wanted to say were great weights that pulled him down. Harry’s demeanor had been quiet, and wonderfully familiar, all night. Dula’s words were ringing hot in Draco’s ears, and Draco turned closer to Harry in the dark of the room.

He placed a fingertip just above Harry’s mouth, imploring silence until he could manage to say what he was thinking. Harry simply remained still, looking at Draco intently through the gloom, while Draco remained still, blushing furiously, just a few inches from Harry’s left ear. His voice was a nervous whisper, and Harry could feel each breath from Draco puff lightly against his cheek and neck.

“Harry. I…I’m not well yet. Not the way I wish I could be. But…but if I were…Harry…I’d want you. You don’t have to say anything. I can’t…I couldn’t give you the things someone else could. It isn’t much, but all I have is me. Harry…I think…I think I’m falling in love with you. I won’t ask this of you again, if you don’t want to, but…I…I’m nineteen years old, I think… I think I’m gay, and I’ve never kissed someone I wanted to be with. If I never get well, if I never find a way to make things right…I just want…to be able to remember having kissed someone who cared about me. I want it to be you. Can I kiss you?”

Harry turned slowly, lining his face up with Draco’s, trying not to seem hurried, or betray his own racing and fluttering heart, and softness brushed against his cheek, then delicately fumbled its way to his mouth, pulling gently and insistently at his lower lip, and then his upper.

It was not a perfect kiss. They were nervous, each of them, and hesitant at every breath, lingering too long here, or hurrying too long there. Their breath was marred only slightly by hints of coffee, wine sauce, spices and more. There were small gasps that were as beautiful as they were disruptive, and their necks craned to meet each other while keeping their bodies safely separate. It was too warm, and sudden, and the apprehension and ‘real-ness’ of the moment made it all dizzying and hard to cope with. It was a perfect kiss, and it was understood without words that nothing…nothing would ever be the same as it was before.

Draco slept the night through, still and peaceful by Harry’s side, and even the ugly things, the dangers of memory and imagination that haunted the edge of his mind, were distant shadows whose threats seemed hollow…just for a short while.
It was not a perfect kiss. It was a perfect kiss. It was life.

TBC!!!
DISCLAIMER: Warning! I make no claim to any property of J.K. Rowling’s, and am in no way profiting by this. I do offer her my sincerest thanks for allowing us this garden of the mind in which we play. Further Warning! This story...and likely any I ever write...are dominated by gay themes and characters. That's how it is, if this in any way makes you uncomfortable...do not read further.

Redeem Me…by Samayel

Chapter 40: Something About Harry

'Blood. Always blood. Blood on his hands. Blood on his arms. The metallic stink of it in his nose. Wading in a river of the stuff, up to his hips, struggling through the gore, trying to reach some safe haven that was always too far away. There was no strength left in him, and no will left to fight, and the tide of sluggish crimson pulled him under, dragging him away. A single, fumbling hand reaching out at the last, finally descending beneath the vermilion flow. Always blood.'

Harry’s eyes snapped open, and despite the cold sweat he was in, at least he hadn’t stirred in his sleep. Draco was still breathing softly and evenly by his side, clinging tightly to Harry’s left arm.

'He kissed me. We kissed. Hah! What nightmare could stand up against that, eh? My head hurts, but who cares? I’m in a bed, with Draco Malfoy, and he kissed me. Hard to believe it wasn’t just a dream, but how could anything like that have been anything but real? Actually…I think Ginny was technically a better kisser, but she had more practice than the both of us together. I know I didn’t feel like this afterwards though! I never understood why people said that if felt like time stopped…now I understand. It has to be love. That’s what makes it different. I…I love Draco.’

Harry closed his eyes and settled himself, letting his thoughts drift while he tried to get back to sleep despite the insistent throbbing pain in his skull. He’d answered Draco fairly directly, just as their kiss had parted. It was still hard to believe the words had come out of his mouth, but he couldn’t deny them now. It was exactly what he felt, and Draco had certainly heard it.

‘You’re the bravest, most beautiful person I’ve ever known. I don’t care about what you can’t give… but…I know I want whatever you can. I…I think I love you, Draco.’

He’d meant to say more, but Draco had silenced him with another kiss, and the second was more confident than the first, if just as tense. He wasn’t exactly sure when they’d fallen asleep, but it had been peaceful enough until now. It was much too early in the morning to actually wake up, and his headache cure was in the other room, which would require getting up and possibly waking Draco. Harry resigned himself to riding out the rest of the headache in silence. He wasn’t sure of much, but if Draco was sleeping peacefully, he wasn’t interrupting it for anything in the world.

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Charlie Weasley woke from his slumber and was immediately aware of Dula’s absence. He glanced about with bleary eyes and saw his lover standing by the frost-rimed window, wrapped in his bathrobe, staring out at the night sky.

“Dula? You alright, love?”
Dula turned and peeled off the robe, sighing and slipping back between the sheets.

“Yes. It was only a bad dream. I worry over things I cannot help. It is foolish. I did not mean to wake you.”

Charlie curled around Dula like an enormous cat, then hissed when his skin came in contact with Dula’s cold feet.

“Your feet are freezing! Budge up, we can get that sorted out soon enough.”

Dula and Charlie rubbed their feet together until the chill had soaked away, and drifted back to sleep under a pile of blankets and quilts. Dula quietly hoped that the chill of night was only a fleeting thing, a thing of nature, and not an ugly omen of days to come.

The days that followed moved in a peaceable blur for the residents of the Burrow. Molly and Arthur exchanged knowing glances when their suspicions were proven true at the breakfast table. Harry and Draco could scarcely look at each other without blushing or smiling. It was the familiar look of young love, seen on the faces of each of their own children over the years, and fondly remembered from the days when those looks had graced their own faces. Whatever Molly’s worries may have been, neither she nor Arthur could bring themselves to feel discontented with the situation, since Harry hadn’t smiled this much in two years, and, to their way of thinking, Draco deserved any shred of happiness that came his way.

The new week found Draco opening a letter from Ollivander’s, apologizing for delays due to the materials used for making his wand. Due to the complicated nature of the materials provided, it had been necessary for Mr. Ollivander, Sr. to supervise its making, but the delays would cost nothing, since the price had already been agreed upon and paid in full. Draco didn’t understand the delay over a phoenix feather, but Harry assured him that none had been used in decades, and that his wand, and Voldemort’s, were the last two made using a phoenix feather core during this century. Draco rather liked the notion of having a wand with such prestige, but the extra wait still irked him. He’d be starting at Weasley’s Wizarding Wheezes in just another day, and a wand would go a long way toward making him feel safer when he was away from Harry (and not just because he’d be working with the twins!)

Draco had managed to brief Molly on some of what had passed between himself and Dula, because he needed considerable help contacting Severus Snape without alerting Harry. Ideally, it might be possible for Molly to visit Hogwarts and let Draco make use of their owls or Floo, rather than risk Snape’s wrath, and Harry’s, by accidentally bringing the two of them together. Their animosity aside, he just had to get in contact with Snape and get more information, and if that meant being subject to Snape’s temper, then so be it. At least the groundwork was laid, and Molly had promised him that as soon as she could make another appointment with Madam Pomfrey, they would make the journey, likely by the end of the new week.

The entire household received letters from Ron, and it was all good news and entreaties to see him at the coming home game. It was only a couple of days into the new week, and the Cannons had made their way into the running for a chance at the World Cup. It would take a few more solid victories to nail it down, but if they made their way through this last few games, then come spring, they would be playing at the international level, representing the whole of England against the world’s finest teams. It was cheering enough for Draco, who was looking forward to seeing a real game again, and it was certainly a thrill to Molly and Arthur, who were puffed up with pride that a Weasley might
well be playing for the World Cup in a few months.

There was, however, one matter that had dampened Draco’s enthusiasm during those few precious days of peace…his scars. They needed treatment, and Harry was insistent about finishing the job, especially since they were so very close to being done.

They started with his back, which took three sessions, since it had taken the worst of the damage, and there was scarcely a place on it that looked healthy. Even Calming Draughts weren’t enough to take the edge off the stress, and the humiliation that accompanied not being able to control his revulsion was enough to make him sick to his stomach after the second session. It was grueling, trying to hold himself still, fighting the urge to run from the room or scream from the tension, and it took a toll on both Draco and Harry even after the sessions were over.

Harry’s research hadn’t borne any fruit, and there was nothing to be done for the nightmares except ward against them by spell, and hope that they weren’t too terribly bad. Some nights were better than others, but Draco still occasionally woke from his sleep with a start, and Harry wasn’t much better off. His own nightmares were quite different from Draco’s, and were often accompanied by violent headaches, but he’d grown used to them over the past two years, and he kept his headache cure-alls in Draco’s room now.

A new week was starting, and Draco was not at all comfortable with the notion of coming home to his last sessions with Scaradicate Salve. Save for a few tense goodnight pecks, the kiss from that night hadn’t been repeated, though they were more comfortable about each other than they had been. Even daily exercise was preferable to what Draco knew was soon to come. The last of his scars were located on his inner thighs, hips, and buttocks, and it had been difficult enough being exposed there for healing purposes. The notion of Harry gently massaging salve into those places left Draco in a complete panic. Admittedly, it was a panic that faded to lusty wishes when he was alone in the shower, but in calm and rational moments, the prospect made him actively consider keeping his scars rather than sitting through something so unnerving.

That brought Draco back to the kiss. It had changed everything, and he wondered if he’d been right to do it. After talking to Dula, he’d felt relaxed, hopeful, and determined. It had seemed so right, just acting on impulse and reaching for what he wanted. Now there were consequences, and not small ones either. Harry was, for all intents and purposes, his boyfriend. The word still felt too alien to say aloud, but he whispered it to himself when he was alone, just to enjoy the weird, giddy feeling it gave him when he said it. Boyfriend. It sounded so…childish, like some pair of giggling fourth years that held hands at Madam Puddifoot’s. It was actually quite insipid…but it still made his heart flutter when he thought of it. Harry was his boyfriend, even if they hadn’t formalized it with words. Neither of them were seeing anyone else, and honestly, neither of them had any interest in seeing anyone else. Even if it had only been a bit of harmless snogging, it had effectively sealed a pact between them, more powerfully than any words could have.

This added a dimension to things that Draco hadn’t considered until now. There was something infinitely more intimate about being touched by Harry under these circumstances, and he wondered very seriously if it would have been easier to get through the healing sessions if he wasn’t pulled apart by mixed feelings during the process.

One moment, he’d be tensed and shuddering, painfully conscious of the hand that was working salve into the ruined tissues of his back. A minute later, he’d be imagining Harry pressed against him, close and warm, utterly naked, hungry-eyed and aching with desire for him. Blessedly, he was face down on the bed, and the stiffness in his groin couldn’t be seen by anyone. The worst part was letting his thoughts of Harry drift too far, and the scene in his mind would bleed away, shifting from imagined love-making with Harry, to utter brutality at the hands of MacNair, Hyde-Pratt, or his uncle. It was
moments like that which spoiled his appetite, made his genitals rapidly deflate and shrink with fear, and left him crying into the sheets and begging Harry to take a break and continue later.

Eventually, his back was finished. A smooth and shining expanse of healthy, if a trifle pale, skin. As fine and wonderful as that may have been, it left only one place for Harry to heal, and the very thought of it made Draco’s head spin. Aside from torture, he’d only been touched there while feverish and barely coherent. That it was going to be Harry doing the touching actually made it worse. It made his feelings of revulsion mingle with desire, and these were feelings he very much wanted kept separate.

There was nothing to be done for it, but to try harder and harder to keep his mind on things that needed his attention, like what to say to Snape if contact was possible, or trying to remember all the tiny clauses and stipulations he would need to recall for work, or even just mulling over ways to approach Harry as gently as possible, and introduce him to the idea that he needed help, likely of a magical nature, and that Voldemort’s taint was lingering around him. Given what was possible if Harry got upset, this was a conversation that Draco would rather have after everything was over and done with, rather than having to live through seeing Harry angry at him.

It was a terrible feeling, thinking that Harry might hate him for what he was doing. Despite their newfound closeness, which was strangely nourishing, and well-liked, Draco held secrets, just as he always had in Slytherin. It was hard to believe he was a different person, or a better one, when he lied and deceived, plotted and schemed, all behind the back of the person he was supposed to love. It felt dirty, and disgusting, and even showers so hot that his skin stayed red and tingling long after couldn’t make that awful feeling go away. That, more than anything else, kept a wedge between them, and kept their ‘relationship’ idling at smiles over breakfast or during workouts.

Draco could bring himself to kiss Harry, when it was dark and quiet, and sleep was almost upon them, and no words were needed, but he couldn’t let himself go any further. Harry seemed happy, and didn’t push at all for more, accepting what Draco was able to offer, but Draco couldn’t bear to think of what would happen when Harry understood the other source of Draco’s hesitation.

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Monday morning came, and Harry woke Draco with a whisper, which was all it took to wake a light sleeper. They forewent the exercises that usually started their day, and Draco took the first shower, giving himself extra time to primp and preen before leaving. Arthur drifted along in his usual morning haze, soaked up his tea, and took his shower promptly after Draco, finding the busy halls vaguely reminiscent of the days when the children had been home.

Draco was dressed in the clothes he’d picked out the week before, and felt a faint and fluttering confidence. Harry was Flooing along with him, just until he got started with the work proper, and that was good, but Draco admitted to himself that spending a little time away from Harry might clear his mind, since something about Harry made it so hard to concentrate. Molly served her usual breakfast spread, and there was only a little noisy chatter at the table, most of it congratulations to Draco, and assertions that everyone was proud of him and wished him well on his first day. Mostly, he found the praise discomforting, since he blushed enough when he was looking at Harry during breakfast, and didn’t need other reasons for his cheeks to pink.

Weasley’s Wizarding Wheezes was actually quite unimpressive from the inside. It was a large, old building, built of good bricks, and clean enough, but not fancily appointed like some offices. It was hard to believe that the wizarding world’s most dramatically successful entrepreneurs made their fortune here. Harry led him through the halls of the old building, cheerily telling Draco stories of
Fred and George’s early exploits, and then he introduced him to the secretary at the desk, a pretty, polite witch named Ella. It turned out that she’d been a Hogwarts student just before the war, but her parents had shipped her off to Beauxbatons at the first sign of trouble. She had very little knowledge of the events of the war, and greeted Draco with a friendly wave and a brief bow, before ushering them into Fred and George’s main office.

It was the largest room in the building not occupied by actual merchandise, and other than the huge desk that seated two and dominated the room, only filing cabinets and office supplies took up space here. Fred and George waved hello, then put aside their quills with obvious relief, and stood up to greet them.

“Sweet Merlin,-”

“-not a minute too soon. We’re so-”

“-glad you’re here. Have we got things to do!”

And that was the end of Draco’s peaceful morning. The financial files were a shambles, and what was complete was occasionally inaccurate or unclear, and the room that had been cleared for him and supplied with a desk, ink and quills was just barely suitable for the workload in front of him. He could probably fix the newest outgoing paperwork for the Ministry and Gringott’s, but he suspected very heavily that he might have to revise even that after he had a chance to go back through the last several years records. It was a thorough mess, and Draco could tell immediately that neither Fred nor George had a head for numbers that weren’t right in front of them. Their talent was knowing exactly what people would enjoy and use, and knowing how much gold people were willing to part with in order to get what they wanted. They had great instincts, but if it hadn’t been for their wild success, the mistakes they’d made would have ruined them.

Harry wished him well a half hour after Draco got himself settled, and Fred and George took turns explaining the details behind the documents that Draco attempted to make corrections on. All was moving along in an orderly fashion, and the twins surprised him with their seriousness, until Draco finally caught them in the middle of a surprisingly subtle joke.

He’d been handed a stack of paperwork, and was terribly busy already, when Ella brought in a slip regarding new inventory, marked as urgent. Draco quickly scanned it, then turned crimson with outrage, looking up just in time to see Fred crack up laughing.

“Very funny, Weasley! Ten thousand orders for an Amazing Bouncing Ferret Kit! I suppose you two spent all morning thinking that one up! Just remember that I get my new wand this week. We’ll see about clever jokes then, won’t we?!”

Other than that, it was a day dominated by scribbling furiously, making accurate ledgers, and getting the most urgent paperwork started. It was oddly satisfying, despite the cramped hand and ink stains that couldn’t be spelled away. He was actually surprised when Fred and George turned off the lights and instructed him to get his coat and go home, on the grounds that it was four o’clock and that Harry would never forgive them if they let him work himself to death on his first day. Draco hadn’t the faintest idea where the time had gone. At least he had a solid stack of forms to be owled, proof that the day had been productive, but it had gone by so fast that he’d never even opened the small lunch that Molly had packed or him.

Draco went to use the Floo, having made his way through the halls while nibbling at what had been his lunch, and was rejected by the Floo entirely. The flames roared, but he hadn’t budged. Obviously there was a Firecall underway, blocking the Floo against current use. As embarrassing as it was, he broke down and asked George for a Side-Along Apparition to the Burrow, since his Apparition
skills were still limited to line-of-sight.

George was decent enough about it, but having someone’s hand, other than Harry’s, parked on his shoulder, well…it just made Draco’s skin itch. The familiar twist of Apparition followed, and with a muted pop, he was back in the Burrow’s living room.

The Floo was indeed busy, and Harry was bellowing into it, addressing the face of Kingsley Shacklebolt, who, despite the greenish tint that Firecalls caused, was obviously furious in his own right.

“-none of your goddamned business! Stay out of what you don’t understand, Kingsley! Leave that to real wizards! I’m sure you have some papers to push back and forth in the meanwhile!”

“YOU ARROGANT LITTLE SON OF A BITCH! I’ve tried my damnedest for you! I’m sick of this shit as of now! You want a paper pushed? How about one that calls you a formal suspect?! I should-”

Draco was trembling, just looking at the lines of Harry’s back through his shirt. Harry was a taut as a harp string, ready to explode with outrage. George stared at the spectacle, stunned and surprised by Harry’s vehemence.

Suddenly, in a way only familiar to Draco, Harry’s entire posture shifted, and his voice was a calm and confident purr.

“Oh…Kingsley. Sorry we got off on the wrong foot. I’m sure you don’t mean anything like that. In fact, I think you mean quite the opposite. We’re old friends, after all.”

Draco saw the Minister’s eyes glaze slightly, and he realized immediately what Harry must be doing. Panic flooded him! This…this was wrong on a scale that far exceeded killing renegade Death Eaters. He was using advanced Legilimency on the Minister of Magic!

“HARRY! NO!”

The words were out before he could stop himself. Harry turned on them, furious again, and Kingsley, blinking and confused in the flickering green fire, sputtered an outraged comment before signing off.

“I’m too busy for this nonsense, Harry. Good night!”

Draco could feel the weird heat coming off of Harry, and he unconsciously took a couple of steps back, while George just looked at Harry with same surprised expression.

“Criminey, mate! You look like you need to relax and take a breather. Whatever it is, it isn’t that-”

Harry pointed a finger at Draco, who had moved behind George for safety, and was shivering slightly from the sudden scrutiny.

“YOU! You…I can’t…I…ought…to…”

Harry was shaking with rage, and his arms were as red as his face. He couldn’t even form words through the state of agitation he was in. He clamped down suddenly, pulling his arm to his side, and turning his back on them while he walked slowly to the door.

“I…am going…for a run.”
Harry stalked out the door, closing it behind him with quiet deliberation, leaving Draco and George in the living room alone. Draco collapsed onto a chair, breathing heavily, trying to fight the urge to throw up or run away. His head was spinning from the adrenal rush that always accompanied seeing Harry so angry, and his own hands were shaking so much that he couldn’t have held a glass of water without spilling half of it. George looked behind him, still stymied by the entire scene, and took in Draco’s state of panic.

“Wow, well that could have been worse.”

Draco looked up, waiting for George to explain himself.

“He could have been really pissed off.”

Draco gave a weak chuckle. What a way to end his first day of work. All he could do was hope dearly that it would get better from here.

TBC!!!
George stepped into the kitchen and poured a cup of tea for himself, and another for Draco, when Molly stepped in through the back door and looked about.

“George! Oh, sweetie, it’s good to see you again so soon! Was that Harry I heard stepping out? Did Draco have a good first day at the shop?”

George smiled while he reeled under the barrage of questions, letting his enchanted eye roll a few times to convey the impression of being overpowered by questions. His mum hated it when he did that, which more or less guaranteed that he did just that…whenever he was sure he could get away with it.

“Likewise, yes and very…in that order. Draco did great, and he’s got a sense of humor after all, which you’d never have convinced us of a couple years ago. Harry was having one hell of a row with Kingsley, then Draco interrupted them. Harry stormed off for a run. Couldn’t get a word out, he was so red. Hope nothing serious happened. D’you know what he’s on about?”

Molly nodded and went back to her spice cabinet. It was almost time for supper, since Arthur would be home in an hour.

“It was The Daily Prophet again. Some awful story upset him earlier today, and he’s been worked up ever since. He said he’d Firecall Kingsley earlier, but I take it that didn’t go well. The paper said that the body of a Muggle boy was dumped in Shropshire last night. Marked up the way Draco was. Might have been the same wicked devils that hurt him, since the Aurors detected magic involved at the scene. The Muggle authorities don’t know anything worthwhile, but all the paper said was that the damage to the poor thing’s body was ‘extensive’ and was ‘likely the product of weeks of abuse.’ Just horrid. I can’t blame Harry for being upset, but he lets these things tear him apart inside. It’s just unhealthy.”

George sipped his tea, and then Draco walked in and took his tea numbly, sipped at it blankly, then apologized and told them he was going upstairs to rest a little before supper.

Molly excused him with a polite promise to check on him in time for supper, then busily started cutting vegetables for the stew pot.

“Draco seems terribly quiet, mum. Looks to me like he was rattled by seeing Harry so worked up. You sure he’s alright?”

Molly fixed a keener gaze on her son.

“Did Harry yell at Draco? Threaten him? Any of that kind of thing?”
“No…nothing like that. He looked like he was about to…then he just told us he was going for a run and walked out the door. That was all, but you’d have thought Draco had seen a ghost.”

Molly nodded quietly, glad that Harry had at least controlled himself more than before.

“George…it’s time you and Fred knew something about Draco. I know you heard about him being a captive of Death Eaters and all that truck, but there’s a lot you don’t know, and you’re past old enough to understand it. That boy was tortured in the worst ways, for almost a year, and he’s lucky to be sane. Braver folks than you have cracked under things like that. Draco can’t deal with violence…or with anger directed at him. I know you promised to go easy on your pranks, and Harry told you about not rough-housing with him, but now you know why. He’s just been well enough to go out in public this last week, and two weeks before that he was half dead of fever and infected wounds. Harry’s watching that temper of his for a reason. One harsh word to Draco, and there’s no telling what it would do to him. Do you understand?”

George nodded soberly, and tried to hide behind his teacup. There was no disputing his mum when she was like this, and there was nothing to dispute. Draco had seemed like he was in pretty decent shape today, if a little titchy at times, but obviously there were things that weren’t even being spoken aloud, and Draco had endured a lot more than Fred or George had guessed at or imagined.

George assured his mum that he understood, and promised he’d make sure Fred got the picture as well, then made his way to the Floo and headed for home. It was disconcerting, thinking of Draco, whom he’d always thought of as a Death Eater poster boy, as a fragile creature, too damaged by violence to handle even seeing it. The Floo flared green and high, and George was gone.

Draco sat in his room, utterly failing to actually rest, and made a truly pathetic attempt to research one of Harry’s books about dreams and nightmares. It didn’t work. His heart had slowed down, and his nerves had settled, but he still had Harry on his mind.

How could he think of anything else? Harry wasn’t just his mission. He wasn’t just a goal…he was also the reward waiting for Draco at the end. He was the motivation for pushing forward and getting through this. Harry was all he was supposed to be thinking of. And right on cue, Harry’s footsteps were on the stairs, even and measured, hinting at calm. Draco took a deep breath and tried to stay relaxed.

Harry stood in the doorway, head hung down, looking irritable and sheepish at the same time. Draco didn’t dare say anything.

“I didn’t yell.”

“I know.”

“What…what did you think you were doing?”

Draco pulled in another breath, trying not to look up. His instincts told him not to challenge Harry too directly, but at the moment, he was genuinely angry. He wanted to lift his chin and scold Harry pointedly, but his nerves just wouldn’t allow it. He settled for saying the words matter-of-factly, and he hoped Harry would stay reasonable when he heard what Draco had to say.
“Harry. That was Kingsley. You…you were going to…do that to the Minister. How….how could you even think that was alright?”

Harry set his jaw carefully, and spoke with calm and deliberate evenness.

“Why wouldn’t it be alright? I didn’t try to make him kill Muggles, or send innocent people to Azkaban. I just suggested that he not name me as a suspect. I’m protecting this house. The one you’re living in. The way I see it, there’s no better use for a power than that. You interrupted me, and now we may have Aurors sniffing around the place sometime soon…all thanks to you.”

There was something even more chilling about Harry’s vague irritable calm, and his weird certainty that he was right. Draco could see Harry’s point, but there was an obvious flaw in Harry’s reasoning.

“Harry…you…you shouldn’t control people’s minds. It’s like rape. You take them against their will, and make them do what you want. You don’t give them a choice. It isn’t right.”

“So it was right when I did it to that nurse at St. Mungo’s, but now it’s wrong when it doesn’t help you? I’m not so sure I see your point. You wouldn’t have seen your mother if I hadn’t intervened, but when I keep Kingsley’s people out of our hair, I’ve crossed a line?”

“I was wrong about the nurse. I was so happy to get to see my mother that I didn’t even think about what it meant. When…when you did that to Kingsley, I realized how terrible it was. If it means never seeing my mother again, so be it, but you shouldn’t do that to people. If any of them ever found out what you were doing…Merlin…it would be trouble.”

Harry stiffened, and a serious frown slid across his face.

“How would that happen? Huh? Would someone tell them? Would it slip out in conversation?”

“No! Never! Harry…I wouldn’t tell anyone. There are other Legilimency practitioners out there. They check for mind alteration spells at the Ministry. If you got caught…it would be a disaster, but I wouldn’t tell.”

“Good. Keep it that way.”

Harry turned and walked away calmly. Draco flopped back onto his bed, stifling the urge to cry. He pulled a pillow to him, curling against it, realizing suddenly that it was Harry’s pillow, and that it held his scent. It was comforting and distressing at the same time.

‘I’m pathetic. His approval means so much, but I can’t just let him abuse his power. That’s the same as giving up. How do I stop him when I can barely stand telling him no? I’m supposed to save Harry, and I can’t even argue with him without nearly pissing myself with fright. Fucking pathetic!’

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Arthur Weasley emerged from the Floo, happy to be home at last. He could smell beef stew in the kitchen, and his mouth was already watering when he reached the kitchen. Molly was busy checking a loaf of bread in her oven, and Arthur quietly reached for a spoon. He was an inch from the pot when Molly’s voice stopped him cold.

“No! Never! Arthur Weasley! Put that spoon down and get your tea! Dinner will be ready in a few minutes. Now shoo!”
Arthur placed the spoon on the counter, admitting defeat. A cup of tea and a kiss later, he was back in his favorite chair, wondering what the boys were up to today. Draco almost certainly must have had a better day at work than Arthur. It had been funny enough in the end, but a devil of a piece of work at the time.

Harry and Draco came down the stairs when Molly called, looking sullen and quiet. Arthur thanked his lucky stars for the tale he was about to spin.

“Odd day at work today, let me tell you! Jenkins and Robinson were eaten by a rabid couch! Thought it was a simple Disenchantment job…but oh no!…turned out to be a full possession. A widow called it in, saying she couldn’t enter her own living room safely. We took the entire crew in, and still had to call for a specialist. Plays hell with our budget when we have to contract out.”

The beef stew was rapidly being devoured, but at least the boys seemed to be paying attention to the story. Arthur finished off a few more bites and continued.

“We couldn’t even get in the room at first, it blocking the door and all, snarling and snapping the whole while. We finally spelled the door away, and I sent the younger lads in first to wrestle it still while we worked on Disenchantments. Nothing was working, and I was getting a bit frustrated, when the deuced thing broke free and ate Jenkins. No harm done, mind you, what with no teeth and all, being a couch, but it sucked him right in and gave us a right scare at the time. Two of us holding onto Jenkins legs, and two more trying to pin the couch down. Wound up losing our grip on the tricky bugger and that’s when it took down Robinson. Fenwick took a caster to the foot and got a broken toe for his efforts, so we pulled back to the drawing room and called for reinforcements.”

By now, Molly was sporting the look of sardonic amusement she usually wore during Arthur’s stories, and Draco and Harry were smirking between bites of stew. Arthur wolfed down a few more spoonfuls with gusto, then carried on.

“Well, at first we called in a Curse-Breaker, and tried fighting the thing off with a coat rack and a lamp stand. Fight of my life, let me tell you. I thought it had me for certain, when I slipped on a fallen tea cozy. If it hadn’t been for Fenwick and that lamp stand, this would have been a very different story! The Curse-Breaker couldn’t get any results, but he detected a spirit presence. Just our luck to have a fellow on board with a little experience in Divinations.

We finally called in a chappie from the Exorcisms and Regulation of Spirits Department. Little, nut-brown, spectacled fellow in a diaper of sorts. We launched another assault and pushed it back to the wall while he burnt some bloody awful herbs and sang some little ditty in his native tongue, and a minute later, the couch starts up this awful roaring. We’re all half deafened by the blasted thing, fighting for our very lives, when the spirit of her dead husband, who apparently loved that couch more than his own wife, pops out and floats away, and…I’m telling the truth here mind you…the blessed thing belched out everything in it in one great breath. Robinson, Jenkins, the poor old dear’s missing cat, Sofie, thirty-seven Galleons in lost change, and two left shoes! Covered the entire lot of us in lint, and it took up the whole day to clean it all, but a job well done.”

Both the boys were chuckling and trying not to spill the contents of their spoons while they ate, and Arthur prided himself on a job well done of another sort. Obviously the mood here had been a bit sour, and things seemed to have turned around nicely. A man can’t properly relax in a house full of tension, and after a day like that, he needed a bit of peace and comfort and one of Molly’s meals. If it cheered the lads up a bit, then all the better. Arthur timed his last comment as Harry raised his glass of milk to his lips and took a gulp.

“Poor Jenkins. Smelled like cat pee and old couch the whole day. Couldn’t even spell it off him ‘til we got back to the office.”
Harry lost it. Milk came up through his nose while he started laughing, and that set Draco off. While the boys cracked up, guffawing until they looked like they hadn’t any wind left, Molly gave Arthur a glare that smacked of mingled disapproval and affection. She knew full well what he’d been up to, and why he’d told the story as he had. She just hated having to spell away spilled milk. No one but Molly caught the broad wink and waggled eyebrow that Arthur employed with a flourish, before taking up his spoon and finishing his stew with a quietly dignified air about him all the while.

The evening passed smoothly enough after that, and Harry looked a bit sheepish long after dinner, since Draco couldn’t stop giggling when he pictured the milk spraying from Harry’s nose.

Night finally came, and Draco made ready for bed while Harry changed in his own room. Given the events of the day, time seemed to crawl while he waited for Harry to come to bed, and Draco fought off tiny, niggling doubts the whole while.

‘He can’t stay away tonight. He can’t. I only just get close to him, and then this happens. Please… please…please come to bed, Harry! I don’t want to be alone. He has to come. What if he’s so angry he won’t sleep in here? What about the spells I need? What if I wake up in the middle of the night? Where is he? It’s taking too long…he never takes this long. He hates me. He couldn’t possibly—’

Draco’s worries screeched to a halt when Harry walked around the corner and into the room, dressed in his pajamas, looking as calm as if nothing had happened. Draco’s only struggle was keeping the pathetic look of relief and gratitude off of his face while Harry slipped between the sheets.

Draco curled closer in the dark, nervous about Harry’s mood, and while Harry muttered the spells to ward away nightmares, Draco reached out and took hold of Harry’s left arm, wrapping his own left arm around it as he had before. Harry settled back down, and relaxed completely, and that was when they realized that there was no sheet between them.

In the hurry to get into bed, they hadn’t left a sheet between them. Harry pulled away a little.

“I’m sorry. Let me get these sorted out. I forgot for a moment…just a second.”

“No.”

Harry paused, surprised.

“What?”

“No…don’t…don’t get up…or change the sheets. I…don’t mind…as long as it’s you. Just…tell me you aren’t angry with me? Please?”

Harry was still reeling from the notion of Draco feeling more comfortable near him, but he relaxed back onto his pillow again with a quiet sigh.

“I’m not angry with you. Not really. Not at all. You said what you believed, and you did what you thought was right. Just because I don’t agree…it doesn’t mean I’m angry at you. You have every right to think and say and do what you want. I…I’m sorry you were worried. Maybe I was wrong… or maybe I was right, but I never meant to make you afraid. I tried, Draco…I tried to make sure I didn’t lose my temper, and I thought I did pretty good. I guess it just wasn’t good enough. I’ll try harder, or—”

Harry’s rambling was interrupted by lips suddenly pressed against his own, and he had no desire to interrupt Draco’s efforts at that moment. It was a stronger, more certain kiss than before, teasing his lower lip with a hint of teeth, then moving back to let him participate. They lost themselves in the dark, minds empty of everything but the comfort and pleasure that came of closeness, and the subtle
freedom that came of abandoning words in favor of the movement of skin upon skin.

It was hard to sleep after a kiss like that. Neither of them spoke, and neither of them dared to address the issue, but erections that positively ached plagued them both, while they closed their eyes and tried to relax enough for slumber to overtake their minds. Tomorrow would be a better day, and the week held the promise of a new wand and a Quidditch game. It hadn’t been the best of days, but better ones were coming fast, and if they could feel this way, after a day like this one, then there was still so much to hope for yet.

TBC!!!
Harry woke early as always, eyes fluttering open and consciousness coming to him quickly. Consciousness regarding his surroundings. His warm surroundings. His unusually warm, pajama-clad, soft, blond surroundings.

Draco had curled very close during the night. His left arm was flopped across Harry’s chest, and the rest of his body was pressed flush against Harry’s left side, except for Draco’s left leg, which was almost across Harry’s lap. Draco’s head was tucked into a corner of Harry’s left arm, and soft, even breaths brushed against his ribs when Draco exhaled. All of these things suddenly became real to Harry, and all of them were good.

The erection pressing into his left thigh was somewhat more problematic. Especially since it rather closely matched his own situation, which was reaching epic proportions and tenting the sheets above him, threatening to pulse its way right through the material of his pajamas. This was not to say that he didn’t entertain ideas about situations like this…he did…but they weren’t supposed to happen this soon, and Draco was supposed to be completely healthy and able to cope with it, and there was supposed to be candles…and music…and flowers…and maybe some wine. This was a little more reality than Harry could handle at this time of morning.

He hadn’t spent a lifetime fantasizing about particulars…he’d kind of been content with more general notions. The actual physical mechanics still unsettled him. To be specific, the fact that Draco’s erect penis was throbbing against his thigh was unsettling him terribly, whether he liked the idea or not.

‘Think, Harry! How do you gracefully get out of this, without a weird scene. Draco would be mortified if he woke up like this…never mind him noticing that I’m about to blast through my pajamas. This is great! Some poof I’ll make if I can’t handle a hard-on next to me! I’ve got to make this go down…at least then he won’t freak out too much. Concentrate on horrible things. Horrible, hideous things. Argus Filch doing a glossy color spread for Wicked Witch Weekly, in a pink thong, and smiling!’

His erection quickly flagged and Harry exhaled softly with relief. Then he looked at Draco’s face, peacefully slumbering beside him.

‘He’s so beautiful. Look at him. He looks so content…so at peace. He deserves that, after all that he’s been through. It would be nice, wouldn’t it…seeing him like this every morning. I never knew his eyelashes were so fine. I don’t think I even noticed that his eyebrows were just a little darker than his hair…until now. His nose is perfect…it looks so…noble. His lips…’

The erection was back in full force.

‘Great. I’m a moron. Now I have to think about Filch all over again! Damn it!’
Eventually, Harry’s rampant prick was back under control, and he managed to whisper a few words to Draco, who woke easily enough, being nearly as light a sleeper as Harry. For a remarkably pale person, it seemed impossible for Draco to sustain such a crimson blush for so long, but he managed it anyway.

Harry acted as though nothing had been out of sorts, launching into an impromptu workout on the floor, doing his morning standard hundred sit-ups while Draco hastily stammered out his intention to use the shower, and then fled from the room with towel in hand, looking completely mortified.

Draco made his way to the shower with all due haste, thanking the heavens for the small mercy of not finding himself sticky and sated by Harry’s warm thigh…instead of just painfully erect and nearly sprawled across Harry’s body. The shower quickly began to steam as the heat kicked in, and Draco peeled away his pajamas and slid inside, letting warmth and comfort ease away the tension that was eating away at him.

‘Oh, sweet fucking Merlin! I can’t believe that just happened. It didn’t. It was a dream. I woke up and it’s over. There is no way I just woke up practically humping Harry’s leg like an alley cat in heat! Didn’t happen, didn’t happen, didn’t happen!’

Draco rested his head against the cool tiles of the wall, and took a few deep breaths while the water rolled down his back. His penis hadn’t shifted gears at all. It was still stiff and waiting, demanding relief as soon as he acknowledged its presence.

‘Who am I even kidding? It happened. Harry was sweet and let me off the hook for it, but I was just that close to coming all over myself…and his leg…and we both know it. I’ve got to switch to wanking before bed. One more goodnight kiss like that one and I’ll wake up glued to him by my own spunk. I am sooo not letting that happen. That settles it. I’m only wanking in the shower before bed…from now on.’

Draco’s cock twitched almost involuntarily, pulsing with need.

‘Right after this.’

Harry chatted idly with the twins for a little while before leaving Draco to his work, but given that Gryffindors were hopeless at subtlety, Draco was well aware that they were discussing something they didn’t want shared. Naturally, this made it necessary to hear whatever they were talking about, even if it meant distracting Ella by dubious means. The comforting thing about the entire matter was that, no matter how silly it sounded, it reminded Draco a lot of Slytherin House politics…something he’d excelled at in school. It was refreshingly familiar, except for having easy access to Extendable Ears, since he was now employed by their makers. That made it all the easier.

The conversation was only on for a minute or two before Draco pulled in the Ears and walked away, shaken by what he’d just learned.

Harry, Fred and George had been speaking of Death Eaters, naming possible locations, and exchanging theories on the recent Muggle killing that had taken place, and Draco had heard enough to realize that Harry got help from the twins…regularly. The context of the conversation was such that he knew Harry had no intention of giving up hunting…he’d only put it off for awhile. It was a handy thing to know, but now he felt guilty for even having heard it. Who would have guessed that the two charming jokers with Harry now would also be deliberate accomplices to cold-blooded
murder?

It made sense that Harry got help from someone with money and connections for information, but Draco hadn’t even imagined the twins being involved. Suddenly, he realized that he would have to be more cautious than ever while working here. It was possible that more information might come his way, but also a greater risk of being caught. This also ruled out the possibility of receiving correspondence from Dula or Snape while he was here. He needed a more secure route to receive information, and right now, Molly was all he had. Any Firecalls or owls with dangerous content would have to be sent elsewhere…perhaps Hogwarts when Molly went again…or maybe at Charlie and Dula’s place.

These things occupied Draco’s mind until the newly familiar ocean of paperwork washed it away for awhile. Harry said farewell quickly, and Draco settled into a long day’s work clearing files and correcting old paperwork. It would be weeks before he would be able to call this office organized, and even longer before he could call it accurate. Still, it was work, and there was pay, and whatever else might go wrong, tomorrow evening he’d be watching the Cannons from the VIP guest seating, and it would take a very bad day to take the edge off of his excitement over that!

The day passed quickly and easily, but Draco forgot to eat again, and wound up nibbling his food on the way to the Floo. Fred and George had been fairly subdued all day, not having pranked or pestered Draco even once. It had been all business, all day, and as much as Draco had expected to like that, he found it oddly insulting. He hadn’t really meant to sound threatening the other day, and it was normal for the twins to test everyone’s patience. It seemed vaguely rude to be left out of their cycle of mockery and pranks, but at least he’d gotten his work done.

His mind was still wrapped around notions of Harry, and of Quidditch games, and he was suddenly coming to terms with the fact that this would be a highly public event…and he’d be with Harry in a seat that no one would fail to notice. Honestly, he should be worrying over a thousand things far more important than a Quidditch game, but it had to be admitted that this would be his first significant public appearance in years. There might very well be talk, or even press coverage, if he were seen publicly with Harry, and he hadn’t had to worry about things like that since he’d been sixteen. He also wasn’t entirely sure he was ready for that much scrutiny.

The Floo was in proper working order, and the Burrow wasn’t busy this time, and Draco returned home right on time feeling rather cheerful about having a home to go to, and a job to come back from. All things considered, it was a fairly decent situation. Draco said hello to Molly and nattered a bit about his work while he soaked up tea, then headed upstairs to peel out of the nice clothes he’d been in all day, and maybe pull on one of the old sweaters he’d grown fond of lately. It was kind of nice to lounge about in them, and they were wonderfully warm…a sensation he still hadn’t gotten over his affection for. Freezing nearly to death will do that to person.

He could hear Harry working out in his own room, even from down the hall. The staccato grunts that Harry made near the end of a long workout were familiar to him now, and a creeping curiosity took hold. Draco crept to the edge of Harry’s doorway and peered in as carefully and discreetly as he could.

Harry was doing push-ups. One-handed. His entire body was flushed from exertion, and his well-tanned skin had a bright sheen of sweat visible everywhere. He was only wearing a faded pair of red shorts, and Draco could see the faint outlines of a curse-scar on Harry’s leg. Every muscle in Harry’s body seemed taut and powerful, flexed and straining while he raised and lowered himself, grunting only at the end of each push. It was hypnotic. Magnificent. Exhilarating.

Also…stimulating.
Draco slipped away from the edge of the door and made his way to the shower. Maybe it had only been nine hours since he’d done this, but frankly, after seeing Harry in nothing but shorts, he needed this if he was supposed to get through the rest of the evening…and night…without humiliating himself.

Showers really were for things other than privacy while one masturbated, and Draco made full use of it first, shampooing and conditioning his hair, and promising himself he’d get it cut soon. It was getting just shaggy enough to touch his shoulders, and he didn’t want it there anymore. Soap was used next, and he lathered himself thoroughly, scrubbing his skin with a washcloth until he smarted slightly everywhere that mattered. Only then was it time for leisure, and his penis had been at half-mast the entire while.

This was a calmer and more rational undertaking than the frantic wank he’d had that morning, and he lavished certain extra attentions upon himself while he tugged gently down below. This time, he massaged the muscle just behind his sac in exactly the way he liked, and allowed a finger to occasionally ghost its way along the sensitive flesh just around his sphincter. His eyes were clamped shut and his head was at rest against the tiles of the wall while he teased himself. He hadn’t set the water as hot as usual, but he still felt like he was burning, right up to his cheeks, and his skull pulsed in time with his heartbeat.

Thoughts of Harry dominated his mind, and while they were largely thoughts of snogging, or of simple closeness and warm skin, a few bolder, wildly indelicate thoughts flashed through. Draco nudged the tip of his finger a little further, and feeling no discomfort, wiggled it about carefully. It was almost instinct that moved him, pushing himself to open for it, putting up no resistance, and the stimulation, however crude, was still pleasant. It was more than enough to send Draco over the edge into orgasm, cognizant of the way his own muscles clenched nicely around his fingertip. The fire of orgasm faded slowly, and Draco opened his eyes, panting, and sweating even though he was in a running shower.

After making certain that all the evidence was carefully washed away, Draco shut off the tap and found a towel to dry himself. Patting and rubbing until his slightly reddened skin was no longer damp, Draco wrestled with the slight depression that always followed these little ‘sessions’.

’There’s no real question, is there? If I’d even imagine him doing that to me…I’ve got it for him so bad there’s no words for it. At least I could control myself through a healing session now…as long as there’s enough Calming Draught left to dope me into a state of low anxiety. He let it pass yesterday…but he won’t drop the subject forever. I have to do this and get it over with. Just hide certain parts with the sheets and let Harry work, and when it’s over you can relax. Oh, hell! This is pathetic! You want his dick in you…but you can’t even let him rub a little salve onto you! You can fall asleep and practically hump his leg like a lonely puppy…but you can’t turn your back on him without shuddering! Fucking ridiculous!’

Draco looked at himself in the mirror. The towel blocked the view of his scarred inner and upper thighs and buttocks, but he stared at his own image like he was hypnotized.

He let the towel drop.

He remembered getting those scars. Hyde-Pratt had been fond of hot irons, and found the sensitive flesh along his ribs, and between his legs, a most appealing target. The things he’d watched done to him, or simply felt through the haze of pain and drugs, had been mind-boggling. He’d been so dazed that most of it simply hadn’t felt real…except for the white hot agony that seared through everything, making the surreal nightmare suddenly come alive. He’d screamed until his throat bled. Noises had come from his throat that no human should make. He knew what it was like to smell his own flesh
cook and scorch. He had a right to be afraid.

Somehow, in spite of everything, he still hungered to be loved, and in the back of his mind he still longed for a touch that wasn’t like the kind he had known. Harry had been gentle from the first. Even reluctant to help, and full of contempt for a person who had gotten his friends hurt, and his mentor killed, Harry had been breathtakingly gentle with every touch, treating Draco’s wounds, and later his scars, with a patience and quiet care that had been as exquisite as it was alien and unexpected. Despite the shudder that thoughts of the previous year brought, Draco straightened his spine and raised his chin a little, seeing a hint of the confidence he’d had just a few years ago.

‘I have every right to want him. Dula was right…about a lot of things. There can’t be anything wrong with wanting someone like that. Maybe I am fucked up in almost every way I can think of, and maybe he has problems that go way past normal, but he’s good. Harry is good inside, and he shows it in so many ways. He scares me shitless, but he’s trying. There is so much there to want. It isn’t about sex…well…not all about the sex. Why wouldn’t I want to be close to someone like him? When you…when you love somebody…you share those things with them. He isn’t MacNair. He isn’t Hyde-Pratt. He isn’t my uncle. He’ll never be like them. I won’t let him. Voldemort can’t have him. He’s going to be mine, and I mean to keep him.’

Draco gathered his clothes and towel, dressed quickly, and headed back to his room. It didn’t take more than a few seconds before Harry wandered in sheepishly, hinting that they were overdue to work on removing Draco’s scars. Draco nodded assent, plucked a vial of Calming Draught from the desk, and drank the entire contents, letting the magic seep into every fiber of his being. His breathing was calm and measured while Harry stepped outside and waited for Draco to strip away his slacks and arrange the sheets for modesty.

“I’m ready.”

Harry came back in and opened the jar of salve. He sat on the edge of the bed like usual, this time facing away from Draco so that he could reach the affected area properly. Draco had lain face down, with the sheet arranged to show only the thigh and buttock closest to Harry, and no more. In the aftermath of his moment of clarity in the bathroom, he was utterly calm…but Harry was not.

Harry applied the salve with his usual hesitance and familiar gentleness, and Draco was calmer than usual, if still somewhat uncomfortable with the feeling of a calloused hand softly stroking his leg and arse. Harry was having a lot more trouble than usual, however, since looking at any part of Draco’s backside brought forth thoughts he really wasn’t ready for yet.

‘How can I think those things?! A bunch of fucking sick goons torture him and all I can think about is buggering him some more! Sick! This is wrong! This is sooo wrong! What the hell is wrong with me? I can’t want these things…they’re not right.’

Harry wanted them just the same. The images slid through his mind every so often, in complete defiance of his desire to put them aside. There were so many things he’d never done. So many things he’d never had the chance to try…and Draco was getting healthier…at least on the outside. His sickly pallor had become a fairly normal paleness. His skeletal appearance had diminished until he looked fairly attractive, if just a little too slender. His ribs could no longer be easily counted, and he was clean and groomed and always seemed content, if a little wistful. His skin was largely healed, save for the few marks that would likely never leave him, due to the Dark magic used while the wounds were inflicted, but the rest of him was whole and fine. Draco was becoming beautiful…and Harry couldn’t easily ignore it anymore.

What would Draco think…if he knew that Harry, despite his calm exterior, wanted to feel himself inside Draco’s body, making love to another for the first time? Would Draco ever be well enough to
even try that? Was that even what he wanted? What if Draco wanted to do the same to Harry? The notion of making love to Draco was enticing and frightening at the same time, but the idea of Draco doing the same things TO Harry was absolutely terrifying. Did that make Harry shallow…or a terrible person, just because he didn’t want the same for Draco as for himself? This and more battered away at Harry’s calm.

The worst part was looking at the damage as it slowly faded. Harry had been hurt before…and badly too. He’d been scarred. Not like this though. Not in places like these. He hadn’t been violated in places so intimate that it made his cheeks burn to have them treated. They’d hurt Draco in so many ways. His mind as much as his body. Even after all he’d seen, and all he’d done, it still made Harry physically ill to see what had been done to Draco. The scars could fade, but Draco would always remember how he got them, and Harry would always know that they had been there.

The session didn’t end quickly either. Draco showed more resolve than ever, and despite quaking from head to toe more than once, he refused to quit when Harry asked if he needed a break. They kept going, first through Draco’s left side, then through the right. Draco turned onto his back, and with the faint modesty of a single sheet to keep his dignity, he sat through Harry’s treatment of his pelvis, upper thighs, and groin. Harry wished he’d taken the Calming Draught before it was all finished, and his nerves were completely shot by the time they were done. All that could be healed had been healed, and Draco was as relieved as Harry when it was over.

The intensity of it stole reason from them, and the evening passed in a blur for both boys. They kept the talk over dinner light, looking forward to the Quidditch game tomorrow, and discussing nothing more complicated than Draco’s work or Harry’s plans for evening workouts to better suit Draco’s schedule.

When the evening slid into night, and it was time to make their way to bed, their nightly rituals were performed in near silence. A simple change of clothes for pajamas, and wards against nightmares were set in place before lying quietly beside each other. Draco wordlessly curled into position at Harry’s left, and this time he took heart in something Dula had told him.

‘I have seen you touch him, Draco. It is clear that you do not like others touching you, but do you think he would not accept letting you decide what you are comfortable with?’

In the pitch black of the silent room in which they lay, Draco’s left hand slithered through the sheets, and came to rest on Harry’s chest. The pajama shirt wasn’t buttoned quite to the top, and the tips of Draco’s fingers were at rest against warm skin. He could feel the beat of Harry’s heart through his palm, and its evenness and perfect rhythm lulled him to sleep with a single sliver of hopeful memory to keep his dreams pleasant.

’I can touch him. I know he doesn’t hate me, and I know he cares about me…a lot. If…I can touch him…some…that would be something for him. I’d…I’d just have to trust him to not expect more. But do I trust him that much?’

And Draco did.

TBC!!!
Winding Down...And Winding Up

DISCLAIMER: Warning! I make no claim to any property of J.K. Rowling's, and am in no way profiting by this. I do offer her my sincerest thanks for allowing us this garden of the mind in which we play. Further Warning! This story...and likely any I ever write...are dominated by gay themes and characters. That's how it is, if this in any way makes you uncomfortable...do not read further.

Redeem Me...by Samayel

Chapter 43: Winding Down...And Winding Up

The crowd was far above the average for a Cannons game, and Draco found the press of humanity a bit stifling. He'd spent a long time in the company of very few people, and his last memories of crowds were less than savory, and involved being pelted with garbage and cursed at while he fled. At least people moved out of Harry’s way, and once they’d presented their tickets and VIP passes, they were ushered to the Skybox by an attendant.

In Quidditch, as in all things wizarding, the Skybox was a bit different. Here, it was an actual room that, once it was occupied, floated up into the sky above most of the crowd and allowed the occupants to enjoy a bird’s eye view of the game, surrounded by food and drinks and with restrooms and other necessities on hand. The Skybox was spelled against foul weather, and enchanted to appear as though it was had no walls or ceiling, but still held those within safe and sound, with no risk of falling out.

Draco had been in a Skybox once. His father had taken him to a Falcons exhibition game, and had reserved the Skybox for them. At fourteen, he’d been so woefully spoiled that he simply took the entire experience for granted, assuming that it was his rightful due as a Malfoy, and he really hadn’t properly enjoyed the event as much as he could have. This time was completely different. Harry was imposing enough to make people move aside on the way to the still-grounded Skybox, and once they were ushered into place and made comfortable, the Skybox rose slowly and gently into the air, scarcely rattling the glasses and beverages left for them. Draco couldn’t keep the giddy smile off of his face the entire while, and Harry was kind enough to not tease him for looking like a kid in a candy shop.

There were hors d’oeuvres aplenty, and Draco hadn’t had a canapé in years. The game was a goodly while from starting, and he’d worked half the day before Harry came to pick him up. The twins attended games regularly, but hadn’t come to this one, opting to finish their workday and catch one of the later season games. Draco greedily worked his way through the hors d’oeuvres, but passed on the wine and champagne that had been left. As common as it looked, he found a Butterbeer and opened it, feeling a bit more comfortable with that. Too many bad memories were still attached to wine and harder spirits, but a Butterbeer wouldn’t hurt.

Harry called to him from the viewing seats, which looked plush and comfortable even from across the room. It was still eerie, having no real walls around them, but for a wizard born to such things, it wasn’t as unnerving as one might have thought.

“Oy! Draco! Ron left us gifts! Boxed and wrapped and everything. That great git...wonder what he got us.”

Draco ambled over, content to sip his Butterbeer and wash down his snacks before speaking. The
package was wrapped in green, with a silver-gray ribbon, while Harry’s was red with gold. House-colored packages had been in vogue back in school, and to be honest, it was the first time Draco had unwrapped a gift since Hogwarts. That Ron Weasley had been the person to change that was a real shock, but Draco picked up the small green box and started peeling away the wrap. Harry already had his half open, and reached in with a look of surprise.

Harry pulled out a clear crystal or glass stag, detailed down to the hooves and antlers. It was an impressive piece of work, and it had been charmed to paw and snort occasionally, bowing its head every so often. There was a letter beneath it, and Harry opened it and read it while Draco opened his gift.

Draco’s box contained a green glass dragon, crafted even more painstakingly than the stag that Harry held. Its tail flicked occasionally, and it would flex its wings every so often, like a real dragon at rest. The long, scaled neck would crane out and look about, then curl close to its body as it settled back down. It was exquisite, and while he’d seen costlier things in his time, this was quite unique in its own way, as well as lovely in its own right. A letter waited for Draco at the bottom of the box, and he read his own while Harry crowed aloud about Ron’s gifts.

“Can you believe it? He made the bloody things himself! Charmed against breaking and magically animated. Nice! I didn’t even know he could do that. The stag is the form of my Patronus. This is the coolest thing he’s ever given me. Go, Ron, go!”

Harry settled into his own snacks and took a Butterbeer of his own, while Draco read his letter from Ron.

Draco,

Cheers, mate! If you’re reading this, then you and Harry made the game. I’ll see you when we take off and do our fly-by, but here’s a little something to say thanks for coming.

I made this the night I screwed up, after I went home and decided to quit the booze. I guess I just needed a hobby to keep myself busy nights, and this works out pretty well.

Anyway, this is the one I made for you. I know the dragon reference and the color choice are pretty obvious, but what the hell, right? I figured you probably wouldn’t mind.

Hope you like it, and we’ll see you both at the after game party in the clubhouse. Harry knows the way, and your passes grant you all access. Enjoy the game. I’ll be pretty busy once we hit the sky, but cheer for us even if I can’t hear it…we need this win if we want to lead the league, and there are observers looking at recruits for the World Cup match right now.

Yours, Ron Weasley

Draco turned to Harry in muted surprise.

“I had no idea he could even be that nice. Skybox, VIP passes, and presents he made himself…that don’t suck at all. Quite the opposite actually. I don’t know what to say when we see him.”

“Don’t worry, Ron’s an easy going fellow when you know him. Just shake his hand and say thanks. He’ll be fine. Leave trying to hug him half to death to me. He might weigh two stone more than me, but I can still pick him up off the ground when I want to!”

They bantered cheerfully, still impressed by Ron’s gifts, and Draco made up his mind to relax and enjoy himself as much as possible. With Harry beside him and in good spirits, nothing could go wrong, and he felt as safe as anyone in the world could be.
A couple bottles of Butterbeer and a fair number of hors d’oeuvres later, Draco lounged in his chair as the game kicked off, starting with the introduction of the teams and their players, as they each did a circuit of the stadium. Ron waved to the crowd, but gave an impromptu salute as he tore past the Skybox, and Harry cheered deafeningly, an orange Cannons’ pennant held aloft in one hand, while Draco waved back cheerily.

The game was a real stunner, and hard to follow, even with the magically enhanced devices provided for same. Professional Quidditch was played at a pace that far exceeded what they’d seen at Hogwarts, and even Harry had only executed a fraction of the in-flight maneuvers that were used in play. The speed of the game was unrelenting, and Ron was one of a half dozen orange blurs on the pitch. The only easily observed players were the Keepers, who were in fair form and were making both teams work hard for a single score.

The game stayed tied at zero-all for longer than Draco had imagined possible, and despite the absence of actual points on the board, the action was fascinating. Harry was also enraptured, and other than the occasional cheer for the Cannons, neither of them said a word. The Tornados’ light blue uniforms flashed past the box as often as the Cannons’ vibrant orange. The Chasers and Beaters were owning the game, competing against each other to keep or take the Quaffle, and they still distracted the Seekers regularly. When Ron sent Bludgers flying, it was always with a loud crack so distinctive that it could be heard across the pitch, and no small number of players immediately shifted course when they heard that noise, dodging just in case it had been aimed at them. Ron was playing a great fair game, but his reputation as ‘the Breaker’ was still intact, and no one wanted to be hit by a Bludger sent by him!

There was a flurry of action near the Cannons’ hoop, and a cluster of pale blue Tornados hemmed in their Chaser, clearing the way for a shot. It was a fast feint, and the Cannons’ Keeper finally overextended, letting the score shift to ten-zero, in favor of the Tornados. The noise of the crowd was deafening, and Harry groaned along with them, but there was nothing to be done for it. It was a perfect play, and you had to admire it, even if it had been executed by the other team.

Now the Cannons took control, and hungry to keep the game tied, they launched an all out assault on the Tornados’ hoops. The moves came so fast that it was like watching a hive of orange and blue bees that had been hit by a rock. Ron wasn’t in the heart of the formation, but outside it, and Draco saw why in a hurry. One Beater was attached to the chaser with the Quaffle, and Ron was above for a good reason. The Cannons’ other Beater sent a Bludger careening toward Ron, knowing full well that Ron would make use of it. A second later, the loud crack of his blow was heard everywhere at once, and a screaming Bludger cleared a path through the Tornados’ defense, which was quickly exploited. At ten and ten, the game was back to tied, and the Cannons’ fans, who were in the majority, roared.

The commentary from the observers was crisp and professional, and helped to keep the events of the game clear despite the flurry of activity. Draco missed any number of things, but regretted nothing…since everything he watched was fascinating. It was a lot to absorb, and he missed the Quaffle changing hands again, this time back into the Cannons’ hands. This time Ron was circling the Cannons’ Chaser like a mother hen, bat at the ready. He muscled several Tornados’ players out of the way, just by looking like he might resort to violence, and pulled away only when the Chaser put the Quaffle through on the far left, barely avoiding a mid air pile-up as the opposing teams split at the same time to strike new formations.

A brief scuffle between the two Seekers took place, and the crowd held its collective breath when they realized the Snitch was on the line and the game was only at twenty and ten. Some games ran long, and the Snitch almost wasn’t needed to decide victory, but if it were snatched now, the game would have been less than a half hour all together. Fenton, the Cannons’ well-ranked Seeker, had
been focused entirely on the Snitch, and so was his rival Seeker. Fenton had the edge by more than a foot or so, and that likely prompted the intervention by the Tornados’ Beaters. A short dust-up later, the Snitch was lost in the mix, and both Seekers were forced to switch back to ‘patrol mode’, scanning the pitch for any sign of their tiny golden quarry.

Draco’s level of excitement couldn’t be sustained forever, and somewhere around his third Butterbeer, which left him warm and cheerful, he felt slightly drowsy and tried to shake it off. He’d been sitting for more than an hour, and raptly attentive for all of it, but he was slowly winding down. Food, comfortable seats, and good drink, as well as Harry’s intoxicating nearness, all contributed to the desire to rest just a little. Naturally, once he was half conscious, it made perfect sense to make himself a little more comfortable…and lay his head on Harry’s shoulder. His subconscious could hear the crack of bats, the buzz of scored points and the omnipresent roar of the crowd, but the rest of his mind was only aware of how genuinely good he felt, fed, warm, safe and wonderfully close to Harry, who now scarcely budged, refusing to disturb Draco.

Draco wasn’t sure how long he dozed, but the roar of the crowd shifted patterns, and he let his eyes flutter open. It was slowly growing darker outside, and while he hadn’t been napping long, the change of atmosphere was surprising. Draco quietly thanked Harry for putting up with him, then nervously fumbled for Harry’s hand. It was a truly strange and joyful feeling…knowing that Harry was there for him to touch when he was ready, and how he was comfortable. The absence of expectation somehow made it easier. Sometimes, when Draco felt like something was expected or necessary, he just tried too hard, and he’d get too tense and fall apart inside. Harry was quiet and easy-going so often that Draco felt complete freedom to do what he pleased, when it pleased him to do so…and that made things so much easier.

‘I’m in the Skybox, with Harry, watching pro Quidditch at its best. I can even nap on his shoulder, or hold his hand all night if I want to. This is definitely the best day I think I’ve ever had.’

Draco sat bemused, not watching the game anymore. It didn’t matter who won. Draco had the only prize worth concerning himself over. He stared at Harry unashamedly and smiling wide, while Harry gawked at the game looking a lot like the animated and largely cheerful boy he’d been at Hogwarts. Harry finally noticed the scrutiny he was under, and paused to look back at Draco quizzically.

Draco leaned forward and sat halfway up suddenly, impulsively kissing Harry on the mouth, and he wasn’t concerned with propriety at the moment. Harry melted into it easily, happily snogging Draco back, keeping their hands together but never quite reaching out to pull or grab Draco and bring him closer. That self restraint was all that made this possible, and if he’d clutched at or pulled Draco roughly into some embrace, it likely would have induced panic, but that was something Harry wouldn’t let happen.

Draco crawled off of his seat, never quite breaking contact, and safe in the privacy of the Skybox, deep in the middle of the most intense snogging he’d allowed himself yet, he moved onto Harry’s lap, curling an arm around Harry’s neck, letting his legs and feet rest on his own chair, while he made himself comfortable, propped against Harry’s chest. This was probably the most daring he’d felt in years, and Harry was worth being daring over. Especially when the tips of their tongues brushed together, or wrestled softly for dominance in Harry’s mouth. Draco knew his body was responding to all this, and even if there was no visible evidence of his arousal, it was still very real. In all the little snogging sessions they’d had so far, Draco had never actually felt more than tension and vague arousal, mingled with fluttering nerves and a slight urge to panic that he always carefully smothered. This was perfect, and the usual things that ruined the moment for him were entirely absent.

His hands could run through Harry’s hair, his lips could do whatever they wanted to the strong lines
of Harry’s neck and nape, and he could return to the familiar pleasures of Harry’s lips at any moment he chose. Draco may have been cognizant of the stiffness in his groin, cramped by his snug clothing, but he honestly didn’t care at the moment.

Gradually, he became aware of a rather serious erection trapped beneath him, straining against Harry’s clothing, and absolutely rigid against Draco’s backside. Harry was as turned on as Draco was, and that was a powerfully aphrodisiac knowledge. Draco’s cheeks were burning with the realization that Harry was so clearly excited by him, and knowing that it wouldn’t go any further than he wanted it to made the entire situation not only tolerable, but superb.

Harry tried to stutter out some inquiry as to whether Draco was comfortable or not, nobly intentioned, and Draco silenced him with another long kiss, deeper than any they’d had at home. Draco occasionally had to twist or shift himself to stay aligned properly for snogging, and he was becoming familiar with the rather impressive bulge in Harry’s slacks. It was a safe fantasy, separated by layers of clothing, and the fact that Harry was almost completely at his mercy was intoxicating, but he was imagining sitting astride Harry, pierced by Harry’s rampant erection, spattering his own come across Harry’s chest. It was a safe fantasy for Draco, but Harry was having more than an idle fantasy.

Harry whimpered into Draco’s mouth, suddenly wide-eyed and taut with excitement. Draco silenced him again with an even fiercer kiss, and he noticed that Harry’s responses were completely off. Harry fidgeted beneath him, moaned into their kiss again, and clenched the armrests of the seat with a ferocity that looked impressive. His eyes were screwed shut, and Draco felt the heavy pulsing and sudden flexing of flesh under his bum. Harry was coming! Draco never stopped their kiss, determined to savor every last second before reality crashed in on them.

‘Oh, Merlin! I just made him come! I didn’t do anything but curl up with him and snog him senseless, and he got off. I did that!’

Draco slowed the pace of his kiss as Harry, flushed scarlet and paralyzed with mingled relief and embarrassment, took a few halting breaths and relaxed.

‘He is sooo mine.’

The crowd was cheering outrageously. They glanced at the board as one. It was 190 to 40...Fenton had caught the Snitch.

“Draco…I’m…I am so sor-”

Draco cut Harry off with a much gentler kiss. His own aching erection would have to wait until he could deal with it, since he wasn’t quite ready for anything more advanced than what had just come about by accident, but he wasn’t in the mood for apologies. Mostly, he was just flushed with pride that his closeness to Harry was enough to make the man come in his pants.

“No…not sorry…at all, Harry.”

Draco leaned in close to Harry’s ear and whispered breathily.

“I thought it was sexy…and perfect…that you came for me…because of me. Don’t be sorry, Harry.”

Draco uncurled himself off of Harry’s lap, after one last, brief and somewhat more innocent kiss, and let Harry right himself and use the restroom before the Skybox drifted earthward. It wouldn’t do to walk out of here and off to the party with incriminating stains on his pants.

Harry was brilliantly red in the face, and kept sheepishly looking Draco’s way with a blend of awe
and adoration. It was impossible to think of Harry as anything but a smitten boyfriend when he was like this, and it was a wonderfully refreshing change from thinking of Harry as a killer. There were so many serious things to worry about, but they could all wait for tomorrow. Tonight, Draco had a victory party to attend with his boyfriend, and he would wear a look of confidence in public for the first time, nearly drunk on the knowledge that Harry desired him so thoroughly, and that he had the means to please Harry if and when he desired to.

TBC!!!
Contrary to popular opinion, Ron Weasley was not stupid. Stubborn, prideful, and overly inclined to make hasty conclusions perhaps, but not stupid. A man who could plot a dozen moves ahead in a game of wizard chess was by no means mentally deficient. Certain things became obvious within minutes of Harry and Draco’s arrival at the party, and Ron would’ve had to be blind to miss them.

Draco was smiling from ear to ear, and Harry practically glowed. The two of them kept looking at each other liked they each thought the other had hung the moon, and despite the polite thanks and kind words about the gifts and tickets, Ron might as well have turned invisible.

‘They’re fucking. It would have been more subtle if they’d just worn fucking signs that pointed to each other and read ‘Just Fucked’! I can’t believe this shit. My best friend and his former worst enemy…are shagging! Awwwww, criminey! I hope to Merlin that at least Harry’s the top! Ooof! Bad image, Ronny…baaad image. Just find a way to deal with it and get Harry alone for a few minutes to talk about this.’

The party rambled on, and Ron didn’t have much luck peeling Harry away from Draco…until Oliver Wood got there. Wood took a contract with Puddlemere United after school, and he made assistant coach after only four years on the team. His fast rise had made him a celebrity among wizards who followed Quidditch, and he often dropped by celebrations where old friends were to be found. Harry hadn’t seen Oliver in years, and Ron knew a chance when he saw one. It was hard enough just ignoring the sheer volume of alcohol, and watching Harry and Draco fawn all over each other was more tension than he could easily adjust to.

Oliver dominated Harry’s attention completely, and with just a few carefully timed statements by Ron, Draco was left completely out of the loop, moved to the background of the conversation for the time being. If he could just get Draco to piss off for a few minutes, he could drop a few questions to Harry and sort this all out. Not that he was absolutely against it, since after all, Charlie and Dula were great…and good mates as well, but Harry and Draco just made no sense. Plus…the looks Draco had been giving Ron for interrupting him had been pretty horrible. Not quite the old ‘Malfoy Glares Of Death’, but close enough for Ron’s money. It was sweet relief when Draco acidly commented that he was going to get something more to drink, then sauntered off looking like he’d just bitten into a fresh lemon. Harry was still floored by Oliver’s arrival, and he looked slightly hurt and confused about Draco’s irritation with him. Really…what was Harry thinking? It’s Draco, for Merlin’s sake! That what he’s like. Maybe he wasn’t evil, but he was still Draco.

Things settled down comfortably, and it felt a little like old times with Harry and Oliver talking about Quidditch. The thought of a decent, stiff drink crossed Ron’s mind more than once, but he kept it in check. He wasn’t Gryffindor for no reason at all. He’d made his promise and he was sticking to it…no matter what.
He’d almost managed to steer things around to Harry taking a short walk with him, but what he saw going on over Harry’s shoulder set his blood boiling. Draco was getting chatted up by Fenton. The Cannons’ Seeker was notorious for his sexual appetite. Anything even remotely attractive eventually wound up shagging him…and Draco didn’t seem too upset about the situation. Admittedly, Fenton was gorgeous, a pure-blood from a wealthy family, and so polished and charming that he’d been featured in Witch Weekly almost every month for the last two years, but the man was a pig. His teammates knew better than to trust him farther than they could throw him. He might be the red hot prospect that drew crowds and recruiters, but he was also a complete bastard.

‘I can’t believe the wee cunt went off with Fenton! I pull Harry away from him for a few minutes and he runs off with the Cannons’ own walking sex machine! I don’t care if Harry likes him…he’s a fucking tramp. I’ll sort this shite out fast enough!’

Ron excused himself quickly, letting Oliver and Harry chat while he trailed after Malfoy, hoping he could pull Draco off that slag Fenton and give the wee bastard a piece of his mind. Nothing rough or anything, but Merlin, Harry didn’t have a lot of dating experience backing him up, and the notion of Draco polishing Harry’s wand and then trotting off to the next guy was just infuriating. Harry would be in for a tough time if Draco decided to play rough with Harry’s heart, and Ron just wanted to have a few choice words about it before leaving Harry to Draco’s tender mercies. Nothing more, nothing less.

Draco had watched a great mood quickly turn into a sour one. First, the press of festive, orange-clad humanity was more than he was used to, and second, Harry’s fame pulled almost everyone toward them. Draco didn’t mind not being recognized, and only had to endure a few suspicious glares from the people who did know who he was, but that wasn’t the problem. The problem was that, having just enjoyed himself so immensely in the Skybox, he rather wanted to just be with Harry and be left alone, but they were hemmed in by people who wanted Harry’s attention almost from the minute they arrived, and Ron was no exception.

Almost an hour had gone by before Draco’s fraying temper had snapped. That ginger ogre, Ron, had interrupted him or spoken right over him a half-dozen times, and with Oliver Wood in the room, Harry only wanted to talk about Quidditch with his old house chums. Not that this was such a bad thing, mind you, but Draco was largely disregarded by the others, and couldn’t get more than a word or two in before being interrupted and ignored. It was infuriating, and even more infuriating was that Harry didn’t seem to notice or care. Coming as this did, on the heels of such a special moment between them, it stung all the more, and Draco tired of competing for Harry’s attention. Finally, Draco slipped off to sulk at the table with the punch, which was delicious, and took the edge off of his irritation nicely. He’d been just a little tipsy before, in the Skybox, but not drunk, and he was still in good shape now, but he was feeling pleasantly warm and relaxed, as well as a little off balance compared to usual. It wasn’t all that bad, but he settled for making this cup his last, since he didn’t really like being any more intoxicated than he already was.

‘I can’t believe those inconsiderate prats! Gryffindors! They’re all the same! The three of them might as well have been triplets the way they act…stuck on each other like clinging vines. Ron’s gift was nice and all, but he’s still a big, rude clod…even if he isn’t trying to maim me. Oaf! That does it… I’m asking Harry to take me home.’

“This is entirely unacceptable. The most attractive and graceful person in the building, and he’s alone by the punch? I thought my eyes were playing tricks on me…are you sure you’re not under a pile of
Glamours that only I can see through?’

Draco turned to the smooth voice behind him, and looked up. The man who had spoken was perhaps an inch taller than Harry, with a classic Seeker’s build, lean and yet powerful. His hair was an artful mess of dark, chestnut-brown curls, and his eyes were a smoldering, volcanic blue that were breathtakingly well set in a handsome and chiseled face. He carried himself like a pure-blood, but with a relaxed sense of self confidence that was immediately impressive. He had an easy-going smile that gave Draco the first impression of harmlessness…and of good humor, and he was probably only a few years older than Draco. While Draco suspected that he was being ‘chatted up’, the implied flattery was intoxicating, and a perfect balm for his recently soured mood.

“I guess your eyes are playing tricks on you. There's no one like that here, but those are still nice things to say. I’m Draco…and you are?”

“Jonathan Fenton, Seeker, at your service. A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Draco. So you came with Harry Potter?”

His greeting was delivered with a perfect short-bow, traditional among the well-bred, and Draco found himself remembering the old etiquette he once took pride in knowing. Being chatted up by someone this handsome was a compliment in itself, and it was refreshing to make conversation with someone outside the Weasley household that didn’t think ill of him for his reputation.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you too. Harry brought me, but Ron Weasley provided us with the tickets. It was a terrific game. I used to play Seeker for my house team in school, and what you folks were doing out there was just amazing.”

The conversation moved quickly, and Draco found he was actually enjoying himself again, and let his past irritation slip away. He could go home later, and Harry was obviously having a great time, even if it meant he wasn’t paying much attention to Draco. Truthfully, it had been a long time since either of them had spoken to much of anyone from outside the Burrow, and Draco realized that Harry probably enjoyed the change of pace just as much as Draco did. Jonathan seemed courteous to a fault, and when he seemed shocked that Draco hadn’t seen any of the Cannons’ clubhouse, it didn’t seem at all amiss to take a tour of the place. After all, Harry would likely be involved with Ron and Oliver Wood for who only knew how long, and anything was better than just standing about and brooding. The fact that the company was handsome and well-spoken didn’t really hurt either.

The Cannons’ clubhouse was more than just offices and a banquet hall. It held hundreds of years of mementos from teams of the past, and despite the rather glaring orange décor, which didn’t really suit Draco’s tastes, it was still an impressive sight. Photos, news clippings, old portraits that chatted garrulously about games from ages ago, and trophies from years gone by graced the hallways and rooms that Jonathan led him through. The last room was the official Trophy Hall, and while the Cannons’ hadn’t won much over the last century, Fenton had helped to bring a few new trophies in, and things were looking pretty good for the Cannons lately. Recruiters for next year’s World Cup were already setting appointments and making interviews, and several Cannons’ players were considered to be ‘of interest’ for the time being. Given that it had been more than a century since a Cannons player had made it onto a World Cup team, it was a time of great excitement.

Draco realized much too late that he was far from the party, and well out of earshot from others. It wouldn’t have occurred to him at all, except that Jonathan was standing terribly close while he spoke about the trophies, and his insistence that they close the doors behind them suddenly seemed less like a gesture of politeness, and more like a careful move to insure privacy. There were couches here, old and well appointed, but surely he didn’t expect anything of a boy he’d met not twenty minutes ago?
Draco got his answer when a minute later, just as he was about to suggest that he was missed and should get back, Jonathan Fenton leaned down and planted a forceful kiss on Draco’s lips, and his hands were on Draco’s hips, pulling the two of them close and tight together, allowing Draco to feel the erection straining in Fenton’s slacks. Panic overwhelmed him completely, and he whimpered unresponsively into Fenton’s mouth, offering a wordless plea for freedom.

Draco tried pushing away, and Fenton grabbed at him and pinned his arms easily, forcing him back and onto one of the couches. Draco was already breaking into tears, and he couldn’t really help it. In the back of his mind, this scene was a replay of a hundred others, and his part was already pre-determined. Give the man what he wanted, and he won’t hurt you. Make them happy, and they’ll go away. Do what you have to, and just get it over with. These were mantras that had made it possible to survive the past year, and they didn’t vanish just because his situation had changed for the better so recently.

Draco’s world was a nightmare pastiche, a weird blend of horrifying days past, with sudden and terrible explosions of the current and the real.

‘Yes! What a perfect little whore you are! Slut…you know this is what you want!’

MacNair’s voice blurred away, only to shift in timbre until it was Fenton’s.

“Mmm. C’mon! I saw you in the Skybox…you know you want some of this!”

He wasn’t really resisting, but at some point he took a slap to the face for crying and shivering instead of responding, and his mind exploded back into the past. London, LeStrange’s hidden manor, streets that he had no name for, and the seats of Muggle autos where favors were exchanged hastily for a few crumpled and dirty notes of Muggle currency. If it wasn’t to be pain and complete degradation, Draco knew what he had to do.

Fenton recognized the posture Draco was adopting the minute Draco went to his knees, and promptly fumbled for his fly while standing upright.

“I knew you were the type who liked it rough and dirty. The way you gave it up in the Skybox showed me what I needed to know. That’s a good little slut. I’ve got something for you right here, you pretty thing.”

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Ron Weasley finally met a dead end, wondering where his quarry had fled. It didn’t bode well that he was in the farthest chambers of the clubhouse, and could barely hear the party from here. If Fenton and Draco were back here, it wasn’t just to look at the trophies! More than one party had seen players sneaking off with dates for a bit of fun, but this was Draco! Draco who was at least nominally supposed to be engaged in some kind of relationship with Harry. The idea of Harry and Draco as some sort of couple confused the hell out of Ron, but he was much more offended by the notion of Draco having a quick one off with Fenton after obviously capturing Harry’s attention. He knew he had to nip this in the bud before Harry got hurt, and there was only one room left to check.

Not surprisingly, a standard Locking Charm had been placed on the doors from within. Ron hadn’t made it through a war without acquiring a certain level of skill, and he cleared off the spell without so much as blinking. The door was locked the traditional way as well, and Ron could hear only vague noises, including Fenton’s voice, beyond it. Ron had hunted long enough, and he’d built up a decent head of steam. His temper, frayed by hours of avoiding alcohol while others indulged around
him, and from trying to accomplish something fairly simple and encountering so many complications, snapped. One booted foot slammed into the point where the double doors locked together, and they crashed open with a shriek of splintering wood and grinding metal. The tableau before him etched itself into Ron’s mind.

Fenton was standing, fly open, with Draco kneeling before him, and he had his hand twisted through Draco’s hair. Draco’s face was buried in the man’s crotch, and Fenton was looking at Ron with mingled outrage and surprise. Ron didn’t know what to say. It was a pretty pathetic sight, and he hadn’t really believed that things would go that far so quick. It looked like Harry was dealing with a complete fucking slut, and any intervention by Ron was pointless.

But, contrary to popular opinion, Ron Weasley was not stupid. Stubborn, prideful, and overly inclined to make hasty conclusions perhaps, but not stupid. Fenton bellowed at Ron, but not enough to distract him from certain crucial details.

“Fucking Merlin, you arsehole! Piss off! Can’t you see I’m about to get off here? Get the fuck out, Weasley!”

Ron was well aware that, as a rule, a slut would never be sporting a bruised cheek, and that tears had no business streaming down a voluntary partner’s face. Ron moved in fast. When Fenton pulled away and tried to shove his genitals back into his pants, Draco crawled away quickly and curled into the corner of the room, while Ron reached maximum velocity long before Fenton was ready.

“Ron…Ron’s fist crashed into Fenton’s stomach so hard that the man was lifted off his feet and bounced off the wall behind him. Meaty smacks followed, then soft and muffled crunches. When Draco finally opened his eyes, it was only because Ron was leaning over him, speaking in a commanding tone that was impossible to ignore.

“Draco…Draco! We have to go. I just Apparated Fenton to St. Mungo’s emergency ward and came back. We need to clean you up before Harry sees this. If you think I’m trouble, just be glad it wasn’t Harry that busted in here. There’s a bathroom just down the hall, but you’ve gotta be a soldier for me. Stand up and march! Come on! You can do it!”

Draco was still numb, unsure of what constituted reality. The sudden and overwhelming urge to be back at the Burrow hit him and hit him hard. He started fumbling his way upright, pushing away Ron’s offered hand, then vomited violently onto the carpeted floor, choking on mingled tears and bile.

“Home…wanna go home. Please…please get me home. I don’t want Harry…to…to see me like this. Please. Get me…get me out of here.”

“Okay. Just follow me, mate. C’mon…that’s it…one step at a time. Let’s go. That Fenton’s a right bastard. We’ve had complaints about him before, but he never tried anything in the clubhouse ‘til now. I’m just sorry it was with you. The fuckin’ bastard. Don’t you worry, mate. No one’s gonna fall for his ‘pretty face’ until St. Mungo’s get some specialists to work on him. I set into him something fierce. I’ll probably wind up on the bench again, but it was worth it just to wipe the sneer off his fucking face. Let’s get you cleaned up.”

Ron waited outside while Draco washed up in the Gents restroom. The mirror above the sinks was enormous, and the room was brightly lit and clean. Draco looked at himself in the mirror; pale as ash, bruising quickly along his cheek, and red-rimmed about the eyes from crying. He still couldn’t stop shaking.
'Stupid, stupid whore! You’re such a fucking whore. They can all see it. A few nice words and you wag your tail like a little bitch in heat. No wonder this shite happens…no wonder. In school you’d have seen that coming from a mile away. What the fuck does Harry see in me? How can he even look at me? How can he not see this? Or does he see it, but he’s too kind to say it? Does he feel sorry for the stupid, little tramp that showed up on his doorstep? If he really knew what I was, he couldn’t possibly keep from being disgusted. Maybe he wouldn’t say it, maybe he’d still look after me, but he’d have to want to puke when he thought of the things I’ve done. I deserved this. I walked right into it…I wasn’t even paying attention, but I walked right into it. I deserved it…I deserved it…I-’

Draco finally lost control for a moment, punching the mirror in front of him as hard as he could. A huge crunch sounded, and a spider web of lines formed just before shards fell to the counter and shattered into still smaller pieces. He could hear Ron coming in. Draco just stared at the red mess of his hand, knuckles sparkling with chunks of silvered glass embedded throughout. Drops of red were spilling slowly onto the white tile floor while he stared at his rapidly swelling knuckles. The pain was blinding, and still weirdly soothing, offering him something to concentrate on that was so much easier to see and cope with.

“Aw, fuck all! What have ya gone and done? I leave you alone for a minute and you’re all torn up. Hold steady.”

Ron calmly rattled off a few spells for healing. His lessons from the war had never been lost. Ron hadn’t had Harry’s raw power, or Hermione’s complete dedication to mastering every subject, but he had studied and practiced all the spells the Order had put in front of him after Dumbledore’s death. He’d changed with the times, learning what he knew he’d have to…knowing that it might mean life or death. He’d been better at Healing Charms than Harry was…and that was still true.

The bruising on Draco’s face faded even faster than the cuts and swelling on his hand. Draco recognized a Cheering Charm in the mix, and almost resented it, but it didn’t induce much cheer. Instead, it just took enough off the edge of his fucked-up state of self-loathing to allow him to function and think clearly for a moment.

Ron Apparated Draco back to the Burrow, and made sure his mother was aware that Draco had had a ‘difficult time’, ensuring that Draco wouldn’t be left unattended. Draco just sat quietly on the edge of the bed, while Molly fetched a full strength Calming Draught and tried to maintain a calm demeanor, but it was obvious that she was terribly worried about Draco’s silence and unresponsiveness. He was only answering with vague nods when Ron Apparated back to the party to get Harry.

Harry took longer to make it back to the Burrow than Draco would have imagined. It was almost an hour before Harry returned, and Draco was half convinced that when Harry had heard what happened, he was just too disgusted to come back right away.

Harry sat down beside Draco, and Draco didn’t have the heart to look up at the moment, and just remained still, hands between his knees, staring at the floor and wondering why he’d been allowed to live through a war…only to wind up enduring things like this. Was it some kind of punishment that just wouldn’t end until he’d paid with his sanity? Or was it just that he sought out people and choices that would hurt him? Was this what he really wanted?

He tried to form words, and made a few noises before collapsing into tears. This time…this time Harry let him cry himself out, cooing reassurances all the while, handing over a cloth to clean his face once he’d got it all out.

There was talk, mostly by Draco, and he was conscious of being reminded that it wasn’t his fault…but the words just rang hollow in his ears. He knew Harry meant it, but he just didn’t believe it.
When they’d made ready for bed, and there was darkness and silence, Draco couldn’t quite bring himself to touch Harry’s waiting hand. He tried to close his eyes and let the world bleed away to nothing, but it was hard to believe that peace would ever come to him.

Harry meant to comfort. He really did…but his whispered words chilled Draco to the bone.

“Don’t worry, love. You’re safe. I wouldn’t let anyone hurt you. Don’t be afraid. I promise you…he won’t hurt anyone again.”

Draco’s mind reeled at the significance of those words. Harry had been almost an hour getting home. How long had he spoken to Ron? How long was he on his own? Long enough to reach St. Mungo’s?

Morning took a long time to come, and Draco knew this to be true. His eyes didn’t close once, and his waking mind was on fire with fears that couldn’t yet be voiced.

TBC!!!
Chapter 45: I Am A Wizard

Draco watched the sunrise through the window, still wide awake after a night that felt far longer than it actually was. Harry slept soundly until just after sunrise, silent and placid by Draco’s side. Draco tried to pretend he was asleep as soon as Harry started to stir, and he hoped that Harry would just get up and leave him to his thoughts, but he knew realistically that there were questions that would be asked, and conversations that would be necessary. He’d resigned himself to the fact that today would be horrible, and even a few minor miracles couldn’t improve this state of affairs.

Harry finally woke and spoke Draco’s name a few times, until Draco grudgingly opened his eyes and pretended that he’d actually been sleeping. It was to be expected. Harry was entirely reasonable, which, at the moment, was the last thing Draco wanted. He was being handled like some fragile glass ornament, and every tiny kindness grated on his nerves. Despite good intentions, they were reminders that he was special…and different…and that he was treated differently because of what had happened.

How long had thoughts of last night rolled through his mind? He’d left everything behind, changed in ways that he never imagined were possible, and made it back from the brink of total dissipation…but he was still a whore. He’d washed away the scent of Fenton in the restroom last night, but the faint odor of musk and sweat still haunted him. The smell of a man’s sex clung to him, and he hadn’t even had the cushion of drugs or fever to dim his memory. It was real. He’d dropped to his knees and started sucking Fenton off almost without thinking. A real man would have fought it…but Draco had practically turned to jelly as soon as Fenton turned rough.

Worse than what he’d been through, Harry may have broken his word, endangered his soul, and risked the wrath of the Ministry because Draco had been tipsy and pissy, and had wandered off with a charming stranger like some ignorant infant. He hadn’t just let himself down, he might very well have let everything he was trying to accomplish fall apart. It was hard to believe in the things he’d thought were possible even a day ago.

The shower he took was an empty solace, bringing no comfort, and little warmth, despite nearly parboiling his skin in the heat. Breakfast might just as well have been ashes. Molly had done her usual finest, and Arthur was cheery enough, but Harry was stern and silent, occasionally making worried and pensive glances in Draco’s direction. It had been taken for granted that Draco wouldn’t go to work today, and Harry offered to make a visit and tell the twins himself. Draco was of two minds about it. He desperately needed time to think and rest, but he didn’t want to just do the expected and confirm his victimization by being coddled and cosseted. Either choice was good, and honestly, at the moment, he had trouble caring about either of them. In the end he just quietly asked Harry to Firecall the office and tell them he would be in tomorrow.

Arthur was the only one who acted like nothing out of the ordinary had happened, and since he was the only one Draco felt comfortable around, naturally, he had to leave for work, leaving Draco with not one, but two, mother hens who fretted over his every glance or gesture. It wore on him before an
hour had gone by, and Draco finally snapped, hating himself even as the words came out. It wasn’t that Molly or Harry had said anything that terrible…in fact quite the opposite. They were so cloying and sweet that it turned his stomach. He couldn’t even remember specific words, just a constant drone of supportive chatter.

“SHUT UP! JUST SHUT UP! Leave me the fuck alone! I don’t want your fucking pity! Just shut up!”

The room was perfectly silent, and there were no looks of anger on Harry or Molly’s faces. Draco’s cheeks suddenly burned with embarrassment at his outburst.

“Gods…I’m sorry. I’m sorry, Molly…I…I have to go. I’m so sorry!”

Molly was answering even while Draco ran to grab a coat.

“Draco! It’s alright…there’s no harm, love. You don’t have to-”

The back door was closed before she was finished. Molly looked to Harry plaintively, and Harry hung his head low, unsure of what to say or do. If kindness had failed, what did Draco want or expect? He just didn’t know.

“I’ll go after him, Molly. Let’s just give him a few minutes to calm down. I…I don’t know what to tell you about yesterday. Draco…Draco was…assaulted last night. Ron said he’d told you some of it, but the Seeker from the Cannons’ got him alone in a trophy room and…he assaulted Draco…sexually. Ron broke in and stopped it partway through. Draco isn’t himself right now.”

Molly sat down, dreading what she suspected would come next.

“Harry. What did Ronald do? When he found them.”

Harry looked out the window, wishing he’d already made it outside.

“He beat the hell out of Fenton. Concussions, multiple breaks of the jaw and cheekbones, busted ribs, fingers and a broken foot. He took him to St. Mungo’s himself, then came back and helped Draco get himself together and make it home.”

Molly hung her head and sighed, torn between pride that Ron had defended Draco, and horror, that his actions had been so brutal, and fear that there would be a higher price for actions like those described. Harry spoke up again, already knowing where Molly’s fears lay.

“I’m proud of Ron. Fenton didn’t deserve anything less. He deserved more, but Ron stopped him and made him pay for what he’d done.”

“Oh, Harry! If it were that simple everyone would do things that way. There will be trouble over this…mark my words. Get your coat and look after Draco. I’ll be fine. The Daily Prophet should be here soon along with the mail. Just make sure he’s alright.”

Harry nodded and went to the cloakroom for his coat. Molly sat in the kitchen, clutching her tea with a hand that trembled faintly. These were bleak days, and worse were ahead if she’d learned anything over the years. Things like this didn’t pass without consequences, and it was only a matter of time before things became more complicated than they already were.

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Harry stepped into the cold November air. It had snowed during the night, and a light dusting of the stuff was everywhere. He could see Draco a hundred yards away, sitting on an old tree stump. At least he’d stuck close to the house and remained inside the wards. Harry began the journey over with a heavy heart. There would be questions about last night, and there were some he didn’t want to answer. Draco was special…and different. Harry hadn’t revealed all the details of his actions to anyone. Not the twins, not Ron, and not to Molly or Arthur. He hadn’t lied to them…but he had sinned by omission more than once, leaving out details they didn’t need to know. Only with Draco did he feel the need to tell more…to be utterly honest and share everything. Draco mattered in a way that was unique in Harry’s experience.

‘How am I going to keep a lid on this? If he asks…I know I’ll tell. It’s not that I couldn’t lie to him…I just don’t want to. He’ll be furious when he finds out. What was I supposed to do? Let a fucking rich rapist buy his way out of trouble? Just let it slide because Ron cracked the guy’s head a little? He had it coming. I was careful. They can’t trace it to me. He has to understand this. He has to.’

Harry made his way to Draco’s side and sat down cross-legged in the snow. He didn’t care about cold or damp. A whispered spell took care of the damp, and the cold didn’t bother him much at all. If anything, it was just bracing enough to take the edge off the tension that simmered faintly inside him. Last night had taken the edge off the stress he’d felt for almost two weeks. Killing Fenton, even quietly and subtly, had been a pleasure, and he’d slept like a baby afterwards. It was the first time in days he’d slept without nightmares, and it came as a sweet relief. Harry sat beside Draco in perfect silence, waiting for Draco to speak first. When the words came, they were anguished, and Draco couldn’t even bear to look Harry in the eyes.

“What did you do, Harry? Fenton…what did you do to him?”

Harry sat silent just a few seconds longer than he should have. He wasn’t ashamed of what he’d done, but Draco would be upset, and that was all that counted.

“Fenton is dead. Aneurysm of the brain. Just after ten o’clock last night. Advanced Legilimency has more than just a few applications…and almost none of them are traceable. He was in bad shape anyway. Ron tore him up pretty bad, but they’d have had him well in a week or so. He won’t…he won’t hurt anyone again.”

Harry could see Draco shuddering despite the warm coat, and he wanted to say something that wouldn’t hurt…wouldn’t burn between them like brimstone.

“How? He hurt you. I can forgive a lot. I can…but not that. He hurt you…and he paid with the only coin I accept. I swore I wouldn’t let anyone hurt you too, and I kept that promise. It meant breaking the other, but I’d do it again, just for the pleasure of making him pay again. I watched him die for what he did, and I’m not ashamed of it. I don’t…I…don’t deal well with people hurting anyone I…anyone I love.”

That final word hung between them like lead. Draco almost hated Harry for using it, but his tone had been serious, and almost frightened. Childlike and lost. Draco could barely handle the conflict in his heart. As much as he wanted Harry, he knew better than anyone what was at risk, and Harry was sliding into darkness in front of him…practically because of him! It was unbearable. He’d fucked up…and Harry might be destroyed by his own blind rage and lust for vengeance. It was a good word
to hear…love…but it reminded Draco of what he was in danger of losing if he failed, and no mistake…he’d failed mightily.

“Oh. Oh, fucking Merlin, Harry…what have you done? What have you fucking done? I believed in you…but I never thought you’d do this…because of me. I…I can’t handle this. I can’t…I can’t take it. I…I have to go…”

“NO! That’s it! I’ve had enough! Draco! This…was…not…your…fault! Fenton was a sick fuck! Now he’s a sick, dead fuck! I never should have left you alone…not even for a minute. I hadn’t seen Oliver since school, but Oliver’s just a mate…I don’t love him. I’m sorry any of that happened, but I won’t see you blaming ANY of this on you! Not now…not EVER! It’s pure bollocks! He died because he was a fucking rapist bastard, and what was coming to him finally found him…not because of you. Because of him! LOOK AT ME!”

Draco had tried to look away, but something in Harry's voice was certain and sure, and couldn’t be argued with.

“Whatever happens, I’m yours, Draco. I don’t care what happens to me, but I won’t let anyone hurt you again. It’s not something we can discuss, because we’ll never agree. It just is. I’m going in, and I’m going back to my books, until I find a way to help you. If you leave I’ll find you. I won’t hurt you, but I will find you and bring you home, so just drop that line of thinking right there. Just know that you didn’t do one…fucking…thing…wrong! What happened only happened because a fucking perverted bastard went too far. I’ll see you when you’re ready to see me.”

Harry stormed off, and true to his word, he went up to his room and delved into the pile of texts that awaited him. Molly remained in the kitchen, watching the mournful and confused boy that sat outside, torn from within and without, until the arriving mail distracted her.

It was like a plague of owls had descended upon them. Aside from the papers, which were nothing more than rags in her opinion, there were letters for Harry and Draco, and a box from Ollivander’s that could only be Draco’s wand. Molly left the rest on the table and rushed outside with the package, praying that this one small thing might brighten the poor boy’s day.

While Molly hurried out, Ron exploded out of the Floo, sober as a head wound, carrying the gifts he’d made for Harry and Draco, and headed for the kitchen. The stack of mail lay on the table, and The Daily Prophet waited to be read. He flipped open the front page, and let the damage done the previous night make itself evident.

**CANNONS’ SEEKER DIES MYSTERY DEATH IN ST. MUNGO’S!**

They had the details mostly right for once, just when they were so bad that getting them wrong could only improve things. It figured. The article detailed Fenton’s brief disappearance from the party, and Ron’s arrival at St. Mungo’s with the sorry bastard. He’d been named a ‘person of interest’ immediately after Fenton’s death, but he had every intention of having himself safely Obliviated before he was questioned. Harry would know what to do.

There was a side article in the gossip columns about Draco Malfoy reappearing first in Diagon Alley, then at the Cannons' home game, alongside Harry both times. Not surprisingly, they made mention of the fact that Harry and Draco had been at the same party that Fenton and Ron had been at, shortly before Fenton’s death. It might as well have been a command to include Harry and Draco in the investigation, the rat bastards! Funny that the gossip column had never in two years mentioned that Fenton had assaulted or at least coerced sex out of anyone who said no to him…not that there were many that said no…but for some reason the arrogant fuck had hated to let someone he wanted get away. The egotistical prat never did accept that there were people who hadn’t any fucking use for his
dick, and it had finally cost him his life. He’d tried to talk Harry out of it, and Harry had seemed coldly reasonable at the time, but Ron had known that when Harry left, he wasn’t heading home. For home he could have used the Floo, but Harry took his coat and walked out into the night. Ron had tracked down the gifts he’d given them, left behind in all the confusion, and took them home to wait until he could come by and deliver them again in person.

Ron sat down and sighed. That morning he’d been contracted by the management of the Cannons. He’d been sacked on the spot, since he’d broken the only rule that did matter. Teammates were sacrosanct, and no matter what the dispute, you never attacked your own. They didn’t care that Fenton had been a worthless, unredeemable bastard. All they cared about was the Cup and their reputation…and the Galleons that Fenton’s fame had brought in. Ron had kept his silence, claiming that he’d had past disagreements with Fenton, and that they’d argued about something trivial. He’d solidly refused to reveal Draco’s embarrassment at Fenton’s hands. As far as he was concerned, they could take their brooms and contracts and stuff them in their gilded arses if they liked, and he’d told them as much right then. Yesterday had been his last day as a professional Quidditch player, and oddly, he didn’t really mind.

Ron’s eyes flicked over the stack of mail. He recognized Dula’s neat script on one of the letters, and it was addressed to Draco. Odd that, but not too odd. Seeing as Draco was a poof, it made sense that he’d taken a shine to Dula. You couldn’t ask for a better role model than that, and even Ron had to admit that a bloke could do a lot worse than to fall for a fellow like Dula. His brother was a lucky bastard to have someone like that in his life, and Ron had been jealous of them more than once. Not because Dula was attractive to him. The notion of a man in his bed mostly made Ron want to puke, but he was envious of the way they seemed so good together. It’d be nice to have something like that for himself, and he’d certainly want something like that for Harry, no matter if it was with Draco or not.

The letter wasn’t spelled or warded, and Ron’s curiosity was itching, but he let it rest, promising himself he’d ask Draco how Dula and Charlie were doing later. He headed upstairs to find Harry, hoping against hope that Fenton’s death really had been some accident at the hospital.

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Draco heard Molly calling him as she strode across the lawn, clutching a small box and waving it. A wand box. Ollivander's!

“DRACOOO! It’s here! Your wand’s come, love! Just off the owl a minute ago! Oh, give it a try, dear! We’ve got to see this at work!”

Even a wand couldn’t take the edge off of Draco’s mood. At least he was a wizard again, but it didn’t seem like much of a victory. Draco stood up and took the package from Molly, then opened it calmly, not really feeling the magic…so to speak. Inside the small box, a folded letter waited atop the velvet lined case that held the wand. Draco flipped it open and read it aloud.

“Dear Mr. Malfoy,

You have our most sincere apologies for our lateness, but due to the unusual working materials, the greatest of care was needed to craft this wand. It was necessary for Mr. Ollivander Sr., who has been in retirement since his captivity during the war, to return to work with us on this most unique and excellent wand.

We assure you that you will find it more than satisfactory, and the components used have never before been combined in a single wand, thus, the expertise of many people was required to ensure the quality we are famous for today.
We present to you with great pride a wand of precisely ten and one quarter inches, crafted from the heartwood of an ancient yew, felled by lightning. Strong, yet flexible, tempered by the very fire of the heavens. The core is of a new phoenix feather, and inserted into the very tip is the tear of a dragon.

Congratulations, and do please contact us to provide feedback on its performance, as we have never before crafted a wand such as this, and we greatly desire to follow its accomplishments…at your leisure of course.

Yours Sincerely,

The Staff and Management of Ollivander’s Wands, Est. 382 B.C.”

Draco pulled the wand from its case, and felt the potential thrumming around him. It was a perfect match, and he could already feel it without having cast a single spell.

Dragon’s tears were incredibly rare and valuable. The tip of this wand held a crystallized tear from a dragon of ancient times, dug from the earth of an old dragon’s lair. The crystal itself was worth a hundred wands easily. They were among the most sought after of magical artifacts, because they focused and channeled magic with incredible potency and ease. How on earth could Harry have gotten his hands on a…CHARLIE AND DULA! Those magnificent bastards had given Harry a dragon’s tear…just for Draco’s wand!

Draco took a few steps, and with a delicate flourish, cast a simple spell from his first year, something harmless and familiar to start with.

“Wingardium Leviosa!”

The leaf he’d aimed at jetted upward, and froze precisely where he wished it to do so, hovering in mid-air.

Draco smiled and turned to the old stump that was embedded deep in the earth.

“Wingardium Leviosa!”

It tore free of the earth with little more effort than the leaf had taken. Molly applauded loudly with a joyful cry of amazement. Draco may not have had Harry’s raw power and knack for wandless magic, but he was holding one of the most perfect spell-casting instruments ever crafted.

‘I’m a wizard. I may be a mess, and a fool, and all those other things, but I’m a wizard again. I may never accomplish anything else in this life, but I’m a wizard again. Give me a spell to change the world…and I can cast it. I am a wizard!’

TBC!!!
Ron made his way upstairs and found Harry in his room, irritably laboring his way through a stack of books. Harry looked up with mixed relief and concern when he saw Ron, and pushed aside the text he had just started flipping through. Ron gingerly held out the letter for Harry that had been waiting on the kitchen table.

"Ministry seal, mate. I think we’re in a spot of trouble over last night. That’s why I came. Fenton died last night...and the press is all over it. They know you and Draco were at the party. By the way, mate...there’s a great photo on page six. Draco on your lap snogging you half to death. Someone out there had a long distance lens, ’cause it’s pretty clear. Anyhow, they know full well that I dropped Fenton off at St. Mungo’s, and that I beat the hell out of him in the first place, but they just couldn’t resist attaching your name to anything that involves a dead guy."

Harry gritted his teeth and opened the Ministry envelope while he answered Ron. At least it wasn’t a Howler. One more argument with Kingsley and Harry was sure he’d be surrounded by Aurors and forced to defend himself by whatever means were necessary. Not that he was actually afraid of them, but it would be irritating and counter-productive to wipe out the Auror Service over a grudge match with Kingsley’s ego.

"Shit. Page six, huh? If Fenton was still alive it probably would have been page one. Those fucking vultures. Ron...I never told you thanks last night...for Fenton, and Draco. There was too much going on, and I was too pissed when you told me, but you really came through for him. Thanks, mate. I mean it."

Harry unfolded the letter and started reading, while Ron sat down on the edge of the bed and clasped his hands.

"You’re welcome, Harry. Just...so that’s it, huh? You and Draco really are an item? I never figured either of you for poofs, and I damn sure never figured you for being with each other. What’s that all about then?"

Harry looked up from the note with a tense frown.

"We’ve got an Auror coming for interviews and statements this afternoon. Damn. Should have expected it, but it’s nothing I can’t deal with. Yeah...it’s true, mate. I never planned it, and I’m sure he didn’t either, but we’ve both changed a lot over the last few years. He isn’t at all like I remember. He’s...he’s perfect to me. I mean...he’s polite, thoughtful, sweet, honest to a bloody fault. He doesn’t whine or carp about things like he did at school. I didn’t even think I was...you know...gay, until I started being around him every day. Fuck all, mate, it’s only been a few weeks, and I can’t imagine him going away. I want to protect him, look after him, wake up with him every day, all of it."
Funny thing, love…isn’t it?”

Ron smiled and shook his head.

“So it’s that, is it? Love? Never heard you use that word before, so you must have it bad. It’s a funny thing alright, mate. Just be careful with your heart…and his. Love’s a great thing, but it plays hell with your head if it goes pear-shaped. Trust me on that one. You sure he feels that way about you? Not that the snog he was giving you on page six looked uncertain. Fact is, you looked like you were under siege and ready to surrender. Hah!”

“C’mon, I wasn’t that bad off. It’s…it’s complicated with him. Ron…the people…the Death Eaters that hurt him…it wasn’t just torture. There was more…like Fenton, but worse. That’s why Draco doesn’t like being touched or grabbed. He gets panicky when anyone gets too close…except me. He tries for me…really tries. That’s got to mean something good, doesn’t it? He’d fight something that makes him shite scared, just to be closer to me? I know he cares even more than he says, and he says it pretty plain too. I…I just feel like I’m failing him. He needs help…and I can’t find a way to heal some of what he’s feeling…and he doesn’t understand about Fenton…or the others, like Kaminski. I can’t let the things they do…or did to him, just slide by. I can’t.”

Ron nodded soberly.

“Well, that settles it then. I don’t know much, but I know what love is. You have it for him, and if he’s got it for you, run with it and don’t quit. Hmmph. It was worth getting sacked just to rearrange that fuck Fenton’s face. ‘Sides, I’ve got enough saved up, I’ll move home if my agent can’t get me a new team…maybe work for Fred and George, or get in at the Ministry with me Dad. Just help me get through this Auror interview thing without any trouble, okay? D’ya think I need to be Obliviated for safety’s sake? They won’t use Veritaserum unless they take me in, but there’s no way to be sure if they’ll leave me here after the interview or not. What do you think?”

Harry looked crestfallen, and stared at Ron in surprise and disappointment.

“They fucking sacked you?! That’s insane! Fenton was a fucking rapist! You saved Draco from a fucking pervert and they fire you?! Who the fuck do they think they are?”

“Oy! Easy, mate! I knew it could happen. First rule of pro Quidditch is keeping your personal disputes from affecting the game. I took a Seeker out of the running during a race for the Cup. I was pretty sure I’d get the axe for it, and they don’t know anything about Fenton and Draco. I kept his name out of it.”

“Why? What for? You lost your job, Ron! Wouldn’t they have understood if you told them what was happening?”

“Maybe. Maybe not. Either way, I figure what happened is Draco’s business, and if he doesn’t want people yammering at him about it, I can just keep it our secret. It’s no one’s fucking business but his what happened there, and if he wants to tell people about it, fine, but until he does, I’m not saying a fucking word. It’s my choice, so don’t worry over it. I’d do it over again the same way if I had the chance. Well…almost the same. I’d probably have broken a few more parts of Fenton’s sorry ass if I’d known I’d get fired and interrogated over the whole fucking thing.”

“Don’t worry over the Aurors, mate. I have a way to deal with that. You’re not going anywhere you don’t want to. Thanks, mate. I can’t even tell you what it means to me that you’d do that for Draco. Thank you.”

They were suddenly interrupted when they realized that Draco was standing in the doorway, face
flushed with exhilaration, smiling from ear to ear, and hovering on the brink of crying. Their eyes both gravitated to the wand in his right hand. It was exquisite…a flawless product of the wandmaker’s art, and Draco looked happier than anyone had seen him in recent memory. Ron blushed, suddenly aware that Draco had heard the last part of the conversation. Not that he felt vast loyalty to Draco personally, but a person’s business was their own…especially if they were important to Harry, right?

Draco beamed at them, grinning like a giddy first-year. He held up the wand and had to fight the urge to jump up and down with excitement.

“Harry…Harry! It came. It’s perfect! Perfect! I’m a wizard again! It works like a dream. Yew heartwood, felled by lightning, phoenix feather core, and a dragon’s tear in the tip! It practically bloody hums! This…this is probably one of the best wands ever built…and it’s for me! Thank you! Thank Charlie and Dula. Thank all of you! Go on…try it out!”

Ron stared at the small work of art while Harry took it from Draco, smiling all the while. Harry waved it with a small flourish, and promptly swept all the clutter in his room into the corner.

“Brilliant. Just brilliant. You know…I asked Dula and Charlie for the dragon tear just after I decided you needed a wand. They came through for me on short notice, and Dula wanted you to know how much he thought you were worth the effort. His exact words were, ‘Draco is a most remarkable young man, and to do such a thing for him is not a mere pleasure, but also an honor.’ That’s so Dula…but he’s right.”

Ron smirked and shrugged. Draco took the wand back and held it like it was his most cherished possession…which, frankly, it was. He looked over to Harry’s wand, comparing the two of them.

“I wonder why mine is shorter than yours.”

Ron answered with a deadpan voice.

“Well, nature can be kind of cruel sometimes.”

Draco and Harry turned bright red when they realized that Ron hadn’t been speaking of wands, and Ron collapsed into a fit of laughter, sliding off the bed.

“C’mon! Don’t tell me you didn’t see that one coming! Hah!”

Draco simmered for a moment, then relaxed, and laughed alongside the others.

“Try to remember that I have a wand again, and I know how to use it! I suppose I could be upset, but it’s kind of hard to vent at someone who did so much for me yesterday…and today. I heard what happened to you. I’m so sorry, Ron. I didn’t think they’d throw you off the team for helping me. I just…I can’t believe you didn’t tell them what happened. Thank you for thinking of me. I don’t…I don’t really want to talk about it, and I’d like to just enjoy my new wand and get on with things. The last thing I want is to have to pick over every detail with an Auror in my face. I really owe you. I won’t forget this, I promise. As for now…I’m headed downstairs to clean the entire house for Molly, all by spell. I’d say I need more practice, but really, it’s just fun to cast spells again…I don’t even care which ones they are!”

Draco headed downstairs in a hurry, while Ron and Harry took up where they left off. Draco had needed to get away, since the urge to hug the two louts had been nearly overwhelming…and if he felt the urge to hug Ron Weasley, the world was definitely spinning off its axis!

Harry took a deep breath and sighed.
“Like I was saying, don’t worry about the Aurors. I’ve got ways to keep them off your back, and keep Draco out of this. Their minds are like butter, and if I decide that they’re asking the wrong questions, I’ll just make sure they ask some easier ones. Believe me…we have nothing to worry about.”

“I hope you’re right, mate. Mum isn’t going to be thrilled when she finds out I pounded Fenton into mulch, and I know I’m getting an earful, but I don’t want to see the inside of Azkaban.”

“Trust me. It’s all under control.”

Draco opened his letter from Dula. He’d thrilled Molly by cleaning the entire downstairs of the Burrow in minutes, and then settled down to read the mail. The Daily Prophet was the hardest thing to read. Fenton’s picture smiled from the front page, giving a rakish wink every so often. It made Draco’s blood curdle just to see that face smiling at him, knowing that the man had been a monster, and that now he was dead because of Harry’s rage. That had been bad enough, but page six made Draco’s hair stand on end.

First, he hadn’t thought that anyone would turn a hi-powered wizard camera on them in the Skybox, and the embarrassment of being reintroduced to wizarding society as Harry’s boyfriend was enough to floor him. Second, the image showed him running his hand through Harry’s hair and kissing Harry savagely, while Harry flexed and arched with pleasure as Draco’s body ground into his lap. It had been so perfect then, but he looked so wanton and slutish in the picture. No one would understand how he felt about Harry…they’d just see a former Death Eater whoring himself out to Harry Potter, who was implicated in deeds much darker than shagging ex-Death Eaters! Draco’s face burned with humiliation. Not for the first time, he was glad his mother wasn’t conscious to see something like this. The shame would have mortified her.

'I can’t believe it was just last night. I had a couple Butterbeers and I was rubbing all over him like an alley cat. Not that my reputation was ever really good, but I hadn’t thought it could actually get worse. Damn it! Like I need this shit! I’m tired, I haven’t slept, there are going to be questions about last night, AND I have to get help for Harry…soon! He’s slipping…and I can almost feel it. I want him so bad, and I know he loves me, but if I just let go and let myself be his…I’ll never be able to say no to him. And I have to…I might have to do more than just say no. I might have to betray him. Thank Merlin I’ve got a wand. At least now I can get a few things done without begging help from everyone else. This is a mess, but I’ve finally got a tool at my disposal that can help. Now if I just get the right spells from Dula, I can sort out where or what Voldemort is hiding in.’

Draco made ready to read Dula’s letter, and pushed more worrisome thoughts aside for the moment.

Dear Draco,

I have visited my family’s estate, and made some progress researching some of the things that might be of use to you. If you cannot arrange to visit in the next two days, I will visit you there, and see to it that you have the information I have obtained.

Our prayers are with you,

Dula

Good news at least. Dula had spells that would help, and now Draco only needed to make his way
back to Hogwarts to see if it was possible to contact Severus Snape. Molly had set an appointment with Madam Pomfrey for Saturday, so with a little luck, Draco could sort out more than a few matters before the month was over. With a lot of luck, he could sort himself out as well. Just because he still felt ill-used and foolish for last night’s disaster…it didn’t mean he was dead. In his heart, he knew he wanted Harry, and Harry was worth wanting…even if it meant risking life and limb to get him.

Draco plucked at the picture from page six and tore it free, folding it and saving it for himself. It wasn’t that he didn’t want it seen in the house…it was that it was the only picture of him with Harry, and even if it was taken under the wrong circumstances and was attached to a very bad night, it was still one good memory locked in place, forever captured, and Draco wanted to keep it for himself.

Harry came pounding down the stairs, wand in hand, looking deadly serious. Ron was right behind him. Molly drifted through the kitchen and picked up her wand tensely.

“Someone’s at the edge of the wards, Draco. Best if you and I hang back. Ron and Harry will make sure it’s someone who has proper business here.”

Ron and Harry were out the front door a second later, and Draco peered out of a window. He could see Auror’s duty robes at the end of the walk, and he knew that trouble had finally come to join them. Ron and Harry led the cloaked stranger back to the house, and Draco slipped upstairs to wait until he was called. His presence could only complicate things if he wasn’t asked after, and if he was asked for by name, the others would send for him. Draco took his mail and moved up the stairs to his room, grabbing a book to read while he waited, praying that Ron wouldn’t get into trouble that couldn’t be dealt with.

Ron and Harry entered the Burrow again, this time looking more relaxed. Molly stepped into the living room to see who the new arrival was, and smiled nervously when she saw Nymphadora Tonks peeling off her cloak.

“Oh! Tonksy! I’m so glad they sent you…this is just an awful mess, and bless them for thinking of us at a time like this.”

“No worries, Molly. I just got out of St. Mungo’s myself. Only just got back to work today, and Kingsley sent me down because he knew you’d be worried sick. I’d love a cup of tea while we get this out of the way…if you don’t mind?”

“Oh! I’ll be right with you in a minute. Make yourself comfortable, love!”

Molly scurried off to the kitchen, while Ron sat down with a worried look on his face. This wasn’t as bad as if they were to be questioned by some stranger, but Tonks brought complications that only Harry and Ron understood. Harry’s mind was racing while he sat down.

‘Fuck! Tonksy! I can’t…she’s…how could I force my way into her mind? She’s Remus’ wife, for fuck’s sake! Did Kingsley know I’d like her too much to do anything to her, or did he just send her because she’s an old friend and I wouldn’t throw her out of here? There’s no way to tell. It’s too late to Obliviate Ron…she’d know. Damn it! This could blow everything wide open, and…and I couldn’t hurt her. She’s a friend…but I can’t let Ron go to Azkaban for something he didn’t do. What do I do?

Tonks set the situation at ease quickly, by offering her usual quirky smile before she spoke, and her tone was as carefree and convivial as ever.

“Relax, you two. I’m not here to take anyone away with me. This is just a routine follow up
investigation. I already talked to the Cannons’ staff and a few of the party guests, as well as the folks at St. Mungo’s. After we’ve established what everyone has to say about last night, then we’ll worry about whether anyone could or should be charged. Officially, you’re not suspects, you’re just ‘persons of interest’ and possible witnesses. Kingsley sends his greeting, Ronny, but as for you Harry-love, what did you do to him while I was in hospital? He acts like you personally climbed onto his desk and peed in his morning tea. I know you and Kingsley haven’t gotten along just lately, but I hadn’t thought it would get that bad.”

Harry calmed himself a little, hoping that, with Tonks doing the investigation, she might just choose not to push hard and unravel details that weren’t strictly relevant to this case.

“You know how it is. He’s stuck in the politics, and it’s all about his image and making gestures for the press. He and I don’t agree about much anymore. I guess he’s better than the last couple Ministers we had, but still, he acts like the people losing their lives mean nothing…compared to the latest opinion polls, and it makes me sick. He doesn’t seem like the person I remember. That’s all that there is between us, and as long as he can manage to leave me alone, we’re fine.”

Tonks listened quietly to Harry, then nodded and turned back to Ron.

“Alright, Ronny. I need to hear what you say happened last night, and try to be as detailed as possible. Any questions I have will only come after I’ve taken down your statement…and Harry and Draco’s statements.”

Harry piped up.

“What’s Draco got to do with this?”

“Routine questions, Harry. It was established that the two of you were at the party before and after Fenton was injured. Any details you have might help shed light on why he died unexpectedly last night. Draco was there, so he gets questioned too.”

Ron was not an exceptional liar, so he stuck to the truth as much as possible. He hadn’t liked Fenton, and very few people had considered him anything but a useful Seeker and a pain in the ass. Ron fumbled a bit while trying to imply that his enmity had run deeper than normal with Fenton, and when it came to his explanation of how they wandered off together and wound up fighting, he was just pitiful. It was fairly clear that Harry should have Obliviated him carefully and left it at that. If Tonks didn’t buy Ron’s tale of a personal grudge gone wrong they were just screwed!

To both their surprise, Tonks barely blinked while she scribbled down notes, then turned to Harry and asked for his side of it. Harry stuck to the basics, admitting that he’d been at the party and knew who Fenton was, but he made it clear that until yesterday they’d never met, and that he had no personal grudge against the man. Harry’s evening had consisted of a long conversation with Oliver Wood and a few Butterbeers. Fortunately, Harry lied as smoothly as could be, and seemed as comfortable as one could be while being questioned by an Auror. Then she turned back to Ron.

“Ron…you said you had disagreements with Fenton before, but it never got out of hand, and it never turned violent. What was different this time? Were you threatened physically? Magically? Is there a solid reason for what you did? Give me something I can work with, love. I’d like to believe you, and Kingsley really loves your family. If you have a good reason for this, we can help smooth things over and keep you out of Azkaban…and since you didn’t use magic, they can’t break your wand either.”

Harry was almost relieved by that statement, until Ron’s inability to lie cocked things up. The man kept stammering and stuttering, sweating from head to toe and muttering pathetic justifications that
didn’t remotely match anything she’d been told before. Harry was despairing inside while he watched Tonks jot notes down while looking disappointedly at Ron. Then a voice from the edge of the room stopped them all cold.

“Fenton raped me. Ron broke in and saw him in the act. I was stupid enough to think he was just a friendly Quidditch star who fancied me a bit. By the time I knew what he wanted we were already alone and away from the party. Ron must have known the bastard’s reputation, and he came following along after us. Ron Apparated Fenton to St. Mungo’s after beating the hell out of him, and he cleaned me up and Apparated me here. The only reason he’s even covering anything up is to keep what happened to me out of the papers. You should be giving him a medal. We don’t know what happened to Fenton, but nobody misses him, believe me. Thank Merlin Ron came when he did… and if I’d had a wand last night, I’d have killed the bastard myself. Does that answer your questions?”

Tonks beamed while she furiously scribbled notes.

“Now that jibes with what I heard from Ron’s teammates. The management of the Cannons disavowed any knowledge of sexual misconduct, but several people claim otherwise. I had Fenton pegged as a sex predator, but I had no connection to what happened at the party last night. You should be proud, Draco. A lot of people wouldn’t be able to give a statement like that. You’ve certainly saved Ron’s bacon! Really, Ron. You should know better than to lie…you’re a Weasley…it doesn’t work for you guys.

Let’s go over what happened from the top, and if we can sort this properly, I can establish a just cause for the fight, and with Fenton’s history of sexual aggression I think the Wizengamot won’t even hear the case. I’ll need to take new statements, and cast a few Priori Incantatem on your wands, but we can have this done in an hour and you won’t have to hear from me again…unless you invite me to dinner! That’s a subtle hint…okay? I miss Molly’s cooking…and so does Remus. Now, let’s take this from the top.”

It took quite a lot of note-taking and questioning, but before it was over, the Ministry had its answers, and Harry’s involvement never came up. As it turned out, despite the lurid headlines in the paper that morning, St. Mungo’s autopsy indicated a sudden brain aneurysm likely caused by repeat trauma to the head. No trace of magic was found, and the death was unsuspicious, though clearly tied to Ron’s fists battering Fenton’s skull. Molly served a light and early lunch, and after a cup of tea and a bite to eat, Tonks wished them well and was on her way back to the Ministry, with a list of people to question in response to the new allegations.

Draco was the hero of the hour, and though praise and scrutiny made him terribly uncomfortable, he endured the hug that Molly gave him quite stoically, and he accepted handshakes from Ron and Harry, who were both still floored that Draco had pulled them out of a tight spot. Ron was forgiven by Molly for his assault on Fenton, since the fiend had touched her Draco, and deserved nothing less than the beating of a lifetime. She wasn’t pleased about the matter ending in a man’s death, but despite her best efforts, she couldn’t say she’d have done any less to the bastard if she’d been the one who found him that night.

For all that the day had started poorly, it had come a long way since, and a faint air of celebration hovered about the Burrow. It didn’t lighten Draco’s mood though. Draco loved his new wand, and he was glad that Ron wouldn’t suffer for having saved him. He was glad that Harry wouldn’t be implicated, and he was even kind of glad that he’d been ‘outed’ as Harry’s date, since that saved a lot of lengthy explanations to who knew how many people. Now they just knew, and little in the way of answers would be needed. All of these things were good, but they weren’t good enough.
All the happy news in the world could not make Harry any less a killer, or Draco any less a victim. Fenton was dead by Harry’s hands, even if no one knew it but Ron, Draco and Harry, and Draco was the only one who knew that it heralded the end of any hope of expecting Harry to change without outside help. Finally, all the dead bodies in the world couldn’t erase the terror that Draco had felt, or the burning shame and humiliation, or the faint and constant self-loathing that haunted him anew. Nothing was really made better by Fenton’s death, and it had cost Harry and Draco more than most would ever know.

TBC!!!
Draco’s lack of sleep caught up with him later that afternoon. The giddy excitement of his new wand had passed (but it was still thrilling to look at and use), and the flat-out fear of seeing Ron arrested for Harry’s crime was gone as well. With those things went the energy that had kept him conscious all day. It wasn’t difficult to excuse himself and slip upstairs for a nap, and now that he had a wand he could even cast the nightmare warding spell by himself…though when he mentioned this, Harry looked slightly disappointed. Mostly, Draco wanted time to rest and think…alone.

There were so many things whirling through his mind that, even as exhausted as he was, sleep came with difficulty. Dula had spells for him, and he only had one more day of work this week before Saturday came, and he and Molly would make the trip to Hogwarts again. He rather urgently wanted to see Dumbledore, and not just because he needed a few questions answered. The old man in the portrait had a lot more confidence in Draco than Draco actually had, and it would be good to hear some of that right now.

Ron was a sudden possible ally, with information about the war and the destruction of Horcruxes that might prove vital…especially since he’d helped destroy at least three of them. He was also Harry’s closest friend, and if he and Draco could unite to help Harry, perhaps Harry wouldn’t see it as a betrayal by Draco alone, but rather a well-intentioned intervention. It really was just that…a well-intentioned intervention…but it didn’t feel like that when Draco was awake in the middle of the night, beside a gentle and handsome young man that clearly adored him and trusted him…while Draco plotted ways to check his power and watched for weaknesses. At moments like that, nausea crept up on Draco, and the urge to vomit was most overpowering when he imagined what Harry would say to him…how Harry would look at him when or if he found out. There could be nothing more horrible than the severing of the weird innocence that had grown between them these past weeks.

Draco pieced together more theories for Dumbledore to test, including a complete mental list of Harry’s symptoms. The weird heat of his anger, the amoral choices he made about his use of his powers, the nightmares, and his peaceful slumber after killing in cold blood, when only a night before he’d needed nightmare wards just like Draco, and often woke with headaches. It was connected, and Draco was certain that it was all tied to Voldemort’s influence over Harry. There were a lot of questions that waited for Dumbledore’s input, and it all hinged on what Draco might glean from Dula’s spells.

Last of all, and least desired, the memories of the previous night were still fresh in his mind. Alone in his room, Draco realized he was napping in his clothes, and it occurred to him that just didn’t want to ‘feel’ naked anymore. He didn’t want to feel vulnerable in any way, for anyone. Somewhere inside, the urge to hold onto Harry was alive, but he couldn’t bring himself to embrace it, knowing that Harry was out of control and completely capable of cold-blooded execution. How could he want to
clinging to someone who killed without even a hint of remorse?

Fenton had terrified Draco far worse than the bastard would ever know. Every ugly memory that Draco had struggled to disassociate himself from had sprung to life again, and they haunted him even while he spoke. Dozens of laps, each different yet all blurring into one, pressed close to his face while he fumbled with hands and mouth to satisfy a stranger who offered money…offered survival. MacNair had rarely bothered with anything but an immediate and brutal assault on Draco’s backside, and that had been dehumanizing enough. It was still freakish and bizarre to think of the act itself as anything desirable, but the way he felt about Harry had sent his mind stumbling into the notion again. It was only by the narrowest of margins that he’d avoided having Fenton do the same thing to him that MacNair so often had, and the very thought of it sent a shudder of revulsion through his entire body.

He’d given in so very quickly, taking the familiar path to safety that had served him for so many months, and then for weeks on the streets of London. He’d been helpless without magic at his command, and he’d grown used to helplessness. It had been a way of life, a constant fact that wasn’t disputed. Surrender had been his watchword, and it had been all that kept him alive. By giving in and accepting whatever happened, he’d made it possible to live through things that would have driven some people to St. Mungo’s…but what happened when he didn’t have to surrender anymore? Did he even know how to do anything else? Was it part of why he hungered to feel Harry inside of him? Would he feel safer if he let himself go and just let Harry take control, doing what was almost familiar by now, the only difference being the affection between them?

He’d hated himself so much last night, and much of that emotion was still in place. No matter how much they cheered him for getting Ron off the hook with the Ministry, Draco knew that he was still practically a complete victim at heart, and the awful thought that maybe he would never be anything else came to him more than once before sleep came to him.

Harry’s scent was on the pillows and sheets, and Draco breathed deeply while he tried to nap, filling his lungs to capacity with air that held Harry’s taste. His eyes were closed, and a tear rolled down his cheek and hit the pillow, tickling the skin beside his ear as it traveled.

‘I don’t know what to do. I need him…even with how he is…I need him. There has to be something to believe in. Something has to go right. Someday. I don’t want to be alone. I…I don’t want somebody else…I want Harry. Why? Why couldn’t he fight it a little harder? So much power…and he could do anything…but he still kills. What if he likes it? What if he never stops liking it? Will there ever be somebody I could want this way? Will I ever want to hold someone else? Dula said things change…and he had other lovers before Charlie. I just can’t see that far ahead. From here, everything just looks black. So...tired.’

Sleep closed its jaws on Draco, and devoured him whole in seconds, and only flickering images were left to him in his restless slumber.

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‘This is complete shite. What the hell was I thinking? Everything almost went straight to hell! Ron could have been sent to bloody Azkaban, and Draco never should have been left alone at the bloody party…not even if he wanted to be! Everything seemed so clear before. I knew what I was going to do, and I just did it. Now it’s all fucked and I haven’t a fucking clue what’s next. He wouldn’t even touch me last night…what does that mean? I know he’s disappointed about…about Fenton…and the promise, but what did he expect? Was I supposed to just say, ‘Oh…he raped you, huh? Was he any good?’ I’m just sorry I couldn’t think of something more painful than a lengthy Crucio. That fucker
deserved to die, get dragged back to life, and then die even slower the second time.

Draco kissed me. I don’t give a fuck about the papers. I don’t care about what they or anyone else says…it was brilliant. I could…I could actually feel how much he wanted me. Ginny never felt like that. It always seemed like she playing a game and knew the ending already, but Draco…Draco felt sooo good next to me. It was hell not wrapping my arms around him, but I did it. I have to do something…anything. I can make this right somehow. I have to.’

Harry paced the edge of the property, locked in thought as he walked away his tension. Ron was a good-hearted fellow, and he’d never even thought to blame Harry for nearly getting him arrested. He didn’t even feel he was owed anything for what he’d done on Draco’s behalf. Right now he was in the kitchen chatting with Molly and talking over what to do with his life if he couldn’t find another team to play for. Ron’s skill was unquestionable as a Beater, but his reputation was terrible before this, and now it was completely ruined. He’d saved Draco before things had gone any further than Draco’s attempt to appease Fenton with a blow job, and Ron had done it at the cost of his career. If anything, Harry owed him for taking the suspicion off of Harry, as well as for rescuing Draco from a bad spot while Harry had been merrily chattering away with Oliver Wood.

Harry started walking back toward the house. His mind was made up. Apologizing was…unpleasant, even at the best of times, but it would take an apology and more if he wanted to show Draco that he was sorry. It still confused him sometimes…the way he felt about Draco. There was admiration, because Draco had principles he’d never had in school, and he was willing to stand up for them, and there was a restless hunger in Harry that he’d never felt for another person before. Desire…all consuming and constant. Draco made him feel glad to be alive, and even though he’d been content this last year, he couldn’t honestly say that he’d been happy. Draco had changed that almost immediately. Just a few short weeks, and his days had begun to revolve around seeing Draco healthy and happy. Now it hurt Harry to see Draco afraid or unhappy…and Draco was clearly unhappy.

The other thing that confused Harry was his own change of pace this day. He felt clear-headed and well rested, and it did occur to him that he hadn’t needed to ward against nightmares to sleep well. Why today of all days? Wouldn’t nightmares recede the longer he went without killing? Why would they go away when he did kill? It didn’t make sense. He’d been tired, irritable and muddled until this morning, and he’d coped well enough with it over the past week. He was reminded of something Draco had said. About killing being no good for him…about it making him want more of the same. He hadn’t forgotten Draco’s worry over him, or the promises he’d made. They were just hard to remember when some sleazy bastard had attacked and terrified his boyfriend.

‘Boyfriends. Are we boyfriends? Is this for real, or is it just some pipe dream that couldn’t possibly pan out? I can’t just be kidding myself over this…it has to be worth it. There has to be something I can do to show much I care. I’ve never been anybody’s boyfriend…or lover…or anything, damn it! I want this! I want it so bad I can almost taste it. The war’s over, no one will AK him or take him away. I can protect him well enough. I can love him and he won’t disappear or die. I deserve this…don’t I? I saved the fucking world…and it only cost me most of the people I loved. Life OWES me this. I can’t just let this fall apart. I shouldn’t even be out walking…I belong at the books…looking for a way to help him recover…help him forget…forget…FUCK! Fuck fuck fuck!

There’s a way! He was so terrified of being Legilimized that I never even thought about it! I know which book it’s in, too! I’ve been looking for spells that calm or heal or modify memories…but I never even thought about advanced Legilimency and Occlumency. There are only a handful of people in the world who would know to do this…and I’m one of them. I could build shields around the worst memories. They wouldn’t go away…but they wouldn’t be able to cause nightmares, and he wouldn’t have those flashbacks all the time. It could work! He’d forgive me for anything if I
Harry broke into a sprint, and headed for the house at a dead run. He skidded to a halt at the back door and strode into the kitchen, grinning like a maniac. Molly and Ron looked at him quizzically, wondering what had Harry so cheerful all of a sudden. Harry kept his voice down, knowing full well that Draco was trying to sleep, but it was hard to fight his excitement.

“I got it! I figured it out! I’ve got a way to help Draco sleep better…cope better…he might even be able to take a pat on the shoulder without trying to run for the door. The only reason I didn’t think of it before now was because I only read of it once…in a text for Advanced Legilimency and Occlumency, and when I mentioned Legilimizing him last month, he panicked because I was angry at the time. I can do this…he’ll be better than ever. I just have to read up on it and make sure I have the technique down pat before I try it. He’s gonna be thrilled when he hears this.”

Molly looked worried for a moment, and frowned a little while Ron delivered a high five to Harry.

“Oh. Oh, dear. Harry…are you sure it’s safe? Tinkering about in someone’s noggin doesn’t sound easy to me. I’m not sure Draco would even want someone to see the things he’s seen. He’s very private about those things, and who can blame him? Now don’t be upset if he needs some time to think about it all before making any choices. Understand?”

Harry looked crestfallen. The idea of Draco not wanting to subject himself to Legilimency hadn’t occurred to him. This wasn’t a threat of any kind. Harry would see things in Draco’s mind, but he would never tell them to others. He was in love with Draco, and he hoped Draco was in love with him enough to endure just one session that could greatly improve his life.

“But…but…it would make him feel better. You don’t really think he’d say no…do you? This could change everything. For the better. He’ll understand…at least…I think he will.”

“Maybe he will, Harry. Maybe he will. I’m just saying that he might not be ready to have someone in his mind after the things he’s been through. Don’t be hurt if he’s not ready. You should do the research and make sure you can do this for him…but don’t expect him to do anything he’s not ready for.”

Harry shuffled his feet nervously, still too excited to be calmed by Molly’s disheartening thoughts.

“Okay. I’ll hit the books now. I’ll make sure I know this inside and out before I even think about trying it. I wouldn’t risk anything going wrong…not for Draco…not for anything. I’ll be in my room.”

Harry slipped up the stairs quickly and quietly, leaving Molly and Ron at the table in the kitchen, sipping their tea in silence. Molly allowed herself a moment of serious concern.

‘Of all the things that could help that poor boy, why did it have to be Legilimency. He can’t let Harry into his mind…he isn’t an Occlumens…and he can’t hide his thoughts. Harry would know what we’ve been trying to do. This could ruin everything. Oh, gods. I hope he understands when Draco says no. Harry is making enough poor judgments lately…we don’t need him all torn up inside as well. Poor Draco. We finally have a way to help him, and it can’t be used without risking Harry simply exploding. It isn’t fair, but it will just have to wait until we’ve helped Harry.’

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Harry paused at the door to Draco’s room and looked in. Draco was still in his clothes, curled on his
side and wrapped around a pillow. Harry’s pillow. He looked so fretful…even in his sleep, that it almost made Harry sick.

‘I can fix this. I can make him well. It’s all possible…I could hold him in my arms and he wouldn’t be afraid. We could be lovers, like other people. He could sleep the night through and never cry out again. I can do this for him. If he loves me…if he really loves me, he won’t be afraid to let me in. I’ll tell him everything. How I feel. What I think. What I want. If he knows those things…how could he say no?’

Harry headed for his room with a purpose that guided him absolutely. He would get the book, find the chapter, and study until his eyes burned if he had to, but he would make this happen. Draco would know how important he really was to Harry, and he would say yes once he understood. Draco would never wake up with a scream on his lips again. Never.

TBC!!!
Draco didn’t wake until it was nearly time for supper, and it was only Molly’s tapping at the
doorframe that woke him at all. He woke sluggishly and sat up, wincing at his own rumpled state,
then grabbed his wand and stood up, muttering a spell. His clothes sorted themselves out handsomely
in a heartbeat, and a small smile played across his lips. He hadn’t used that spell since he’d been in
school. How perfect was it to be able to do such things again…and with a wand that made hard
spells easy and easy spells incredible? Draco made his way to the dinner table with just a few more
hasty spells to groom himself, his melancholy mood tempered by the constant reassurance that he
could change his own environment with magic once again. It was just intoxicating!

For Harry’s part, he’d been ensconced in his room, hunched over his desk, making short notes from
his Legilimency texts for hours. The procedure was a little more complex than he’d imagined. To be
honest, it was actually a LOT more complex than he’d imagined, but it still wasn’t beyond his level
of skill…it was just more time consuming than he’d expected.

He’d be building something like shields around Draco’s memories. Not opaque, absolute walls, but
rather more like translucent, shimmering veils that would shelter Draco’s conscious mind from direct
contact with things that still tormented him. If Draco wanted to, he could still concentrate and bring
forth any memory he chose, but they would seem hazy and indistinct, as if decades had passed
instead of weeks or months. The end effect would be that Draco could function as if he’d had years
to recover, and the shields would erode very slowly over the years, allowing a very long and gradual
process of recovery that would seem entirely natural. There would be no flashbacks or nightmares
for many years to come, and when they did come again, there would be nothing as unmanageable as
what Draco had already experienced.

There were risks…not so much for Draco, but for whomsoever was building the shields.
Legilimency and Occlumency were not arts for the weak of mind, but some people could not handle
the things seen in the minds of others. It was possible to become lost in the mind of the subject if one
was not both careful and determined. The text actually specified that someone who had a significant
emotional attachment to the subject should not attempt this without supervision, but Harry didn’t see
much in the way of a choice. There were dozens of wizards and witches skilled in elementary
Legilimency or Occlumency, but you could count the number of people in England that were as
skilled as Harry on one hand. The worst that could happen to Draco was that the shields in his mind
might fail, and it would be traumatic to have all those memories tumbling back into the forefront of
his mind at once. Traumatic, but not fatal. Harry’s role would entail much more risk, but it was a risk
he was utterly willing to take. He wouldn’t be able to finish his preparations until at least the next
night, but he had every intention of talking to Draco before they slept.

Truth be told, Harry held out the hope that, if he showed contrition for breaking his promise, and if
he held out as his peace offering the means to give Draco peace of mind and freedom from
nightmares, then perhaps Draco wouldn’t refuse to touch him.

It was almost humiliating, and just admitting so much to himself made his cheeks burn, but the idea of Draco not wanting to hold him in the night was sickening. It was sobering to realize just how good such a small thing had made him feel, but it had been a symbol of a lot more. It had been heady, intoxicating, and weirdly nourishing in the extreme. It was everything he’d ever dreamed idly of for years on end. He’d only spent a handful of nights with Draco curled around him, but they’d each been a tiny paradise in the middle of hell, and Harry most definitely did not like the idea of his own cold and empty bed anymore. He’d risk a lot more than this to show Draco how much he cared, and hopefully he could win back a little of the trust and closeness that he’d just lost.

Molly was talking to Draco in the other room, then came to Harry’s doorway and smiled when she saw him bleary-eyed over a pile of books for Draco’s sake. Supper was ready, and Arthur was home, so Harry marked his page and made his way downstairs. Draco was already at the table with Arthur, and Harry didn’t really want to discuss his hopeful treatment for Draco at the table…it seemed like something he should talk about with Draco alone. It might have been possible to restrain himself from talking about it during their meal, but it wasn’t possible to keep the smile off of his face when he thought about it. Arthur commented on Harry’s chipper mood and Harry just shrugged, letting Draco give him a puzzled look. Ron was already noticing the strange dynamic between them, and he and Molly were the only ones who knew that Harry had a plan for Draco.

Arthur was completely oblivious and drifted off into a story about a streetlamp that had been charmed to dance, disrupting Liverpool traffic in broad daylight. The entire office and several supporting groups of Ministry personnel had been needed to restore order and Obliviate witnesses. His day had been exhausting enough and the few wits he had left were keeping him upright until supper was over. He had no interest in bringing up the vast number of people who had questioned him about Harry and the latest article in The Prophet. That was a subject for private conversation… and certainly not for discussion over one of Molly’s better roasts!

The chatter at the table was muted and vague, distracted by the events of the past day, and Draco was painfully aware of the attempt to make the scene ‘normal’. It was sweet, and at least they weren’t cooing over him like before, but it was still a bitter reminder that yesterday’s events had repercussions, and he was at the heart of it all. He found his appetite dwindling, and even though the roast was good, Draco couldn’t keep thoughts of last night from flitting through his head. They all knew. Everyone at the table knew what had happened to him, and they knew what Ron and Harry had done because of it. Draco’s naïveté and Harry’s temper had cost a life. Not the life of a Death Eater…the life of a Quidditch celebrity. This was something that wouldn’t go away. The public at large might not know the truth, but the people that Draco thought of as friends did…and his stomach churned when he thought of what they must think of him.

Draco excused himself early with an apology, and left the table early, heading back upstairs quietly and hoping that they’d understand his desire for a little privacy. He picked a book from the desk in his room and idly flipped pages while he tried to concentrate on more important things. He still had to work tomorrow, though the twins would understand if he didn’t show. He needed to contact Dula, and he was due to visit Hogwarts and Dumbledore again in just another day after that. There were plans to make, and all he could do was mope about and hover on the brink of open self-loathing. It was pathetic.

He was too wrapped in his thoughts to even hear Harry’s footsteps, and he was surprised when Harry’s shadow fell across him from the hall. Draco relaxed a little when he looked and saw Harry smiling, and Harry walked in and sat down on the edge of the bed, keeping a respectful distance between them. Draco fumbled for something to say. Something normal…anything to take the edge off the tension that hung between them now.
“I…I’m sorry I left early. Don’t worry or anything. I just…I wanted some time to think. I’m okay…really. It was just a little too much…being around everyone. You know?”

Harry breathed a sigh that hinted at tension that matched Draco’s own.

“I understand. It’s alright, Draco. I’m sure they understand too. I…uh…I had something I needed to tell you. It’s important, but before I get to it, there are some things I wanted to say first. Okay?”

Draco’s brow creased with concern. Harry sounded earnest and reasonable, and that boded well, but his tone was serious, and Draco couldn’t help feeling like a bomb was about to drop and break the silence as soon as he nodded his assent. He picked idly at some lint on the quilt, trying to maintain a calm appearance, and Harry just took a deep breath and launched into a speech that felt prepared, but truthfully well-intentioned.

“There are things I have to say about…about last night. I wasn’t thinking very clearly, but I see things a little better now. Draco…I can’t tell you with words how sorry I am for breaking my word. Maybe we don’t agree about what I should or shouldn’t have done, but I made a promise, and I didn’t keep it. The only thing that matters to me is that I let you down, and Molly too. I’m not sorry Fenton’s dead, and I’d be lying if I pretended anything else. He hurt you, and I only regret that I couldn’t find a quiet way to make him suffer more for that. I never should have let myself get wrapped up talking to Oliver. It was like a reunion, and he’s a good friend, but I wasn’t paying attention to you the way I should have been. None of that would have happened if I’d been thinking of you first. Apologies aren’t even enough. You deserve more than that.

I’m…Draco…I’m in love with you. I knew it before last night, even before last week. I’m not used to saying it because…because I’ve never been in love before. Do you understand? I’ve never…been…close…to anyone until you. There is so much about you that’s worth loving, and I want to be the person who proves that to you every day. I couldn’t handle someone hurting you, and I can’t remember when the idea of losing someone has ever scared me so much. I’ve hated not being able to help you recover as much as I’ve wanted to, but I finally found a way. I found a way to help heal you…inside.”

Draco had long since looked up from the quilt, and his eyes were wide and shining when Harry paused. His heart had started pounding like a bass drum, and he had to remind himself to breathe. Harry loved him, in spite of all their faults and flaws, Harry loved him…and he’d found something that could help.

‘Oh, Merlin! He did it! He said it! He said he loves me. He found something that will make me better. I knew he could do it! Fuck everything else! I don’t care…about the rest of the world. He loves me…and he did it!’

Draco waited eagerly, tensed from head to toe, biting back the urge to cry with relief. Weeks of spells and potions for calm and sleep. Weeks of nightmares and memories and daydreams so repugnant that they made him cringe. Weeks of flinching from the mere threat of being touched, even when he wanted to be touched or held so badly that he thought he’d scream for lack of contact. Even if it wasn’t a cure-all, even if it wasn’t perfect, it would be something better than this.

“Draco. There’s a way to build shields around some of your memories…the ones that make things difficult for you. You’d still have your memories, but it would be like you were remembering the distant past. No more nightmares, no flashbacks, no bad reactions. It would take years to wear off, and it could be done again if necessary. You wouldn’t feel anything worse than a headache, and…and…the only risk is that it might not work if I don’t get it right. You’d be safe no matter what. I can do this for you. I let you down before, and I won’t promise what I can’t deliver, but at least I can give you this.”
Draco didn’t trust himself to get words out properly. He could feel himself trembling uncontrollably, and if he let go of his tenuous grip on himself, he’d fall apart from unrestrained relief and joy. He honestly didn’t want to fall apart until he could realize his dreams entirely, and actually be held by someone…specifically Harry. At that moment, it was hard to imagine doing anything after tomorrow but holding onto Harry for the rest of his life. When he could finally get a few words out, the strain was evident in his voice, but at least Harry could tell he was happy. The earnest smile on Harry’s face said it all. Draco managed to grab hold of Harry’s hand, and if he’d been stronger, his grip would have been crushing from desperation. Harry just smiled all the wider.

“H-Harry! Thank you! Thank Merlin! How? What do we do? What spell is it? Where did you find it…oh, who bloody cares! I love you! Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

“Easy, love. I can do this by tomorrow night, as soon as I make sure I have the technique right. It isn’t a spell really…it’s a discipline from advanced Legilimency, mixed with Occlumency. I’ll be occluding parts of your memory for you, in a way that will allow you to remember things only when you want to, not just whenever they spring to mind. You won’t need wards against nightmares or Calming Draughts after this. It might take a few hours tomorrow night, but believe me…I’d do that and more if I had to. I just want to give you this…this…”

Harry paused and faltered, watching the look on Draco’s face. Draco’s eyes were much wider than before, and a look of sick and creeping horror was on his face. Harry felt a thread of panic run through him, mirroring the panic he could see quickly spreading through Draco.

‘He’s a little scared. That’s all. It’s okay…you can calm him down, and once he’s thought about it he’ll be fine…he has to be fine.’

“Draco…it’s…”

“No.”

The word came out strangled and wispy, more a breath than a word. Harry looked utterly crestfallen. The confusion was written all over his face, and just beneath, a hint of poorly hidden hurt.

“But…but it could…”

“No.”

It was the hardest thing to say that Draco had ever tried to voice aloud. Harder than telling Harry how he’d felt, and far harder than speaking of Muggle London or of LeStrange’s tortures.

’It’s…it’s not fair! It’s not fair! Why? Why did it have to be that? I want to sleep…I want to touch…I want my fucking life back! If…if he saw what was in my head, he’d never forgive me, and even if he did, he’d never be able to look at me the same way. Never. If it were anyone else, it wouldn’t matter, but not Harry. Not him. He can’t…I don’t want him to see what I’ve done. He did it. He really did it. He found a way…but I can’t take it…unless I didn’t mind losing him in the process.’

Harry was looking ruined. Draco had to say something. He had to bite back his tears and say something to make sense of this for Harry. If it meant opening his heart up and saying things that made him sick just to think, it would be better than leaving Harry like this…wondering why Draco would say no.

“I don’t understand…I thought…”

“I…I know. Harry, you are the best and most decent person I’ve ever known, but…but I can’t do this. I…I don’t want you in my head. I know you say you can handle it, and maybe you could, but I
just don’t know. I think…I think if you looked at the things I’ve done…you might…you might look at me differently. You’ll say you wouldn’t, but you might. If it was anyone but you…I’d say yes…but I don’t ever want you to…to look at me and see those things. I’m afraid, Harry. I’ve never felt like this before…about anyone…ever. If you…if you looked at me, and only saw those fucking horrible things…I couldn’t stay sane! I’d rather…I’d rather stay like this, than know that when you look at me, all you can see is what I’ve been…what I’ve done. Maybe I’ll be a mess forever, but I’d still have the way you look at me now. Do you understand? I couldn’t take it…if you looked at me and thought of those things…and I saw it written on your face…I don’t think I’m…I’m not strong enough to take it. Please don’t ask me to do this…and don’t be hurt because I can’t. Please?”

Harry looked like the world had been torn out from under him and he was just free-falling through some endless void. His shoulders had slumped helplessly, and he looked like he wanted to say something, but couldn’t find the words that were right.

“’Kay. I…I think I understand. You were…you were right about what I’d say. I couldn’t change how I feel about you, just because of some memories. I’d…I’d swear it, but I broke one oath already. I don’t even know how much my word would mean to you now. If…if you don’t want me…in your mind…I understand. I just…I really wanted to…to be the one that helped you. I…”

Draco bit his lip while listening to Harry ramble. He couldn’t even look up at Draco, and the strain of keeping tears in was making Draco bite harder…until he could taste blood. Pain made it easier to keep control…it distracted him from what was exploding in his heart and mind. Harry got up to shuffle out of the room, and was slinking away like a kicked puppy.

“Maybe…maybe there’s some other way. I’ll…I’ll go and read…I…I’m sorry, Draco. I should go.”

Harry’s thoughts were racing violently, a chaotic whirlwind he couldn’t rein in.

‘He…he doesn’t believe in me. He doesn’t trust me. I broke my word, and I can’t make this better. Maybe he meant it…when he said he loves me…maybe. But he doesn’t trust me…and why should he? I let him go off with that perverted bastard, I almost killed him myself once, I bloody well threatened his life and even his mind, and then I want him to believe that I can help him? I don’t know what the hell I was thinking…he’ll never let me…”

Something clicked in Harry’s mind as he stepped out the door to the room, and he turned slowly, eyes wide with sudden and horrible realization. ‘If it were anyone but you…” There were no other masters of Legilimency left in England that Harry knew personally. One was dead…and the other…the other he had exiled. Harry knew what he had to do. There was no choice so ugly that, if it benefited Draco, he wouldn’t make it, and this was such a choice. They needed Severus Snape.

“Draco. Did you mean it? When you said…”If it were anyone but me”? If there were someone else…would you let them do this?”

Harry’s tone was level, but his voice was trembling a little, as if he was barely able to believe what he was saying. Draco looked up, helpless, hanging on the edge of complete emotional collapse, and nodded yes.

“There is another. I can find him…write to him. I just have to convince him that I mean it. He could probably do this as well, or maybe even better, than I could. The only problem is…I…we…we don’t get along. It might be hard to get him to come here, but I’ll try.”

Draco sat bolt upright, wiping his nose and eyes. He knew instantly what Harry must be speaking of…and he hadn’t imagined it as possible.
‘Merlin’s Name! Snape! He has to mean Snape! He hates Snape…but…but he’d bring him back…for me!’

“Harry…you mean you’d…you’d forgive…”

“No! I’ll never forgive him…but I’ll let him come back…offer him whatever he wants, put up with him as long as it takes, and make whatever kind of peace we have to…if he can help you.”

“You hate him that much…and you’d still…”

Draco left the question hanging. Harry smiled wanly, thoroughly wrung out by the turmoil still roiling inside of him.

“Don’t you get it, Draco? I’d do anything for you, anything to protect you, anything to make you well. Anything. Whatever it takes. I told you I’d find a way to help you. Now we have one, and I’m not throwing it away because I won’t get the starring role. If it can help you…I’ll make it happen. You’re the only thing that matters here. My pride isn’t worth anything…if you can’t sleep a decent night through beside me. That’s what I meant when I said ‘I love you’.”

Draco finally lost it. It was actually fairly gross. Tears he couldn’t stop poured from him, and he was almost laughing through them. Bubbles of snot appeared from his nose, and Harry had come back to the bed, handing over small cloths from the table and letting Draco wipe away the mess every so often. The humiliation was worth it. A small price to pay to know how much Harry really loved him. He’d try to forge a peace of sorts, with a man he’d watched kill his beloved friend and mentor, for Draco. It took awhile for Draco to regain his composure, and when he did, Harry, who had been whispering encouragements and comfort to him, stood quietly to leave.

“If you’re alright, I have to go to my room for awhile. I have…well…I have to write a couple of letters…and these might take awhile to get right. I’d like to owl them out tomorrow while you’re at work, and get this started as soon as possible. I’ll be back by bedtime, alright?”

Draco nodded pitifully, practically glowing with the happiness that suffused his being. Harry smiled shyly and headed for his room, and all that was heard from the hall was the scratching of quill on parchment, and the occasional crumpling of paper as drafts were thrown away. Draco listened carefully, lying still upon the bed in his room, a few last tears trickling down reddened cheeks. He wasn’t sure how long he lay there, still and silent, smiling like some village idiot, and Molly paused to ask after him before going to bed herself. He made a few quick assurances to her that everything was alright…in fact, better than alright, and Molly took his giddy smile as proof that this was true.

Draco peeled away his clothes a bit later, and switched into his pajamas, slipping under the sheets to wait for Harry. He couldn’t quite bring himself to sleep, despite feeling exhausted and wrung out, and Harry was terribly late coming to bed. Draco was dozing fitfully, barely conscious and scarcely alert when Harry finally joined him. The shift of weight upon the mattress only lightly roused Draco from his half-slumber, and he fumbled impatiently, curling toward Harry’s warmth. Harry’s body stiffened with surprise at the suddenness of it, but a second later, Draco was firmly wrapped around his left arm, using Harry’s shoulder as a pillow. Draco’s words were terribly slurred, and Harry was fairly sure that Draco was asleep when he mumbled them, but he was glad to hear them just the same.

“…love you…Harry.”

Harry sighed deeply as he relaxed. It had been a very hard day, and the letter he’d written had left a bitter taste in his mouth. In his opinion, swallowing pride should come with a warning to quickly induce vomiting and call a medi-witch, but he’d done what needed doing, and Draco was by his
side. It was worth it a hundred times over…to feel like this. Harry listened to Draco’s soft and even breath, and took a crazy risk. He’d held too much inside today, and just this once, he dared to reach for something more.

Harry leaned his head forward with care, and placed his lips on Draco’s sleeping brow. Draco didn’t budge, and Harry leaned back with a final benediction before letting sleep claim him as well.

“Sleep easy, Draco. I love you too.”

In the pitch black of their room, Harry drifted to sleep without ever having seen the smile that slid across Draco’s dreaming face.

TBC!!!
Better Days To Come

DISCLAIMER: Warning! I make no claim to any property of J.K. Rowling's, and am in no way profiting by this. I do offer her my sincerest thanks for allowing us this garden of the mind in which we play. Further Warning! This story...and likely any I ever write...are dominated by gay themes and characters. That's how it is, if this in any way makes you uncomfortable...do not read further.

Redeem Me…by Samayel

Chapter 49: Better Days To Come

Harry sat at the desk in his room, reflecting on the night and morning he’d had. It had been a difficult night, but morning had been a taste of paradise. He actually woke up later than Draco for once, and Draco had a rather nice way of waking him. Harry woke up with the faint and insistent realization that he was being kissed, and Draco’s repeated attention to his neck and to his lower lip was both welcome and thoroughly pleasurable. Harry had been confused for all of a second before he managed to start kissing Draco back, fighting the urge to wrap his arms around him the entire while.

They both had ‘morning breath’, their hair was a mess, and they were both still groggy because of the early hour, but it meant nothing. There was a brilliant newness to what they were doing that seared away any imperfections that might have marred their thoughts about the moment. Harry had only been conscious of how closely Draco was curled against him, and how warm and comfortable the entire arrangement was. Draco’s hand was resting nervously on Harry’s chest, while his mouth was busy savaging the line of Harry’s jaw. They were both completely aware of the fact that Draco was pressing something which was rapidly growing erect into Harry’s left thigh, and neither of them really cared at that moment.

There were copious murmurs of affection, which were all they could get out between rounds of snogging. Harry wasn’t sure it would have ended when it did, had it not been for the soft squeak that Draco made before pulling away, scarlet-cheeked, with an apology and an announcement that he needed the bathroom...immediately. Harry was much too polite to mock Draco for it, but he had a pretty fair idea of what had happened. He’d been awfully close to coming as well, and only Draco’s sudden halt had prevented it.

Harry’s shower that morning had been his chance to relieve his ’tension’, and he hadn’t wasted a minute of it. Not that he’d had much choice. His erect penis had been clamoring for attention before he even made it under the water, and it had taken less than a minute’s worth of attention, imagining holding Draco closely, before he released rather more than the usual amount of white droplets into the shower.

Breakfast had been subdued, but pleasant, and Ron was put off by all the blushing and smiling at the table, so he made mock gagging noises while motioning to indicate nausea. Harry responded with a hasty two finger salute while Molly’s back was turned, and Draco responded with all the dignity at his command...by sticking his tongue out. Arthur, aware of the entire spectacle, rolled his eyes and paid careful attention to his oatmeal, toast and jam. Eventually, it was time for Draco to go to work, and after a few mournful looks of farewell at the fireplace, Draco, in full view of everyone else, leaned up and kissed Harry on the mouth before stepping into the Floo and vanishing in a puff of green flame.

Ron had turned red and left for the kitchen immediately after Draco vanished, and Harry had glared
and demanded to know what was wrong.

“I need a fork and a spoon.”

“What? Why?”

“I mean to shove the spoon down my throat so I can puke properly, and the fork is for my eyeballs. You two are so sickly sweet I think I just lost two teeth!”

“Hah! You think that’s bad? We started the day with a snog that lasted almost twenty minutes! You can poke your eyes or puke all you want, but I think I bloody died and went to queer heaven.”

“Oy. Harry. What happened between you two last night? One day it’s all gloom an’ doom, the next morning it’s singing birds and whatnot. What gives?”

“I found a way to help Draco get better. Really better. No shakes, no nightmares kind of better. He’ll be as well off as anyone could possibly be after what he’s been through. I just need a little help to get it done.”

“You need a hand or something? I can help if you need me.”

“No thanks, Ron. This time…this time I need Snape. I wrote a letter for him, and I’m owling it off today. I hope I can get him to try coming here. Draco needs this.”

That had silenced Ron for the rest of the morning. The notion of Severus Snape setting foot in the Burrow was enough to send Ron off in a daze, and he saluted Harry with a slightly glazed over look before Flooing back to his flat to get ready for a meeting with his agent.

Harry had returned to his room and cleaned up a bit. There were scraps of parchment and abandoned letters everywhere. He picked them up one by one, reading them before he threw them away.

‘Dear Murdering Bastard,’

‘You Traitorous Son Of A Bitch,’

‘Die! Die, you fucking bastard! Die!’

‘You were right to run, you greasy turncoat fuck!’

It had taken several dozen tries to work out his distaste for Severus Snape before a decent letter even started to take shape, but it was worth every minute of grief, every second of bile, if it would get the man to come back to England…if only for this. Harry unfolded the parchment he’d produced the night before and read it one last time.

To Severus Snape,

Maybe you expected a letter like this someday, and maybe you didn’t. I can’t say, but this is mine to say: You’re needed here as soon as you can come.

Draco Malfoy needs your help…and it has to be your help. He needs a Master Legilimens, one with the skill to heal his mind, and ward his memories.

Draco has endured more than any human being should have to, and he’s alive to tell of it, but he isn’t the same person you remember.

He nearly starved to death on his own and he needed to eat, and a cluster of people you might recall
lured him off with the promise of food. Hyde-Pratt. MacNair. LeStrange. I’m sure I don’t have to tell you what those three were capable of. It’s enough to say that he spent about a year as their captive. He’s lucky he’s alive at all. As it is, it took weeks to heal him properly and remove almost all of the scarring, but we can’t heal his mind. I can’t heal his mind.

Whatever he did wrong years ago, he’s paid for a hundred times over, and there’s nothing left of the person who took the Mark. Of this I am sure. This is why I’m willing to go to any lengths to see him well again.

I’ve been told by a lot of people that you were Albus Dumbledore’s closest confidant, and that he was your oldest friend. If there is anything left of that friendship, you’ll remember that your friend, our friend, died because he believed Draco wasn’t a killer. I used to think he was wrong, just as I once thought he was wrong about you. It’s become clear to me that I sometimes rush to judgment, and I am willing to admit that I’ve wronged you.

You were cleared by the Ministry. Shacklebolt and Tonks swore that your testimony was true, and it was the evidence from Dumbledore’s own Pensieve that convinced them. I ignored it all, because I couldn’t stop seeing my friend die at your hands. Dumbledore was right. Draco isn’t a killer, and he never was. If Dumbledore was right about that, then just maybe he was right about you too.

I wronged you. I apologize. I am sorry for what I did, and I hope it isn’t too late for me to make it right. England is your home. You belong here. I had no right to expect you to leave. I want you to come back.

Name your terms. If you can help Draco, I will do whatever you ask. Funds, equipment, assistance, I can acquire whatever you need. I will undo what I have done, if you can just help him have a normal life again.

If you doubt my sincerity, let me end this letter with this. I am begging you to help him. You are the only person I know of that can help, and I will do anything, undertake any task, endure anything to see him well again. Please come to the Weasley Burrow. You have my oath as a wizard that no harm will come to you, and that if you can’t do anything to help, you may leave in peace, and England is still your home.

Please come.

Sincerely,

Harry Potter

Harry folded the letter again and placed it in an envelope. He folded the envelope and placed that inside another envelope, this time including a letter to the twins. Fred and George had an informant network that rivaled any operation in Europe, and it was all wizard-based. As soon as they had a place to send the letter, it would be sent. The only reason he hadn’t sent the letter along with Draco was to protect the secrecy of that network of snitches, and Fred and George needed to remain uninvolved by all appearances.

The envelope felt heavier than it really was. So much was hanging on Snape, and on this letter, that it felt like it weighed a ton when Harry carried it downstairs. Harry rarely used owl post, since it always reminded him of Hedwig. He’d never actually replaced his owl, and he still felt no desire to do so. Hedwig had been shot down while Harry was living at Grimmauld place with the Order, near the closing days of the war. Even at the Dursleys’, Hedwig had been the one constant reminder that he was a wizard, and the only pet he’d ever had. Funny, that a person could miss a bird that way, but seven years was a long time to know anyone…even a pet…especially if you were Harry. When he
had to, Harry used the Weasleys' owls, and that would do for now. Perhaps someday…if he left here with Draco…he'd see about another owl, but it was still hard to imagine another bird taking Hedwig’s place.

Harry watched owl and letter wing skyward, and trudged back indoors for a bite of lunch with Molly. From here it would be a matter of counting days until Snape answered…if he answered at all.

Draco started work feeling cheerful enough. Actually, giddy would have been a more apt description, but he privately loathed the word, even if he understood the feeling. To say he felt giddy made him sound like some innocent schoolgirl with a crush and a perpetual giggle…which he most definitely was not! The problematic blush that hadn’t left his cheeks since shortly after waking…well…that was another matter.

‘I can’t believe this morning even happened. I did not just come from snogging Harry…didn’t happen. Had to be a dream. I…I’ve never done anything like that before. There are so many things I have done, but never that. Never because I was snogging a boyfriend. He was so sweet about it. He knew I’d just die if he mentioned it. It’s like Charlie and Dula. He just knew. This could work. I’m not crazy for wanting this. I’m not even foolish. There’s something here I have every right to want…well…except for the sticky shorts. I didn’t really want those. Severus Snape…wherever you are, soon is not fast enough. I need you here yesterday! Fix my bloody head and turn me loose on Harry! I don’t know how long I can hold out on just snogging. On second thought, I might be able to survive a paltry seventy or eighty years of it. Yeah…that would be alright.’

Draco smiled and flicked through his paperwork. He tried to go about business with his usual thoroughness, and the twins were unfailingly polite and seemed happy to see him back so soon. It was obvious that they knew at least part of what had happened at the Cannons’ clubhouse, and they were clearly trying to make sure Draco was comfortable. Despite being clever bastards in their own right, they were Gryffindors, and they were showing it in their own unique way.

Fred had wandered in with a sheaf of new papers, and then sat down on the edge of the desk. Draco looked up expectantly, waiting to hear what the red-head had to say.

“Here are the latest statements for income. That covers everything up to this last month. This month’s will be ready a lot faster, now that we know you need it. Good to see you back, Draco, but we wanted you to know that you could have taken the rest of the week off if you needed it. We’re not exactly slave-drivers here, and we saw the mess in the paper. Harry didn’t say much, but we assumed that if he was Firecalling for you, it must have been a tough time. Just don’t feel like you can’t take time off for something important…okay?”

That was a bit of a surprise to Draco. He took what he was doing rather seriously, since it was his first job, and he had no intention of accepting his pay without earning it. Charity had been for when he couldn’t survive on his own. Those days were over, and Draco meant to keep them that way…forever.

“Thanks. Really. I’m…alright. Better than alright today. Harry and I worked some things out last night that we really needed to talk about…and I’m feeling better. It’s nice of you, though, to tell me that.”

Fred looked relieved. To be honest, he’d felt guilty about Draco coming back to work so quickly, but if Draco was comfortable, then so be it.
“Alright. If you get bored…or at least remember to take lunch, just come join us in the main office. We don’t stand on ceremony here. I’m off to see the latest owled orders. See you later?”

Draco nodded yes with a smile and waited until Fred was on his way out. Then a smirk crossed his face just before he spoke.

“Oh…Fred? By the way, I have a wand. About that order for ten thousand Amazing Bouncing Ferrets? It’s the reason I spelled the desk to cover the back of your pants in black ink.”

“You didn’t…!”

Fred whipped around, checking his bum, which was completely clean. Draco chuckled wickedly.

“Not this time, I didn’t…but I got you looking. Watch your back and I’m sure you’ll be just fine.”

Fred pursed his lips, looking speculatively at Draco, then broke into a truly evil grin.

“Oh, is it ever on now! And to think I was afraid you weren’t going to fit in! You’re toast, Ferret Boy! Just you wait!”

Draco stuck his chin out defiantly.

“We’ll see about that…won’t we, Bookend! If you’ll excuse me, I have some work to do…when I can take a break from plotting your downfall. You’re going down in flames, Weasley.”

The banter set a pleasant mood as the afternoon wound down. Draco kept his mind on his work, except for intercepting and disarming two booby-trapped letters. How dare they even imply that a Slytherin would fall for such amateurish tactics. It was almost an insult! His retaliation was swift and subtle. The charm he’d placed on the toilet got someone, but he couldn’t be sure who. He only knew it worked when he heard muffled curses from down the hall. It was an easy charm to remove, causing a person to remain stuck to the surface they’d sat upon, but the point was that he’d successfully gotten one of the dreaded twins. It was on…indeed!

Productivity took a sharp downturn from there. By the time Dula arrived in the office Floo, coughing and dusting off soot, he was the accidental victim of a crossfire between Draco and Ella, whom he’d rallied to his cause, and Fred and George, who were hiding behind pillars and firing minor hexes in tandem. The damage was very minor…except to Dula’s dignity. It’s hard to remain serious and sober looking while heaving loose the results of a Bat Bogey Hex. The combat ceased immediately and counter spells were promptly applied, along with apologies that were entirely sincere. Dula coughed a little and smiled.

“I have not been the victim of that hex since I was a student. Do not worry. I am fine, but curious. Is this how your workday normally goes? If so, I am suddenly certain that the handling of dragons is a safer occupation than I had imagined.”

Fred and George cracked up, while Ella looked terribly embarrassed around Dula. She’d been the victim of many a prank in the past year, and she had enjoyed fighting back without restriction for once, but her sense of professionalism had reemerged and it was hard to take her job seriously after accidentally participating in the hexing of a guest. Draco spoke up for the lot of them.

“It’s good to see you, Dula. We were just settling a little inter-office dispute about who is the better prankster. Things got a little out of hand. What brings you this way?”

Draco kept up the pretense of surprise, knowing that Dula had likely chosen a public visit because it would allay any suspicion about Draco’s correspondence. The spells could be slipped to Draco at
any time now, and no one would think anything of it. Durmstrang was the one school that produced students like Slytherin House, and it was comforting to deal with a person whose mind worked in subtle ways.

“I was concerned by the report in your Daily Prophet. Charlie read a little of it in the newspaper at home and purchased one of the papers from England to learn more. He is worried for Harry and Ron, as well as for you, and I decided to take my lunch and come here. Knowing that you are all well will set his mind at ease. Do you have the time to take your lunch? Or have I come at a bad time?”

Draco assured Dula that the timing was perfect, and that they need to get back to work soon anyway. Fred and George chatted a bit, and relented when Dula asked to take lunch with Draco. After all, the reason for the visit was to establish the well being of Harry, Ron and Draco after the clubhouse fiasco, and Draco was the only first-hand witness. The twins rather gracefully took Ella out to lunch for Indian cuisine, by way of apology for the Itching Hexes that they’d pelted her with earlier. That left Draco and Dula alone for awhile, and their conversation immediately turned serious.

Draco held out his wand, smiling from ear to ear.

“Thank you…and Charlie. The dragon tear was a princely gift. I can’t believe you gave up something like that for me. I…there are no words for this. Just thank you…both of you. This is one of the most incredible wands I’ve ever seen, and it’s a perfect match…thanks to you two and Harry.”

“You’re most welcome, Draco. It was well used for this purpose, and you deserve a wand with such poetry. A rod of yew, tempered by many storms, sundered and made anew, flexible enough to endure in the face of many troubles. The feather of a phoenix, willingly given, the symbol of death and rebirth, beauty rising from ashes. The tear of a dragon, an eternal monument that proves even great sorrow and loss can mark the birth of something beautiful and enduring. You deserve nothing less.”

Dula discreetly placed an envelope on the desk while he sipped a cup of tea. Draco pocketed it silently while nibbling at his sandwich, and blushed from Dula’s praise.

“I guess. Those are beautiful things to say, but hard to live up to. Dula, the last couple of days have been hell…and heaven. The man that died…Fenton…he got me alone at the after game party. He was…was…taking liberties with me when Ron broke in. Ron beat the hell out of him, then took him to St. Mungo’s. When he got back he helped clean me up and get me home safely. Harry went apoplectic when he found out…there’s no proof, but he killed Fenton that night, in the hospital, with nothing but Legilimency. Untraceable. I wasn’t in very good shape yesterday, but my wand came, and I’m still happy to be using it. I can’t tell you what it means to throw spells when I want to again.”

“Draco. I am sorry. Harry goes too far, but I cannot fault his choice of targets. I also heard that you and Harry were much closer than last I saw. It had pleased me to hear this, but I worried over the events of this party I read of. I suspected Harry’s hand in it, but I did not think that he was acting in defense of you. You say it was untraceable, but I read also that Ron is no longer a member of the Cannons. Have there been investigations into this Fenton’s death?”

“Yes, but they didn’t dig too deep once they found out that Fenton was a pervert. They blamed the death on the beating he took, and it looks like the Ministry will let Ron off the hook because he was rescuing me. That’s not all though. Harry found a way to heal my mind…by making my memories…the bad ones…distant from my conscious mind. You remember the person I told you about? The one who was a close friend of Albus Dumbledore? He’s the one Harry is contacting. Severus Snape knows how to use Legilimency to help me, and Harry is working on getting him to come back to England. He doesn’t like either of us much, but I can’t believe he’d just ignore a letter from Harry. I
hope he doesn’t. The spells you showed us for warding nightmares have helped a lot, and I’m grateful for them, but this could mean I won’t need spells or potions again.”

Dula smiled and nodded softly.

“Much has happened in such a short time. The spells I have given you today include instructions you should study. If you have not taken Divinations, you will need to learn to read the auras you see. The spells will grant you sight, but you must know how to interpret what you see accurately. Still, I am pleased to hear that things are not so bad as I had feared. You have grown very close to Harry…if page six is any indication of the progress of your friendship.”

Dula’s last comment was made with a sly and conspiratorial smile and a wink from his merrily twinkling eye. Draco blushed scarlet and hid behind his tea cup.

“We’re…doing well. He said it, Dula. He said he loves me. He was willing to write Snape and ask him to come and help me…and Harry loathes Snape, but he said he’d do anything to help me. I told him how I feel too. We’re…we’re pretty much boyfriends. I don’t know what to call it, but we’re something…and I like it.”

Dula sighed with pleasure and soaked up the last of his tea. He stood and offered Draco his hand.

“I must take my leave now, but I am glad you have dealt so well and wisely with the matters that come before you. Harry is fortunate that so many people care for him, and he is more fortunate than he knows, that you have chosen to fight for his well being. Whatever malevolent forces influence our friend, they face an implacable and subtle foe. My prayers are with you, Draco. I will assure Charlie that all is well, and carry your greetings to him. Be well, our little dragon.”

Draco took Dula’s hand and shook it as firmly as he could, though next to a dragon tamer, any handshake he could muster would always seem weak. They parted ways and Dula returned to the Floo. Draco secured his papers inside his coat and returned to his lunch. Dula had been right. Events were moving at lightning speed, and it was dizzying when he thought about it.

Despite all he had endured in the past weeks, he felt more frighteningly alive than he ever had, and a weird ebullience filled his imagination. Good things were hovering on the brink of happening. Tomorrow he would visit Hogwarts with Molly. If he could cast these spells tonight, or tomorrow, he could take what he’d learned to Dumbledore and press for explanations or help. Snape was somewhere out there in the world, carrying the power to give Draco back the world of dreams instead of nightmares, and Harry had shown his love for Draco in a way that quelled all doubt.

Harry needed help, but his feelings for Draco were sincere and real in a way that Draco had never known before, and Draco would spit in the face of hell before he would surrender something like that.

TBC!!!
Draco walked through the halls of Hogwarts once again, beside Molly Weasley just as before, only this time with a sense of urgency instead of terrible uncertainty. What was needed of him was clearer now than ever before, and the past day had proven this absolutely.

So much had passed in a simple day. He’d made a careful study of the spells that Dula had brought him, and they had served him cruelly well that very night. In essence, they granted the power to see magical and spiritual auras to wizards who did not possess the innate talent to do so. With these spells, Draco had been imbued with means to view the energy that lingered around people, places and objects, and with the notes that Dula had left him he could assess the meanings of the colors he saw.

He’d cast the spells just before returning to the Burrow, and he’d stepped from the Floo only to be greeted by the riot of colors that represented the magic at place in the Burrow. The wizard photos and mementoes all shone softly with auras of enchantment, and the protective wards on the house were strong and clear to him. The old Weasley clock was a shining beacon of complicated spells, and Draco took it all in slowly, then headed up the stairs for Harry’s room.

Harry had been out at the moment, but his room was still a source of information. The knife he kept handy was still on his desk, sheathed and waiting for action, but Draco saw it far differently now. Sluggish, blood-red energy coursed around it, and darker colors flickered in and out. Death hung in the air near it. Shadows of pain and violence moved sullenly around its surface. No spirit presence dwelt in the ugly thing though, and Draco had gained knowledge from that alone. He needed to find Harry soon, since he now knew that the knife was not home to Voldemort’s spirit, and that meant that either Harry was tainted by exposure to foul magic, or that Harry himself was a Horcrux. Draco fervently hoped for the former, but apprehension and gut-wrenching fear were already taking root in his heart.

“Welcome home, love. Molly’s got supper almost ready. We’ll eat in a half hour or so…soon as Arthur’s back. I got that letter sent, and as soon as my contacts have an address to owl it to, it’ll be winging its way toward Snape. How’d it go with the twins today?”

Draco started a bit. He hadn’t heard Harry coming up behind him. Draco turned slowly and faced Harry, letting the Sight take in what was to be seen.

Harry’s aura was the most terrifying and powerful thing Draco had ever beheld…and what it told him chilled him to the bone.

Harry stood in the hall, smiling and relaxed, obviously glad to see Draco home. Though hearing Harry call him ‘love’ made his heart melt, what Draco saw filled him with atavistic horror. Harry’s
aura was unlike any other. Where most were fairly close to the body, Harry’s radiated brilliantly outward, leaping and sparking with flares of energy, to a length of more than three feet. The colors ran riot, melding and whirling one through another. Yellow and gold, soft green and brilliant white were shot through with dark and muddy red, shocking violet, and hideous oily black. The worst was close to his body. A spirit presence was visible, as clear to Draco as the sun in the sky. A smoldering, sickly, pulsating darkness, blood-red and oily black, was grafted onto Harry’s essence, leeching energy and feeding in darkness and hatred. The metaphysical stink of purest evil was overwhelming, and Draco had great difficulty remembering to keep his calm and act as though he’d seen nothing. He’d struggled to sound casual as he answered Harry.

“Uh…good. I’m starved. We had a lot of fun at work…and Dula came by, just to reassure Charlie that I was alright after…after a couple days ago. I thanked him for the dragon tear in my wand. The twins are…pretty nice when it comes down to it. Ella’s sweet too. Can you excuse me, Harry? I just came up hoping to find you and let you know I was back, but I really need the bathroom. It’s good to be home.”

Harry was nonplussed. “Sure. I’ll see you downstairs in a bit.”

Draco had steeled himself, and leaned forward and up, giving Harry a small, chaste kiss on the cheek before backing away toward the bathroom. As soon as the door was safely closed, he’d exhaled and grabbed the counter for support, letting the short panic breaths finally come, and letting his worst fears run free through his mind.

‘Oh, fuck! Merlinmerlinmerlin! Shite! He’s it. He’s a fucking Horcrux…and I have no idea how to stop that! Nagini was a Horcrux too, but they killed her to end the enchantment…would they kill Harry if I asked for help? Would anyone know what to do? Voldemort is alive…we’re fucked! Fucked!’

Voldemort was alive, or as alive as he had been when he’d given Harry his scar eighteen years ago…a bodiless and malevolent presence, with no form of its own, but this time Voldemort had a host…and his host was the most powerful wizard in the world. Harry. Draco’s heart had thundered while he absorbed what he’d learned.

Nagini had been a living Horcrux, and Ron and Harry had destroyed that one by killing Nagini outright. What if there was no other way? Was that what it would take to defeat Voldemort now? The need to see Dumbledore had increased exponentially.

The poisonous knowledge in Draco’s mind had spoiled the rest of the evening, and the morning after. He’d had to fight his revulsion just to remain close to Harry, who was sweet and understanding about Draco’s hesitation that night. Harry had assumed that Draco was still having lingering fears about how far they’d gone that past morning, and was still shy and embarrassed about the whole incident. This was all true, but Draco would have given anything to feel that way again and be merely uncomfortable next to Harry, without the awful certainty that the last remnants of the Dark Lord hid beside him in the night.

In the morning, after restlessly awakening several times in his sleep, Draco grudging exercised alongside Harry, and there was no pleasure in it this time. To be truthful, there wasn’t all that much pleasure in it normally, but there wasn’t fear or loathing, and Harry had sensed the soured mood and seemed fretful. Obviously he thought it was something he had said or done, and Draco wasn’t sure how to undo that impression. It was just unbearable, knowing that the creature who had Marked him, maiming his flesh for life with a brand that made him an outcast, was lurking in Harry’s spirit, twisting a gentle and decent man, a man Draco knew without doubt that he wanted for a lover, into a psychotic killer without remorse. It turned Draco’s stomach to think this, but he couldn’t drive those
thoughts away.

Breakfast might as well have been ashes, and he was wan and miserable throughout, at least until he divvied up his pay from the past week at the kitchen table. The look in Molly’s eyes when Draco parcelled out coins to Molly and Harry, insisting that, since he was physically well, and working, he should contribute to the house and repay his debt to Harry, was priceless. Only when he pitched a near tantrum did they relent and allow him to pay them, since it was clearly the only thing Draco would accept.

He’d earmarked a quarter of his pay for Molly, and an eighth for Harry until he’d paid the price of his wand and clothes. The rest he meant to save until he could purchase more things for himself, and he hadn’t told Harry yet, but he’d had the notion of slipping a few coins a week into the retirement fund that Harry held for the Weasleys. It seemed the least he could do for people that had given him back a life worth living. Hell, it wasn’t nearly enough, but it was what he was able to do now, and that would have to suffice.

When Molly and Draco had left Hogwarts, his kiss to Harry had been almost reluctant, and it ripped Draco in half to see the discomfort on Harry’s face. It didn’t take a Legilimens to tell that Harry was nervous and sad, afraid that he’d accidentally hurt or upset Draco. He’d promised himself then that he’d try harder to control himself, and keep his own fears under wraps while he kept up a pretense of comfort and happiness for Harry’s sake. It wasn’t Harry’s fault that that thing was inside of him, and he shouldn’t suffer for it. He was already paying the price for saving the wizarding world, and that was more than anyone should have paid.

That was the state of affairs when Draco arrived at Hogwarts, and every step felt like he was marching uphill in boots made of lead. Molly’s steps were brisk and cheerful, and when they reached Madam Pomfrey’s, they parted ways.

Molly gave him a look that could only have been called motherly. “Alright, love. I’ll likely be done quite soon, but I’ll take a cup of tea while I’m here and just keep Poppy company a bit. You do what you must and don’t worry for the time.”

Draco nodded and assured Molly that he wouldn’t be longer than he had to, but he couldn’t be sure how long it would take to cover all that he needed to discuss. As soon as Molly was sure he was alright, Draco made a beeline for McGonagall’s office, hoping she was in a better mood than last time. Her stern gaze had always made him feel inadequate, and her tone had only been kindly to him the last time he’d seen her.

McGonagall’s office door was open, and she sat before a stack of papers and envelopes. In the chair across from her, fumbling with envelopes and letters, was a man Draco hadn’t seen since his third year at Hogwarts. Remus Lupin. McGonagall looked up when Draco tapped at the edge of the door nervously, and gave a brief smile and waved for Draco to enter.

“Draco. Our former headmaster told me you might be back to see him again. I’m sure you remember Professor Lupin. You look a little better for Molly’s care. Would you like a cup of tea before you see Albus?”

“Hello, Draco. Tonksy told me you were keeping different company these days. She was happy to see you. You know we’ll be dropping by the Burrow when the holidays come around, don’t you? Wouldn’t miss it for the world. We’ll see you there soon. Take a seat…if you’d like?”

The shabby, tired man he remembered from school had changed drastically. Lupin looked healthier, happier, and considerably more alert than he had in school. Apparently marriage agreed with him. Draco still couldn’t believe that anyone related to the Malfoys had actually married a werewolf, but
Tonks had always been a law unto herself. At least Professor Lupin loved her, and she certainly loved him. These days, the thought of two people happy together was enough to garner Draco’s instant approval.

“Uh…thank you, but I told Molly I wouldn’t keep her waiting long. I just…I have a lot I need to talk about…with Dumbledore. It’s been…a tough week. I’d just rather talk about it with him. I’m sorry.”

He hadn’t managed to keep the morose tone out of his voice, and he wanted to kick himself for sounding so plaintive. The looks on their faces suggested that they’d read the papers lately, and probably knew full well what was going on between Draco and Harry. Especially if they’d seen page six!

McGonagall nodded agreement. “Very well, Draco. Remus…do lead our young guest to the headmaster’s office. I’ll keep at these blessed letters until you return. Take care, Draco.”

Remus Lupin stood, smiling genially at Draco, and led the way after Draco wished Minerva a good day. Draco hadn’t the faintest idea what to say to the werewolf-turned-professor and just nervously trotted along beside him, hoping for an uncomplicated journey to the headmaster’s office.

“Page six, huh? The press can be fickle, but at least you two looked happy together, eh, Draco? You and Harry make a pretty remarkable couple. Certainly nothing any of the rest of us saw coming!”

So much for hope. Draco’s face was flaming, and out of the corner of his eye, he could see that Lupin was smirking cheerfully, well aware that Draco was uncomfortable.

“I wasn’t really thinking about cameras at the time. Harry…Harry and I are…complicated, but thank you…for the compliment…I think. If it’s any comfort, I don’t think we saw it coming either. It just…kind of…happened, and here we are.”

The entrance to the headmaster’s office lay before them, and Draco sighed with relief, thankful that he wouldn’t have to discuss what was already a tender subject with Professor Lupin any longer. Draco had enough worries and fears about what was happening between himself and Harry, and he didn’t need someone else’s questions making his tension over these things any worse.

Remus Lupin spoke the password and stone ground against stone as the office opened. “Draco…if I don’t see you before you go home, give Harry my best, will you?”

Draco nodded his assent, and hurried into the privacy of the office, eager to take his seat before Dumbledore. By the time the door ground its way to closed, Draco was already seated next to the headmaster’s desk, staring at the portrait with a look of near despair on his face. Dumbledore was gone! The paint was in place, but the image of the former headmaster was elsewhere. Draco tapped his feet and waited impatiently, praying that Dumbledore wasn’t off on some extended visit to another frame. He could be anywhere in the castle, and Draco only had a few hours at the most…less if he wanted to avoid unwanted questions.

Draco was on the edge of panic when the image of the old wizard finally strolled back into his frame and smiled at him.

“Draco, my boy! Good to see you again! You look better than you did the last time we met…Molly Weasley’s cooking must agree with you. I can only trust that you’ve come with questions…let us see what I might be able help you with, shall we?”

Draco sighed expansively, then took a deep breath. There was more to cover than he could possibly have expected.
“What don’t I need help with? That’s an easier question. Everything…everything is screwed up, professor. I may have finally gotten my wand…thanks to Fawkes and Harry, but there are a hundred things going wrong at the same time and I can barely handle it. I found a way to read Harry’s aura, and…and…Voldemort is alive. You were right all along…and he’s tied to Harry. I saw it in the aura…a dark, black and red shadow, draining energy from Harry, and leaking pure evil into his aura.

Harry killed someone again. Just a few days ago. Right in St. Mungo’s. The man he killed…hurt me…and Ron Weasley beat the guy half to death for it, but Harry broke into St. Mungo’s and killed him with advanced Legilimency. Ron almost got blamed for it. Harry promised me he wouldn’t kill anymore…and this man wasn’t even a Death Eater. I’m…I’m scared, sir. I don’t think Harry can help what he’s doing. I know he means it when he says he’ll try not to lose his temper, but he couldn’t keep his promise, and I don’t think he’s able to anymore.

When he’s angry, the air around him feels hot…almost alive. He argues with Kingsley Shacklebolt all the time, but the last time they argued, I interrupted them…because Harry was trying to use Legilimency to influence the Minister’s mind. I stopped him from doing it, but he was furious. It’s hard to believe he’s the same person when he’s that angry.

He’s so powerful…I don’t know how anyone could stop him. He can Apparate through wards, and with Legilimency, he can control people’s minds. What if I can’t help him? How could anyone control him? If he’s a living Horcrux like Nagini was, and Nagini was destroyed by killing her, how can we even hope to get Voldemort out of Harry safely? It’s too much. You can’t ask me to be a part of something like that. I can’t do it. Because…because…"

Dumbledore finally interrupted as Draco’s voice trailed off miserably. The portrait’s voice was wistful and quiet.

“Because you love him…don’t you?”

Draco nodded quietly, biting his lip and trying to maintain his composure.

“Yeah. I do. When…when he’s normal…when he’s just Harry…he’s so kind, and gentle, and wonderful. No one ever made me feel like this before. I’ve never wanted anyone this way. I didn’t even think I could…and then I was at the Weasleys’, and Harry was there, and he was taking care of me. It’s been less than a month, and I’m not sure I could ever be happy without him. You can’t imagine how much he cares about me…what he did for me.

He studied for the last couple weeks, trying to find ways to help me cope…with the things I…I remember. To help me sleep without waking up screaming. We used some stop-gap measures for awhile, but he never stopped looking for a way to help me feel better from day to day. I…I can sleep…most of the night through, but my dreams are awful. I think I’ve gotten used to it. I get shaky sometimes, when I remember…certain things. Worst…I… I hate being touched by people. Or even just being surrounded by them. It’s like I can’t breathe, and I’m waiting for them to hurt me, and I want to start screaming or just run until I’m alone.

He found a way. Harry found a way he could help me. He was so proud. He was going to use Legilimency and Occlumency to build shields around my memories…but…I couldn’t let him in my mind. I told him…I told him it was because I didn’t want him to see the things I’ve done…the things I had to do just to stay alive…and I wasn’t lying. I didn’t tell him everything, though. I couldn’t let him see what you told me, or what I know, or what you said I might have to do. I hate this. I hate it! He’s trying so hard to help me…and I have to tell him no…and now we’re trying to contact Professor Snape, because he might be able to do this for me…if he doesn’t burn the letter on sight. I don’t know how much more of this I can take!”
Draco broke down completely, burying his face in his hands, while Dumbledore’s image lowered its head respectfully, looking surprisingly burdened for an image spelled into canvas and paint. Albus spoke softly, and Draco pulled his head up and listened, red-eyed and sniffing.

“Draco. Draco…I’m sorry. Perhaps too much of this is hanging on you. If I could take some of this from you, I would, but alas…I cannot. I feared that Voldemort had cheated death again the moment you told me of Harry’s erratic behavior, and the knowledge that he is indeed a Horcrux is terrible news, but I am telling you that all is not lost.

I can tell you a few things…now that we have made certain of Harry’s predicament. It is not necessary to take Harry’s life to destroy Voldemort once and for all. I told you that love is the power Harry holds…the power the Dark Lord could not stand against, and love can still set Harry free, as well as banishing Lord Voldemort forever from this world.

The spirit of Tom Riddle is not truly dead and cannot be exorcised like some petty ghostling. He is bound to Harry in blood and spirit. Much of Harry’s uncommon power comes from the second spirit that dwells within him, waiting to rise again. It is clear that Voldemort and his enormous power have combined with Harry’s own, and Harry is at war inside himself, locked in a silent struggle that none can see. The heat you feel from his anger is feedback…when his true nature and Voldemort’s rage clash, you can feel it near him. It isn’t true heat…and cannot burn, but that is how your mind registers such a thing.

To cast Voldemort out, Harry himself must forgive him. He must abandon all hatred, all anger, and confront Voldemort with love. This he must do in his own mind and soul, and only he can make this happen. I am certain that Voldemort engineered the deaths of those close to Harry, through his minions, solely with the intent of ensuring that, when he did face Harry, there would be no love left in Harry’s heart, and his prophesied defeat could not take place. He used Harry’s rage and the violence of his own death to catapult himself into Harry’s soul, escaping death once again. It is essential that, when Harry confronts what dwells within him, that he act out of love. Harry must reject Voldemort entirely, and do so with no trace of rancor in his heart. Without anger, fear or hatred to cling to, the Dark Lord will be without a means to remain in this world and he will be forced out, at last to face his final judgment in the hereafter.

All is not lost, Draco. Because, if Harry can love, as he loves the Weasleys, as he loves you, then his capacity for good, for kindness and decency, is still intact, despite Voldemort’s efforts.

There is more I must impart to you. I willed to Harry an artifact of surpassing power. I did not know then that he would abuse it someday. The boy I knew would never have exploited the thing I gave him. It is a silver amulet, etched with ancient runes. We have no true name for it, but it has been called the Dampener. It is so named for its power to make a wizard or witch invisible to wards, and untraceable by spell. I carried it for decades, using it only when needed most, and I have told only two others of its existence. Minerva McGonagall and Harry…and now you. If Harry cannot be brought to reason, the loss of that amulet will greatly even the odds for those who would seek to capture him. If it must be, then steal the amulet from him and return it to Professor McGonagall. I have the highest confidence that this may not be necessary though.

I do believe in you, Draco. I know that this weighs heavily upon you, and it grieves me that you carry so much sorrow in you, but for Harry’s sake, and perhaps even our world’s…you must go on. You have the strength in you. The instant you stumbled upon the knowledge of Horcruxes, you joined a cursed few…those of us who know of their power, and are bound to see them forgotten by others for all time. I would give much to take that burden from you, or to undertake this myself, but I cannot. It must be you.
You have it in you to foster love in Harry’s heart, and this will be Voldemort’s undoing. You are already making Harry an inhospitable environment for the Dark Lord. I suspect that Harry’s drifting temper may be Voldemort’s subtle attempt to exert control and push back the love he senses taking root in Harry. You are already doing more than any other could, and doing it well. As for help… I think you shall find what you seek upon my old bookshelf. The Potions manual at the top. Fetch it and turn to page three-hundred and twenty-six.”

Draco had listened in awe until this point, alternately confused, frightened and elated. He rose and headed for the bookshelf. Did Dumbledore know a potion that could salve his mind and clear his dreams of terrible memories? Was there something safer and better than the Potion Of Dreamless Sleep?

Draco opened the textbook and flipped pages until he reached the correct one. It was a description of the interaction between powdered moonstone andaconite, when stirred counterclockwise by… Draco’s eyes fixed on the slip of parchment folded at the bottom of the page. In familiar script, a simple address was listed… in German. Professor Snape was in Stuttgart, and this was his home. With this, Draco could reach him by Floo or owl before the weekend was over, provided he had the privacy to do so.

Draco turned back to the portrait and desk. “Thank you…but do you think he’ll come?”

Dumbledore’s eyes twinkled. “Draco…I assure you that Severus has been my friend for many years, and I know him as few others could. He will not shower you with kindness, but his aid won’t be as difficult to enlist as you might think. For all that Severus carries a long grudge, he is far from without heart, and he has a sterner sense of responsibility than many another man. If you make certain that he knows what lies at stake…I promise you that he will do what must be done.”

Hope was flickering back to life in Draco’s chest. He couldn’t defeat Voldemort himself… that was Harry’s task, but he could make Voldemort’s goal of conquering Harry all the harder, just by loving Harry, and coaxing Harry into loving him. The more love Harry felt in his heart, the less influence Voldemort would hold over him. He could reach Snape almost immediately, and once he was treated, he could share things with Harry he’d only dreamed of before.

Dumbledore interrupted Draco’s stunned musings.

“Hmm. Two o’clock. As it happens, I know that Severus is always home on Saturdays at this hour. If an enterprising fellow wished to see him… well… there is a fireplace in the next room…”

Draco felt his heart start pounding. It was worth it. Facing Snape would be worth it… if he could be set free from the worst of his memories. Harry needed Draco’s help, and soon, and the biggest obstacle in Draco’s path was his own inability to cope with intimacy. He was just a Firecall away. Snape could come to the Burrow, ward Draco’s mind and memories, and Draco would be free to concentrate on Harry. He just had to steel his nerves and do it.

He took the slip of parchment with him as he marched to the fireplace in the other room, and Dumbledore’s portrait gave a somber nod of proud approval as he left. Draco clutched a bit of Floo powder, uttered the destination, and poked his head into the green and flickering flames.

In Stuttgart, seated in a comfortable chair and engrossed by a historical study on classical potion-making through the ages, Severus Snape flicked his eyes away from his book and cup of tea, and gazed into the rising green flames, then closed his eyes and looked to the ceiling, as if to accuse the heavens for the face he saw in the Floo.

‘Damn! I knew…I just knew I should have put a proper ocean between Hogwarts and myself.’
TBC!!!
Severus Snape opened his eyes and turned to face the Floo directly, knowing full well what he would see in the flickering green. He delivered a gaze that would have withered flesh on anyone thinner-skinned than Draco.

"Mr. Malfoy. It would seem that I was mistaken in leaving directions to my coordinates at Hogwarts. I had trusted that it would remain confidential, and unused save for the most serious of emergencies. You scarcely qualify as such. May I ask what possessed you to believe, even for a moment, that the sight of you in my Floo would be a welcome one?"

His tone was so acidic that, had it been liquid, it would have sizzled as the words hit the floor. Despite years of association with his former head of house, Draco gulped, suddenly uncertain about Snape's willingness to help, despite Dumbledore's assurances.

"Sir…professor…I have to talk to you. Please believe me when I say it's serious. I wouldn't have dared bother you for anything trivial…I swear it. May I step through?"

Severus frowned. It was actually hard to tell that he did so, since the difference between his traditional look of scorn and a full frown was very faint indeed. He frowned, and it was only by the thinnest of margins that he managed to accept the notion of listening to Draco Malfoy speak again. His eyes narrowed with apprehension.

'Incomprehensible. I cannot believe I'm actually saying this…but…'

"Enter…if you must. Be brief, be concise, and if you can manage to do so promptly afterwards…be gone."

Draco stepped through the Floo and emerged into Severus' Stuttgart flat with a puff of enchanted green fire and soot. It was as spartan anyone might have imagined, more like a monk's cell than a residence. Aside from an elementary kitchen in one corner, overwhelmed by brewing supplies, only the shelf of books near the narrow bed indicated that the rooms were anything more than a place to sleep. A proper potions master had no business in a place like this. Draco dusted himself off and wrung his hands nervously. Snape would take careful handling, and giving him offense was almost impossible to avoid, but Draco hoped to at least avoid being rejected out of hand.

"Sir…professor. I thought…I thought I should apologize first, but…"

Snape interrupted him coldly, with an arched eyebrow and a chill tone.

"First. I am not a professor. Not now. There is no point in reiterating the cause of that change of status…I'm sure you know it well enough. Second. You thought? That alone suggests a change of
epic proportions in you. Third. If you wish to apologize, I shall hear it, but I admit to a desperate and likely morbid curiosity about what you intend to apologize for…especially give that you term your arrival as caused by an emergency, and will likely ask of me some boon or favor. Your optimism must be boundless to embrace such a notion, but your courage is laudable…if misspent. Go on. Amuse me."

Draco sighed. This was hopeless. He might as well spill it all and be done with it, since it made little difference what he said. Snape would have him out of here as soon as he was done laughing in Draco's face, and that would be an end to that.

"Sir…there's a letter coming for you. I don't know when, but soon. It's from Harry. He's going to ask you to come back to England…to help me. I need help…and it has to be your help. I came to ask you in person…to say yes. I know you haven't any reason to, but I had to ask…and tell you I'm sorry. I should have trusted you. I know you tried to help, but I didn't listen and I've paid for it. You don't know how I've paid for it. I…things happened…and…I…I'm not…well. A few months after you left I was starving. No one…no one would even talk to me. It wasn't a very good time, but it got worse.

Hyde-Pratt found me, and he was the first person in weeks who'd been willing to speak to me for more than a minute. He offered me a meal, with some others who were Marked…and outcast. It was my uncle Rodolphus…and MacNair. They drugged me, kept me prisoner for months, broke my wand…and there was more. You must know what they were like. I didn't…until then. They kept me almost a year. They wouldn't let me die. Then one of them was seen somewhere and they had to move. They pushed me out of a car in Muggle London. Some people found me and kept me alive enough to get around, and I…I had to make my way back to Diagon Alley. The Weasley family took me in…sanctuary. It took a long time…weeks…to get me well…and take the scars off of me, but they did it. I have a job, and something…something like a life, but I need help.

I can't forget what happened. There are parts I can't even say aloud. I still can't sleep right…can't stand being touched…by anyone. I wake up trying to keep myself from screaming. It's too much. I can't take it. Harry…Harry found something that could help. Advanced Legilimency. He said he could build shields around my memories. Not take them away, just make it so I could remember them without it hurting…control them. I can't let him do it. I can't tell you why…unless you agree to help me, but I can't let Harry see into my mind. I don't want him to see…any of it…or other things. You're the best Legimens Harry knows of anywhere. Only a master at Legilimency could help me. I'm sorry for all of the things I did, but I know I can't change any of them. I just want to start a new life…and I'll never be able to do that…like this. I wouldn't even ask if…it Dumbledore's portrait hadn't told me to try. Please…please help me."

Snape listened impassively, while Draco shuffled and stammered through his confessions, and through his pleas. Dark eyes flicked over every movement, reading the boy's body language, taking in every tiny detail. It was clear that Draco had changed quite a bit in the last year or so, and his words had a raw sincerity that the arrogant brat of yesteryear could never have faked.

Oh yes…Draco had been bright in school, but horribly flawed. Precocious, gifted and magically adept, but arrogant, ignorant and given to fits of spoiled temperament. Both of Draco's parents had spoiled him outrageously, eventually turning what could have been a truly exceptional young man into a tempestuous and insipid, overly pampered adolescent with no self-discipline of any kind.

Snape winced inwardly, his face remaining an impassive mask, when Draco mentioned the Death Eaters he'd fallen in with. LeStrange was far more wicked than most, and MacNair had been a savage and brutal thug. Hyde-Pratt was merely a fawning toady with a penchant for dispensing pain
upon the helpless, but the three of them together was a troublesome thought. Severus needed no imagination to conjure up images of what Draco might have endured…because he'd witnessed a thousand such acts of bestial vulgarity at Dark revels. He'd survived because he could show no emotion save for what he wished to be shown, and he had often watched with a look of sick glee while Muggles were tormented, violated, and eventually slaughtered like sheep. His proclaimed pleasure had been watching, and others had looked upon his countenance and believed him, but they had been wrong.

Every horror visited upon the victims of Voldemort's followers was indelibly burned into Severus' brain, and had it not been for his adept use of a pensieve, he'd likely have gone mad.

The sight of Draco was irritating, even after considerable time, but he couldn't ignore the boy entirely. Draco showed a sincerity and a courage that was utterly unfamiliar to Severus, and if his words were true, then few deserved aid as he did. It was tempting…to vent his bitterness upon the wretch that had brought complete ruin to him, altering so many lives for the worse with a single stroke of pride and cowardice, but Severus settled for a simple test of resolve. If Draco could take his licks, so to speak, and endure an unflinching view of what he had wrought, and still have the courage to ask a boon…well…then perhaps he deserved that for which he was asking.

"I see."

Severus let the words hang in the air between them, gazing directly into Draco's eyes and carefully measuring what he saw in them.

"Draco…tell me, without embellishment or unnecessary explanation, what you think I am."

"You're…you're a potions master, sir."

"Very good. Now…can you tell me, succinctly, the degree to which a true potions master is valued?"

"There are very few who truly master the art of potion-making. So few that, when someone does accomplish it, they're name is known around the world. Magical schools and wealthy patrons practically throw themselves at the feet of potions masters, in hopes of acquiring a contract with one."

"Again you answer correctly. You were never stupid. Unwise, but never stupid. Let me offer to you a possible scenario…one which makes little sense…and we shall see if you can make sense of it for us."

Silky sarcasm and faint menace oozed from Snape's every word. Draco nodded meekly, suspecting that Snape's rejection was going to involve monumental humiliation.

"What, if anything, would cause a potions master, a man respected around the world for his expertise in one of the most demanding crafts in the magical field, to abandon his homeland, dwell in a Stuttgart ghetto, and labor for a pathetic apothecary, instead of taking a position at a school or a court, when his skills are ostensibly so valued that they command awe and esteem? What, in your opinion, would bring such a strange, and highly unlikely, situation to pass?"

Draco looked down to the floor, dejected and clearly uncomfortable in the extreme.

"Look me in the eyes…and say it! What do you think would bring this to pass? Now!"

Draco looked up, and held Severus' gaze the best he could, obviously near to tears. If the appalling wretch couldn't handle this, there was little that could be done for him in any case. Draco's voice was
strained and uncertain.

"I did. You tried to help me. You took a vow, and I pushed you away, and I...your reputation was destroyed. That's...that's why you're here. I'm sorry, and...I shouldn't have wasted your time."

"Correct again. Now that we have established these things as clear, let us examine the rest of the matter. Am I to understand that, impoverished, defamed, and burdened by the knowledge that my friend and mentor is dead by my hand, that I should, at your request, render up aid and succor to you, the very person who brought this state of affairs to pass?"

Draco was already turning for the Floo when Severus spoke calmly.

"Sit."

The boy turned back, looking like he hadn't heard properly.

"What?"

"I said...sit. Come to the table, take the seat that remains, and sit. I cannot assess what will be required without preliminary examination. If you do not sit, you will likely fall when I am finished. You may leave if you wish, or you may stay and permit me to get on with this. It is of no moment to me which you choose."

Draco hurried into the chair, words stumbling out.

"Thank you. I don't know how to..."

"Be silent. I haven't any need to hear your fatuous praise. Sit still, hold your tongue, and I will see what can or cannot be done."

Snape's eyes bored into Draco's, and a second later Draco could feel the push of a consciousness entering his own. It was like fingertips brushing through the fabric of his mind. Here prodding gently, there moving something aside. The tension was unbearable, and there was worse. Key memories were pulled to the forefront of his mind's eye, and examined with a ruthless eye for detail. Things he'd striven to forget were dragged back into the light, forced to play out in his imagination with a clarity that was far greater than any nightmare haze.

'The feel of cobblestones crashing into his back, hurled by angry street merchants. The mix of elation and disgust, shame and relief, that filled him when he found discarded food that hadn't completely spoiled in the trash bins of Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade. Hyde-Pratt's eyes holding a faint gleam of pleasure when Draco consented to join him for a meal. His uncle's sickening calm while carving open Draco's belly, calmly discussing the matter while toying with Draco's exposed viscera. MacNair's wild laughter and crude insults during endless acts of violation. Hyde-Pratt's leers and giggles when he pressed red hot irons into the sensitive skin of the inner thigh. The memory of the stench of his own charred and smoking flesh. Tears, screams, vomit, madness, drug-induced solace and withdrawals that brought Draco to his knees.

'Muggles. Draco numb and automaton-like in a world of Muggles, trading his flesh for sustenance. Endless automobiles and passers-by, each looking for quick gratification, feverishly provided by a skinny, starveling youth with a vacant expression. The bitter taste of seed spat from his mouth onto sidewalk stone. The aching slow withdrawal from drugs, made possible by a dozen substitutes that kept the worst symptoms at bay. A final violation, this one not on terms set by the traditional agreements of whore and trick, but taken by force. Screams muted by a blow to the head that left stars traipsing across Draco's already hazy vision. Pain. Helpless tears. Rude thrusts that tore and
burned. Relief when he was left alone, shuddering, in a dank basement flat, wrapped in cheap blankets that were now soiled with blood and come.


The past few weeks flew through his mind, spilling their secrets to the man that whisked through them with ease. Every fear, every desire, and every notion or mood was weighed and judged, nothing left unread or deemed unworthy of interest. Draco had been right…he couldn't have let Harry see these things. When Snape's mind drew back, pulling away from Draco, a mountainous headache followed in Snape's wake. Combined with the freshly relived horrors of the past year, it brought Draco slumping to the table top, gasping, trickling tears, and barely conscious through the pain.

Severus Snape flicked his wand. A cupboard opened and a series of potions, each carefully sealed and stoppered, floated to the table between them.

"The human mind was never intended for psychic invasion. The headache is the price to pay for any major intrusion caused by Legilimency. Drink these one at a time. They will greatly diminish your discomfort. I can only warn you that the headache you feel now will be a mere shadow compared to the one that lingers after any form of psychic surgery. It cannot be entirely mitigated. It must be endured. I expect you will be strong enough to survive it."

Draco choked a moment, biting back a sob, and reached for the first bottle. Three potions later, the headache was merely annoying, and his mind had been sufficiently dulled to tolerate the lingering visions of the past year that still flickered across his mind's eye, inducing moments of panic, disgust, self-loathing and terror. Severus Snape stood up and paced the room while Draco held his face in his hands, struggling to pull himself together and speak again. Snape's monologue was hard to concentrate on, but the words were too important to miss.

"It can be done...the thing you ask for...but it won't be without sacrifice...or without pain. It will take hours, Draco. To ward so many memories will be time consuming and difficult, but it can be done. I will do this. You are fortunate indeed that Potter did not attempt this procedure. He did not tell you of the risks. He blunders through life using his power with all the subtlety of a club to the head, and yet he imagines that he could manage this with precision? Utter arrogance! His own mind could be lost in yours, and failure was almost certain. This use of Legilimency requires a certain distance from the subject, lest the sight of a suffering loved one steal away reason and caution. I have no doubt that Potter would have tried, and I have no doubt that he would have failed. You were right to come here, and when the letter arrives, I will come to you."

Snape paused his pacing and stood across from Draco, waiting silently for acknowledgement. Draco finally lifted his head and blearily looked his former professor in the eyes. Snape spoke in even, measured tones, none of his usual sarcasm remained, and Draco was dumbstruck by what he heard.

"Draco. My bitterness over things of the past aside, I regret that you have endured so much. I would not have wished those things upon you, but sentiment counts for naught. You erred, as people often do, and no one should pay such a price for an error, no matter how serious their lapse of judgment. Albus would have wanted this, and I feel as though I have little choice but to give you some semblance of normalcy, that you might have some hope of success, and a life beyond that.

What you have entered into is a dangerous game, and Potter is to blame for ignoring Albus' every attempt to educate him. He did not listen when he was told that love would conquer the Dark Lord, and he did not believe when evidence was placed before his very eyes. None of this would be
necessary, but for the ignorance and arrogance of a reckless and powerful boy. I will help however I can, but I offer this counsel. Your 'involvement' with Harry Potter places you in direct conflict with the spirit that resides in him, and places you at the forefront of a battle of wills that has been brewing for almost two years. Whatever your persuasion, whatever your preferences, you are taking grave risks with your sanity and health by choosing this course. For your own sake, take your leave of that boy and get as far away as possible. It would be all the safer for you. That said…are you certain that you wish to do this?"

Draco nodded soberly, his chin set at a defiant angle. His choice had already been made before he came here, and even Severus Snape's direst warnings could not have dissuaded him at this point. Whatever it took, he would help Harry, even if it meant following him to his grave. His life had a single purpose…a final destination. As if viewed through a looking glass, shrouded by distance and the haze of possibility, Draco could see a future, however far-off. Someday, somehow, he would have a lover, and a life with that lover, and that lover would be Harry. He was resolute. He had been debased, abused and made sport of, and had endured complete and total degradation. Nothing could deter him now, because he had already been through every ugliness that fate or chance could dish out. Come what may, he would either see Harry well and free of Voldemort's influence, or he would die trying. He gave his answer without hesitation or even a trace of uncertainty.

"Yes."

Severus Snape sighed softly.

"Very well. When this letter comes, I will respond, and we will do what must be done."

TBC!!!
The days that followed left Draco waiting on pins and needles, terrified and yet excited. Harry, not knowing that Snape's assent was guaranteed, had interpreted Draco's tension as a symptom of uncertainty…and he was right after a fashion. Though only Draco knew with certainty that Snape would come, the real source of his apprehension was the cruel knowledge that Voldemort dwelt in Harry's spirit. It was all Draco could do to suppress a shudder when Harry joined him in bed, and Harry could still tell that something was wrong. It was heartbreaking for Draco, knowing that Harry, the real Harry, his Harry, wanted desperately to help…to comfort, but when he tried to get close to Harry he couldn't avoid the faint and sometimes even serious revulsion that his secret knowledge had brought.

A new work week had started, bringing distraction that was much needed. Draco poured himself into his work, overwhelming the twins with his output and organizational skills. The twins had been surprisingly empathic, and had sensed Draco's desire to focus on his work for awhile. He'd actually been upbraided for working too hard and skipping lunches. It wasn't that he had no appetite, but the temporary freedom that came of concentrating on something simple and easily accomplished was sweet relief, and Draco didn't like breaking away from the work and facing the worries that lurked in his mind. He endured more than enough of those concerns when he was home, during supper, sitting up during the evening, or when he was trying to sleep with Harry beside him.

It had occurred to Draco that Harry didn't absolutely have to sleep beside him, but the idea of sleeping alone was equally discomforting…not to mention the way such a request would hurt Harry. The last thing he needed right now, this close to Snape's arrival, was to be estranged from Harry, whom he needed to keep close at any cost, and not just because Harry was a potential danger to himself and others.

He needed Harry because…well…he needed Harry. There was nothing unsettling about Harry's patience with Draco's seemingly inexplicable moods. Harry was reasonable, attentive, and just distant enough to give Draco a bit of space, while never actually acting embittered or pulling completely away from Draco. It was a little maddening, being presented with behavior that was completely endearing, and being completely paralyzed by fear and disgust when he tried to show that he appreciated it.

The only bright side…if one could call such a thing a bright side at all, was that Draco was usually too petrified by the notion of sleeping next to a host for Voldemort to even remotely entertain romantic thoughts about Harry. Not waking up sticky or clingingly tangled around Harry was a small relief…sort of. When Draco was alone…in the shower…or when Harry was away, his imagination rather missed that closeness, even if the results of it had been occasionally embarrassing. The only kisses that had passed between them in days were nervous, chaste little pecks that took all of Draco's iron nerve to deliver. Harry was obviously worried by Draco's reticence, but there was nothing to be
done for it…yet. Draco had made up his mind that, once Snape had set him right in the head, as soon as he recovered, he'd make the fullest possible apology to Harry...in whatever fashion seemed most enjoyable at that moment.

It was an intoxicating thought, and one that every so often stopped Draco completely when he was busy, occupying his mind and firing his imagination. What would it be like, to live without fear? He'd been afraid for so long that it seemed alien to imagine a life not dominated by fear. Even when he'd been happy, or cheered by good company, fear had still been a faint and constant presence in his heart and mind. How would his life be defined without that familiar presence? Would he really be able to touch and be touched? To be hugged by Molly when there was cause for good cheer, or patted on the shoulder in celebration? Would it be possible for him to curl into Harry's arms and just be held for as long as it pleased him? That alone would be worth any headache that Severus Snape had warned him about.

The most perverted part of it all was that, despite never actually having had sex with Harry, he felt vaguely ashamed of masturbation, simply because Harry wasn't a part of the process…except in Draco's imagination, of course. He'd hovered on the brink of exploring sexuality with Harry for days, only to see his desires thwarted by the terrible memory of what lay in Harry's aura. A serpent was clutched to Harry's breast, in the form of Voldemort's undying shade, and try as Draco might, he couldn't drive that knowledge from his conscious mind when Harry was near. It was completely vexing, and Draco spent nearly every day in a state of complete agitation, biting his tongue to keep harsh words at bay while his temper slowly frayed.

The arrival of the letter from Snape single-handedly turned the tide. Harry had read it while Draco was at work, and promptly Flooed to the office to share the news. Harry strolled into Draco's small workroom with a smile that spoke volumes, and handed Draco the letter without fanfare, quietly waiting for Draco to read it. The answer wasn't a surprise to Draco, but the interminable wait made necessary by secrecy was finally over, and he could finally see a partial end to his torment approaching.

Mister Potter,

I will be arriving tonight, at the Weasley Burrow, by Floo, at precisely six in the evening. I will require a room and meals for three days at the most.

Let me assure you that I have no need to curry your favor. This will be done for Draco's benefit, and no other's. Your apology, such as it is, is sufficient.

Severus Snape

Draco sighed with relief, and smiled back at Harry with a giddy, almost schoolboy-like, demeanor. It was hard to reconcile the image of the killer with the person practically bouncing on his toes with excitement now.

"Well? What do you think? He said yes…he's coming tonight. He'll probably do this tomorrow. This could be your last night with nightmare warding spells…ever! Aren't you excited?"

Harry's ebullience was infectious, and Draco pushed aside the letter and took a few deep breaths before he answered.

"I am…really. It's just that…it's like a dream, Harry. I guess I'm just not used to them coming true. I don't want to be excited until I have a good reason to be, and if something happens between now and tomorrow to muck this up, I want to be able to stay sane. I don't want to be like this anymore, but I feel like, if I let myself get too hopeful, and then something goes wrong, I'd be half-crazed. Does that
Harry nodded, suddenly sober and serious. "I'm sorry, love. I just wanted to see you smiling. Even just for a few minutes. I...you haven't cheered up at all since this started...the day I wrote that letter, and..."

Harry was already turning pink and looking away fretfully. Draco knew something uncomfortable would come of this, but there was no way out of it without hurting Harry's feelings. He'd just have to roll with the punches.

"...and I...I feel like I did something that upset you. If I knew what, I swear I'd set it right. I'll try harder...do anything you ask, just...please...don't shut me out."

Draco cringed inside. It was so fucking hard, biding his time, keeping these secrets and playing these games. It was like Slytherin house all over again...but worse. This was real life...and a lot of lives were at stake. So much on the line, and it was still all he could do to keep himself from spilling everything and begging Harry for forgiveness. His face was drawing up, tight and miserable, and Harry was already looking like he was sorry he spoke. Something begged to be said.

"It's...it's not you, Harry. I didn't mean for you to think that. I don't know what to say. I...sometimes I can't talk about the things I think...without falling apart. So I keep silent. Can you let me have that? I think I'll be better...soon. Maybe...maybe I didn't say it right, but Snape wouldn't be coming at all if you hadn't thought of a way to help me. I'm just...shite!...I'm fucking scared, okay. Everything is changing and I don't know what the hell to expect and and..."

Draco was starting to ramble and babble, and Harry broke in immediately, hands out and palms up in a gesture of pacification.

"It's alright! Don't worry over it. I understand...now. It'll be fine. Snape is coming tonight, and you'll be sorted out and sleeping the night through before the weekend gets here. One thing at a time, right?"

Draco gulped a few breaths and composed himself, then begged off and sent Harry home with an edgy kiss on the cheek and a promise to see him back at the Burrow. There were moments when he wanted to just Apparate away and keep traveling until no one knew him, and this was one of them, but he'd come much too far to quit now. Draco's paperwork beckoned, a siren call that offered peace and serenity, and he forced himself to keep going until the day was done.

Harry sat in the Burrow's living room, staring into the empty chimney. Draco would be home soon, and not long after that, Snape would arrive. This was not an occasion for celebration. Snape had his uses, and with Draco's health on the line, even Harry could see that...but he didn't like it...or Snape. Not one bit.

Severus Snape had always hated Harry Potter, and the feeling had been perfectly mutual. Since Harry's first year at Hogwarts, Snape had used his authority and influence to belittle, bedevil, defame and otherwise make Harry's already complicated life a little more difficult. In short, the man was a black-robed thorn in Harry's arse, and he didn't expect that to change anytime soon.

Harry knew some of the source of Snape's constant irritation. His father, James, had humiliated Severus more than a few times when they were students, and obviously represented everything that
Snape could never have been…like popular, handsome, accomplished at anything other than Dark
curses or potions. Snape had carried that grudge for more than a decade, and it was their Pensieve
and Occlumency lessons that had clued Harry in about Snape's lingering hatred of all things Potter. If
he'd shown up on his first day at Hogwarts and killed Voldemort on the steps of the school, Snape
would have still found fault somehow, and just the memory of the arrogant bastard sneering down at
him was enough to make his fists ball up with frustration.

'GOD! I can't believe I agreed to this. If it was for anything less than Draco…I swear…I'd hand that
snarky git his own teeth.'

Harry sighed and slumped into the easy chair he occupied, cursing his luck and facing facts.

'It is for Draco though. There's nothing else to be done for it. I can't stand seeing him like this. The
part that makes it worse is knowing he's so close to being well, and watching him look more
miserable than ever. It makes me want to puke. Every time I see him flinch away, I know he's
thinking about touching me.

I…I miss how things were…before. He was happy about the wand…and he was okay until just a
few days ago. Ever since I sent that fucking letter, he's been a walking wreck. I thought he'd forgiven
me for what happened with Fenton. Maybe I went too far? What if he just leaves as soon as he's
well? Should I just say goodbye…or should I at least try to fight for him? Shite! I just don't know. I
don't know anything. I'm pants at this kind of thing…and I wasn't even a poof until a few weeks ago.
How the hell would I know anything about this stuff?

Look at me. I save the world from a Dark Lord, and I spend the day with my guts in a knot because
someone I hated for eight years doesn't act like he really loves me. This is complete bollocks. Get it
together, Potter. If you so much as blink while Snape's here, you'll never hear the end of it.'

Harry pushed his hair back and tried to maintain his composure, but Molly entered the room with
cups of tea for the both of them and sat down in the chair next to Harry's, looking like she was about
to speak.

Harry thanked her for the tea, silently thanking her for pulling his thoughts away from Draco and
Snape for the moment.

"Bless you. I kind of needed a cuppa. Been too worked up lately anyway. I might go for a run in a
bit. I just need to get things off my mind."

Molly smiled gently, sipping at her cup, and fixed Harry with a serious gaze.

"Oh, Harry. I'm not blind, love. Not at all. Something's been wrong all week between you and
Draco, and I've seen you look like this every day this week. Maybe I can't help, but I just wish you'd trust
me enough to talk about it. Whatever's off between you can surely be set right…and even I can see
how much he likes you even now. What's been eating at you, Harry?"

Harry sighed and flopped bonelessly back into the softness of the chair, vaguely embarrassed by how
badly he wanted to just spill everything. He was tired of being strong, being independent, coping
with things alone, and Molly was one of the few people left that Harry trusted implicitly not to hurt
him. He finally cracked, haltingly letting the words out.

"I'm scared, Molly. Snape…Snape is going to help him…and he might just leave. I think he's…he's
still upset about what I did…after the party. Ever since I wrote that letter to Snape, he's been
distant…and I hate it. I don't know what the hell I'm doing, and I feel like it's all falling apart in front
of me. I've never…felt…this way…about anyone! What do I do if he leaves? What if he never
Harry felt himself starting to shudder, and words were coming hoarsely to him now, while he grimaced, fighting back the urge to cry. Molly listened soberly, an impassive and empathetic presence at his side.

"I don't…want to lose him! I think…I think he's scared of me. Or scared that I won't do the right things. I…don't know who I am…anymore. I feel like…like two people inside, and I'm never sure what I'll do next. Sometimes everything makes sense, and…then…then it changes…and I'm doing things before I can even stop myself! I don't…I don't know how to make him believe in me…and I'd give anything…anything to see him happy, but I think I've…I've screwed everything up! I know I don't have any right to ask this, but…help? Help me? Please, Molly?"

Molly had already sat up and put down her tea. With a single step forward, she encircled Harry in her arms, rubbing his back gently while stifled, nearly grunted sobs racked their way out of Harry's body.

"That's it, love. Just let it go. You carry too much on yourself, Harry. You always did, and you still do. You don't have to hold those things in…not here.

I know that what's between you and Draco is new for you…and just as new for him. It's plain to see he fancies only you, Harry. Don't fear for that, but think of him clearly, Harry. Can you blame him for being afraid of what he's feeling…what he's thinking? I'm sure he doesn't want to leave us just yet. He's already well enough to have left here, and I'm almost sure the only thing keeping him here is you…and I'm glad of it. If he wants to stay he can take up with us for as long as he'd like, and I think he will.

Draco is a wonderful boy. As good in his way as you are, and I'm sure he knows how you feel. As soon as he's well, and Mr. Snape has seen to his needs, I've no doubt he'll feel freer about talking to you. It's been hard for him these past weeks, finding his way after so much, but he's such a determined lad. He'll make his way yet, and I'm sure there's a part for you to play in whatever he decides to make of his life next.

All I can say for certain is…hold your temper, love. He can't be blamed for being frightened of violence…and there's a lesson in this that you should have learned before now. You owe it to him to control yourself. Let go of the past, Harry. Nothing good comes of nursing old hates…you have to set those free and start over. That boy has no business being close to brutality of any kind…if anything, he needs to be surrounded by just the opposite. He needs to believe that life can be different than what he's seen. You want him to see that, don't you?"

Harry took his comfort from Molly's closeness. He hadn't broken down like this since he'd been in school…since Sirius had been killed. Even then, he'd been quiet and sad long after, but never public in his grief. By the time others around him had died, he'd long since learned to contain himself, functioning when others would have let themselves weep. For a moment, he felt much younger, and unashamed of his fears and worries. The Boy Who Lived was a fiction of the press, and Harry Potter, who was nothing more than a deeply troubled young man, was completely present.

"I do…I do, Molly. I'm sorry! God, I'm sorry! He's so much to me…everything…and he needs to know that. I didn't mean to…to lose my temper. Just…when he was hurt…and I knew who hurt him…it was like I wasn't even there…I just shut down. The next thing I knew I was…I was there…in St. Mungo's…and I was staring at Fenton…and I wanted to make him hurt…I wanted to kill…so badly I could almost taste it. I did it. I burst a vessel in his head, and just left like it was nothing. He wasn't casting curses, he wasn't armed, he was just laying there…and I killed him. You…you've covered for me…and so has Ron…and Arthur…and Draco…and I acted like it was what I was due.
I'm sorry, Molly. Please tell me you forgive me. Please?

Harry choked the words out, buried in Molly's shoulder, feeling like a dam had broken inside of him.

"It's alright, Harry. Never you worry for us. When we lost our Ginny, you were there for us…and when Ron lost Hermione, you looked after him like he was your own brother. Harry, love, I want everything for you that I'd want for my own children. I want you to be happy, and I know I'll never see that with you on the course you've chosen. Of course you're forgiven, love. We love you too much to let you go, but you have to fight this. Not for us…but for you. For Draco. Don't promise, don't try…it just do this. I know you have it in you. Fight this with the strength I know you have in you, love."

Molly pulled away, stroking Harry's cheek, wiping away a stray and bitter tear. The young man that had blended into their lives so seamlessly was in pain, and she could do nothing less than offer every comfort she could. Harry breathed deeply, calming himself, unused to this intensity of emotion, and decidedly unused to showing it.

"Thank you. I…I didn't mean to…like this…well. I should go upstairs and shower. I…uh…I need to clean up before they get here."

"Of course, love. Go on. Supper will be ready just after Draco and Arthur get home. I should have it ready just in time for Snape's arrival. Thank you for helping straighten out the rooms today. Took the work right out of it, having you here did. Now go on ahead and see to yourself, dear. We'll make a good night of this yet."

"Aye…okay."

Harry sheepishly headed upstairs, still finding it hard to believe he'd gotten those things out. A shower set him right, clearing away the last evidence that he'd broken down at all, and he found himself calmer than he'd thought he could manage, with Snape soon to come calling. Molly was right. Draco needed to believe in someone that wouldn't turn cruel, wouldn't terrify with their power, even if they didn't use it on him. Harry wanted to be that man…whatever it took.

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The restless spirit that dwelt within him was not blind and senseless. It's oily presence was nowhere and everywhere, but its influence was limited by its bodiless lethargy and weakness. It knew itself well, and it also knew well the feelings of rage and discontent, hatred and the fire of wrath. It did not know, nor did it like, the feelings of affection, warmth, and that cursed thing…that folly of so many…love. The creature that hid in Harry's soul had little beyond raw power…which Harry directed and controlled, but it could push in its own way…subtly shift the realm of emotions, trigger reactions in the land of dreams, and it would fight back with all it had, lest it lose its host. It was a matter of life and death…and death held no appeal.

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Severus Snape stood before his Floo, bags packed, supplies ready at hand. It was time to leave, and with a little luck, he might find work in England when this task was done, always assuming that a certain scar-headed adolescent didn't bollix up the works and doom the world. So much effort, so much sacrifice, and for what? To be exiled from his home, only to return when Potter's arrogance had made the boy a house for the Dark Lord that was supposed to have been dispatched?

'Someday. Someday I will have the peace and quiet I so richly deserve…and there will be no more of this nonsense. No distractions, no concerns, and most of all, no insipid brats mewing about their
traumas…but not today. Today…today I am going to…the Burrow…and I will see this drama to its end before I'm done.'

Severus made his peace with the mess that he was surely walking into, and stepped into the chimney with powder in hand. Disgust rolled off of his tongue when he said the fateful words that whisked him away in a blast of green fire.

"The Weasley Burrow."

And then he was gone, and the Stuttgart flat that had been his home in exile sat quiet and empty. Severus Snape was going home, and come what may, he meant to remain.

TBC!!!
Let Me Tell You A Story

DISCLAIMER: Warning! I make no claim to any property of J.K. Rowling's, and am in no way profiting by this. I do offer her my sincerest thanks for allowing us this garden of the mind in which we play. Further Warning! This story...and likely any I ever write...are dominated by gay themes and characters. That's how it is, if this in any way makes you uncomfortable...do not read further.

Redeem Me…by Samayel

Chapter 53: Let Me Tell You A Story

The arrival of Severus Snape at the Burrow occurred without fanfare. He stepped into the modest living room, robes dusted with soot, and uttered a hasty spell to clean himself quickly. He placed his bags on the floor and favored the assembled persons with a frosty gaze, nodding curtly to Arthur and Molly, as well as Draco, then stared disdainfully in Harry's direction before turning back to the people that would be his hosts for the next few days. Molly interrupted the arch silence.

"Hello, Severus. Welcome to our home. We're grateful that you'd come all this way to help Draco. Supper is ready, and I'm sure you'd like a cup of proper tea...after being away so long. Shall we all move to the table and take out seats? It's past time for supper as it is, an-

"No," Snape replied flatly. "I will be fasting...and so will Draco. What we will be doing tomorrow requires it of him, and I should do so as well, to ensure that this is done once and done correctly. I have a home that hasn't been attended to in more than a year, and I mean to see to it as soon as matters here are resolved."

Draco looked crestfallen. One of the chief pleasures of his life these days was the food that Molly prepared each day and night. He hadn't expected to skip dinner and breakfast for this, but Severus Snape knew his business, and there was no point in arguing over it. The sooner it was done the better. Harry's glare could be felt from across the room, and Draco watched Snape turn a withering look to Harry in response.

"Mr. Potter. Is there something amiss?"

Harry scowled, obviously biting back comments that would have seared the ears of everyone present. Draco gave a panicked look to Harry, silently pleading for patience.

"I don't recall anything in the texts I read mentioning a fast. Is there some reason for this, or do you just feel like spoiling dinner for the rest of us? I read the material extensively, and I can tell you that starving yourselves was never mentioned anywhere."

The tone of challenge was clear, but at least Harry had just stuck to a terse statement instead of cruder barbs or open threats. Snape's face colored slightly, and he delivered his response with a voice that was laden with honeyed venom.

"You've improved. The last time I saw you, Mr. Potter, you would have been both incorrect, and lacked anything resembling studies to support your conclusion. Suffice it to say that, had you performed this procedure before, you would know my reasons. The headaches from psychic surgery are legendary in this limited field. Nausea and vomiting are routine side effects of prolonged Legilimency, especially for the subject. By all means, if you wish to heap upon Draco the additional discomfort of a full stomach when he awakens, do invite him to ignore my recommendations...but I shall expect you to attend to him after, and it will be you holding the bucket for his bile. Now...will
there be anymore questions, or may we dispense with these trivialities and just assume that I understand what needs to be done?"

Harry's face pursed, as if he'd just bitten a lemon, and he nodded 'no' with only a few seconds hesitation.

"Very well then. Draco. Show me to the room I will be occupying, then we will speak while the others dine. You may have water, if you wish, and I recommend it tonight, since tomorrow and the morning after you will be in no condition to take in much of anything. Lead the way."

As abruptly as he'd arrived, Severus Snape followed Draco up the stairs with black bags in hand, a look of vague distaste firmly in place all the way to his room. As soon as Draco opened the door to Bill's old room, which had been neatened for the occasion, Snape stalked in with a snarl.

"Close the door and take a chair. Muffliato! There. We have matters which should be discussed, without interruption by that intemperate and meddling ass below us."

Draco sat in the chair beside the writing desk, watching nervously while Snape unpacked a series of bottles and placed them on the nightstand, then set aside his clothes for the next day. After a lengthy pause, Snape spoke without even turning to Draco.

"First, are you still certain that you wish to continue on this course? Remain here, concern yourself with Potter and the spirit that bedevils him, and endure this particular treatment?"

"Yes. I don't want anything else."

Snape sniffed. "You lack ambition, but I scarcely care. If this is what you choose, so be it. If you wish this to succeed, the burden lies not merely upon my skill as a Legilimens, but also upon your preparedness, your will, and the purity of your intent. If you enter into this with a mind that flinches from the truth, you will fail, and the shields I build will have no foundation upon which to rest. What I will ask of you will be hard, but you say you are certain, and we shall see how certain you truly are."

Severus sat on the edge of the bed, fixing Draco with a cool and serious gaze that held no malice.

"Draco. Tonight, you must do more than fast. You must face all that you have endured, and voice your fears, your shames, and your desires. When I place these wards within your mind, there must be no doubt left in you, and no flaw that will leave them tumbling after I have gone. You do not have to be perfect in a single night, but you must face your imperfections and embrace them, or risk letting them quickly undo the work I will have wrought. You may tell what you wish to whom you wish, but you must give these things voice. If you cannot do this, the risk of failure is incalculably higher."

Draco sat in numb shock. Nothing had prepared him for this possibility. Fasting was easy enough, and he'd starved for months and lived. A day or so without food was no challenge, but this? This was far more terrifying than any ritual or sacrifice. This was an exposure of the self, and Draco's cheeks were already burning at the notion of speaking his fears aloud.

"If there is no other to whom you can speak, I will be your confessor. I will not mock you, though I disagree with your choices, and with the company you keep. There are things at play more significant than what I think of these matters, and if this is required of me as well, so be it."

Draco's tone was hushed. "Thank you. I need to think for awhile. I don't know what to say. There's...there's too much. I'd prefer to talk about these things to you, but I think there are some things I should tell others about. I have other questions for you though, and you know what they're
about. You saw what was in my mind. You know what we're dealing with. Do you know anything that could help? You and Albus are the only people besides Harry that know everything about the making and destroying of Horcruxes."

Snape huffed. "Albus didn't tell you everything, but he told you what you needed to know most. As for the making of such a thing, I have seen it done once, while Voldemort was still consolidating his power, and preparing for the Prophecy he feared by making himself effectively immortal. He used the energy that is brought to bear by a dying victim to fuel his effort to break away a piece of his own soul. It required enormous effort, as well as the absence of fear of pain, and he simply willed the portion of his soul to bind to an artifact of his choosing. Nagini became his eyes and ears in the world, even after his destruction at the Potter residence. Thus, bound to her, the snake became a vehicle by which he could aid his recovery and sustain his life. To destroy a living Horcrux, the only certainly effective path is to kill the host. This is the only means we have seen employed and know to be successful. With Potter, more may be possible.

The link between Potter and Voldemort was always unique. In accordance with the Prophecy, the Dark Lord was crippled and robbed of his flesh by the curse that recoiled against him. Potter was scarred ever after, and a link was forged between them. A measure of his power, such as Parseltongue, comes from the link between him and Voldemort. I have seen in your mind the things which you shared with Albus, and I agree. The Dark Lord used his own violent death to catapult his soul into Potter, using the link between them as a tether to guide him in. He was weak at first, and Potter made a safe vehicle for him, but as he has fed on Potter's lust for revenge, and fueled it with his own undying lust for power, Potter has weakened, and the boundary between the two of them is slipping.

You can be sure that Harry Potter will never simply become Lord Voldemort, but the fusion of the two of them will create a man that possesses the full magical power of both souls, and has no moral boundaries left to guide him. Even the Dark Lord alone would never have been this powerful. This is what Albus fears. You must engineer a situation in which Harry confronts himself, acknowledges that a hostile spirit exists inside of him, and ejects that spirit without hatred or violence. This is not possession, no exorcism would suffice. Only that boy can cast out the remnants of the Dark Lord, and the world hangs in the balance. If this cannot be done, a way must be found to incapacitate and contain him. He is simply too powerful to be left to his own devices, and the only other choice would be to kill him before he loses himself completely and becomes a threat to the entire world. Do you understand now why I hoped you would choose another path? I would not wish this for you, Draco, but I will make my amends to Albus by helping you to prepare for what comes."

Draco took this information in, and it was a bitter draught. Somehow, he'd hoped that Snape would have an insight that made things easier, or some trick or spell to bring Harry around quickly. The realization that there was little else to be done was sobering in the extreme. Only Harry could save himself, and he would be armed only with love in the end. Draco had no other recourse, and answered Snape haltingly.

"I…I see. I appreciate that you want something better for me than this. Something safer. But I want this. Even if I have to fight for it. I don't think I've ever been happy like this before…here. You've…you've seen what I've done…where I've been. I'm not afraid of losing this. I like how I feel here. I like who I am, or who I could be, here. They're good people. They've given me so much. It would be a poor repayment of that generosity to just abandon them now.

I want Harry. I know you don't understand it, and I know you don't like it, but I don't think you'll ever see him the way I do. I know there is something about him worth fighting for. You can see the memories, or hear my thoughts, but you'll never see them the way I lived them. He's the most gentle
person I've ever known, and he cares about others with a passion I don't think you can even imagine. Dying to protect that... would be an honor I'm not even sure I deserve. I know what I feel now. In my heart. It's clearer than ever, and I won't pretend it isn't real. I always admired you, because you were like iron. Unyielding, always pushing for perfection, never letting emotions own you, no matter what you privately thought. I wanted to be like you.

I was too young to know better. You don't keep your thoughts veiled because you're strong. You hide them because you're afraid. That's what Albus Dumbledore knew, isn't it? You trusted him because he truly knew you, and he was still your friend. That's what made you willing to do anything he asked of you, anything that he said was needed. Maybe you don't believe it, but that's how I feel about Harry. He trusts me, and I don't think anyone else ever has. I'll do anything to have that. Anything."

Snape had watched Draco from the corner of his eye throughout their conversation, his expression giving away nothing of his inner thoughts, but in that last moment, a faint smirk creased the corner of his mouth. Draco couldn't have known it, but something like a perverse sort of pride had filled his former mentor.

"Very well, Draco. You surprise me, and I did not think I could still be surprised. Your insight will serve you well, and I will take you at your word. I had thought the teaching would be harder, but it seems that the pupil was educated before the instructor made it to the classroom. I cannot fault you for wanting such a friendship. I only warn you that few ever find one. See me after you have had time to think, or we can begin now, if you wish?"

Draco let himself breathe again, proud that Snape had offered his praise, even in a roundabout way, and made his way to the door.

"I'm going to my room. I'll talk to Harry first, and then I'll come to see you. Thank you."

Draco accepted Snape's dismissive nod and made his way down the hall. His own room was clean and quiet, and there was much he needed to think over. Obviously, he couldn't tell Harry everything, but there was a strange freedom that only truth could bring, and there were things he'd only dreamed of saying to Harry before now. No matter how uncomfortable the subject might make him, there was now a greater purpose behind sharing his fears with Harry.

Draco mulled over the past two years, picking apart so many things he'd felt at so many different times. His doubts, his fears and shames, his dreams and disappointments, all of them. He let his mind drift and wander through the past weeks in particular, and he did not shy away from the impact that Harry had made in his life. Harry couldn't yet know of Draco's plans to help him, but tonight, tonight he would know more than Draco had ever dared to say before, and Draco prayed that when Snape's work was finished, what had been shared would be the foundation of something that wouldn't break under the strain of other secrets. It made sense, really. He couldn't expect to wake up as a different person, just because of confessions and Legilimency, but he could make himself closer to Harry, and all it would cost was gambling on Harry understanding the fears and doubts that Draco privately held. It was a gamble that Draco could believe would pay off.

Harry paced the living room in silence. Arthur and Molly were dining together, and he'd been asked to join them, but refused. His irritation with Snape was almost under control, but the idea of entrusting Draco's sanity to that arrogant prick had killed his appetite. The books hadn't mentioned anything more than headaches, and hadn't implied that the magnitude of the headache would be so great. How was he to have known? It was bitterly similar to his time at Hogwarts, listening to Snape mock him for not understanding something so obscure that a student couldn't possibly have known it, then holding himself up as some fucking standard of excellence against a group of children. It was
galling, but Harry had promised to endure anything for Draco, and if controlling his tongue and temper meant missing a meal, then so be it.

"Harry?"

Draco was at the last step of the stairs, and he looked weirdly peaceful, as if some beatific calm had come over him while he was upstairs. Harry paused and answered, his train of thought completely derailed by the sight of Draco, who seemed somehow more determined and comfortable than he had looked since his arrival.

"Yes?"

"We need to talk. Will you come upstairs with me? There are some things I want to say, and some other things I need to say, before tomorrow. Is that okay?"

Harry felt the annoyance that had gnawed at him slide away. Tension slipped from him, and he nodded quietly and followed Draco up to the room they'd shared for just over a fortnight.

Draco sat upon the edge of the bed, and he motioned for Harry to sit beside him. The smile that was firmly fixed in place took the edge off of Harry's worries, since he hadn't seen Draco looking happy in days, and the only gnawing disappointment was the ugly realization that a conversation with Severus Snape had likely been the cause of this sudden good mood. Harry took a seat, wishing the brief sense of comfort between the two of them would return. They hadn't even exercised together lately, and their contact had been limited to brief exchanges of vague affection, peppered with hints of regret. It would be a fine thing if Draco told him what was wrong. At least then Harry would be able to try and set things right. At this point, almost any price would be worth regaining that comfortable familiarity that had grown between for such a short time.

"Harry, there are a lot of things I wanted to tell you about. Things I think about, but don't say. Snape says that before he starts tomorrow, I need to let go of my fears and doubts…share things I've kept private with people that matter to me. Otherwise, the shields he'll craft in my mind might fail. I guess I wanted to wait until the time was right, but…since I have to get some of this out tonight, I thought it would be best just to say everything at once. Would it be alright if you just let me speak? No interruptions. Just to let me get all of this out before I lose my nerve?"

"Sure…but can I say one thing first? I wanted to tell this to you earlier, but we never really got a chance today."

"Yeah. What is it?"

"Draco…you're probably going to be a lot better in a short while…and there isn't really a reason for you to stay, except if you want to. I'd like it if you did. The holidays are coming, and the rest of the Weasley family will be here soon. Um…it's going to get pretty cramped in the Burrow, probably for at least a week or two. I was just wondering if…if you'd mind…staying in my room?"

Draco felt like his heart would burst, it was pounding in his chest so hard that he could feel it in his eardrums. It was almost deafening, and he couldn't hold back the way his smile was spreading into a mad grin.

"I don't think I'd mind that at all. Besides, you have a bigger bed anyway. And just so you know…Harry, I don't want to go anywhere. I know it's been hard sometimes, and things aren't perfect, but I'm very happy here. I wouldn't want to go somewhere else, even if I had somewhere else to go…unless…unless it was with you. Do you understand?"
Harry sighed pure relief and dropped his head into his hands while he caught his breath.

"Yes! Thank you. I was…it was stupid of me…I didn't want you to l-"

"Leave? Let me say it again, then. You thick-headed Gryffindors need everything spelled out for you. I'm staying as long as there's a place for me. I wasn't lying when I said I love you. I haven't even figured out what that means, and I was hoping it might take a little longer than this. You know? Something like maybe seventy or eighty years. That ought to be enough to work out a good definition for it. Sound good?"

Harry finally lost the slender thread of control he'd held onto for weeks. He moved quickly and placed his hands very gently along Draco's jaw and cheeks, moving forward intently and with a soft whisper.

"Forgive me. Just this once…let me kiss you."

Draco had always taken the initiative, safe with the knowledge that the circumstances were under his control. Though his heart trembled, and cruel barbs of memory made him shudder, these things melted slowly away, and Harry's kiss was a balm that soothed all aches. Draco unclenched his will and let all thoughts of control drift away.

'Merlin's Name! I've missed this. This is even better than when I was the one kissing him! I don't even know what I was afraid of anymore. The Dark Lord doesn't own him. He's just a stowaway that won't let go and just die. He wouldn't do this, couldn't say those things. This is Harry, and I love him. I'll never give this up. Never'

They'd forgotten everything for a time, and came back to themselves haltingly at first, still uncertain of how they'd wound up on their backs, curled in each others arms. Draco felt himself trembling with nerves, and Harry sensed it a moment later, pulling away slowly and apologizing.

"I'm sorry, love. I…I just had to. I don't know if you understand what that means to me. I didn't mean to-"

Draco broke him off quickly. "Don't worry. I liked it. In a couple days I won't be like this anymore, and everything will be different…better even. I thinks it's time to tell you some things, and I think I know just how I'd like to do that. Lay on your side…facing away from me."

Harry looked puzzled, but slowly rolled to his side and faced the door to the room, while Draco shifted on the bed behind him. They were still atop the covers and fully clothed, and Harry hadn't the faintest idea what Draco was on about, but he was more than willing to wait and find out.

Draco was suddenly pressed almost flush against Harry's back, and a slender arm slithered under Harry's own and pulled him close to the boy behind him. Draco was shuddering ever so faintly, but his whisper in Harry's ear made it clear that he was alright.

"Perfect. You know it wasn't even that long ago that I couldn't even imagine this? Harry…let me tell you a story."

TBC!!!
Once Upon a Time…

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Redeem Me…by Samayel

Chapter 54: Once Upon A Time…

"Once upon a time…"

"Oh, please."

"Shut it, Potter! It's my story, and I don't care if it's clichéd. I've never told one before, and this is the way I got told stories when I was little, so suffer in silence…prat!"

"Sorry, love. Go ahead. I promise I won't interrupt again."

"Okay. Once upon a time, there was a little boy who believed in things. He believed that his mother was the most beautiful and gracious woman who had ever existed, that there was no one more powerful or magnificent than his father, and that the entire world was obviously made to make him happy, because that was all it had ever done. He lived in an amazing mansion, and played in gardens that stretched for miles. Other families brought their children to play with him, and everyone treated him with respect because his family was so well loved. At least, that's what he thought.

One day his family invited many guests to their home, and the children played in the garden. It was the little boy's birthday. Seven is a magical number, a lucky number, and a wonderful age to be. Of the children that came to the boy's party, one was the boy's favorite. He liked that boy's hair, which was exceptionally dark, and his smile, which was very pretty. A group of the children went deeper into the garden and sat in a circle to play a game. It was one of those games that wound up with children kissing each other, and the little boy didn't mind the idea of kissing his friend at all. Actually, he thought there could be nothing more normal than kissing someone he liked so much. He couldn't have known any better.

His father appeared just as the boy kissed his friend, and before the little boy knew what was happening or why, he was carried away and taken back to his room in the mansion. His father was almost too angry to speak, and when he finally spoke he was yelling. He pulled the shirt from the little boy's back and thrashed him with his cane. Everything changed after that.

The little boy knew only that he was not perfect, and that his father was capable of being very cruel, and that his family would only love him if he didn't make any more mistakes. There were endless lectures year after year about 'proper masculine behavior' and 'duty to one's heritage' and 'honoring one's ancestors'. His father and mother watched over him constantly, looking for any sign of whether he might disappoint them again. The little boy understood perfectly. What he'd done was sick and wrong and evil. His parents had said so, and they couldn't be wrong. He was too young to know any better.

He studied magic, learned to ride a broom while his friends were only just picking up wands, and pushed himself as hard as he could to make his parents happy, but he always felt like they were waiting for him to fail. They spoiled him with gifts when he pleased them, but whenever they
thought he might be anything but what they expected, he was punished.

He went to the school his parents had attended, and he was sorted into the house that his parents had been schooled in. He only saw them during the holidays and summers, but he learned to keep his secrets in school and out of it. He tried to be proud on the outside, because he was terrified on the inside. In that house, weakness was the only sin, and the other children were very cruel when other children left themselves vulnerable. The boy had allies, but he couldn't trust them. He had servants, but he had no friends. He had money, and influence, and a powerful reputation, but he had nothing else. He constantly tried to remind himself that he was better than others. Because of his heritage, because of his looks, and because of his talent for magic. It wasn't enough.

He always knew that he was weak. He was afraid of losing, he was afraid of his father and mother, and he was afraid of others hurting him for what he truly was.

There was one boy even more well known than the first. This boy had dark hair that never did what it should, and bright green eyes. He was said to be very powerful at magic, and people claimed that he had a great destiny. Anyone who took the limelight away from the first boy was an immediate threat, and he responded accordingly. He tried everything he could to show that he was better, more talented, and more powerful than the new boy, but it made no difference at all. No matter what he did, the other boy was a hero. Not to everyone, but to enough people that it was obvious to all. Awards and trophies and fame just fell into that hero's lap. Not because he wanted them, but because events always conspired to pull him in and make him a part of every great deed that could be done.

One day, an evil that had been thought destroyed returned. The first boy's father was chief amongst that power's servants, and he wasted no time in indoctrinating his son. In truth, he'd started years earlier, explaining the worth of the pure-blooded, and the inherently detestable nature of Muggles. There would be no fame or glory for that boy while the current powers remained in charge, and this new power offered change, and a place high in his service, as well as the respect of all who followed him…for a price.

The boy wanted to please his father. He wanted to be looked at with awe and respect. He wanted to make a place for himself in a world where no one would look at him as weak or frightened. He should have known better. He allied himself with a Dark power, willingly enough at first, but he'd had no idea how much it would hurt, or what it would be like after.

His father was captured while in the Dark Lord's service, and was sentenced to Azkaban. His family name was disgraced in the eyes of both sides of a conflict that was quickly getting bigger than he'd ever imagined, and people everywhere looked at him with suspicion and contempt. A mission was assigned to him. He knew it was almost impossible to succeed, but he had no choice but to agree to it. The Dark Lord had set his servants near the boy's mother at all times. With a word, he could have her killed at his pleasure. She would die if he failed, and the boy himself would suffer unimaginably if he were caught after failing. He stalled for time, trying things that kept his master believing that he was doing his best, and that success was near at hand. He stalled for time, trying things that kept his master believing that he was doing his best, and that success was near at hand, but in truth, he was barely able to understand what he was doing. It was easier when he didn't think about it…didn't think of what might happen if he actually did succeed. He kept his mind on his task and did as he was told.

His mentor at school, the one instructor he admired most, tried to gain the boy's confidence, offering to help, and trying to find a way to arrange for the boy's safety, but there was no trust in either of their hearts. That was just the way they were trained to be. There was more pressure than ever on the boy to succeed, and the few communications he received were always laced with subtle threats, a constant reminder that his mother's life was hanging on the completion of his task. It was almost more than he could take and stay sane.
Only one person ever saw the boy break down...the boy he hated for being everyone's hero. The one person he'd tried to prove he was stronger than...was the only person who saw the boy crying, at his weakest. He tried to curse that boy out of blind hate and embarrassment, but the other boy was faster, and more ruthless. It was fortunate that the boy's mentor wasn't far away, or he'd have died right there. If he'd known what was coming, he would have wished for just that.

Everybody knows the rest of the story. What the boy did, and what happened because of him, the people he hurt. There was one thing that nobody ever knew, and nobody ever asked. In that bathroom, when he was caught crying because he was going to fail, and because he was afraid, he wanted one thing so desperately that it was tearing him apart inside. He wanted a friend he could trust, or someone he could believe in. Something...anything to believe in. When he saw the face of his rival, looking sorry for him, he snapped. But what he really wanted to do was...was...ask for help."

Harry had listened in silence, aware of the way Draco's arm tightened around him at odd moments, and of how Draco's voice had grown quieter and softer as the story had reached its end. Mostly, Harry was lost in magic of Draco's perspective. He had never stopped to imagine what it must have felt like to walk in Draco's shoes, or what pressures Draco had been under. In a way, despite the money and luxury, Draco's childhood had been as empty and terrible as his own.

Draco's voice was a little hoarse, as much from emotion as from the length of his story.

"Harry. I'm still afraid of things. Afraid that what I'm doing is wrong, or that I'll make a bad choice and other people will pay for it. Sometimes I know exactly what I want, but I never know if I'm right for wanting it. I know one thing, though. I don't want to be alone again. Not anymore. Even if trying to be with you is wrong, then I want to be wrong forever."

Harry curled his fingers around the hand that was on his chest, pulling it up to his mouth, and kissed the center of Draco's palm, eliciting a small gasp of surprise behind him.

"There's nothing wrong with being afraid, love. It's called common sense. It's how we stay alive. I can't tell you how many times I nearly pissed myself fighting Voldemort. Believe me, you aren't weak. It isn't about being afraid...it's about getting things done anyway, and you do that better than anyone I know. I've got every good reason to love you. Believe in that. And...believe that you won't be alone that way again. Not anymore. That's something I can promise you."

Draco sighed with a heavy shudder, relaxing completely behind Harry. Who knew? In another day or two, perhaps he could manage to be the one in Harry's arms instead of vice-versa. As it was, Harry's words were a relief to him, and he felt oddly better for having gotten just a few fears off his chest. There would be more. Some he meant to speak of with Molly, and others with Snape alone, but if this was how good it felt to loosen just a few burdens, he could only imagine what it would be like to carry but a few.

------------------------------------------------------

Far from Ottery St. Catchpole and the Burrow, and far from Draco and Harry, events were moving of their own accord, unseen and unknown, out of sight, out of mind.

Rodolphus LeStrange sipped his wine and turned to his assistants, grimacing slightly at the bloody bundle of rags at MacNair's feet.

"Hmmph. Really, MacNair. Couldn't you at least have cleaned the tarp we used last time? Pathetic. It's just as well that we're leaving this malodorous dump behind. I believe it's time to make our way back to London proper, don't you?"
Hyde-Pratt smiled while MacNair just grunted assent.

"Hyde-Pratt. Bring the car around. MacNair. Load that rubbish into the trunk. When you've finished that, we'll pack our things and be on our way. The timing is nearly right. If we dispose of this most recent 'project' of ours along the way, we can ensure that Mr. Potter is in the proper mood to accept his eventual invitation."

Hyde-Pratt bowed and left, and MacNair hoisted the bundled corpse of their most recent plaything over his shoulder and stalked off. Rodolphus flipped open a recent copy of The Daily Prophet and flipped through the pages, finally settling on the gossip columns with a toothy smile.

'How marvelously ironic. My dear little nephew does find his way into the most unusual places. From the embrace of one Dark Lord into the arms of the next. How much sweeter the irony will be when he watches his latest conquest become his new master. Perhaps, if our new lord is feeling gracious, he may even return my much-missed favorite to my care. Ah, Rodolphus. No time for woolgathering. The time for rituals is almost upon us, and we must be ready by the Yule Solstice. It's time to move again, this time closer to home, and find ourselves one last toy before we rally Mr. Potter to our cause.'

Rodolphus folded the paper and whisked his possessions into trunks with a few waves of his wand. MacNair entered with a satisfied smirk and bowed.

"The car's ready. Trunk's loaded. Where to now, boss?"

"Home, MacNair. We're going home. London, as they say, is a lady, and I miss her dearly. We'll dispose of our 'baggage' along the way, but remember to remain unseen. It isn't yet time to show our location. Our task is almost complete, but there is just a little more to be done. Let's be on our way, shall we?"

With that, they were out the door of the dilapidated country house they'd co-opted this past week, and on the roads of England once again. Rodolphus smirked while he mused from the passenger seat.

"They say Death rides a pale horse. Hmmph. If he had any taste at all, he'd have chosen a black Rolls-Royce."

Draco had talked himself hoarse before he was finished that night. He'd spoken to Molly in private, and voiced some of his worries over Harry, and over his own future in the Weasley household. Before it was all done, it had been decided that he was genuinely welcome to stay as long he wished. Molly had gone maudlin and wept a little while describing Draco in kind terms that made him blush, and he'd been grateful when she calmed herself, if only because he was already emotionally over wrought as well.

Snape had been a tougher matter, and facing his acid scrutiny while admitting his worst fears about betraying Harry had been grueling. Snape had been unrelenting, even if he had been kinder than usual. He wasn't accusatory or condescending, but he pushed and prodded Draco to examine feelings he'd rather have left unchecked. The subject of his time of captivity took them hours to cover, and his brief weeks in Muggle London had been terrible to recall. Snape had heard it all. The normally recalcitrant and laconic potions master had made the faintest of grimaces on occasion, which for Snape, meant that he'd been horrified beyond his expectations. At least that was perversely satisfying. It meant that his former mentor at least acknowledged that the emotions that came with Draco's experiences were as horrifying as the images he'd already seen in Draco's mind.
It was past midnight when Draco stumbled back to his room and peeled away his clothes. Harry was already dozing fitfully, despite obviously planning to stay awake until Draco's return. Draco could tell by the way the sheets were still folded on his side and by the way Harry was propped almost upright by pillows. He pulled on his pajamas quietly, with his back turned to Harry out of modesty.

The sheets were still cool on his side, and the window was faintly rimed with frost. At least Harry had warmed up part of the bed just by being there for the last couple of hours. Draco debated whether he should or shouldn't move closer, then threw caution and worry to the wind. Tomorrow he would be in no shape to enjoy anything, and his stomach was already rumbling complaints of hunger. He might as well enjoy the one comfort left to him for the next couple of days while he still could.

He turned onto his side facing Harry, and slipped an arm around Harry's stomach, burrowing his face into Harry's side, just beneath his arm. Sleep came fast and easy, despite the weighty thoughts he'd endured that day. With the warmth and scent of Harry all around him like a pleasant haze, Draco let the night take him, and his dreams were mercifully fair.

The Burrow's residents dozed in innocent slumber one and all, while a black Rolls-Royce slid through the English night, fast and sleek, bound for London like hell itself was on its heels.

TBC!!!
Changing His Mind

DISCLAIMER: Warning! I make no claim to any property of J.K. Rowling's, and am in no way profiting by this. I do offer her my sincerest thanks for allowing us this garden of the mind in which we play. Further Warning! This story...and likely any I ever write...are dominated by gay themes and characters. That's how it is, if this in any way makes you uncomfortable...do not read further.

Redeem Me…by Samayel

Chapter 55: Changing His Mind

Draco did not wake early from anticipation, nor did Harry. In fact, Molly peeked into their room and noted that they were still sound asleep, Draco curled comfortably in the crook of Harry's arm, and she chose to leave them be. Harry could always eat a little later, and if Master Snape's claims were correct, this would be the only time they would have together for at least a couple of days.

Severus Snape drank only a single glass of water before heading back upstairs and opening the door to Draco's room. The spectacle before him was…unpleasant to say the least. It was unbearably, insufferably, insipidly, atrociously cute. The entire scene inspired immediate nausea, and he hadn't eaten since morning the day before. None of this improved his mood.

"AHEM! If you will please try to recall that we have something of importance to do today, I should appreciate it greatly if you would separate yourselves, by whatever means are necessary, and make ready for our task. I will return to this door in a quarter hour. Do not make me wait any longer than is absolutely required."

Harry and Draco both started awake at the withering tone of Snape's voice, and Draco blushed furiously at the sudden realization that his former head of house had just seen him casually curled around Harry Potter...in bed. It wasn't an experience he'd ever imagined having, but at least he'd had many an experience that was more frightening than this. All he could manage was a stammered and sheepish apology. Harry, on the other hand, glared at Snape's departing back in a way that would have peeled the flesh off of a lesser foe. He cooled off in silence when Draco nudged him and slid out of the bed.

"C'mon. This is it. My last day as a fucked-up wreck. You can forgive him anything if he can just make this happen, right? Besides, it's late and Molly should have breakfast for you. Merlin…I can already smell it! Never mind. I just want to get on with this."

Harry sighed with resolution. "Yeah. He's still a greasy git, but I'd walk on fire if it needed doing to get you well. I won't really see you today...after this. You'll be locked in here with him. This kind of work takes hours, and I doubt he'd be any faster than I would. At least I know he'll do his best. Even if it isn't actually for your sake, he's too proud of a bastard to do anything less than his finest work."

Harry fumbled with the sheets and blearily climbed out of the bed, standing an yawning mightily. When his arms stretched their widest, the pajama shirt rode up, exposing a streak of dark and tautly muscled midriff. Draco paused in silence, staring nervously and lustily at Harry's toned flesh. It wasn't the first time he'd seen idle glimpses of Harry's body, but it was the first time he'd felt largely unashamed of looking. Harry blinked and lowered his arms, noticing Draco's unsteady gaze. Harry looked away nervously.

"I should go change and head downstairs. Snape will be back any minute, early unless I miss my guess, and I'm sure that blacking his eye won't improve his craftsmanship."
Draco smirked in spite of himself. Soon, so many things would no longer matter. It was worth one hasty morning, but not before he made a point that had lingered in his mind the night before. He walked around the bed with a confidence in his stride that he didn't really feel, but at least he made it look real enough.

"He'll be a minute yet. We have time for this. Tomorrow I'll be different… and better…but I want you to have this now, before anything changes. Because you know how much it means. I just want you to remember that I wanted you when I was scared, and I'll still want you after I'm well. I'm not sure I want to change without you knowing that first. Hold still."

Harry froze while Draco paced toward him, and remained motionless while Draco slid arms around Harry's waist, tilting his head up to reach Harry's mouth. Harry's only response was to lean his head down and meet the lips that were so clearly asking for his attention. Mutual morning breath aside, it was a kiss that would linger in Harry's memory for many years. It was heavy with promises that didn't need to be limited by words, and full of hope for days to come.

They parted only when the heavy footfalls in the hall warned that Snape was on his way, and Harry reluctantly left for his room and clothes, still bemused and maundering in the wake of Draco's voiceless desire for him.

Draco remained in his pajamas. There was no need to dress today. He'd be abed for at least a day after this was over. He did, however, need a trip to the bathroom quite badly. There was no telling how acidic Snape's comments might be if he found Draco in such an aroused state, pajamas strained outward just below the waist.

Severus waited in Draco's empty room, listening to the sound of the running shower while he separated herbs and potions, and placed a small charcoal brazier on the nightstand. State of mind was crucial in this exercise, and he had the tools and substances necessary to bring the right mental state into being quickly. He did notice that Draco lingered overlong in the shower, and was further irritated by Potter's arrival at the doorway.

"Once this begins, there will be no interruptions. There will be no noise, no crowds of milling Weasleys and no conversations of any kind. A break in concentration could easily disrupt what I will be doing, and it is on you to ensure that we remain undisturbed. Have I been clear on this?"

Potter looked smug and contemptuous, which was no surprise, coming from that insolent brat, but the look on his face changed quickly, softening to a sober nod of assent.

"Aye. Consider it done. For Draco. There's something I should make clear right now, while Draco is busy. I should have said this when you first arrived, but we never really got the chance to chat. I don't like you. I've never liked you. Even so, I had no right to do what I did. You did what you thought was right, and you acted on Albus' orders. You did what none of the rest of us could have done. I know you tried to keep it from coming to that, too. Draco told me that you even tried to help him. I guess it comes to this. I'll never like you, for the things you've done to me and others, and you and I will never be what anyone would call friends, but I respect you. You're the only person I know who could have helped Draco, and you came here in spite every reason not to. Even if this doesn't work, you tried, and that's more than we had a right to ask for. Thank you."

Snape put aside his herbs and bottles, and cleared his throat before addressing the young man before him. Something faintly like a smirk played at the corner of his mouth.

"Hmmph. It would seem that you've grasped a few things since your school days, Mr. Potter. I still cannot fathom how anyone could combine humility with such towering arrogance, but that seems typical of the enigma that is Harry Potter. I am not, nor have I ever been, interested or concerned
with being liked. I am not here to please people, and the approval or disapproval of others is insignificant to me in the extreme. I am, however, entirely concerned with the careful exercise of my skills, and the appropriate respect due to me for my abilities. If I were to assess the state of my opinion on you, I should say that, as a student, you possessed the subtlety of a draft horse, you lacked even a shred of discipline, and you displayed a complete contempt for anything resembling a rule…and yet…you are not entirely lacking in potential, and you seem to have realized at least a portion of it since those days. You are too impulsive, too rash, and woefully arrogant, but then again, no one is perfect."

Harry offered a wry grin. The dance of words and subtle but honest barbs aside, they had their understanding between them now, and that would have to do. They were interrupted by Draco, who padded down the hall from the bathroom, clad once again in his pajamas, still toweling his hair dry as he walked into his room. Harry gave a nod to each of them, then strolled downstairs without a word. Draco addressed his former mentor, while seating himself on the edge of the bed.

"I'm as ready as I'll ever be. What now?"

Snape lit the brazier with a whispered spell, scattering packets of herbs into the mix. Another word of magic and the door closed. The smoke trailed in serpent streams, heavy and yet wispy, filling the room with a strange sweet and bitter aroma.

"Your part in this will be blessedly simple. Lie upon your back and relax. Breathe slowly and deeply. Close your eyes and let your mind drift. The herbs I have burnt are haoma. It will greatly enhance relaxation and make the transition to a meditative state go swiftly. You have been Legilimized before, and so you will feel only what you are used to, but do not let the images that discomfort you cause you to break trance. Relax. Let them come, then let them go. You won't remember much upon awakening, and I have already set aside potions that will help with the headache to come. The shields will be semi-permanent magical constructs in your mind, and the pressure they initially create will be most unpleasant. Now breathe…slowly and deeply…and we will begin."

Draco obeyed in nervous silence, pulling in long draughts of incense and air, hoping that the haoma would kick in quickly and steal away his tension. It didn't disappoint. Before more than a few minutes had passed, Draco was already aware of a faint floating sense of elation and a slight dizziness that wasn't terribly unpleasant. His mind drifted easily from one notion to the other, flighty and fanciful and, against all odds, he was feeling quite relaxed. Darkness and quiet overtook him easily, and before long he felt as though he was at the bottom of a well, or submerged deep in warm water and looking up toward the light. Visions flickered across his mind's eye, and faint, feathery touches stroked his mind while he ceased to be aware of more than breathing.

Hyde-Pratt's offer. Draco's pathetic gratitude at the prospect of food and company. MacNair's silent appraisal. Rodolphus' distant amusement. Pleasure. Pain. Horror. Hopelessness. Bits and pieces flowed and ebbed through Draco's subconscious, each fading into a soft mist as it passed. Violence. Nausea. Hunger. The ache of a throat run raw by screams. The disgust that came with looking at his own body, feverish red sores and blackened burns. Pus-yellow wounds and puckered grayish-red tissue. The stink of a cell soiled by continual imprisonment next to his own filth. The acrid, peppery sweat-stink that came of being unclean for weeks. His captors' laughter. MacNair's grunts of pleasure in the act of rape. Hyde-Pratt's sickly giggle while he heated a fresh iron until it glowed red. Rodolphus' dry tone while peeling away layers of epidermis and muscle, forcing Draco to look at his own wet and glistening viscera. All this and more drifted through Draco's mind while Severus labored, shuffling each hellish moment behind a curtain of shimmering power.

London. Utter confusion and disbelief. Cold. Biting, bitter cold. Strange faces and hands carrying
him to cover. The smell of musty wool and old leather. Beer and greasy food. A basement shelter occupied by young men near his own age. Outrageous clothes of leather and denim, ripped and bedecked with pins and studs. Hair of many colors and styles. Music in the background, loud and raucous. Food, greasy and cold, but edible, and finer by far than anything he'd had in months. Withdrawal pains. Vomit and tears and panicked responses by the others. They'd seen the needle scars on his arms. They brought a needle before the day was out. It wasn't much, but it was enough. Draco did what he had learned well to do. Wordless, automatic, he offered gratitude the way he'd been taught to.

How ironic, that the people he'd fallen amongst were also whores. They hadn't expected anything much in return, but the silent boy in their midst simply sated the needs of others without complaint or struggle. With warmer clothes he was able to walk the street with the others, who handled introductions and prices for him, while his pretty face and fine blond hair brought immediate attention from gentlemen passersby. The Muggle boys brought different drugs from then on. They called them methadone and antibiotics, and they cut the dosage by a little each day.

The situation didn't last. The others had collectively acted as pimps for him. A real pimp found out soon enough, despite efforts to keep the daytime location of the strange, quiet boy a relative secret. The others were away. A fist yanking at white-blond locks. Clothing yanked from his body. Not entirely. Just enough to make violation convenient. Familiar pain and horror. The man's words meant nothing. Draco's mind woke up, snapping back to reality for the first time in weeks, slashing through the dope-haze that had kept him quiet and peaceful. He had to leave. When it was over, and he was left alone again, bracingly sore and sickened by the sight of himself in the cracked and spotted mirror, Draco took up a pair of shears left by the others and lopped away the long locks of hair that just been used so violently again. He pulled on a few of the strewn bits of clothing that had been left on the floor by others. There were several notes of Muggle currency in his pocket. He stared at the bundle of stained and bloody blankets. If he stayed here, he would suffer this again and again until he died. If he left here, the drugs would wear off completely in another day or two and the pain would be back, hellish and brilliantly bright. There had to be something better than this. Somewhere. The only place he knew well in London was that entrance to Diagon Alley and Platform Nine and Three-quarters. That way lay the future, and here would die the past. Beyond that, he had no plan, but it was all his newly awakened mind could handle. For what it was worth, Draco was going home.

Harry waited downstairs with Molly, irritable and tense, brimming with mingled hope and anxiety. He'd always been steady as a rock, but today he could see the tremor of his hand when he lifted his cup of tea. Shaky. Edgy. This was hell. Waiting helplessly for Snape to finish. Hours ticked by one minute at a time. Molly tried to distract him with small chores, but they never lasted long, and the noon hour chimed on the Weasley family clock long before Harry heard the creak of the door and footsteps upon the stair. It had been more than four hours since Severus had started, and the man who emerged from the stairs and staggered into the kitchen looked wan and haggard.


Snape slumped into a chair, looking slightly disoriented and terribly weak. Molly had a cup of tea in his hands a few seconds later, and he gulped it like a man who'd just found water in the desert. Harry was going to ask after the procedure, but Snape held up a hand before he could even open his mouth. The second cup of tea was sipped instead of gulped, and the potions master withdrew a small vial from his pocket and poured it into the cup, swirling the mixture before sipping the rest of it.
"Restorative Elixir. Hard on the stomach unless imbibed with other liquids. I can tell you what you wish to know. It was difficult, but it is done. I cannot possibly explain to you what it takes to shelter more than a year of a person's life. Traditionally, this discipline is used to heal the mind of single traumatic event. The death of a loved one. Near death experiences. Things of that ilk. I have never seen a case where a year's worth of experiences needed shielding. He…Draco…is a most remarkable boy. When he wakes, tonight or tomorrow, he will endure a headache of truly legendary proportions, but he will live. I will inspect my work then, and again before I leave."

Harry's questions were answered, and it was plain enough for him to see that Snape had exhausted himself on Draco's behalf. Even with tea and a potion, the man was still pale and shakier than Harry had ever seen him. Molly whispered quietly, respectful of Severus' condition.

"Thank you for what you've done here. Draco well deserves a chance at a better life, and you've helped him on the way to one. If there is anything we can do for you, don't you ever hesitate to ask it of us."

Harry nodded agreement quietly. Whatever his personal opinion of the man, Severus Snape had done a kindness that merited respect, and Harry felt indebted. Not that he'd let Severus know that, since the man would only mock sentimentality, but the feeling was there just the same. Severus looked up warily.

"I might consider myself well recompensed if…you could perhaps make something in the way of a late breakfast. Then, I think I shall retire to my room, where I will collapse for the next twenty-four or so hours."

There was a ghost of a smirk on Severus' face, but an eyebrow arched with surprise when Harry joined Molly in the making of a meal just for him.

'A day in Draco Malfoy's mind, welcomed and thanked by Weasleys, and Potter is serving me breakfast like a house-elf. Perhaps I should check and see if I'm not still upstairs and unconscious, dreaming on the floor of Draco's room. Will the surrealism ever cease?"

And despite his expectations, in spite of headache, Severus Snape had a very good meal.

TBC!!!
Draco Makes A Move

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Redeem Me…by Samayel

Chapter 56: Draco Makes A Move

Draco remained abed for well over thirty hours, only waking near the twentieth. It was less waking, and more becoming cognizant of an agony that was centered on his skull and refused to do anything but grow. He was aware of a potion being poured down his throat, and the footsteps and murmured words of others might as well have been cannons going off next to his head. Mostly, he just whimpered into the pillows, tears leaking out of the corners of eyes that were screwed shut to keep out the light that threatened to stab his brain.

He could tell Harry was there. It wasn’t just his occasional words to others. It was his presence. It wasn’t possible to answer anyone yet. Words required thought, and thought equaled bright and blinding pain. The pain crested at a high plateau, bringing dry heaves along for the show. Empty-stomached, nothing emerged but spit and thin strings of bile, but the process exacerbated the headache greatly. Time eventually lost meaning, a final echo of what he'd felt like when he'd been in the clutches of his uncle and the others. There was a place that one reached, when pain was simply so great that the body couldn't register more, and Draco found that place again, having been free from it for only a couple of months.

Later that evening, and more than half a dozen potions later, Draco was only barely able to speak, and he was just coherent enough to reach for Harry’s hand while mumbling his name over and again. As soon as that hand was in his, Draco passed out in a blurry haze of pain again, and slept some more. Severus Snape continued to reassure Molly, Arthur and Harry that this was to be expected, and that, in essence, Draco’s mind was actually bruised, and since it was bruised magically, it would only heal with time. This was not especially comforting, but it was true. At least he was able to ascertain that the wards around Draco’s memories had held up so far, and looked solid enough to last.

Severus spent most of his time working on relieving his own headache and reading the books he’d brought along for his stay. After his own lengthy nap, he thoroughly inspected the wards he'd placed in Draco's mind, then broke his fast with a full and proper meal, and returned to his room. He left complete instructions, in excruciatingly exact detail, on how to tend to Draco, and thus there was no need for his continual attendance. All for the better, in Severus’ opine, since Harry was constantly beside Draco's bed, and he had no overwhelming desire to spend every hour in Potter's company, no matter how passing well they got on the last day or so.

The Weasley household held its collective breath, waiting for Draco’s recovery, and the boredom and routine was only interrupted by an owl from Ron, carrying word that his agent had found him a few small offers for work. It was happy news of a sort, but apparently there were no significant professional teams looking for a Beater that had been sacked during his first full season. The offers mostly consisted of lower paying positions as an assistant trainer or second string player for teams with poor prospects. It seemed obvious that they wanted a decorated war hero's name among their ranks, but could only afford to place offers because his reputation had been so badly tarnished.
Aside from that disappointment, Ron was getting on fairly well, and would be closing out the flat he’d been letting at the end of the year, which was just a few weeks away. He seemed to be taking the whole situation with uncommonly good cheer, and that was a relief to Harry and Molly, who had both privately feared that Ron would turn to the bottle if his life hit a rough patch…which it had certainly done. Against all odds, Ron's letter was full of nonchalant confidence and calm resignation. He wasn't yet sure if he'd take one of the offers or try something else, but at least he seemed resolute and comfortable with his lot in life, and that was better than most folks.

Draco finally came to full consciousness fairly late in the evening. His head felt like it had been swollen to twice its natural size, packed with cotton, and hammered like cheap iron. It was almost impossible to keep his vision from blurring, and he was fairly sure he wouldn't stand up until the next day, but he was awake…and he was holding Harry's hand. Things only got better from there.

Molly had liquids at the ready, and simple foods came shortly after. Potions kept the worst of the headache fading slowly, but it looked like Draco wouldn't accomplish anything more significant than a journey to the bathroom until Sunday. The only thing that made this journey unique was the help he was able to receive along the way. This time, Harry slipped Draco's arm over his shoulders and nearly carried him, since Draco's legs were unsteady, and his vision still tended to blur from pain. Harry took his post at the chair by the bed, relinquishing it only when Molly insisted that he too should eat. Harry gobbled his food down without tasting it, and returned promptly to the upstairs room where Draco lingered.

Sunday morning stretched into Sunday afternoon, and although Severus had grimly predicted a potentially worse scenario, Draco was in a hurry to start a new life, already silently probing the inside of his sore and throbbing mind. It was strange and eerie, feeling the presence of something that clearly did not belong in his skull, but made such a profound difference. He'd first noticed it when Harry had helped him to the bathroom. His mind had been full of urgency for the toilet, and Harry had been immediate help. Draco was halfway down the hall before it occurred to him that he was being held up almost entirely by Harry without so much as a shudder of distaste, but he was in no shape to properly enjoy their closeness at the time.

Others praised his eagerness and speed of recovery, but Draco had his own private thoughts on that. Unspoken was the knowledge that, having known pain like unto this before, he was better able to cope with it, and could function even while his skull was pounding like it was made of gold and a goblin tribe had moved in with hammers and pickaxes. Whatever the source of his ability to get moving quickly, it was all for the better, and the Weasley household celebrated quietly, becoming a place of cheery smiles.

Sunday evening found Snape inspecting his work carefully. Draco was fully awake this time, and that made a small difference. Snape was as taciturn as normal, and occasionally grunted noncommittally, which told Harry and Draco nothing. Both of the boys were on the edge of screaming before Snape stepped back with an expression of bored disinterest.

"It will hold. Likely for years, but there can be no guarantees. This is the first time such wards have ever been used so comprehensively. In a few days, all you'll feel is a slight 'tightness' about your head, and that will be that. I'd say that by the end of the week, you won't feel any more discomfort."

With that simple statement, Snape picked up his potion bottles from the nightstand and headed for his room, leaving behind a few doses for Draco. Draco looked perfectly content, but Harry rankled.

"That's it? You're leaving? Nothing else to say?"

Snape's eyes narrowed. He hadn't been a professor for some time, but insolence was no less annoying than it had been before.
"Essentially, yes, Potter. The work is finished. I have a few things to pack, and then I will be leaving. I assumed this would fill your heart with boundless joy. I must have been mistaken. This aside, I have a home that hasn't seen tending to in more than a year, and to be vaguely indecent, we both know why. It will take days before I can properly settle back in, and there will be many a correspondence I must take up, not the least of which pertaining to employment...unless you think I can subsist on air and sunshine. Let me assure you, photosynthesis does not sustain life for human beings. Draco? Is there something more that you require?"

Draco had rather expected the absence of emotion. He knew his former head of house reasonably well, and Snape's distance from other people was always carefully maintained. He shook his head 'no' and gave a look to Harry that silently implored patience. Harry took the hint, and grudgingly let it drop.

"Fine. Thank you for coming. Goodbye."

Harry's tone was flat and as void of emotion as he could manage to make it, and Snape sniffed before arching an eyebrow and leaving the room to pack. Draco scolded Harry mildly as soon as they heard the door to Snape's room close.

"You were his student for six years. You know what he's like. Why expect something different? Besides, I'm fine, and if you think this is good, give me a couple days and you won't know what hit you."

Draco's smirk spoke volumes, but the vaguely impudent and predatory look he gave Harry spoke libraries. Admittedly, it was nervously and yet artfully feigned, and not a minute ago, Harry's attention had been completely absorbed by his irritation with Severus Snape. Now certain other things came to Harry's mind. A universe of possibilities spiraled into existence, and Draco was the sun at the center of them. A Draco that wasn't crippled by terror, or repulsed by touch, was a sudden and pulse-pounding reality.

The room was suddenly a lot hotter than Harry remembered. Very odd, given that it was December in England.

Draco privately rejoiced at the sight of Harry flummoxed and stammering. He might have sounded more confident than he actually was, but he'd reduced Harry Potter to jelly with a few words and a look. His head hurt too much to push the issue any further, and he stretched back and sighed with comfort, making a little show of planning to take a little more rest while his headache was fading. Harry took the cue and ran with it.

'I...uh...I need a cuppa. I'll be downstairs, 'kay?"

Draco nodded softly, still a bit stiff from the tension the headache caused. Harry was down the hall and gone five seconds later. Draco quietly tested the limits of his memory. Even though his mind was genuinely sore, he couldn't resist the urge to test the work Severus had done. He reached for memories he'd tried to hide from before, wrinkling his brow with discomfort when the pain increased.

Dinner with Rodolphus and the others. It was there, but it was filmy and distorted. It was like staring through a long tunnel...or a telescope. Draco relaxed and let go of the memory when he reached the moment he'd been drugged, and the memory slid away like a fish, returning to the murky depths of yesterday.

He felt very odd. Ever since the headache had receded just enough to allow him comfort and speech, something had been weird and off. It was vaguely frightening, and yet enthralling at the same time.
The pace of his heart seemed faster, and a smile was threatening to break out at any minute.

Draco was happy. Not the happiness he'd known before, undercut by a nagging and constant flow of reminders from his past, but genuinely, wonderfully, dizzyingly happy, and he didn't need a reason to feel that way.

Draco sat up and got out of bed, grunting softly when the motion made his vision swim. He took his wand from the nightstand and spelled the bed and sheets back to order. He didn't have much in the way of possessions, but now that he was well he had a plan for the ones he had.

Severus Snape was carrying his bags and stopped at the doorway to Draco's room. Draco was in the middle of a Cleaning Charm that executed perfectly, polishing every surface and removing dust from every surface and corner. Draco turned nervously to face his former mentor, unsure of what lay behind Severus' stern countenance. The potions master broke the pregnant silence at last.

"This isn't for Potter's ears, and don't pester me with endless thanks, I know precisely how you feel, and that is sufficient. You know how to reach me if you must. Do so if you feel the situation calls for it. I've seen Potter's aura for myself. Your assumptions are correct. He has to be stopped or contained. If you cannot help him to move that spirit from his body, contact me before you attempt to take the amulet from him. I shall see if a plan can be made to incapacitate him should we need to. This aside, I have one final thing I wish to tell you."

Draco nodded soberly, unwilling to interrupt when Severus was so deadly serious. The former professor looked like he was about to choke on something, and his eyes flicked warily down the halls before settling back on Draco's own.

"Albus would have been very proud. I argued with him often then, certain that he was wrong. I would not have sacrificed his life to preserve yours...then. It would have amused him enormously to know that I have come to recant that sentiment. Do your best, Draco. I've given you what you need. The rest is in your hands. If we do not meet again...it is my hope that this was worth it for you. Goodbye."

Severus accepted Draco's mute and sober nod, and strolled down the hall and stairs. He placed his bags beside the fireplace and paused long enough to tersely say goodbye to Molly and Arthur, rolled his eyes at Harry with patent exasperation, and took the Floo home with the same absence of fanfare with which he'd arrived.

Harry took in a cup of tea, settling his stomach and nerves while chatting with Arthur and Molly. Draco's recovery consumed the conversation, and Molly was fretting over Draco's every change of appetite or wrinkled brow. This was not the ideal way to relieve himself of thoughts regarding Draco, and since that telling comment, Harry had been hounded by discomforting possibilities he hadn't had to face before.

Draco had been a very safe fantasy, but that fantasy had taken a huge step towards becoming reality. It was one thing to nurse quiet affection between them, knowing full well that there was a limit to how far Draco could go, but it was another thing entirely to face a relationship that was now capable of maturing. Perhaps two months ago, Harry hadn't considered the possibility of dating anyone since he'd left Hogwarts. Now he was in love, or something that was rapidly growing into love, and it was with another boy, AND that boy was Draco Malfoy. All things considered, Harry had dealt reasonably well with the repeated shocks to his system, in part due to Dula and Charlie. But even they couldn't help him when the day or night finally came that Draco decided he wanted actual sex. For that, Harry would be alone. Harry took his tea into the living room, and stared edgily at the staircase he'd be taking soon.
'I haven't got the first clue what I'm doing. I mean, I know I love a good snog and all, but Draco's special. What if I do something wrong? What if I hurt him? Fuck all, I'd wanna just die if I thought I hurt him that way. What if I'm just not good? It's not like I have a vast level of experience at this kind of thing. I came in my fucking pants at the game…how pathetic is that? I suppose I could talk to Charlie or Dula again. I know I'm not giving up on this, but that doesn't mean I know what the fuck I'm doing. Sod it. I'm just going to sit up with Draco for awhile. It's not like he's in any shape to do anything tonight, but it's just nice seeing him looking this well.'

Harry drifted back into the kitchen and washed up his teacup before heading upstairs, wishing Molly and Arthur a good night. Molly turned to Arthur just after Harry had left.

"Well, dear? Our Draco is supposed to be getting better soon. What do you think will happen from here? They're just lads, and young ones at that. I hope they'll do right by each other, but I can't help but worry…for the both of them."

"Molly, my love…you worry too much. They're neither of them blockheads, and I've a feeling they're good enough for each other. You'd never have convinced me years ago that young Draco would fall so far from the Malfoy tree, but that young man has a good way about him. Harry's the lucky one if you ask me. I think he's wise enough not to waste a good thing when it's right in front of him. I just hope our Ronald gets on well enough. There's just no telling what he might get up to. New jobs, none of them looking good, and nothing but codswallop coming out in The Prophet about him."

Molly set to washing the last of the cups before bed, keeping a few of her worries to herself.

"Nothing that bad, Arthur. Actually, I was thinking of canceling our subscription. I read the most awful thing today. Harry was busy looking after Draco, and thank goodness he didn't see it. Seems another young man was found dead yesterday evening. All marked up the way Draco was. They say it was Death Eaters again, and the last time Harry read news like that, he had an awful row with Kingsley. Better he not see something like that right now. He needs to think of other things, and Draco certainly doesn't need any more to worry about. I expect Ron will be alright. His heart was always in the right place, and it looks like he's finally getting over Hermione. I'm for bed, love. You coming?"

Arthur smiled and nodded, then rose to join his wife of some three decades. Not a bad life, when one looked at it right. It had had its share of difficult times, but they were well outweighed by the good ones.

Harry had already headed upstairs some twenty minutes ahead of them, and found the door to Draco's room closed. He tapped gently at it, hoping he didn't make to much noise, and when there was no answer, he opened it as quietly as he could.

Draco was gone. Draco's trunk was gone. The nightstand was empty of potion bottles. Even the bed was made and the room cleaned to sparkling. But no Draco. Harry's heart stopped in his chest. This was his worst nightmare come true. Draco had gotten well, and had just left. How had he slipped out? Why? When? Harry's breath was already coming in short gasps, and his cheeks and eyes were starting to burn, when he noticed the single scrap of parchment on the bed. His hand was trembling when he picked up the note. Harry swallowed and braved the reading of it, wishing he'd had the chance to talk Draco out of doing something like this.

Harry,

I feel wonderful, even with a headache from hell. Thank you for making this happen. I finally felt ready for a change. I'll be waiting for you.
Harry's heart stopped cold again. I'll be waiting for you. A terrible suspicion filled him. Cold sweat was forming on his brow. His legs moved of their own accord, and he headed down the hall for his room. Our room?

The door wasn't shut all the way. Harry pushed it gently open, sighing with relief. He'd been an idiot even to think those things. Draco's trunk was in the corner next to his own, and when the door swung wider, there was Draco himself, comfortably ensconced in a pile of pillows, pajama-clad, and waiting for Harry with an enormous and giddy smile.

"You worried for a minute, didn't you? Gryffindor sap. Like I'd leave you behind. Get in here. It's cold. At least the bed is bigger."

Harry took a deep breath and composed himself. So this was it. He wasn't spending the nights in Draco's room anymore. Percy's old room was vacant, and Draco lived with Harry now. No more bouncing back and forth to change clothes out of sight, fearing that too much closeness would send Draco running in the opposite direction. Draco really was ready for a change. Maybe it would feel strange for awhile, and maybe it would scare the hell out of Harry now and again, but it was worth it a thousand times over, if he never had to feel the way he'd felt a few minutes ago. As long as there wasn't a Draco-shaped hole in his heart, all was well with the world.

Harry flicked a hand and turned off the lights. Draco watched with nervous curiosity while Harry peeled away his clothes and put on his pajamas. Harry had discreetly turned his back while he changed, but moonlight still made the lean muscles of his back stand out in stark relief while he pulled off his shirt and slacks and picked up his pajamas. Draco watched in silence, not really feeling like interrupting the magic. That and he seemed to have lost control over his voice right about the time Harry's shirt came off. Even with his back turned, Harry was as leanly powerful as any pro Quidditch player, and Draco knew his own eyes were a bit wide, but he wasn't thinking about appearances at the moment.

Harry finished changing and slipped between the sheets and quilts with an irrepressible grin and cheeks that were flaming. Draco was kissing him before he even got the sheets smoothed. They parted when Draco pulled away to whisper breathily into Harry's ear, periodically nipping at the tender flesh just beneath it.

"I said I was ready for a change. Hold still. I've never done this before."

Harry's pulse was pounding in his ears, and he couldn't believe what Draco was implying. He was still supposed to be aching from treatment, and Harry wasn't ready for this! It was happening so fast, but he didn't dare complain. Hurting Draco's feelings was out of the question.

Draco twisted about, shifting positions, and Harry was overwhelmingly conscious of the nearness between them. They were on their sides, and Draco had turned his back to Harry. Harry's hand was suddenly grabbed and lifted, pulling his arm around Draco's waist, while Draco's body slid back a little more, curling extremely close, until they were genuinely 'spooning'. Not that they hadn't been close while sleeping before, but not like this, not with Harry firmly wrapped around Draco and holding him close. Draco fidgeted, then settled down with a sigh.

"Perfect. I've waited forever to feel like this. Thank you, Harry."

Harry was still bemused, but relieved. This was just his speed. Draco wasn't the only one who'd ever dreamed of something like this. Harry's life had been spent wondering what it would be like to be so close to another person, and now that he was here, it was ecstasy. This was what he'd been waiting
for all this time. Holding Draco close made him feel good. Strong. Gentle. Alive. It was intoxicating, and Harry wondered how he'd ever manage to sleep like this. He kissed the back of Draco's neck softly, enjoying the small gasp of contentment it brought, then finally found a few words of his own.

"I never thought I could. Feel like this, I mean. How do you feel about doing this forever? I'm game."

"Well. I guess that's it then. Don't plan on getting away from me now, Potter. You're mine, and I'm keeping you. Good night, Harry. I love you."

"I love you too. Sleep easy, love."

In silence, though neither was aware of it, they both watched the light of the moon and stars play across the far wall in the four panels created by the window. The stars didn't tell them their destiny, or impart any secret wisdom, but they were beautiful. The Solstice was two weeks away.

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In a dusty tenement flat in one of London's uglier neighborhoods, three men laid spells of warding and secrecy about the walls and windows. Veiled by magic, their new dwelling became safe and sound. When the work was over, and living space had been seen to, the one who led them issued his command.

"Fetch me another toy, will you? Make certain that this one is sturdier than the last. I should hope to get at least a week or two out of him. If this one lasts, he shall be our final message. If not, I'll have you fetching another before we're through. The Solstice is almost come, my dear companions. While others prattle over the giving of gifts or of the meaningless divisions between the religious, ours shall be a great work for the ages, and Death and Rebirth will be at our fingertips. Choose well, and this one last time, be discreet and remain unseen. We'll unveil ourselves soon enough, as the first disciples of our new Lord. Now go."

TBC!!!
The Flesh And The Spirit

DISCLAIMER: Warning! I make no claim to any property of J.K. Rowling's, and am in no way profiting by this. I do offer her my sincerest thanks for allowing us this garden of the mind in which we play. Further Warning! This story...and likely any I ever write...are dominated by gay themes and characters. That's how it is, if this in any way makes you uncomfortable...do not read further.

Redeem Me…by Samayel

Chapter 57: The Flesh And The Spirit

'Oh, fucking Merlin! It's huge!'

Consciousness came to Draco early that morning, and despite the wonderful, muzzy heat from Harry that made the winter dawn bearable, he was very, VERY aware of the erect and softly pulsing thing pressed against his backside. Harry's arm was still draped across his chest, and they were as close as they had been when they'd fallen asleep. Harry's breath danced across the back of Draco's neck in even, calm puffs, telling Draco that Harry was still asleep. That aside, the most immediate thing Draco had noticed, even before his eyes fluttered open, was the swollen flesh pressed against him, even through their pajamas. He hadn't actually seen Harry naked before, but he'd guessed by the way that Harry filled out his clothes that the man was fairly well-endowed. Now, sight unseen, the feel of it against him made it seem positively enormous, and just a little bit frightening.

Draco hadn't had the wherewithal to relieve his own 'tension' for days. The treatment and the headaches after it had seen to that. His head still hurt very faintly today, and he felt well enough to go to work, though he suspected that he wouldn't get anywhere near as much done as usual. Being well was all fine and good, but it brought back into play a problem that had been temporarily rendered moot. However unnerving it might be to wake finding Harry fully erect behind him, it wasn't genuinely frightening at all. In fact, it was fairly exciting, if the rapid stirring in Draco's own groin was any way to judge things. He could remember fantasizing about moments like this just a week ago, but they'd been nothing but dreams and wishes then. It hadn't seemed possible that so much could come to pass in a few short days, and now the reality of what he was doing struck Draco squarely in the face.

'I'm nineteen years old. I'm bent as hell. I'm in love for the first time, and I'm 'spooned up' in bed with him, and now I'm so horny I could just explode right here. I've got to wake him up and see if he deals with this well enough to try something a little more...interesting.'

"Harry. Wake up, love."

Draco settled for stroking the arm that was draped across him, brushing his fingertips across the smooth and tanned skin of Harry's arm. A nervous trepidation filled him, making it hard to speak above a whisper, and his stomach felt fluttery while he held Harry's hand close to his stomach. So peaceful. It almost seemed a shame to wake Harry up at a time like this, but Draco had slept as much as he could the past couple of days, and he had no intention of wasting today as well. Frankly, he was sick of being sick, and desperately eager to enjoy some of the things had would have been impossible for him less than two days ago.

"C'mon, Harry. The sun's up. Wake up."

Harry stirred just a little, mumbling something unintelligible, then drifted back to slumber. Draco huffed a little with frustration. He pulled Harry's hand to his mouth, and kissed the open palm,
dabbing his tongue in the center just as he pulled away, then blew gently onto it. Harry smiled in his sleep, then wriggled closer to Draco suddenly, the erect prick in his pajamas shoving indelicately against Draco's bum. It wasn't quite the reaction Draco had hoped for, but it was pleasant enough in an awkward sort of way.

They were so close that Draco could almost feel Harry's heartbeat, and every so often Harry's erection throbbed involuntarily, and the feeling of it being ground against his backside was setting Draco's blood on fire.

"Harry! Wake up!"

His voice only made it to a normal speaking volume out of sheer desperation, and while he hated to admit, he'd actually sounded vaguely whiny, but, damn it all, he needed some kind of attention NOW!

Harry woke with a slight start, eyelids fluttering open, bleary and confused. He'd been in the middle of a very pleasant dream, and the sudden realization that he was grinding his cock against his boyfriend, in his sleep, on their first morning in Harry's room as a couple, was extremely disturbing.

"Ngh! Sorry! 'm sorry, Draco. I…I didn't mean t-"

Draco cut him off quickly, and when Harry tried to pull away, Draco latched hold of Harry's arm and pulled it back around his own waist.

"Knock it off, already. We sleep in the same bed, we snog whenever we like, and we're crazy about each other, right? Fine couple we'd make if we both go running for the hills every time we wake up with a stiff one. I don't want you to get away from me. Harry, I wanted you to wake up and…well…you know…"

He'd been doing fairly good with his little speech, until the part where he trailed off, blushing furiously. He wasn't even really sure how far he wanted things to go, but he was fairly sure he wanted to get off, and sooner rather than later. Harry got the idea quickly enough, and his blush matched Draco's a few seconds later.

"Oh. You…you want to…now?"

Harry's question came out strangled, and Draco rolled his eyes in exasperation.

"Not everything at once! Just, well, something to celebrate my first day in this room."

Draco had a sudden devilish thought. He twisted back a little, craning his neck to give Harry a proper good morning kiss. Harry seemed a bit stiff, albeit this time north of his waist. Draco pulled away and nibbled his way down to the shell of Harry's ear, twisting a little more so that he could turn to face Harry properly. As a result, his own stiffened flesh was rubbing gently into Harry's thigh. He could feel the breath catch in Harry's throat.

Draco whispered huskily. "Haven't I waited long enough? I'm as happy as I can imagine ever being…here…with you. If you could, would you let me do whatever I wanted?"

Something vaguely like a whimper died in Harry's throat.

"Yeah. If…if you're sure."

Draco let his breath drift warmly across Harry's neck.
"I'm sure. Relax, love."

Draco's hand fumbled with the buttons on Harry's shirt, opening them one by one, and he made himself comfortable on his side, letting his lips work their way down Harry's neck, while Harry was on his back, paralyzed with uncertainty.

'Who's the big, brave Gryffindor now? I never thought he'd be like this. Maybe he'll be more... forceful, once he's sure it's okay with me. I hope so anyway. It would a bloody tragedy if I fell hopelessly in love, got well enough to enjoy a normal life, just to find out he's the one terrified of sex. Mmmm. Sex. That's right. Where was I?'

It was positively intoxicating. Harry relinquished any semblance of control to Draco without any complaint. Draco was well aware that it wasn't anything that Harry had to do, and he couldn't have forced his will on Harry if he'd tried. Harry simply gave him carte blanche to do as he pleased.

Draco peeled back the pajama shirt and ran his hand up the dark expanse of smooth skin. His own hand looked like ivory or alabaster next to such an earthy tone. He marveled at the small, yet perfectly defined muscles that had escaped his hurried notice in the past. Harry's skin was warm and soft, unscarred and clean. Draco brushed his fingertips across a flat, dusky nipple, enjoying the small gasp from Harry. Draco was nearly hypnotized by the luxury he was enjoying, and rather innocently fell into brushing lazy circles across Harry's chest with his hand, spiraling slowly lower until he noticed that Harry was trembling. His hand was less than an inch away from the knot in the drawstring of Harry's pajama bottoms.

Harry's eyes had been closed, and his breathing was thready. Draco also suddenly noticed the bulge in Harry's clothing. He rested his chin on Harry's stomach gently, looking up to Harry, waiting for those eyes to open and acknowledge him. A second later, wide emerald orbs were looking down, and Draco framed his question quickly, trying to decide what he wanted first.

"Can I? Harry, I want to see it."

Harry could only barely manage a nodded 'yes'. Draco reached for the drawstring, tugging slowly at it, enjoying the anticipation as much as possible. Technically, this wasn't such new territory for him. He'd seen dozens of men with their flies open, jerked or sucked them to completion, and had been thoroughly violated in every way that he could have been. This was truly different. Those memories were locked in a misty haze, walled off by arcane power and kept at bay. This was the first time Draco had ever willingly touched another person this way, much less a person he adored and desired, and there was a subtle magic at play that couldn't be denied. Dula had been right in more ways than one. To this, Draco might as well have been a virgin, no matter what else he'd done in the name of survival. And there was no one in the world he would have chosen for this moment save Harry.

The drawstring was undone, and Draco tucked his thumbs under the edges of the pajamas, pushing them down slowly. Harry nervously obliged him by shifting his weight so that the clothes slid down easily and didn't get stuck beneath him. And there it was.

Draco stared while he pulled his hands away. It wasn't really as enormous as it had felt against his backside, but it certainly wasn't anything to scoff at. It was perhaps a couple of inches longer than his...at the most, but its girth was unnerving, especially at the base, where it was thickest. It tapered upwards noticeably, and curved slightly upwards, toward Harry's chest, making a soft arc of swollen flesh. Draco's own erection was leaking a small amount of pre-come into his pajamas, aching for freedom and eventual satisfaction. Harry's was stone-hard, but didn't seem to do that. It was as smooth as velvet, and almost as dark as the rest of Harry's skin, with a heavy slip of foreskin that had already peeled back, evidence of Harry's arousal.
Draco slithered his hand down Harry's chest, letting it rest just beneath the jutting thing that sprouted upwards from a small thatch of dark fur. His palm was flat against Harry's stomach, and the warmth and softness of Harry's stiffened flesh was at rest against the back of his hand. He was so hypnotized that he didn't notice the hand pulling a strand of hair away from his cheek. Harry was gently rubbing his back, and it was still a weird and wonderful thrill just to be touched and not feel fear cresting like a wave in his heart.

He turned his hand up, brushing it down Harry's thigh, feeling the tension in the muscles of Harry's legs. Then he ran his fingertips back up the same path, caressing the sensitive places that he already knew had never been touched by anyone before. Harry's gentle massage of his shoulders and back halted suddenly, and a soft gasp could be heard behind him. Draco smirked at the knowledge that he did so little, and yet pleased Harry so much, then made up his mind and moved again, this time making himself comfortable on his side before wrapping a firm and cautious hand around Harry's erect length. He could actually hear Harry swallowing out of surprise, and a frisson of excitement shivered through the man's entire body.

He made a few tentative pulls, feeling out what Harry responded to best. No two people liked exactly the same things, and a decent wank hinged on finding a style that suited the recipient. Harry was cursing softly under his breath, so it was safe to assume that he was enjoying himself. Every so often, Harry would twist this way or that, wracked by a need to come that was becoming immediate. Lack of experience had a lot to do with it, since at that point, any sexual contact, however mild, was overwhelming for Harry. Draco, however, had no intention of letting things end that quickly.

'I have waited wayyyy too long to let this be over with in a matter of minutes, and if I have to get him hard all over again, before going to work, just to properly enjoy myself…well, actually, I guess that might be fun too.'

Draco leaned forward, glancing back at Harry, who was wide eyed and trembling, obviously unsure of what to do. Draco smiled disarmingly, trying to show his level of comfort, and slowed his pace while he whispered his thoughts.

"I want to watch you do it. You can watch me too. We should get used to each other this way. Don't you think so?"

Draco leaned back onto his haunches and started to peel away his pajama shirt. Harry, red-faced and confused, took the cue and did the same. A few seconds passed while they divested themselves of their night clothes and settled back in laying side by side.

Harry's eyes were riveted to Draco's groin. The parts he'd seen weeks ago, withdrawn from cold and fear, were prominent now. A modest tuft of dark blond fuzz surrounded the slim, pale wand of flesh that Draco was rather lazily tugging at, and Draco himself was staring lustily at Harry, waiting for Harry to take up the same activity. It didn't take any encouragement to move Harry to action, but the reality of what he was doing made his skin feel like he was on fire.

Draco's free hand was exploring every reachable detail of Harry's chest and arms, while Harry stared in amazement at the pale, slender young man beside him. This wasn't the sickly, wounded youth that had arrived at the Burrow weeks ago, and it wasn't the Draco he'd gone to school with either. Something new had been born, an amalgam of each of those persons, and this Draco was stronger and more confident than either of the others that had come before. He was beautiful in a way that Harry was only just becoming aware of, and the sight of lusty, lambent gray eyes locked hungrily on Harry's body was as much, if not more, than he could stand.

Their mutual pace quickened rapidly, and Draco's breath caught in his throat when he saw Harry's stomach and chest tighten. Harry groaned softly, eyes clenched shut and head tipped back, and then
arched forward hard, his entire body tensed while he shuddered and came. Copiously. Draco stared in surprise at the sheer volume of the mess that Harry made. Seconds kept ticking by slowly, and Harry was still coming, heavy white streaks of fluid splashing onto his chest and stomach, jet after jet. Draco flopped back onto the pillows and let his own excitement carry him over the edge. He was at peace with the knowledge that this was the only time another person had ever seen him come to orgasm, and even if he hadn't been at peace with that, he was much too aroused to care. Pearly droplets rolled across his knuckles and spilled down onto his stomach, one after another, while Draco clenched his teeth and periodically looked over to Harry, who was gasping for breath, flushed from head to toe, and staring in unabashed awe at Draco.

Draco caught his breath, and wriggled sideways, resting his head on Harry's arm. It was a little surreal, realizing that they were starkers in bed together, and dotted with their own come besides. Harry interrupted his reverie, finally finding his voice.

"I can't believe we just did...that. That was...it was strange...but great! No complaints. Bloody brilliant, even! I'd give you a hug, but I'm a mess at the moment. I haven't had one off at all this week. Guess I was overdue."

Draco chuckled giddily. "I guess so! Someone needs a Cleaning Charm. Maybe three or four. Accio! Evanesco!"

Draco repeated the last spell several times to clean Harry, once he had wand in hand, then flopped bonelessly back onto the bed, sighing with contentment. His mind registered one thing immediately, solving a small mystery that had crossed his mind weeks ago. Harry's rampant cock had softened, but was still very close to the same size it had been before, while Draco's had rather dramatically deflated, curling in on itself quickly. No wonder Harry always gave the impression of being exceptionally well hung. He had the kind of endowment that just didn't shrink, and didn't really grow that much when it was erect. Draco wondered idly if it was inconvenient to have something like that swinging about in a pair of boxers all day.

Harry had curled an arm around Draco's shoulders and Draco responded quickly, moving closer for the kiss that was coming. Draco felt exultant, celebrating several firsts in a row, all before the day started properly. Harry's kiss began to falter, and Draco pulled away, curious. Harry was as pale as ash, eyes glazed over with something that was not lust. His breath was coming in short gasps.

The spiteful specter lodged in Harry's soul struck fast and well, exploiting the fears that would wound Harry best. Images of violence flickered through Harry's mind's eye. Sickening visions of what was possible, and dark temptations that made his heart quail with terror and disgust.

His fist in Draco's hair, grinding that impudent face into the pillows, muffling the mewing cries while he sated his blackest lusts with that slim little body spread-legged before him. The muted cries from the boy beneath him were a symphony in his ears, and the knowledge that he had absolute power, over life, and over death, was intoxicating. He could close his hands around that soft throat and snuff the life from this insignificant creature with such ease. Power was all that mattered. He could take his pleasure in any way he wanted, and discard the ruined shell of this pitiful brat when he was finished with it.

"Harry? Are you all right? Harry!"

"Nghk! AHH! Huhhn!" Harry snapped back to reality, suddenly and violently nauseated.

"I'm sorry!" That was all he could get out before he grabbed a towel and leaped up and out of the room, running for the toilet as fast as he could. He hadn't eaten all that much the last couple of days, but it all came up in a matter of minutes, while Harry reeled at what his mind's eye had seen.
'How? How could I even think things like that? Sick! I'm sick. I'm wrong…and evil. How could anyone want that? Draco…I was hurting him…and liking it. How could I even imagine something like that?! Maybe he was right. Maybe Molly and Draco were both right. The things…the things I did…the people I killed…changed me. Something is wrong with me…something fucking horrible is wrong with me. I've got to…control…myself. I can't do things like that. I can't. Not to Draco. Not to anyone. I won't be a monster. God! Anything but that. I couldn't…I couldn't live with myself…if I hurt him that way.'

Harry emptied the contents of his stomach into the toilet, sweating profusely and quietly praying that he'd just had some isolated flashback. Nothing so sick could have been his desire…could it? He heard a soft knock on the door.

"I'm…I'm alright. Just my stomach. Didn't settle right. Sorry. Don't worry, love." He called the words over his shoulder, gasping for breath and clean air. The bitter tang of bile was in his mouth and nostrils.

Draco stood by the door, hastily wrapped in a blanket. His heart was pounding like a bass drum and it was hard to concentrate on anything but his immediate and chaotic fears for Harry. What if he'd pushed Harry too far too soon? Maybe Harry liked him a lot, but wasn't really gay? The man had supposedly thought he was straight until a few weeks ago. Maybe he found the reality of sex with a man more grotesque than he'd imagined. Or worse…what if seeing Draco act so comfortable about sex had reminded Harry of the fact that Draco had been a whore? Harry had never had sex with anyone, and presumably he thought it was too important to just have it with anyone. Draco had seen and done so much, most of it against his will, but some of it just for survival. He'd wondered if that knowledge would someday make Harry sicken at the sight of him, and now that worst of fears was a reality.

Draco stepped away from the door, leaking tears he couldn't stop, and shuffled back to the room that had just been christened by their lust…and now by his shame. He quickly pulled on his clothes and snatched his wand from the nightstand. He could hear the sink running in the bathroom, and slipped downstairs. Molly wasn't up yet, so he forced himself to start the tea, keeping his mind away from the fluttering urge to panic or break down completely.

He was in much too far. He didn't want anyone but Harry, and Harry might care about him, and even love him, but evidently not enough to overcome his disgust at the filthy slut he'd fallen for. Draco's throat felt too thick, and the idea of going to work early crossed his mind. He jotted a quick note for Harry, folding it and setting it on the stand by the fireplace, not far from the stairs. Harry's name was on it in bold print, and it was hard to miss. When he came downstairs for tea or breakfast, if he could hold it in, he'd see it right away, especially if he was looking for Draco.

Draco snatched a clump of Floo powder and stepped into the fire, wishing he wasn't so…attached to this place…to this life. It was easier when he didn't care. Now everything was bright and real and sharp…and it hurt. He uttered the address of Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes, and vanished in a puff of green fire.

Not two minutes after his departure, Ron Weasley Flooed in, exploding out of the fireplace with a cheerful step, hurrying to the kitchen first. Unknown to him, the note that Draco had left on the stand fluttered to the ground as he passed by in a hurry, and slid beneath the edge of a chair, one corner still poking out from its hiding place.

TBC!!!
Panic In London

DISCLAIMER: Warning! I make no claim to any property of J.K. Rowling's, and am in no way profiting by this. I do offer her my sincerest thanks for allowing us this garden of the mind in which we play. Further Warning! This story…and likely any I ever write…are dominated by gay themes and characters. That's how it is, if this in any way makes you uncomfortable...do not read further.

Redeem Me…by Samayel

Chapter 58: Panic In London

Draco stepped out of the Floo and flicked his wand to activate the lights. The offices were dark and empty, and the others likely wouldn't be here until an hour or so had gone by. For now, it was just himself and a pile of paperwork for company, and that was to his liking.

Harry's sudden reaction to sex, and Draco, had been a cruel slap to Draco's fledgling sense of self confidence. He'd been feeling so good and so alive until this morning's disaster, and truth be told, it hurt all the more precisely because he was so capable of feeling good. He was still biting his lip to keep from tearing up on the way to his office. A few days ago he'd have probably fallen apart on the spot, but now he at least had the strength to maintain a shred of his composure.

The note he'd left had been enough. Just a quick acknowledgement that he was fine and went to work early, would pick up lunch in Diagon Alley, and a plea for Harry to not worry about him, since he'd be home just after five like usual. He hadn't dared to sign it with more than an impersonal 'D', although part of him has wanted to include the word love somewhere in the mix. If he'd done that, though, he'd likely have never made it out of the house.

His paperwork and files were just as he'd left them on Thursday, and true to form, without his insistence, the latest paperwork hadn't been brought in for review. Draco huffed irritably and headed for Fred and George's office. It was like pulling teeth to get anything done on time here, but at least they'd started getting a sense of what was required of them to make his job run smoothly. Since he was actually early, and had missed Friday, he supposed he couldn't really blame them for not having it ready yet, but his mood was just foul enough to make him want to blame someone…for something. Anything really. Anger seemed better than the tears that were threatening to emerge at any moment.

Fred and George had left their office fairly clean, and Draco's much needed reports were no where to be found. A Muggle-style filing cabinet was the repository of all their records, and a simple Locking Charm was all that protected it. With his natural talent, Slytherin heritage, and exceptionally powerful wand, the spell didn't stand a chance against him. A few seconds later, Draco was flicking through the folders hastily, searching for the most current income and expense tallies. The last folder in the file made his blood run cold when he opened it.

Clippings from wizarding papers. Lists of names. Columns regarding the spectacular deaths of Death Eaters. One list was populated by names that Draco knew by heart. They were all Death Eaters, and certain names had been crossed off. Less than a dozen remained clear, and the sight of his uncle's name, as well as MacNair's and Hyde-Pratt's, sent a shiver down his spine.

There were other notes. These were records of movement. Informants all over England had been sending discreet notes to the twins for more than a year. This was how Harry found them…it had to be. George and Fred weren't just privy to Harry's activities, they were the source of his ability to
track down Death Eater's anywhere in England. The operation of an informant network must have cost a fortune in bribes, but the twins certainly had that kind of money to spare. It all made sense. Draco closed the file and made ready to put everything back as it was. This was too serious to risk…

"Care to explain what the hell you think you're doing?"

Draco started at the voice that came from behind him and whirled around. It was George, and his magical eye was already hovering in front of Draco's face, even though George himself had just entered the room.

"I…I came in early. I didn't have this week's new paperwork. I didn't…mean to…"

"Didn't mean to what? Unlock a spelled cabinet without invitation? Open up files that have nothing to do with your job?"

George had never looked so dangerous. There was an ice cold gleam in the eye that was still natural, and the set of his shoulders suggested a willingness to do whatever was necessary to protect his secrets. The Weasley twins were famous pranksters, and devils on the Quidditch pitch, but this was the first time he'd ever seen one of them as a veteran wizard and former member of the Order of the Phoenix, the clandestine organization that had spearheaded the war against Voldemort.

"I'm sorry! I didn't think it would hurt anything. I was just going to put it back where it was and forget I ever saw it. I swear it. George…you have to believe me. I never meant to see that. I just wanted my files."

George took a few steps forward casually, wand held at his side, ready for action in a heartbeat. The eye that hovered in front of Draco zipped back and inserted itself into the stylish metal track that was attached to George's head. He looked at Draco speculatively.

"This eye has a few improvements over Moody's. I can see through walls when I want to. I can also see the heat people give off when I choose. I can see in the dark like a cat. I can also see when people are lying or telling the truth. Handy thing, having an eye like that. I know you mean it, but there is a price for what you know. Silence. Absolute fucking silence. I'll be taking an oath on that… on your wand. Swear it. Now!"

George had his wand up, and there was no doubt in Draco's mind that an Obliviation was coming his way if he didn't swear the oath in a matter of seconds. He held his wand up sideways in the ancient gesture of peace.

"I swear that I won't reveal what I learned today. Not to anyone. On my word as a wizard. I swear so on my wand."

His wand flashed for a second, and the oath was binding. George lowered his wand and moved to his chair.

"Why were you here so early? And remember, I'll always know if you're lying to me."

Draco shuddered. The tension in the room could have been cut with a dull knife, and even relaxed, the image of George Weasley ready for extreme measures hadn't dissipated in the slightest.

"It was kind of personal. Harry…wasn't feeling well, and I was upset, so I came here to get away. I only got here a few minutes ago. I just wanted to forget about home for a little while and get some work done."

George nodded distractedly, pulling papers from his desk and getting a quill ready.
"I'll be informing Fred about this after he gets here. We take turns coming in early and getting the place lit up and ready for the day. Your paperwork was on Ella's desk, ready for you when you wanted it. I hope you know that the fact that you're still alive right now is entirely owed to Harry and Mum. We trust you not to rock the boat, or you'd be dead or Obliviated nine ways from Sunday by now. You aren't the ferret from school that we all remember, but don't think you can just poke your nose into anything you want, Harry's boyfriend or no."

Draco sat down on the guest chair in front of the twin's giant desk, sighing heavily. This was an overdue conversation, and he wasn't in the mood for it, and his headache was quickly going from faint to heavy, but he'd have to just wing it and see if he could get something useful out of this mess.

"George. I'm really sorry. I didn't think I'd see anything like that, but there's something you should know. I know a lot more than you think about what Harry's been up to the last year or so, and I've kept his secrets too. I didn't know how much you two knew, or I might have talked about this before...about Harry."

"What about Harry? We've been with him since the Order days. Tricks, Charms and devices were our contribution. Information services took most of a year to get working worth a damn, but that's our end of it now. Harry does the wetwork, and no one does it quite like him. Try to remember that you're the newbie here, and if I take your opinion with a grain of salt, it's because we're all very damn good at what we do. Complaints can be forwarded to the Complaint Department."

George pointed at the trash bin beside the desk. Obviously he was fairly hostile to being lectured about what was right or wrong. Draco needed to frame this in a way that wouldn't immediately offend George, and he thought carefully about how to approach his subject.

"Harry isn't well. I'm worried about him. Once I noticed that something was wrong, I did my homework, and I know that Harry isn't entirely healthy. I want him to be well. I think what he's been doing has taken a toll on him. He has nightmares...and headaches. He gets...angry easier when he hasn't killed for awhile. He's so powerful that the atmosphere around him changes when he's really mad. Don't you think he should stop doing this? Not because of laws or right or wrong, but for his own health."

George looked up, scanning Draco for any sign of lies. Draco was relieved that he was being taken seriously and not dismissed out of hand. George looked slightly disgruntled, then looked back to his paperwork and grabbed a quill.

"We all have nightmares. We all get angry sometimes. Harry is powerful. That's why he can do what he does. Without him, we wouldn't be looking at a few renegades, we'd be looking at an army of killers and rapists running loose while the Ministry fumbled around with blinders on. I'm sure you mean well. I know you're keen on Harry, but he's a tough nut to crack. He's not as fragile as you might imagine. Poof or no, Harry is probably the most dangerous wizard alive, and I doubt he's falling apart over a few dead murderers."

Draco bit his lip. He hadn't told George the most compelling evidence, in part because he wasn't sure it would be believed. Some of it involved his oath to Dumbledore, which prohibited letting knowledge of Horcruxes fall into other people's hands. He was fairly sure that, even without that critical knowledge, he could get the twins to see reason.

"There are so few of them left. The Ministry caught one a few weeks ago. I'm sure Tonks is working her hardest at it. I wouldn't tell you that I'm worried about Harry if I hadn't seen things with my own eyes that made me worry. I'm distant enough from all of this that I can look at it and care about just one thing...Harry. Kingsley is onto Harry's activities and he knows what's happening, and even the press has a clue for once. Harry is in danger of taking the fall for all of this. If you don't believe
anything else I say, then believe this one thing. I need him. Harry is the one person I care the most about, and I don't want him to get hurt, or wind up in Azkaban. You can see that that's true, can't you?"

George sighed heavily, his jaw clenched shut tightly. He stared at Draco with both eyes for a moment, then put down his quill. He pushed the slim metal track that held his magic eye up and over his head, displaying the scarred socket that had once held his original eye. His voice was a tense whisper.

"This is what I can see. Get it? When I can look at my sister's face, with the eyes I was born with, then I will consider seeing things a little differently. I respect your feelings for Harry, and Fred and I always wondered if he'd find someone for himself someday. You weren't expected, but you turned out alright. It's quite a compliment for me to say that, really. Because our personal goal is to see everyone else who wears that Mark buried six feet underground or locked in Azkaban. This world doesn't need them, and Harry has the strength to take them out of it. That's what I can see. This conversation is finished, Draco. Your paperwork is on Ella's desk."

Draco bowed his head and stood to leave. George was a lost cause. He'd lost too much in the war to forgive and forget, or let the Ministry handle things while he had the means to do more than they could. There would be no help coming from this corner. He plucked his paperwork from Ella's desk on his way down the hall and made his way to his office. At least he had Dula and Snape in his camp. It was clear that helping Harry would take more than just his lone efforts, and this was all he thought of while he whittled away the hours until lunch. Better than to think of what Harry felt about him.

The joyful memory of Harry's naked body so close to his own, and the warmth and heft his swollen member in Draco's hand, hadn't vanished, but it was tinged by the fear that Harry would always see him as the oft-used and pathetic whore that he had been. It was easier not to think of it, and Draco poured himself into his work, letting headaches and sorrow drift into the background of numbers and columns and tallies.

Harry found Ron in the kitchen, soaking up tea, even though Molly was nowhere to be seen. He was still shaky from the visions that had terrified him, but he was glad to see Ron's smile when he entered the kitchen. He had expected to see Draco, and that immediately concerned him.

"Hey, Ron. Have you seen Draco? He was upstairs not five minutes ago. I thought he'd come down here, but…"

"Nah. Haven't seen him, mate. But have I got news for you. Grab a cuppa and take a seat."

"Nah. Haven't seen him, mate. But have I got news for you. Grab a cuppa and take a seat."

Harry cast a quick tracing spell at the Floo, and it registered Ron's arrival, and then Draco's departure to work a few minutes earlier than that. Harry sighed relief, but still felt a flicker of despair that Draco had taken off without a word. He was obviously upset by Harry's reaction, and who could blame him? Harry didn't dare voice the things that had crossed his mind just after their…encounter. For the first time, he had a glimpse of what Draco must have felt like. Some things were just too horrible to speak aloud, and the idea of others knowing the foulness that had bubbled out of his subconscious was almost more frightening than the actual memory itself. Harry took a chair at the table and sat with a sigh, running his hands through his hair. Ron got up and poured a cup of tea for Harry, then took the chair beside him.
"Rough morning, mate? You look like hell. I've been up since six. Figured I might as well treat every day like I've still got to train. Wouldn't do to fall out of shape with job offers on the hook as we speak. That's what I dropped in to talk about. I think I've made up my mind, but I thought I'd run it by someone I trust first. Naturally, that means you, mate. Wanna hear?"

Harry looked up at Ron's cheerful expression and winced. His morning had obviously started off better than Harry's had. Still, maybe he had something in the way of happy news, and that was worth something. Harry had felt guilty for well over a week, worrying over whether Ron would backslide into booze because of his sudden unemployment, which was at least partly Harry's fault.

"Sure. Let's hear what you've got."

Ron slurped his tea and started in. "I had a pretty thin list of choices, but I think I've got a good one pinned down. I was one of the top rookies in the league until last week, and the war record didn't hurt, but this last little fuck-up put my name in the rubbish bin. Still, I've got a name everyone knows, and that's worth something.

I didn't want to take anything dodgy, so that ruled out a few offers from people who wanted me to help with adverts and such. That left a couple offers from bottom ranked teams and the like. Then me agent scraped the bottom of the barrel and came up with this little jewel. Brighton has a youth Quidditch league that needs a coach with some visibility to bring in more Galleons. The pay is lousy, and I'll have to leave the flat and move home to make ends meet on this kind of pay, but it's working with kids who don't get the chance to go to Hogwarts or Beauxbatons, and get this…the director for the program fancies me. Her name is Eileen, and she's bold as brass and sharp on the uptake. I like her, and she wouldn't be my immediate supervisor, so we could probably manage to nip off for a dinner sometime without getting into trouble. I figure Quidditch, working with kids, and a date with a fine looking lady makes this the right one. So? What do you think?"

"Take it. You know your Mum and Dad would be proud of something like this. You're off the bottle, and there might be a bit of bad press at the start, but I'd bet anything that you'll take to it like a duck to water. You really like this Eileen, huh?"

"Well, we only met the once, but I can tell she fancies me. She smiled an awful lot while we were going over my application. She knew I had offers for higher pay, but I think she liked that I'd favor something like this over making more money. We'll see how it goes, mate. What I really wondered was…am I doing the right thing? What would Hermione want me to do? I've still got the rest of me life in front of me…so what now? I wouldn't want to foul it up worse than I have. Am I headed in the right direction?"

Ron looked nervous about the last part, and no wonder he'd asked Harry. He never spoke of Hermione with anyone else. Harry rubbed his eyes and nipped at his tea.

"Ron, there's no doubt in my mind that she'd have wanted you to do something like this. Maybe it'll work, maybe not, but it sounds like it's more than worth trying. Shite. I mean, how bad can it turn out if you do it for all the right reasons?"

Ron nodded. "That's what I hoped you'd say. Something just feels right about this one. I'm gonna go for it. How's the wee ferret, then? Doing better?"

Harry favored Ron with a droll look of disapproval. "It's Draco. Not ferret. Snape did alright. He's back to work today if that tells you anything. And he is…better. I mean he's very…uh…forward. And more spirited than I kind of thought he'd be. Like he was back in school, but nicer."

"You two finally stop pining over each other like lovebirds and just shag the ever-loving fuck-all out
of each other yet?"

Harry choked on his tea. "You are a complete ass. You know that, right? The answer is no, kind of. Not that it's anyone's business but ours. We're... um... doing things... together. A little at a time. I mean... he's only been well for one day... and that's today. Give it some time. We'll figure things out as we go. Same way anyone else does, right?"

The conversation drifted and rambled from there. Ron didn't want explicit details about Harry's sex life, but was content to know that he finally had one... sort of. The topics shifted and ebbed, until finally Ron brought up the recent articles in the Prophet.

"See that bit in the paper? They found another one just like Draco. Just outside of London. Poor wee thing was cut to ribbons before he passed on. Looks like the same crew that did the last one is still out there, but they're moving back through the London area. You got any leads on 'em?"

Harry dropped the teacup, frozen in panic, and Ron snaked out a hand and caught it before it fell.

"Bloody hell, mate. You're losing your touch. What's wrong?"

Harry turned to him with an odd look. Serious and yet curious.

"No. I hadn't heard about it. Odd that. I guess I've been busy. Back in London you say? Maybe I'll look into that."

There was something distracted in Harry's tone, but they were interrupted when Molly came down the stairs in her robe and delivered a prompt hug to her son, then thanked them for having the tea on so early.

"Wasn't us, Mum. I think Draco made it and went off to work early. Harry an' I just had a sit down to talk about me new job. Coaching youth Quidditch up Brighton way. Pay's crap, but it's a good cause. I'll be moving home after the Solstice. I'll be starting next week if they take me. I'll be seeing them again today to seal the deal if they're interested, and they sound like they want me for the job, so that's that."

Molly was overjoyed, and started a breakfast that would have left trolls bloated and sluggish before they were done. Arthur wandered down a few minutes later and joined the crowd for tea, happy to hear his son's news. Through all the cheery chatter, Harry was oddly silent, wheels turning in his mind at a feverish pace.

The day rolled on, and Harry was in a pensive mood, quiet and thoughtful, yet tense and uncertain. He knew one thing for sure, and that was that he'd see Draco at lunchtime soon. The prat had left without taking along anything to eat, but he'd set tea for the rest of them. It was sweet, but he'd only just started eating properly yesterday, and Harry knew full well that Draco would work his way through the day without thinking of food if he was left to his own devices. At half to noon, Harry threw together some sandwiches, a good wedge of English cheddar, some fruit and a small thermos of tea, packed the lot of it in a small sack, and headed to the living room.

Before he made it to the Floo, Harry saw a slip of white beneath the corner of a chair. Upon picking it up, he saw his name in Draco's bold and hasty script. He flipped it open. Just the thought that Draco had left him a letter soothed the ache that had been in his heart all day. Then Harry read the words within.

Draco was fine. Don't worry. Going to work early. He meant to have lunch in Diagon Alley.

Diagon Alley. Linked to London.
LeStrange and his crew of psychopaths were back near London.

Harry Apparated out, passing through wards like a hot knife through butter, the bag of food still clenched in his hand, panic threading its way through his heart

TBC!!!
Draco had endured a truly miserable day. First there was the fiasco with Harry this morning, which had left his heart smarting and raw, aching with tension all day. Then he'd pissed George off by stumbling onto their information network, and the conversation afterwards had made it clear that no help would be forthcoming from that quarter. His headache had only gotten worse, since he hadn't eaten anything since the day before, and the growling and gurgling from his stomach was exceedingly annoying. To top things off, even though he had money in hand, he was recognized at two different restaurants in Diagon Alley, and it had taken a lengthy and patient discussion at the third before they would finally serve him.

Diagon Alley had been full of familiar faces and places, but the flashbacks just hadn't come. That was one small relief. He remembered shop doors he'd begged in front of, but the images of them in his memory were hazy and indistinct. He even passed a corner he'd nearly been stoned to death on, and all he'd felt was a faint shudder of discomfort. Snape would probably never forgive him if he actually did it, but he considered breaking form and just hugging the man the next time they met.

His lunch had been a bit disappointing as well. Perhaps it was that they didn't like him, knowing his identity, and simply served him without putting any effort into preparing his meal, or perhaps it was that Molly was a better cook than these prats could ever hope to hire, but the food just seemed bland and unappetizing, despite his hunger. Either way, he was content to simply enjoy the feeling of buying a meal with money he'd earned…honestly. At least the Butterbeer he'd ordered had been as good as any other Butterbeer he'd ever had, and it slightly improved his mood when he took his check and paid the staff for his meal.

He didn't have a lot of time left before he ought to get back to work, but given his lousy day, and the small measure of cash left in his pockets, it occurred to Draco that a little shopping might improve his mood too. A new shirt was within his budget. Just one. Something sharp and sleek. Preferably in green. Harry would probably like seeing him in something like that, and looking attractive to Harry was at the forefront of his mind an awful lot lately.

That notion pushed forward the memory of their morning encounter, both good and bad. He couldn't be sure that Harry saw him as a slut and a whore, but the possibility was very real. If it were true, how would he counter something like that? Dress down? Try to be shier than this morning? Acting hesitant about sex, or sexuality, seemed a plausible way to calm Harry, but Draco still hated that idea. He'd waited his entire life, even if that only consisted of a little more than nineteen years, to figure out what he wanted. He'd spent more than half his life hating the very idea of what he was, and the only experiences he'd ever had had been nightmarish, until recently. Until Harry. Now sex looked pretty good, even if everything had gone pear-shaped afterwards.

Gladrags was quiet, given that Monday was not a heavy shopping day, and that suited Draco just fine. It only took a few minutes, even without help from the scowling staff, to track down a shirt he liked. Long-sleeved, emerald green and vaguely shimmering material. Perfect. It was easy to feel
more confident with clothes that suited his tastes, and he felt just a little like his old self when he paid for it. Maybe the staff were right prats, and maybe he wasn't the most popular person in Diagon Alley these days, but he wasn't homeless, helpless or unemployed. He made a final stop at an apothecary for a few other small purchases, and ignored the glares of others with an admirable stoicism. A quick spell and his packages were neatly shrunk and tucked into a pocket. The nature of his purchases had made him blush, but if his plans were to be made real anytime soon, he'd need them.

Draco started the last of the journey back to work with a spring in his step that had been missing for a long time. Ever since Snape had exercised his talents, Draco had felt better in so many small ways, and the knowledge that he could still find a little happiness on a day this lousy was a great comfort… right up until the spell hit him in the back, leaving him completely paralyzed, and a rough arm snaked out to haul him into the alleyway.

Harry Apparated into Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes with a muted 'crack'. He made his way straight to Ella's desk with a look on his face that would have made strong men tremble.

"Draco! Where is he? Is he here?"

Ella looked shocked and stunned by Harry's savage tone. He'd always been unfailingly polite until now. His body language and tone screamed 'emergency'.

"He went to lunch. About half an hour ago. He should have been back just about now. Is something wrong?"

Harry was already thinking on the fly, marching toward Draco's office for something he'd need.

"Don't know, but it's better to make sure. If he comes back before I do, let him know to stay put!"

Draco's office was empty and quiet, as well as very tidy. Harry looked for the one thing he needed now. On the back of Draco's chair, a single fallen blond hair stood out against the black fabric. Harry picked it up carefully, then spelled it to hover in the air. Under his breath, a series of words were uttered while he breathed out and onto the spinning blond thread before him. In seconds, it began to glow, encapsulated by shimmering golden light, until it was almost three inches in diameter. Harry uttered a single command.

"Find him."

The ball of light shot down the hall for the doorway to Diagon Alley, and Harry was running behind it like hell itself was on his heels.

Draco was aware of the stink of stale sweat coming from the man that had dragged him down the alley and into the shadows.

"I knew I'd finally catch one of you two alone someday! Let's just get you situated, and you can answer a few questions for me, Mr. Malfoy!"

Draco was unceremoniously dumped onto the ground, and his gaze centered on the haggard figure of Auror Dawlish. The man had Draco's wand in his pocket, and he was fumbling with the cork to a
small vial of liquid, a feverish gleam in his beady eyes.

"Recognize this, Malfoy? Veritaserum. You'll be singing a different tune in just a minute or so. Then we'll get the bottom of this and I can close this case once and for all! I'm adjusting the spell to let you swallow and talk, but don't bother yelling…I've spelled this alley for silence."

A muttered incantation later, Draco gasped for breath, wide-eyed with panic. Veritaserum would have him spilling secrets in no time, and these were secrets that couldn't afford to be shared. An idiot like Dawlish couldn't be trusted with knowledge of Horcruxes. It'd be all over the press by Wednesday!

"No! Please! I didn't do anything wrong! I was cleared by the Ministry, and I've talked to Kingsley...I swear it! You don't have to…"

Dawlish grabbed hold of Draco's jaw and poured the Veritaserum into his mouth, then clamped his mouth shut and pinched his nostrils closed while Draco struggled to spit the stuff out. It didn't work, and worst of all, Draco realized that he'd taken more than twenty times the amount he'd ever been dosed with before. When he'd been questioned by the Ministry, he'd never had more than three drops at a time. There was no telling what this much of the stuff might do!

Draco's struggles ceased, and he lost his train of thought as the Veritaserum kicked in fast and hard. His vision blurred, and his tongue suddenly felt heavy in his mouth. Dawlish loosened his grip and snickered to himself.

"That's a boy, Malfoy. Now...let's have the truth. What's Potter been up to? And aside from being his little tart, how do you fit into all this?"

Draco's world was out of focus, and his subconscious let words and notions bubble up without order or meaning.

"Killing. Vol...Voldemort. 'cruxes. Harry. Harry's nice. Warm. Mmm...I like Harry. 's good to me."

Dawlish frowned. "Damn it! You're not making any sense! Who's the killer?! How does Potter do it?"

Draco hiccupped, then giggled. "Weasels an' ferrets an' sever a snake. Haha!"

Dawlish delivered a stinging slap to Draco's face, leaving a bright red handprint across his cheek.

"Snap out of it! ANSWER ME! What's going on?!"

Draco looked up with clouded gray eyes and a goofy smile, and told Dawlish the absolute truth.

"Yer really, really, really fucked."

Dawlish didn't quite have time to register the significance of that statement before a matched set of spells hit him in the back, sending him tumbling onto Draco, Stupefied to within an inch of his life. Nymphadora Tonks pulled Dawlish off of Draco, while Remus Lupin checked Draco by spell, looking after his health and breaking the enchantment that bound him.

"You alright, Draco?"

Draco blearily stared at Remus Lupin, clearly having difficulty recognizing him.

"Woof-indor. Hic! Pssst! I like puppies. Wan' Harry. I wanna see Har-harry!"
Draco was attempting to scratch behind his ears, and Remus rolled his eyes. There was no communicating with Draco while he was this high. He turned back to his wife, who already had Dawlish Immobilized and thoroughly searched.

"Good eye, love. I can't believe you recognized him. Dawlish looks like he's gone mental. Draco's alright, but the poor thing's doped to high heaven. Veritaserum overdose. He'll be out of it for the rest of the day. We'll have to get him home. What can you do with Dawlish?"

Nymphadora sighed. "It looks like it's Azkaban for Dawlish. The Ministry frowns on abuse of power by Aurors, and he was already on administrative leave. He's violated a half a dozen laws and regulations, and some of them are major. Black market Veritaserum, illegally administered? That alone would put him away. Throw in assault and battery against a citizen, and violating the terms of his leave by harassing Draco when Kingsley specifically told him to leave Harry and Draco alone, well…it'll probably be five years before he sees sunlight again. I hate to see an Auror go bad, but good riddance!"

Nymphadora handed Remus Draco's wand, then gave her husband a quick kiss. "You take Draco home, and I'll cart off Dawlish here. By the way…you were great. I spotted him but lost him, and that keen sniffer of yours picked up his trail. Between the two of us, we make a nice team. Wish you were an Auror, love. I'd have you on my team any day!"

Remus smirked. "Like we'd get anything done besides a decent snog. Thanks, love. Let's…"

A ball of golden light dodged into the alley, zipping straight toward them. Remus shielded Draco with his body by instinct, and Tonks had her wand out and ready for anything. A second later, Harry rounded the corner like the Hogwarts Express at full steam, skidding to a halt a couple of feet from them. As soon as he saw Draco on the ground, wide-eyed and mumbling, Harry lost it.

"DRACO! What happened? Who did this? Is that fucking Dawlish?! I'll kill 'im! That fuck! What has he done?! What did he do to Draco?!!"

Harry was panting like a bellows between shouted questions, and the air around them started to move, whipping papers and stray bit of trash into a cyclone. Tonks took a step back, while Remus stood up and spoke calmly.

"He's fine, Harry. He needs to go home and sleep it off. Dawlish is headed for Azkaban. You can take Draco home now. He's asking for you."

Remus stepped out of the way, and let Harry see Draco, who was still mumbling nonsense to himself. Harry faltered, and the whirling debris of the alley slid back to the ground, the golden light above Draco winked out, and then he leunged down and snatched Draco into his arms.

"That's it, love. I'm here. No one's going to hurt you. We'll just go home, right? Shh. No worries. Everything's fine."

Harry looked up from Draco for a moment, glanced at Dawlish, and something feral lit in his eyes for just a second.

"Get that fucking trash away from him! If I see him again, Auror or no, I'll paint the place with his fucking blood. He's just damn lucky you found him first!"

Even Remus was taken aback by Harry's sudden vehemence. Tonks grabbed hold of Dawlish's hand, nodded to Remus, and Apparated away. Remus stood in the alley facing Harry alone, wondering seriously if Harry was safe on his own.
"Easy does it, Harry. Draco's fine. Dawlish doped him with Veritaserum. He'll come around sometime tonight. Do you want some help getting him home?"

Harry was breathing a little slower, choking on curses and pointless anger that he couldn't justify venting on his old friend.

"No. Go to Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes main office. Tell them Draco will be back tomorrow. Tell them what happened. I'm going home."

With a sudden, muted 'crack', Harry and Draco were gone. Remus Lupin put his hands in his pockets, and made his way down the alley and out into the street, wondering all the while what had happened to the dark-haired little boy he remembered from just a few short years ago.

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Harry Apparated right into their bedroom, and placed Draco gently onto the bed. When he tried to pull away, Draco tugged at his sleeves and hands, pulling him back, suddenly sounding clearer.

"…no…don' go 'way. Wan' my Harry. Herey. Harry herey, haha. 'M so 'n love wi' you."

Harry's anger and fear melted away like ice in the sunlight. He suddenly felt tired, and shaky, and very, very old. It was impossible to resist the cloudy gray eyes that kept drifting out of focus, but clearly begged him not to leave. Harry kicked off his boots and laid down beside Draco, letting his boyfriend curl close to him, sniffling wetly into Harry's shirt. Harry kissed Draco's feverish head, and whispered soothingly to him.

"I love you too. I won't go anywhere. I'm all yours. Forever and always. There's nothing in this world I love more than you."

"Fervor 'n awas…luff you."

Draco hummed softly into Harry's chest, purring approval. Then his head shifted back and to the side, looking up at Harry, eyes ridiculously wide and serious.

"'m sorry I made you sick. 's 'kay. I know 'm dirty…an' 'm a whore. I was jus' so…so horny. Whory…horny, Harny, whory." Draco broke into another fit of giggles, then started crying into Harry's shoulder.

Harry didn't quite understand at first, then enlightenment stole upon him. Draco thought he'd been nauseated...because...because of Draco's time in London. No wonder he'd taken off that morning! He'd thought Harry was disgusted with Draco's past. It made sense, but it ripped Harry's heart apart to think that Draco had spent the day thinking anything like that.

"That's not true, love! You didn't make me sick. I made myself sick. It had nothing to do with you. You were beautiful, and perfect, and I don't want to do anything like this morning with anyone else. Only you. I love you so much it hurts. I don't even know how to say it, love. There's nothing wrong with you, and I love you just the way you are. You could never, never make me sick of you. Understand?"

"You mean 'at, Har-harry?"

"Of course I mean it. I can't believe you even thought those things. I don't care about your past. It's all over. I love you right now, today, no matter what."
Draco flopped contentedly back into Harry's lap, sighing happily.

"Too... too goof... good for... me. 'm a liar, an' no good, an' sc-schem... hic!... ing. An' you luff me an-way. 's... so good. My Harry."

Harry stroked Draco's mussed hair away from his eyes, smiling and tearing up in spite of himself. Even healed, Draco still wrestled with his past, and Harry could barely stand that he was unable to make Draco believe that he wasn't still hated for the things he'd done in school. What Harry didn't know was that Draco was referring to his current deceptions, and not those of the past, and it was only by the slimmest of margins that he hadn't said something more incriminating.

"You aren't any of those things, love. You need to rest. I'll stay with you... so don't worry, but you need to sleep this off."

Harry slid down a little, wrapping an arm around Draco, who suddenly wriggled away and started fumbling with his shirt buttons.

"Too... t' warm. 's hot. Too hot."

Harry sat up and helped Draco, who was having serious difficulty with even basic motor skills, and a certain amount of giggling was involved, but he finally got Draco's shirt off. Before he could turn around from discarding the shirt, Draco had flopped onto his back and wriggled out of his slacks, and Harry found Draco sprawled luxuriously across the covers in nothing but a very attractive looking, but very scanty, thong of silky, dark green material. Draco smiled with lazy-lidded eyes, and rolled a little to his side, displaying his backside to Harry provocatively, if a little clumsily.

The back of the thong consisted of only a single, incredibly slender green string.

Harry's glands ignited, and he clamped them back down under control, forcing himself to look away from the spectacle before him. Draco cooed to him, slurring the occasional word.

"D'you like? You bought this... these... for me. B' you didn' know."

Harry mustered all his strength. He just had to get Draco under the covers and keep him still long enough to drift off to sleep. He wouldn't dare touch Draco... that way... in a state like this. Draco had no idea what he was saying or doing, and it would be hours before he was back in his right mind. In the meantime, Harry would just have to cope. Somehow.

"You're beautiful. Very beautiful, love. But you need to rest. Just 'til the serum wears off, okay? You don't know what you're doing right now, but if you just take a little nap, you'll feel better when you wake up."

Draco clambered across the bed on all fours, and started climbing into Harry's lap, and Harry found himself more or less covered in pale, nearly naked, blond Slytherin, while his own self control hung by a thread. A second later, Harry was being sloppily snogged, and was painfully aware of the way Draco's erection was poking out of the band of his thong and into Harry's stomach. Draco interrupted the snogging just long enough to mumble a few more words, all the while trying to pull Harry's t-shirt up.

"Wan' you so bad. Wan' new memo... memories... good ones. Wi' you, Harry."

Draco's arms were under Harry's shirt, soft and warm against his chest, and Harry's pulse was burning and thundering in his ears. He barely dared to fight back, since the idea of handling Draco roughly was even more terrifying to him than this, and Draco's next words chipped at Harry's resolve. They came as a whisper, while Draco held himself close to Harry, grinding clumsily on
Harry's straining lap, as he worked his tongue and teeth along Harry's neck.

"Wan' you inside me. For weeks. All I...all I think 'bout. I wanna make you come...from...for me. Jus' for me, 'cause you love me. Mmm...make love t' me, Harry."

Draco was so warm, and close...and very, very next-to-naked. Harry was answering every kiss with a kiss of his own, and he wasn't exactly sure when his shirt had disappeared. When Draco slipped down and started fumbling with the fly of Harry's jeans, Harry came back to himself, briefly, blessedly, cruelly free of the unstoppable influence of Draco's mouth. Panting from desperation and barely contained desire, Harry made his plea.

"St-stop! Wait, love...I'm sorry. I can't...can't do this. You're stoned on Veritaserum, Draco. This isn't right. I want...I want the first...our first time...to be because we're both ready. You deserve better...better than this. Please."

Draco paused in his fumbling, one hand already down Harry's boxers, a look of confusion, mingled with desire and adoration, on his face. He puzzled out Harry's words for a moment longer, then smirked broadly, swaying just a little before he spoke, still idly caressing Harry's stiffened and aching flesh, a vicious reminder of what Harry was frantically trying to refuse.

"You...you said it. Verta...serum. Truth posh...potion. I cand...couldn' lie to you. You...you'll always nuh-know this...this is how you m-make me really feel. Shhh. Firs' time c'n be a 'nother time. Let...let me give you this...firs'."

Harry gasped as Draco pulled the fly of his boxers open and fumblingly directed Harry's erection through the slot in the cloth. A heartbeat later, a velvet-soft tongue and skillful lips were working in tandem with a hand that knew by instinct what would please. The protest on his lips died a sudden and absolute death, and Harry's world exploded.

TBC!!!
Overdue Lessons

Draco, whether he possessed clear memory of his experiences or not, displayed both a skill that was astonishing, and an enthusiasm that was completely unbridled. His solitary goal, the only one he could concentrate on in his giddy state, was to send Harry completely over the top from pleasure, and leave his boyfriend utterly satiated. The year gone past had held nothing but bitter memories of similar acts, but this...this was entirely unique. Draco was not for one minute sating anyone's lust but his own, and though Harry was in no condition to tell, Draco was enjoying himself every bit as thoroughly as Harry was.

The muted groans and stifled breaths from Harry were a weird symphony to him, and he was focused completely on his task. His actions had been mechanical when this had been necessary in the past, but here, now, Draco exercised the whole of his art, lips tongue, throat, and hands all working as one, laboring to deliver pleasure to someone he loved. Harry was reduced to occasional whimpers, and Draco occasionally lifted his head up, smiling wickedly, only to turn his attention back to the slick and reddened spear of flesh that jutted upwards from his hand.

There was a significance to Draco's actions that wasn't lost on Draco at all. He felt no shame for what he was doing. This was no grudging ritual for some trivial reward. This was an act of love, an expression of desire, and the symbolism inherent in taking the sex of his lover into himself was a potent and heady thing. Harry's scent surrounded him, the faint musk of a healthy young man that had just run and run hard, sizzling with adrenaline, enveloped Draco completely, even while he let his tongue flick and swab its way around Harry's rigid length.

Draco was the master here. No longer a servant or slave, unfettered and free to work his will, Draco effectively ruled Harry by fiat, making the most powerful wizard the world had ever seen his subject. At this moment, he was Harry's god, and Harry's entire world bowed to Draco alone. It was far more intoxicating than any drug or potion could ever hope to be, and Draco reveled in this even through his state of delirium.

Harry had never known sensations like these. The most intimate and private part of his body was being handled both fiercely and delicately, by his lover, at the same time. The sensations of molten warmth and wetness, soft suction and teasing swipes of spongy, velvet tongue assailed him. After a lifetime of near celibacy, pleasure of a level Harry had never even imagined overwhelmed him. When the moment came, Harry realized only at the last second that he was in a house with Molly somewhere not far off, and he hadn't spelled the room for silence. He bit his own hand, keening and whimpering as orgasm overtook him.

Draco's face was beatific. His eyes were closed, as opposed to Harry's, which were wide open and staring below him at the commonplace miracle that was occurring just then. Draco lazily stroked and sucked each jetting from Harry's loins, swallowing them one after another, eyes closed and at peace.
in a world of his own. Harry could take no more and slammed his eyes shut while his head lolled back, teeth still clamped around his hand, stifling any cries that might have disturbed Molly, while his groin pulsed and released seed into Draco's skillful mouth. His legs and thighs flexed, and his free hand clenched the sheets until a knot of cloth was wound into his fist, and all the while, Draco gently lapped and pulled, offering no surcease until the last drops of Harry's come had been claimed as his own.

Draco finally pulled away from the tender head of Harry's spent and flagging cock, allowing it to rest on Harry's stomach while Harry himself relaxed utterly, still gasping for breath and trying to regain his ability to speak or even think clearly. Draco smiled a lazy and sensual smile, making a show of licking his lips, which were just a bit swollen, and redder than his flushed cheeks. With only a second's hesitation, he slipped out of the thong that had been impeding his own freedom and comfort for some time, and then clambered astride Harry's waist, seating himself provocatively and comfortably atop Harry's rapidly deflating manhood. He steadied himself by placing a single palm on Harry's sweat-dampened chest, wrapped his other hand somewhat gingerly around his own engorged flesh, and began to rock slowly, stroking himself all the while.

Draco was far beyond merely aroused, drunk not so much on the presence of Veritaserum in his system, but rather on the sensation of Harry's cock sliding between the cheeks of his arse, sometimes gently grazing across the most sensitive of places, and making Draco frantic with the desire to come.

Harry recovered enough to realize that Draco was listing to one side, still clumsy under the influence of the potion, and he slipped his hands onto each of Draco's hips, steadying Draco and eliciting an instant gasp of pleasure. As far as Draco was concerned, it was past time for Harry to touch him, and this was long overdue. Gentle, yet strong, calloused hands were idly running along his hips, calves and waist, and Draco quickly lost control.

Pearly droplets scattered across Harry's stomach and trickled down Draco's knuckles, while Draco ground himself hard against Harry's groin. A few shudders, a long, lazy sigh, and Draco leaned forward and wrapped his arms around Harry's neck, dizzy, sated and perfectly content. Harry couldn't help stroking Draco's back softly while he caught his own breath, still stunned by what had just happened. His mind was reeling, and he was only just barely beginning to comprehend that what had just happened constituted actual sex. He'd just had sex! With another guy! Specifically Draco… and it was incredible! Draco was nuzzling just beneath Harry's chin, and Harry sighed and shivered with contentment and elation.

The spirit that dwelt in Harry recoiled in disgust. That most hated of things was ever-present, waves of it rolling through the being he had taken shelter in. It was intolerable! Fear and hatred were this creature's food and drink, and its excrement was rage and ruin. Voldemort fought back in the only way he could, tugging at the strings of doubt and fear, and even weakened by the onslaught of affection and joy, his efforts weren't in vain.

Harry was at peace with the world, a somewhat sticky and very sated Draco still half-asleep on his chest, when his ruthless subconscious belched forth nightmarish questions over what they'd just done.

He could have stopped himself and waited for Draco to sober up when the potion wore off, but he didn't. Draco was completely 'round the twist on Veritaserum, and Harry hadn't put up much of a struggle. Maybe he'd given in just to get off. He'd enjoyed it so much, even though Draco probably hadn't the faintest idea what he was doing. Harry hadn't thought about that for a second once Draco's mouth had enveloped his cock. He wasn't any better than he'd been in the vision he'd had that morning. He might as well have raped his boyfriend for all the choice Draco would have had.
Could he honestly say that he was above doing something like that? Only Draco had stopped him from assaulting Kingsley's mind. He'd killed people, and not just a few of them, but dozens. He was a hardened killer, and very good at it as well. He had no reason to believe that he wouldn't hurt Draco...if his temper flared enough.

Harry had endured a lifetime of people describing his many flaws and faults to him. Vernon and Petunia Dursley, Severus Snape, a never ending stream of abuse from the press, and even from a few well-meaning people. Among the common themes were his thoughtlessness and recklessness, as well as repeated assertions that he was self-aggrandizing, attention seeking, dishonest and completely self-involved. He'd pushed those claims aside for years, since most of the sources were biased, but sometimes...sometimes Harry wondered if they'd been right. This was such a time. Harry's stomach hurt, and his head was beginning to throb and ache. Just as he was about to succumb to a serious wallow in self hatred, Draco stirred.

Draco's head lifted up, and Harry paused his musings when slightly unfocused gray eyes locked on his own. Draco put a finger on Harry's lips, and was looking so serious and earnest that Harry lost his train of thought and concentrated entirely on Draco.

"Shhhh, love. Haff to...have to tell you. m'portant. Fergiff...for-give, Harry. There's...is a darkness...in yer heart. You 'ave ta let...let it go. Jus' love. On-ly love 'n you. Love you, Harry."

Draco planted a clumsy kiss on Harry's mouth, then slid back down into his arms, breathing softly and evenly, occasionally breaking into nonsensical mutters. His words, however slurred, rang in Harry's ears like a great bell, and Harry couldn't escape the feeling that something very important had happened. Something just felt right about them, and though Harry didn't realize it, those words were etched indelibly into his soul.

His headache faded, and reminded that Draco loved him, Harry let himself put aside his fears for a little while. It was hard to think such dark things about himself when he saw the happy little smile on Draco's slumbering face. Draco didn't look violated or afraid, just tired and happy and bloody adorable. Harry watched the slow rise and fall of Draco's chest, and listened to the soft sounds of sleep that came from his lover, until he drifted peacefully off to sleep as well.

The creature rooted in Harry's soul railed against its condition. Surrounded by feelings that itched and burned and scalded, it retreated inward, burying itself deep and weathering the barrage of gentler emotions that it hated so dearly. There would be other times, other places where it could strike. Weakened so, there was little that it could do but wait, and hope for a suitable trigger to come. Like all tides of human emotion, these feelings could not last forever. Someday anger would rise again, and he would be waiting to ride its surging tide.

Draco woke first, groggy and vaguely out of sorts, but not uncomfortable. He slowly became aware of his surroundings, and the fact that he was starkers and half-sprawled across an equally naked Harry reached his waking mind.

'Oh. Damn. What the hell happened? Mmm. Not that I'm complaining, but it would be nice to… wait! Diagon Alley! Dawlish…Veritaserum! Oh, fucking Merlin! What did I just do?'

One feature that separated intoxication by alcohol from Veritaserum overdose was the complete
absence of a headache. Another was the fact that Draco quickly remembered everything that had happened…in crystal clear detail. His speech and motor skills had been impaired, and his inhibitions drastically lowered, but his memory hadn't been affected at all. The past came whirling back to him in a flash.

He'd babbled like an idiot in front of Tonksy and Remus Lupin, and hadn't thanked them for getting that miserable ape Dawlish off of him, but that wasn't the worst. He'd all but mauled Harry when they got home and…and he was still vaguely crusted with the evidence of their activities. Eewww! On the bright side, he hadn't awakened to an unintended erection, and Harry looked as peaceful as could be, so it couldn't have gone too badly. The scent of Harry's body was actually still detectable about his own face, and his lips and jaw were faintly sore, as well as the back of his throat. The taste of Harry's seed was still with him as well, and Draco was fighting mingled feelings of embarrassment and excitement while privately reveling at the memory of what he'd done. He hadn't intended to be so forward with Harry, but he'd enjoyed it so very much!

If he knew Harry at all, and he certainly thought he did by now, the noble prat would probably be worried about nonsense like 'taking advantage' or something along those lines. Draco would put a stop to that as soon as they were both properly awake. Harry had been such a perfect gentleman. The memory of being carried in Harry's arms was still with him, and it was almost as delicious as the memory of Harry's splendid naked body, which scarcely needed remembering, since he was currently laying halfway across it. When he had touched Draco, it was with the same gentleness and respect that Draco had felt when being healed. He'd just known that Harry would be like that, and he hadn't been wrong. Being touched by Harry that way made everything feel right and good instead of just wicked or shameful.

Then there were Harry's words. He'd confessed his fears of that morning, and Harry had said every right thing that could be said, soothing Draco's worst fears. Of course, that had touched off what had followed, so in a way it was Harry's own actions that had put Draco in such a 'romantic' mood. He knew that Harry loved him, even though it was only recently that they'd taken to saying it aloud, but it was still comforting and good to hear it. His family had never spoken such things to each other, and hearing the words still made an atavistic thrill run up his spine.

He'd been very lucky he hadn't spilled everything he knew on the spot. If Dawlish hadn't been such a vicious pig, he'd have been properly dosed and telling every secret in his head with perfect clarity. As it was, he'd said a few things that were too vague to be clearly interpreted, but the secret of the Horcrux was still safe, and Harry still had no idea how far Draco had gone in his efforts to help Harry expel the hostile remnants of Voldemort. It had been a very narrow miss, and Draco thanked his lucky stars that things had happened as they had.

The clock read almost six in the evening. Supper would be ready very soon, and Draco needed a shower…for several reasons. It had been a trying day, and it would be nice to relax and wash away past worries, but mostly he just wanted to make sure he didn't arrive at the table mussed and rumpled and smelling of sweat and sex. Sex. Harry. This morning’s wank aside, what he'd done this afternoon was a much more real first. It was very actual and real sex, and he'd enjoyed it because he'd wanted it. Nineteen years old, and his first consenting sexual acts had all taken place today, with Harry. That…that was a happy thought to wake up to. Draco ran a hand up the center of Harry's chest, loving the way his palm slid easily up the smooth flesh.

"Wake up, Harry. It's almost supper."

Harry started very slightly, eyes flicking open and focusing quickly. He, too, came to the sudden realization that they were both stark naked, and he looked a little overwrought for a second before recovering with a faint nervous smile.
"You sound like the Veritaserum wore off. Are you alright, love? You were…a little…’out of it’ earlier."

Draco smirked and placed his palms on either side of Harry's face, making sure that Harry's gaze didn't avoid his own.

"I'm better than fine. I feel wonderful. My head still feels like it's packed with cotton, but I think that's from Snape's work, not the potion. You know you're my hero, don't you?"

Harry blushed mildly and tried to turn his head away modestly.

"I didn't mean to…you know…I should have…"

"Shut it, Harry. You were a perfect gentleman in every way. I remember everything. Everything. You hurried to help me, you brought me home, you said the most wonderful things, and you tried everything but force to protect the tiny bit of virtue I supposedly still have…from yourself…while I was trying my best to throw it away. If that isn't the definition of a hero, I don't know what is."

Draco pulled closer, until the tip of his nose almost touched Harry's.

"And if I could do everything we did over again, without the Veritaserum, I would do it…exactly…the…same…way. Maybe even more. You can't even imagine how much I love the way your hands feel on me. I'm not scared anymore, Harry. I might be a little nervous sometimes, and I know you're trying to be careful with me because I was such a mess for so long, but that's over. I can handle this. Just let go and love me, Harry, and I'll be happy. Okay?"

Harry was only three or four inches from a very determined looking set of cloud gray eyes, and the unshakable certainty in Draco's voice reached right through to his soul. Draco was right. He'd been weighing every choice based on the last couple of months, but a couple of days ago, everything had changed, and Draco was fine with it. Only Harry had lagged behind. Now he was catching up fast. Harry slipped his hands up Draco's hips again, this time unashamed of the way he enjoyed touching his lover. Draco's eyes widened a little with surprise, but quickly adopted a look of sly contentment while Harry answered.

"It's hard to tell sometimes, but I really am a fast learner, once I figure out the basics. I think we'll be just fine, love."

Their kiss lasted right up until Molly called from downstairs, announcing that supper was almost finished, sending them into a scramble of hasty cleaning spells for lack of a shower. Draco couldn't suppress his smiles through dinner, and no one was fooled by them, least of all Arthur or Molly, who had seen each of their children in the first flush of love and knew the signs well, but neither of them would ever have faulted him for having feelings as he did, and though he didn't know it, in truth, they were silently cheering all the while.

TBC!!!
Tonight

DISCLAIMER: Warning! I make no claim to any property of J.K. Rowling's, and am in no way profiting by this. I do offer her my sincerest thanks for allowing us this garden of the mind in which we play. Further Warning! This story...and likely any I ever write...are dominated by gay themes and characters. That's how it is, if this in any way makes you uncomfortable...do not read further.

Redeem Me…by Samayel

Chapter 61: Tonight

What passed before the holidays could easily have been described as the best two weeks of Draco’s life. Even though it began with several stern upbraiding sessions about wandering around alone, once he swore faithfully to make sure someone was with him, the rest of the holidays went far better. They didn’t have to warn Draco twice. He’d been caught unawares, not knowing that LeStrange’s gang had returned to the London area, or that Dawlish was still roaming about with a grudge. There was no question in his mind as to what he should do. When he wasn’t at work, he was home, and with the holidays approaching, that was work in itself.

Molly’s Yuletide preparations weren’t restricted to the kitchen or to the opening and cleaning of unused rooms; they encompassed the whole of the Burrow and nearly all of the surrounding property. Draco had been raised in a household of muted emotions and carefully calculated displays…and house-elves. The decorations strewn about the property alone were sufficient cause to have purchased a few elves, but he already knew that such a thing would never come to pass.

There was something oddly pleasing about the preparations, however silly some of them might have seemed. Draco was fully engaged in a project that occupied the entire household, a very real and palpable reminder that he really was part of this place and these people. He wasn’t tolerated, or coddled anymore; he was as good as family here, and he couldn’t even voice how he felt about that…unless he wanted to actually break down and cry in front of everyone! As it was, he was curiously content, even if he was frequently tired.

As the youngest and healthiest males in the house, much of the labor fell to Harry and Draco, and while the heaviest parts were Harry’s, Draco certainly wasn’t taking it easy. Arthur chipped in, but advancing years and considerable wisdom had helped him to master every means for escaping the worst tasks. When cornered on the subject by Harry, the old devil cited ‘privilege of age’, and rather smugly found a way to transform each task assigned him by Molly into a ‘joint project’ shared by all. All meaning Draco and Harry of course.

An otherwise perfectly healthy tree was sacrificed in the name of the Yule season, and dragged indoors with great difficulty and considerable mess. Draco spent most of an evening just helping Molly decorate that, but at least he was indoors for once. Molly had secreted herself upstairs for almost a day, wrapping presents and stuffing stockings, only to emerge frowsy and exhausted, heavily laden with package after package, each of which was deposited beneath the tree in the living room. Molly’s baking efforts reached new heights as well, and the Burrow constantly smelled of biscuits and pies and fresh bread. However different Draco’s own childhood might have been, Yule Solstice at the Weasleys’ was a wonderful thing, and being surrounded by the scents of baked goods and spices, full of good food, and safe as could be was more than Draco could have asked for.

The rift between himself and George had healed quickly enough. Fred and George behaved the same
around him as they had before the incident, and a few prank battles later they seemed comfortable pretending that it had never happened. In fact, it had been the twins and Ella who had supervised Draco’s next journey through Diagon Alley for holiday shopping, and a pretty good time had been had by all. The twins were well known and their wealth was a powerful motivator. Being seen in their company, as well as having been seen in Harry’s, forced some of the recalcitrant merchants to open their doors to Draco. In the aftermath of the war, the Weasley family had been universally lauded as heroes, and in the eyes of many folks, if George Weasley could be seen with a former Death Eater in public, then the matter was resolved and Draco was no one to worry over.

No new killings took place, but rumors abounded anyway. A few false leads reached Fred and George’s ears, but not one panned out as accurate. Diagon Alley was blessedly peaceful, and the Ministry and Auror Service proudly announced the capture of two more renegade Death Eaters. Perliss and Chalmers hadn’t been Inner Circle, but they were hardened killers and Muggle-haters as well, and the knowledge that they were bound for Azkaban was a relief to all. Of Dawlish, nothing more was heard after a footnote in the paper about his conduct in Diagon Alley. Tonks dropped by to take a statement from Draco, and sent an owl after Dawlish’s conviction by the Wizengamot. Dawlish would be in Azkaban for seven years before he’d even be considered for release, and Draco was perfectly at peace with that.

Harry had been in an uncommonly good mood for such a length of time, that Draco was beginning to wonder if a major confrontation would even be necessary. He’d even tried the spells for seeing auras again, and while the smoldering presence of evil still clung to Harry, it seemed to have shrunk in on itself, and Harry’s aura was far healthier than before.

Harry showed no signs of anger, and lavished attention and good cheer on Draco. He spoke more often and more openly, and Draco noticed the difference immediately. Harry also showed intimacy with his hands more, in simple little ways that Draco relished. A hand on the shoulder or a pat on the back, a hug for no reason other than because they could, or fingers brushed lovingly across Draco’s cheek. Touch was still a thrilling thing for Draco, and coming from Harry it was food for the soul, nourishing Draco’s heart the way Molly’s meals nourished the rest of him.

Seeing Harry happy and peaceful, playful and kind, set the Weasley household truly at ease. Molly had privately congratulated Draco for being the biggest part of Harry’s changing demeanor, and Draco knew she’d been right. Love was making Harry different, and Draco was at the center of that love. He no longer blushed to think of it, but Harry was changing because he was giving as much love as he was receiving. Sometimes small gestures, other times large, but Harry provided constant evidence for Draco, so that he would never wonder if he was wanted or needed. There were other ways in which they’d grown closer as well, and those were the most telling of all.

Draco hadn’t wasted a single evening since the day Harry had brought him home from Diagon Alley. He poured the whole of his will into a single task, and that task was making Harry comfortable around him. Harry hadn’t lied about being a fast learner, and Draco was in a little bit of a hurry to work out his own limits, likes and dislikes.

It quickly became clear that one thing was still similar to a few weeks ago. Draco did not feel at all comfortable with people behind him, and even Harry’s presence there made him shudder sometimes. Nothing like before, when his skin had crawled at just the thought, but it was still something that made him anxious and edgy, uncertain and faintly frightened. Under the right circumstances, he could handle being cuddled by Harry, and given just enough time to get used to it he would be fine, but Harry couldn’t move suddenly or do much else before Draco found himself nervous. It was a little disappointing, and a reminder that he would never be the same, Snape’s help or no, but it was a far cry from the terror such things used to cause, and that would have to be good enough.
He also felt slightly uncomfortable when Harry was completely on top of him. They’d rolled about in bed quite a bit these past weeks, and frottage had been a very significant part of their initial closeness. When Harry had rolled completely on top of Draco, looming over him, large and strong, Draco’s rational mind found it enticing and arousing enough, but his instincts left him feeling faint and fluttering apprehension. Harry had seen the difference almost instantly, sensing Draco’s slight discomfort, and he’d pulled away immediately while Draco caught his breath and reassured Harry that he was just fine.

Other than positions where he felt too vulnerable, Draco was capable of almost anything else he pleased, and he tested those boundaries thoroughly, making the time he had alone with Harry the stuff of legends. Even now, lugging fresh blankets and sheets to the rooms Molly prepared for her soon to be arriving children, Draco could look back at almost two weeks of orgiastic luxury the likes of which neither he nor Harry had ever imagined.

Firmly fixed in Draco’s memory was the night after Dawlish’s attack. He’d rather expected that, after a full workday and good meals, Harry would know that Draco was more than healthy enough to take things up where they’d left off the night before. It had started more or less as Draco planned it, with a long, happy snog and a bit of fairly discreet rubbing and touching. It hadn’t stayed that way for long, but the direction it took after they were out of their pajamas caught Draco completely off his guard.

Harry…stodgy, gentle, nervous Harry…paused in the middle of their continued snog, running his hands up and down Draco’s chest and thighs, and then slowly kissed his way down to Draco’s groin! Draco periodically remembered to coo encouragement and remind Harry that he was alright, but mostly he was just busy trying to keep himself from coming on the spot. Harry hadn’t the first idea what he was doing, but allowing that he’d never given head before, he was bloody stunning at it. Maybe it was just that Draco had never been given head while sober before, and that the last time it had happened, it had been while under the influence of several drugs, and hadn’t really been a matter of choice. This…this was something entirely different, and calling it amazing didn’t do it justice.

Shaggy, dark hair had veiled his groin from view, and all Draco could tell for certain was that Harry had the softest lips in the world, and a tongue with a penchant for exploration. Draco went from wildly tense to utterly relaxed in minutes, surrendering himself to the mouth that enveloped his erection so deftly. His hands had worked their way into Harry’s thick, dark hair, and he was aware of every subtle motion that Harry’s bowed head was making.

This time, their room had been spelled for silence, and Draco felt free to cry out as he came, shuddering from head to toe while his cock twitched and pulsed in Harry’s mouth. He was too far gone in ecstasy to respond to Harry’s small coughs and gasps, and a small trickle of come ran down Harry’s chin and dripped onto Draco’s inner thigh. The man gave a stellar blow job, but he was just pants at swallowing. Still, first time and all, one could only give Harry kudos for surpassing even optimistic expectations. Draco was laughing and crying at the same time, gasping for breath between choked praise for Harry’s efforts. If it was anything like what Harry had felt the day before that, no wonder he’d been eager to try the same thing for Draco.

And that settled that. No day was complete without one or both of their faces winding up in the other’s lap. The discovery that this could be done by both parties…at the same time…was treated with the kind of respectful awe one would think was more suited to the creation of a cure for cancer, or for world peace, but they were happy, and that was all that mattered. Draco’s days were full of comparatively uncomplicated work, and his nights were full of Harry, and without a crisis to manage, he let the days slide past him in a blur.

It wasn’t that he didn’t think of Harry’s condition, and of Voldemort, but rather that he suspected he
was winning the battle in a way that worked out very nicely for him. The specter attached to Harry seemed to be weakening, both visibly and as far as its power over Harry, and those were good signs. Harry didn’t have headaches anymore, and his dreams hadn’t been troubled since the dynamic of their relationship had taken a leap forward. Maybe it was vanity, but the notion that he was the power that soothed Harry’s soul, and was slowly extinguishing the evil thing that clung to Harry, was enticing in more ways than one. It justified his desire for Harry, and made his submission to his own desires more than just rooted in lust, but also heroism, and that was comforting.

Doubts still crept into Draco’s mind, but they were faint and wispy compared to the genuine happiness he’d known of late. Perhaps he was a little…wanton…but it was only with Harry, and while he felt a little strange about being so eager for acts that had once frightened him, he felt entitled to some pleasure in his life. He’d been through hell, and then some! If anyone had ever deserved to be happy, and worked hard to earn that right, then he certainly had. As weakened and shrunken as the darkness in Harry was, so also had the self-loathing and fear in Draco withered. It was hard to be fearful of days to come when life flowed this smoothly, and if Draco was lulled into a little complacency, he meant well none the less.

They had spoken of so many things, curled around each other in the night. Mysteries were answered one after another, and Draco unraveled so many threads that made up the enigmatic patchwork of Harry’s soul. He was fairly certain that Harry had shared things with him that he’d never spoken aloud to another living soul, and that Harry trusted him with things like these was a clear sign to Draco that he had done things right for once in his life.

He knew the truth behind Harry’s childhood. Everyone knew the myths and legends. The Scar and The Boy Who Lived were famous the world over, but what came after was barely known by anyone. The Weasleys knew more than most, but Harry had never wanted anyone’s pity, and he’d never been comfortable speaking of his feelings to much of anyone. The secrets of the Dursley household remained with him to this day. Harry understated it all, obviously trying to make it sound better than it was, but Draco read between the lines. Children do not live in cupboards beneath the stairs unless they are astonishingly poor, very eccentric, or are in the care of people who could barely qualify as human. Harry fell into the last category.

So many things about Harry made sense now. The ratty, oversized clothing. The battered spectacles and underfed waif-like appearance of his youth. The Muggles who had been blessed with the chance to care for the Boy Who Lived had been ignorant and hateful pigs, and Harry had suffered for it. That Harry could still care as much for the Muggle world and people in general was, in Draco’s opinion, a bloody miracle. Harry hadn’t kept silent about his past out of some desire to appear mysterious...he’d done it because he’d been trying to leave it behind and let it go. Small wonder he was such an intensely private person. He’d been raised to keep silent and keep to himself. He’d been used like a house-elf. It certainly explained why the most powerful wizard alive felt right at home with his arms to the elbows in a sink full of dirty dishes.

Draco drank all this in like it was ambrosia. Harry was opening up like a flower in spring after a long and brutal winter, and Draco was the sun that warmed him. He hadn’t raised his voice in anger in two weeks, hadn’t sulked or stormed off for privacy, and hadn’t shown any signs of the affliction that had bedeviled him for so long.

There were two days left until the Solstice, and family members were due to start arriving tomorrow. The house was almost in good order, and this would be the last night of privacy before the bustle of the holidays arrived in full. Draco had plans for this night. He wouldn’t be going to work tomorrow, since the office was closed for the next several days, and he certainly wouldn’t need to worry about rising early in the morning. Tonight he would cross another boundary. He’d made up his mind several days ago, and it seemed kind of inevitable anyway. He’d flirted with it so often these past
weeks that it probably wouldn’t be a great surprise to Harry, but he was desperately eager to satisfy
his own curiosity and gnawing hunger.

Draco wanted Harry to make love to him. He’d had a bottle of lubricant tucked away for this
purpose since his ill-fated visit to Diagon Alley. It had reddened his cheeks to purchase it then,
because surely the help would draw their own conclusions. He was in The Prophet as Harry’s
boyfriend, pictured curled in Harry’s lap. Being seen in an apothecary shop purchasing lubricant
didn’t leave much to the imagination. The only irony was that they probably imagined him getting a
lot more action than he had.

His cheeks no longer flushed when he thought about it. His life had changed a thousand fold since
he’d come here, and after having spent so much time in Harry’s bed, surrounded by his scent and
enfolded by his arms, there was nothing left to be ashamed of or embarrassed by. He’d ironed out the
last details after a hasty Floo trip to Charlie and Dula’s. He’d had two purposes. One was to let them
know of the changes in Harry, and the other to discuss his changing relationship. Specifically, he’d
needed to drag Dula away for a rather ticklish chat about workable positions.

That had been the last blush-worthy event this week, but he’d gotten the information he needed, and
he’d sworn them to secrecy on the subject of his plans for this night. He’d left with a very solid idea
of what to do and how to do it without hurting himself, and a matched set of hugs that were all the
more refreshing because they were now possible. Admittedly, he could have done without Dula
looking at him like he was someone’s daughter on her wedding day. Beneath that eloquent and soft-
spoken exterior, the man was a terminal romantic.

Draco had always thought himself rigidly unromantic. He’d also once thought himself a cynic, but a
cynic at sixteen is generally inexperience posing as worldliness. What he’d seen since then should
have killed cynicism and romanticism alike, but a shred of each had somehow lived, and both traits
cropped up now and again. He doubted that happiness like this could last, but he was fully prepared
to savor every last minute of it while it did.

Molly was calling again. No doubt another frantic last minute thing to prepare, and his help would be
needed along with Harry’s. She was another matter that bore thinking of. For all intents and
purposes, this was his home now. Draco knew he had a mother, but she was a living corpse in St.
Mungo’s, and always would be. The Cruciatus Curse had ruined her nervous system and shattered
her mind irretrievably. He would never hear her voice, pleading or fussing, or pinched with
condemnation, again. It felt like a betrayal of the woman who had given birth to him, but Molly
Weasley was as much a mother to him as she was to her own children. She expected him to try his
best, and always knew if he had, and never judged him if he’d done as much as he could. It was still
discomforting to think that not all that long ago he had held the people who lived here in contempt.
He’d thought he’d had reasons to…then. Now they were the only family he really had, and contrary
to everything he’d ever learned as a pureblood, they accepted his fondness for Harry without
question.

Molly appeared at the bottom of the stairwell.

“Hurry now, love! Supper’s almost on, and there’s still a bit to be done yet. And tell Arthur to hurry
along if you see him!”

“Right. I’m hurrying, I’m hurrying.”

Draco delivered a final set of sheets and blankets to one of the recently Transfigured beds, and cast a
spell he’d learned in school long ago. The bundles of cloth quickly made themselves and the bed was
done and ready, freeing Draco to seek out Arthur, who was probably wrapped up in a simple chore
that was mysteriously taking three or four times longer to accomplish than usual.
On the way back to the stairs, Draco passed the open door to his and Harry’s room. The bed was still rumpled from this morning, and looked wonderfully inviting.

Tonight he would give himself to Harry, sharing something that had only ever been taken from him before. It had all been leading up to this…this ultimate act of trust. There was no one but Harry that he would even think of doing something like this for, and tonight his idle dreams and fantasies would become his new reality.

‘Tonight.’

TBC!!!
The First Time

DISCLAIMER: Warning! I make no claim to any property of J.K. Rowling's, and am in no way profiting by this. I do offer her my sincerest thanks for allowing us this garden of the mind in which we play. Further Warning! This story...and likely any I ever write...are dominated by gay themes and characters. That's how it is, if this in any way makes you uncomfortable...do not read further.

Redeem Me…by Samayel

Chapter 62: The First Time

Harry couldn’t honestly remember a time when he’d felt better than this. On one hand, a lifetime’s worth of pent up hormones and sexual energy were finding release every single day, and on the other hand, he had a lover who was also his closest friend and confidant. In two short weeks, Draco had gone from a beautiful and untouchable mystery, to a confident and sensual lover, and Harry had reaped the benefits of this change each night…and some of the mornings as well! He’d never really thought of himself as brooding or morose. Those were things that better fit his mental description of others. Only now, in retrospect, did his life before this seem dark and empty. Perhaps it was hard to define emptiness…until one’s life was full. Either way, the changes to his outlook were as clear as the changes in his life.

The heaps of housework hadn’t slowed his stride in the slightest, and since he was home with Molly fairly often compared to the others, he had cheerfully shouldered most of the labor. He always had, because he was here, and because with magic of his strength, he could make many chores easier with a wave of his hand. There was a subtle change in the very way he looked at his day, all from nothing more than the knowledge that he’d awakened next to Draco, and would be falling asleep beside him again tonight. Those two seemingly simple things made everything that happened between those two points irrelevant. He’d lived with nightmares and headaches for so long that, until this sudden respite, he’d accepted them as part of his life. Throw that kind of relief in next to comfort, companionship and sex, and life was sweeter by far than anything he’d ever known.

It wasn’t as if he hadn’t been trying to behave himself better before now. It just seemed to come so much easier. There seemed to be no anger in him, and little if any discontent. Logically, he knew there were Death Eaters still out there, doing harm or just fleeing from the Aurors, and the situation hadn’t really changed, but the way he felt about it was rapidly shifting. The Auror service seemed to be doing their job, there hadn’t been any word about new victims of LeStrange’s gang, Ron was getting on with his life and loving his new work, and Draco was healthier and happier than Harry had ever seen him. How could anyone brood when things were like this?

Draco had started working out again, and Molly’s big meals had put five more pounds on his frame, and it was all in places it belonged. He might always be slim, but he looked fresh-faced and energetic instead of waifish and pitiable, and these changes suited Harry perfectly. Draco just kept getting better looking with every week, resembling the young man Harry had gone to school with…minus the attitude problem and inclination toward mayhem. Molly’s words months ago had been prophetic, and they echoed even now in Harry’s ears.

‘This is a chance to see what kind of person he could have been all along…to let him be who he would have wanted to be.’

Draco had done just that, transforming before Harry’s eyes into a confident, hard-working and
decent person, and a thorough and considerate lover. A very thorough lover! Harry hadn’t realized he’d had the capacity to do those kinds of things...until last week. His personal fantasies had never really gotten a chance to develop that far. He’d gone from dreaming of intimacy to swimming in it in a matter of weeks, and he’d figured out right away that he liked it. The most stunning part was the unquestionable fact that Draco had faced a lot of very valid fears for the sake of being with Harry, and while Harry couldn’t imagine the details of those internal struggles, Draco had pushed himself and pushed himself hard to give their newborn relationship every shred of normalcy he could. It was an amazing thing to think of, and Harry tried never to forget what Draco was overcoming to live this way.

At the moment, Draco was stringing garlands on the tree with Molly, and out of a sense of tradition and teamwork, no magic was being used. Harry was still peeling off his heavy boots and winter coat, and he watched Draco stand on his toes, stretching to reach the upper branches and secure the garland on his side. The arch of his neck was perfect, and his bangs were falling into his eyes. He saw Harry staring at him, and spared a second to wink before turning back to his task. It was so...so normal. It was everything his life had never been, and everything he hadn’t known he was missing until he had it.

“We never did this at home.” Draco sounded vague and wistful.

“No? Well, we do it at home now, don’t we?”

Harry’s happy smirk and comment struck the mark and brought a smile, as well as a long deserved kiss. After supper they’d set to working on a few more things rather than relaxing as usual, and there hadn’t been a minute of privacy between them all day. Molly had finally reached her limit, flushed and tired, and sat down with a heavy sigh.

“Dear me. Hadn’t thought this would tire me out so. Time was I could do this kind of thing and manage a houseful of small ones at the same time, and here I am knackered already.” Molly nipped at her tea and closed her eyes while breathing slowly.

Draco flopped gracelessly into a chair, exhaling loudly. “Thank Merlin! I was afraid you’d never get tired! I was embarrassed to think that you were running me into the ground. I wasn’t going to stop until you did, but I was starting to wonder if I’d wind up keeling over first!”

Molly took the ribbing good-naturedly. “It’s just rare that I see all the children home these days. There’s the night after tomorrow, and then there’s the ringing in of the New Year, and it will be a goodly while until I see them all in this house again. Not that I don’t love the both of you, but I do get to missing my boys. Speaking of same, where on earth is Arthur?”

It was at that moment that a muffled bang was heard from Arthur’s small workshop. Harry hurried to the door after exchanging looks with Molly and Draco, and opened it just in time to find Arthur staggering back toward the house. The man’s thinning reddish hair was standing straight on end, and his eyes were slightly glazed, every so often losing their focus. His left hand was blackened as if by soot, and when Harry touched Arthur’s arm to help him in the door, static electricity crackled between the two of them, catching Harry quite by surprise. He led Arthur back into the house and deposited him in his favorite chair, dazed and confused. Draco ran to fetch a drink for the beleaguered head of the Weasley household. Molly, on the other hand, was already in a dudgeon.

“Arthur! What, pray tell, do you think you were doing in that workshop of yours when we’ve so much to get finished? Hmm? Tinkering about with your Muggle things at a time like this! Serves you right! Hmmph!”

Harry braved the obvious question while Draco handed the man his tea. “What happened? Are you
Arthur blinked a few times, then smiled rather vaguely. “Oh. Fine. Just fine. Remember those Muggle decorations you’d told me about last year? The ones for the holidays? They need electricity to light them up proper?”

Harry nodded. “Yeah. But the house isn’t wired for it.”

“Found a spell. Worked just fine. Makes great loads of that electricity stuff. Just need to find a way to get it to go in that deuced little plug and stay there, though.”

The others didn’t understand why Harry was laughing so hard, but he couldn’t help but intervene on Arthur’s behalf.

“It was a noble effort. Molly would have loved it if it had worked. Try talking to some Artificers from the Magical Devices Division. They might know a way to make a storage battery for all that electricity and put a plug on it for you. As long as you’re alright, I suppose it was worth the try.”

“Oh, I’m alright. Just a bit shocked is all.” Arthur’s pun wasn’t lost on anyone. It was just so bad that they all stared at him in dumbfounded awe.

“Might say that I haven’t lost my spark at all.”

“That’s it, you! Off to bed! Clean yourself up and get to bed this instant. There will be no more of that at this hour!”

Molly was still heckling Arthur mercilessly all the way up the stairs, leaving Draco and Harry mercifully alone at last. Draco looked up from his chair and fluttered his eyes at Harry with a ruthless and overdone innocence.

“Harry? Remember when you floated me down the stairs…wandlessly?”

Harry had a fairly good idea where this was going, but there was no point in spoiling Draco’s fun. Besides, the answer was already yes.

“Yeah. I think I remember that. Why do you ask?” His smirk gave away too much. Draco knew perfectly well that Harry had already figured out what was coming.

“Well…it’s been such a long day, and I’m sooo tired. Would you float me back to our room?”

Harry didn’t say a word. He just smiled and stood up, raising his hands and letting the magic gather. Draco was already smiling from ear to ear when he began to lift into the air, slowly rising until he hovered just a few feet off of the ground. Draco basked in relaxation while magic suspended him in the air, moving him slowly up the stairs ahead of Harry.

“Mmmm. Thank you, Harry. This is the life. Wandlessly transported to bed by my sexy boyfriend. This could only be better if…”

Draco’s voice trailed off as Harry spelled the door to their room open and looked inside. He was so stunned he almost dropped Draco from surprise, but recovered, leaving Draco wobbling in midair a bit.

At some point that evening, Draco had set candles about the room, and had scattered rose petals across the bed. Anything out of place for the atmosphere he wanted had been quickly spelled out of sight, and Harry’s cozy room had been transformed into something vaguely romantic. Incense hung
in the air; something that hinted of summer and night in foreign lands. Draco looked awfully smug for someone depending on magic to keep him aloft, but he had faith in Harry’s ability to take the hints and get him to where he so obviously belonged.

Harry actually blushed. He’d put aside his ability to blush over the last week or so. So much proximity to Draco, and so much sensual activity, had finally cured him of the semi-permanent redness of his cheeks...until now. This was a bit more than he’d expected, and he wasn’t nearly so foolish as to miss the significance of all this. He floated Draco gently into the room, then ended the spell and let Draco drop into his own arms, holding the smug little prat close. He was beautiful, but that knowing smirk of his was absolutely insufferable.

They kissed warmly and softly, perfectly content with the state of affairs just the way it was, and Draco was only barely aware of Harry walking slowly to the bed, even though they never broke contact, letting the kiss linger until they both made themselves comfortable.

There were soft and breathy declarations of love, which curled past their ears just as the smoke of incense drifted by. Clothing found its way to the floor almost of its own volition. Time slid by in in a warm and flickering haze; a sweetly scented pastiche of smooth, dark muscle and lean and pale limbs winding languorously together.

A moment passed between them. Something not unlike the unspoken messages passed by Dula and Charlie. A look, and Harry simply knew to let Draco take the lead. Draco reveled in that moment. Harry knew him completely, and understood that for Draco to do what he intended, it had to be on his own terms, and at his own pace. Harry made himself comfortable on his back, while Draco tried to tastefully distract Harry with a few long kisses, buying time to reach the small vial of lubricant he’d purchased in Diagon Alley two weeks ago. Getting it open was one thing, applying it to himself was another. It very much brought home the reality of what he was about to do. Once again, it was different from anything he’d ever done before. Obviously in part because he was astride Harry’s hips, and entirely in charge of whatever he chose to do, but also because he’d never had the luxury of using something to smooth the way into his body. Idly pressed fingers wouldn’t be enough, and there was a brief pause while Draco hung his head and flushed crimson, slipping a heavily slicked finger into himself, rubbing it about just a little, and then slowly pressing a second in.

It wasn’t bad at all. A couple of fingers were a fairly snug fit. Then he remembered the thickness of Harry’s cock, and shuddered slightly with apprehension. Perhaps this wouldn’t be quite so easy after all. The fingers slipped free, and Draco positively coated them in the slick gel before placing the vial back on the nightstand. His slick palm reached behind him again, and this time took Harry’s stone hard erection in hand, gently working the stuff onto every part of it...especially near the head.

Harry had one hand on Draco’s hip, and the other was knotted into the sheets. He hissed when Draco’s loose hand wrapped itself around his cock, massaging gel onto it, and effectively wanked him with a warm slickness he’d never felt before. It was agonizingly pleasant, especially since they’d wanked each other before, but never with lubricant in the mix. Draco shifted slightly, bringing Harry’s attention back to him.

Draco leaned forward, resting his head on Harry’s chest, arcing his back slightly in the hope of making the initial entry easier. He held the rigid flesh behind him in position, braced carefully for entrance. Its presence there, hot and close, nudging slightly against a place that had only known violation, made him terribly tense and more than a little frightened. He was determined to do this, even if it hurt, but the reality was a lot more unnerving than the fantasy.

Harry sensed Draco’s apprehension, could read it in the stress of his muscles and in the faint widening of his eyes. He whispered softly.
“Draco, you don’t…”

Draco stopped him with a finger on his lips.

“Shhhh.”

His eyes were still wide, and Harry could feel the nervous shiver that ran through Draco’s entire body. Draco took a long breath, exhaled slowly, and pushed out and back. A few heartbeats later it smarted terribly, as muscles strained against intrusion, but it wasn’t anything at all like what he’d once endured. Uncomfortable maybe, but not torturous. Then a sobering realization struck him. That was only the first couple of inches.

‘What the fuck was I thinking? Maybe it isn’t MacNair’s mule-dick, but it’s bloody more than large enough! It’s huge! Shit! Fuck! Breathe. Breathe and relax. You can do this. This is your night. Harry’s night. Breathe for Merlin’s fucking sake.’

Draco rested himself on Harry’s chest, breathing slowly and evenly, and Harry was stroking his hair and shoulders with hands that spoke a silent language of affection. He knew. He knew it wasn’t easy, but he wasn’t going to go against Draco’s wishes. He’d been told to hush, and hushed he would remain. Draco felt his body relax a little, albeit only barely, and he wriggled ever so slightly, letting the lubricant work its magic. His own penis was limp from the pain earlier, and was wedged between Harry’s chest and his own.

Another long minute or so passed, and Draco finally felt confident enough to try the recommendation given him by Dula. Ever so carefully, he rocked himself back and forth on Harry’s chest, bearing down on the engorged cock behind him but not really pushing hard enough to achieve deeper entry. He could feel the difference, as the thing lodged in him slid ever so slightly in and out, but little more than an inch or so was involved in the entire process. Draco huffed softly, surprisingly overwrought by the effort this was taking. The frottage against Harry’s chest was nice, though, and his own cock was starting to respond to the warmth and soft friction of skin on skin. The pleasures of Harry’s gentle hands didn’t hurt either. He felt treasured and wanted, even though he was concentrating very hard on something fairly difficult, and the sluggish return of his own sense of arousal changed the dynamic nicely.

The gentle rocking was taking its toll, stretching tensed muscles inside of him and moving lubricant into places that desperately needed it. He wasn’t sure how much time had passed, but Draco became aware of the fact that Harry was slack-jawed with pleasure, and breathing unevenly, hands occasionally tensing against Draco, and it was because Draco was slowly and evenly taking in and releasing just about half of Harry’s prick. He wasn’t sure when or how it had happened, but it hadn’t really discomforted him in awhile, and his own erection was rigid against Harry’s body and leaving tiny dabs of pre-come against the smooth, tanned flesh of his lover.

His face was flushed, and a faint sheen of sweat had coated his entire body from his efforts, and a desperate heat was kindled in him. Draco pushed harder, further, taking another inch with every new push, bearing down and trying to open himself as much as possible to accommodate the whole of Harry’s sex. The girth of the thing made it challenging, but Draco was rapidly becoming too aroused to be worried about it.

Harry was gritting his teeth, eyes clenched and head back, straining with the effort of self-restraint in the face of pleasure. Draco was sliding slowly back, engulfing more and more of Harry’s aching erection into a taut warmth that Harry hadn’t even conceived of. Bands of muscle clenched around every inch of him that was inside of Draco. A soft, silken heat suffused his cock. No grip could ever be as firm as this, and no mouth so thorough. It was taking a lot of his willpower just to stave off immediate orgasm, and Harry looked up to see Draco push himself back again, his flushed face
grimacing slightly with the effort, and then it was done. Just like that. Draco was at rest against Harry’s groin, and Harry was as deep inside Draco’s body as he could be.

Draco exhaled with relief and let himself rest on Harry’s chest again. He’d done it. It was in. Supposedly, the difficult part was over, and the actual fun could begin. At the moment, he was absorbed by so many things he hadn’t expected. The pressure inside him was strange. Violation and pain he was used to, but this was new territory. He felt terribly full, and if he’d had a full bladder, this would have made such a thing unbearable. As it was, the presence of Harry’s straining and pulsing cock inside him made his own dick twitch with the anticipation of orgasm. A tiny thread of pre-come linked his bobbing cock to Harry’s waist, and Draco raised himself up, intent on making the rest of this night legendary.

Dula had warned him that wasn’t the most comfortable of positions for a first evening, but it had been the only one he’d been sure he could handle emotionally. From above Harry, he could maintain a semblance of control, and feel a sense of choice in his actions. Dula had been right, in that Draco’s knees were sore, and his thighs were straining already from making so many tiny adjustments to prevent his being swiftly impaled on Harry’s cock. All in all, it was a bit more work than he’d imagined, but the way that Harry looked below him made it all worthwhile. The man was positively glowing with excitement, and Draco knew with absolute certainty that he ruled Harry’s world with impunity.

Draco wrapped his fingers in Harry’s mussed locks, and busied himself with a kiss while he ground himself against Harry’s cock, letting the pressure inside himself shift and change within. Nerves that had only been awakened once before came to life once again, this time because he was fused together at the hips with the one he loved, and because he was too aroused to feel shame or doubt over his actions. Draco rocked back and forth, taking all of Harry that was there to be taken, delighting perversely in the soft burn of friction inside himself, and reveling in the tiny explosions of pleasure that came of Harry’s pulsing flesh pressing again and again upon bundles of nerves that had waited a lifetime to know such stimulation.

His motions became unconsciously frantic, seeking repletion as his own need mounted, and before long he was gliding back swiftly and evenly, almost entranced by the bliss such activity brought, and his breath was coming in ragged pants. Wide-eyed, a little confused by the overwhelming physical pleasures, and just a little frightened and confused by the feelings rising within him, Draco broke away from Harry’s lips, supporting himself with a hand on Harry’s chest while he frantically reached for his own leaking and desperate prick. Harry placed one hand over the one that was on his chest, and watched in stunned amazement as Draco feverishly stroked himself to orgasm, all the while flexing and straining against the organ rooted deep inside him, keening softly as he began to come.

Harry watched droplets of semen spatter across his stomach and chest, also dotting their joined hands, and let go of his self control at last, coming explosively hard, deep inside the unfathomably tight warmth of Draco’s body. It was a merciless orgasm, since the whole of his newly sensitive cock was enveloped in velvet soft flesh that clenched savagely around his manhood again and again, pulling the last drops from Harry with a cruel deliberateness that was almost ruthless.

Draco sunk down onto Harry, dizzy and replete, exhausted past the ability to do more than whisper his devotion a few times before gasping for breath while letting himself recover. He hadn’t thought it would be like that. That it would take him over so subtly, or make him a servant to his own frantic desires. Pushing his fears aside had been worth this reward. Nothing…nothing had ever felt like that, and nothing could have felt better than the way he did now.

Harry had wrapped his arms around Draco, and had his face in Draco’s hair, still trembling while his jutting prick spurted a few final and uncontrollable jets of seed into his lover’s body. He couldn’t
possible have been prepared for the closeness he felt to Draco. They were inextricably linked now, and not merely in the physical sense. There was a truth that came with such intimacy. No matter what happened, no matter what came, they would always be closer than they could ever be to other people. It was a thing that only lovers could know, a familiarity that came of sharing one’s self completely with another, and it marked them forever.

A howling spirit railed against the cruelty of the haven that had become its prison. Battered by tide after tide of love, the shade of Voldemort clung weakly to the spirit that hosted it, almost tempted by the notion of surrender to death’s sweet embrace. It possessed no strength beyond the power to cling desperately to its host, and it suffered with a wordless scream that no living creature could have heard.

The slim wreckage that had been their toy these past weeks hung from its ankles in the seedy abandoned tenement. The bowl beneath the dead boy had collected the blood that had sullenly dripped from several expertly placed cuts. Even battered as he had been, he’d likely felt the precise moment his life had ebbed away. Rodolphus picked up the bowl and moved it to the center of the room.

A hasty cut from his own scalpel and Rodolphus blended his own blood with that of his victim’s. An uttered spell and the small wound on his wrist vanished instantly. The tools of the art were about him. Sea salt, iron powder, silver dust, brimstone and chalk. Other, far more obscure items lay at his feet as well. It would be a long night’s work, but it had to be done, else his goal might never be realized. The symbols he etched into the floor were old. Older than most could comprehend, and almost beyond recognition even to most wizards. Magic of this sort was tedious and difficult, beneath the notice of today’s hasty world. It offered so much more possibility though. It offered freedom for his Lord, but these symbols had to be perfect, and they had to be ready for the Solstice.

Rodolphus labored into the night. Tomorrow, the body would be disposed of, and a message would be sent. The deed would be done, and there could be no flinching from what came after. It was a necessary thing, risk. If one wanted to strike out for the stars, one had to gamble in the gutter. Fortunately for Rodolphus LeStrange, he had never gambled without hedging his bet.

TBC!!!
Dreams Of Days To Come

DISCLAIMER: Warning! I make no claim to any property of J.K. Rowling's, and am in no way profiting by this. I do offer her my sincerest thanks for allowing us this garden of the mind in which we play. Further Warning! This story...and likely any I ever write...are dominated by gay themes and characters. That's how it is, if this in any way makes you uncomfortable...do not read further.

Redeem Me…by Samayel

Chapter 63: Dreams Of Days To Come

The day before the Solstice might easily have been called a truly good day. Draco woke late, and Harry was resting peacefully behind him, curled comfortably and rather protectively around Draco, which suited Draco’s mood perfectly. He’d coaxed two more rounds of sex from Harry the night before, and each had been an improvement over the one before it. His body had relaxed, accommodating the fullness of Harry’s cock with greater ease, and that had allowed him a certain level of comfort with which to experiment and find ways to please himself.

Harry had been all hands, and had been perfectly comfortable remaining on his back while Draco took the initiative, but his one stroke of genius had been lubricating his hand and slickly wanking Draco off. The combination of feeling Harry inside of him, hard and thick and perfectly shaped, and a firm and slick hand around his only just recently sated cock had been as much as Draco could handle. It had been a fortunate thing that Draco had possessed enough foresight to spell the room for silence before Harry had brought him upstairs, otherwise the ghoul in the attic would have been deafened by the noises Draco made when he came.

It was at that point, just after Draco had shakily spilled his seed onto Harry stomach…again, that Harry had brought his hips into play rather daringly, thrusting slowly into Draco from below, while Draco had just dizzily snogged Harry’s neck and recovered. They hadn’t really ‘separated’ at all, until much later. Draco had just pleasured himself a third time, and was too exhausted to do more than grind gently on Harry’s lap, which was just enough stimulation for Harry to finally let go for a second time and rut softly into Draco from below until his final release into Draco stole away his rational mind and left him a shuddering mess.

There had been hushed words, fervent and truthful. Quiet statements of adoration and murmured words of affection. Harry’s wandless magic had cleaned them both with a few uttered words, and they had curled together, snogging sleepily, hesitant to let slumber bring this night to an end. So much activity had taken its toll, and they had slept the night through and run well into the late morning before Draco had peeled an eye open to survey the new day’s light through the window.

He was immediately aware of Harry’s closeness, which was delicious, but he was also aware of a burgeoning need to use the bathroom, and of a very noticeable tenderness in his nether regions. What set it apart from past encounters was that it didn’t truly ‘hurt’ per se, but rather burned, the way one’s knee might if one had skidded to a halt on a carpeted floor. There was a gnawing emptiness as well. He felt hollow, shaky and incomplete, as if without Harry inside of him he wasn’t entirely whole. It was more than a little disconcerting to feel that clingy and needy despite Harry being snugly wrapped around him, but it was also kind of pleasing in its own right.

He’d got the storybook fairytale. It was all his. Harry was getting better fast. He had a family that, even if he was not a child of their own, loved him, cared for him, and accepted him completely. He
had a job where he was respected for his abilities, and he had friends that would help him or talk to him when he needed them. And he had love. Tomorrow he would celebrate the Solstice surrounded by love, and it would be the first time he could say that such a thing was utterly true. It was a very good day.

It took a bit of effort to wake Harry, who was sweet but sluggish in the morning, especially after all that Draco had coaxed from him the night before. A few hasty kisses and he’d been up and fetching a bathrobe for his journey down the hall, while Harry’s bleary eyes still registered appreciation at the brief sight of Draco’s naked body. Draco was sure he would never get tired of that look.

He was thankful that Harry hadn’t been in the bathroom with him, as they had done a few times this past two weeks. Their closeness had grown to the point where nudity was meaningless between them, and mutual showers had been a happy and exhilarating expression of that change. This time, however, was an occasion for privacy, since Draco quickly discovered that he had not only a bladder that ached for release, but a very sudden and desperate need to release the fluids that Harry had left deep inside of him the night before. His face positively flamed over the entire matter until well after he’d finished and showered. It was a little gross, and more than a little embarrassing, to be reminded in the harsh light of morning that, the night before, he’d taken that much into him. The romanticism of the act had blinded him to the realities, and it was sobering in the extreme to be reminded of that reality first thing in the morning. That aside, the day only improved as it went along, and Draco enjoyed himself thoroughly.

Since the boys had been asleep quite late, Molly had made a light breakfast for herself and Arthur, and waited until later to make an early lunch, putting out food for soon to be arriving family members as well. In ones and twos, Weasleys began to arrive. Percy appeared first, chipper and excited to be home again, but still fretting over matters left unresolved at his office for the holidays. Then came the twins, dressed down and looking more like the scruffy hooligans they’d been in school. It was hard to tell that they were among the wealthiest merchants in Diagon Alley when one saw them trading jibes with their brother and Harry.

Ron Flooed in, and made a beeline for the table with food on his mind as always, quick to load his plate before his brothers devoured his favorites, and Charlie and Dula weren’t far behind. Last came Bill and Fleur, almost inseparable even at the table, doting upon each other just as they had when they first met. Draco managed to hide his blush when Ron mentioned aloud that Harry and Draco were little better than Bill and Fleur in that department. He promised himself revenge later, preferably in the form of a truly humiliating hexing, and let the chuckles and chortles of others slide by for the moment.

Harry was in good spirits too, and no one begrudged them the way they looked to each other often or seated themselves beside each other at the newly expanded Weasley table. Molly had rarely looked so supremely content, and despite the dull roar of chatter going on, the Burrow had never seemed so joyful.

Bill and Fleur captured the entire house’s attention with the impromptu announcement of Fleur’s recent pregnancy. At long last, Molly and Arthur would be grandparents, and the remainder of the family would collectively become uncles. Nothing could have raised the spirits of those assembled any higher than that, and only Harry noticed that Draco was often silent that afternoon. Eventually, Harry cornered Draco while clearing the kitchen, when Molly nipped into the living room to deliver tea. They were helping to wash and rinse the dishes and cutlery when Harry gently prodded Draco about his reticence.

“So quiet, love. Something’s eating at you. I can tell. You’re as welcome as anyone here…what’s wrong?”
Draco winced slightly. The reason he’d looked a little uncomfortable at the table had been because sitting still made his bum smart, but he’d rather have chewed off his own arm than admit THAT. Instead, he just blurted out what had been gnawing at him since then. At least he trusted Harry implicitly enough to share this.

“It’s…it’s Bill. I can’t stop looking at his face. I might as well have put those scars there myself. I let that fucking maniac do that to him. I…”

Harry stopped him cold with a look and a gesture. “Don’t even start thinking that. Bill’s a good fellow, and he knew you were here. Molly is forever passing owls back and forth. They knew when you showed up here, and they probably knew within a couple of days when you were invited to stay here. If Molly thought for a minute that there was any bad blood, she would have talked to the both of you by now. You’d know if he was angry. Believe me, he’s not. All that stuff is done and gone. Tonight, this is your family, so take a few breaths, relax, and just say whatever you like to anyone you want. Got it, love?”

Draco soaked in the reassurance, smiling at Harry while he dried off another dish. They both had wands, and yet doing at least part of this the Muggle way had become a ritual. Draco tilted his head up and kissed Harry on the mouth. At least they had a moment’s privacy for that.

“Oy! Bloody hell! Do you two ever quit? Give me one of those pot scrubbers…I have to open my skull and scrub that memory out of my brain.” Ron’s amused tone made a lie of his protests, but Draco still pursed his lips and scowled.

“That shouldn’t take long…except the part where you try to FIND your brain!” He stuck his tongue out for emphasis. “Blow me, Weasley!”

“Hah! Tough luck, Ferret-boy! These lips are for ladies only. Once they go Weasley, they never go back!”

“Yeah? That’s only ‘cause the ones that recover from the syphilis usually hang themselves from shame!”

Ron grinned evilly. “Okay. That’s it. The gauntlet has been thrown down. There’s a snowball fight in the yard in one hour, and I’ll be pelting you until there’s nothing left for Harry to snog but a giant icicle. That is, unless you haven’t got the nerve to back those words up?”

Draco gave his wickedest smirk. Slytherin snowball fights had been legendary for underhanded tricks. “You’re on. Prepare to eat icy death! I’m getting my coat as soon as we’re done in here.”

In the end, the lines were drawn and sides chosen, and Draco wound up with Percy, Dula, Harry and Bill, while Ron took Fred, George and Charlie and Arthur. Outright warfare broke out on the snow covered lawn of the Burrow, and more than a few spells were surreptitiously cast, despite the unspoken implication that it was to remain a snowball fight. Bending of the rules took many forms, such as Fred and George’s famous charm for making themselves appear just a few feet to one side of their actual location. This made hitting them quite hard until Harry started using wandless spells to launch barrages of snowballs at the same time, peppering whole areas with flying balls of slush and fluff. The situation only escalated from there.

Draco finally cursed Ron with what he’d hoped was a subtle hex that made him attract snowballs in flight, rendering him an easy target. It would have been subtle, except that Draco’s wand made the spell powerful enough that even Ron couldn’t fire off a snowball without it swinging back in mid-flight and zipping after him. Before another five minutes had passed, every snowball in the yard was chasing Ron like a hive of outraged bees, and while he was thoroughly distracted, victory was
claimed by Draco when Ron’s own teammates abandoned him because his presence put them at risk of being pelted by the horde of airborne snowballs that followed Ron everywhere.

Of course, Draco might have been a gracious winner. Might have. Draco did restrain himself to a single, brief, public victory jig, and a complimentary winner’s snog with Harry.

Hot chocolate was the order of the day, and as the valiant and fallen both trudged inside, Draco felt a great deal better about his standing in the midst of the Weasley family. The day passed with cheery chatter and good food, and Draco was more than comfortable. There were games of wizard chess that were absolutely epic, with Ron crushing all comers, including Draco, until Arthur soundly trumped his son in a few dozen moves, proving once and for all that he was still the undisputed Burrow chess champion. Molly was in her element, completely surrounded by her children and alternately chiding or feeding them, and Harry looked as at home and content as Draco had ever seen him.

Bill was speaking of his work for Gringotts, and Draco finally edged his way into the conversation when Harry made mention of Draco’s skill with numbers. Between the snowball fight and the ice-breaking over their similar skills, Draco finally relaxed and joined the conversation fully. It seemed that Fleur was three weeks pregnant, and it was owed to a work related journey to Greece, which they had treated as a sort of working vacation. At some point during their stay she had conceived, and they were giving serious thought to picking a vaguely Greek name for their child just to honor the occasion. Fleur and Bill had been a perfect match from the day they’d met, and despite the brief engagement that had scandalized Molly then, their marriage had been happier than anyone could have hoped for.

In somewhere around eight or nine months, the first new Weasley child in almost two decades would be born, and it felt like a new era was being ushered in by that knowledge. The war was really over, and a generation that had never heard of Voldemort was being brought into the world, one at a time, slowly filling in the empty places in hearts and homes around the wizarding world. Someday the war would be nothing more than a history lesson taught by Professor Binns, and likely snored through by half the students at that. Perhaps there were lessons learned that shouldn’t be forgotten, but the people who had lived it were looking forward to a long spell of peace and quiet, and if that meant letting the past slip away into obscurity, so be it.

Games were played and maudlin songs sung, and a vast Yule log was set afire that evening, meant to burn long enough so that its last coals carried the fire into the new year to come. Molly’s feast that night had half-emptied her larder, and the table groaned beneath the weight of the food placed upon it. For a boy who had grown up in a huge mansion, careful not to make noise or break anything, and who had sat at the end of a long table, dozens of feet from his parents (when they dined with him at all), being elbow to elbow in a house full of outspoken and festive Weasleys was a major culture shock.

There was much merriment and abundant good cheer, and Draco was very full and very tired before the evening wound down. He’d spoken to every person present at least a few times, and felt that he’d both met the requirements of etiquette and enjoyed himself at the same time. He was sleepy enough that, for once, sex wasn’t on his mind when he and Harry headed upstairs for their room. There was a thorough snog that roused Draco’s libido briefly, but not so much so that he wished to put off sleep. Besides, there was always tomorrow, and when the Burrow was just a little quieter, he would take his time and enjoy a proper shagging from Harry again.

Anticipation of just that floated through Draco’s drifting mind as he slipped into slumber, still reveling in the knowledge that Harry was there to please him, and vice versa, and a lifetime of opportunity for such things lay open before him like a wide and shining road to paradise. Draco slept
as peacefully as the child he’d once been, though far removed from his childhood, and occupied by very different thoughts that, even in the most generous of terms, couldn’t have been described as innocent.

Under the light of a fat and impassive moon, three black-cowled men sat around a circle of blood, eldritch symbols and lighted candles placed strategically around them. Each bore a small knife, and chanted rhythmically, invoking black powers to their cause. The knives flashed, and their blood joined the blood that made the circle. Each had opened their veins for their cause, each cutting themselves open where a faded Mark had once shone upon their arms.

Rodolphus LeStrange led them in their dark litany, focused entirely on the spell that he was casting. Their master had given them power, bound them to him, tying them immortally together to wax or wane as one with him. Now they gave that power back. Their rightful lord would need to be stronger if he were to rise this coming eve, and they gave what little power they had willingly, in exchange for the hope of a future at his side once again.

When the ritual was complete, there were no words between them, as the plan was already understood. In the dead of night, shrouded by spells, they left their final victim where all would see the work that they had wrought. The boy’s body was hung by the ankles like a martyr, left at the London entrance to Diagon Alley. Before they left, Rodolphus uttered a final spell, leaving a calling card the world had once learned to fear.

The Dark Mark hung in the sky above London once again, and all who witnessed it felt dread in their hearts, for it heralded the return of evil times. The man who had cast it returned to his lair, and penned a missive to be sent the next day. It was written in a steady and elegant hand, the script as neat as that of a clerk of ancient times. It wouldn’t have done to be hasty or sloppy in the writing of it. This was an invitation, and it was an invitation that would change the world. After all, a man had to think of posterity, didn’t he?

At first weak and sluggish, the beast that slept in Harry’s breast flickered to life as new energy fed it, flooded it with vitality it hadn’t known since it had walked the earth in a body of its own. The spirit roared to life, latching hold of the sleeping mind that harbored it, and struck deep, extracting vengeance for the indignity it had suffered at the hands of its unwitting host.

Harry woke in the night, blinded by the pain in his scar. His dreams had been more terrible than any before and had left him sweating and cold. He’d seen laid before him a world in ruins, ashen and gray in the aftermath of destruction, the bodies of the fallen everywhere to be seen. On a vast throne carved from the bones of the fallen, a black-robed lord sat brooding, supplicants bowing at his feet, and when that terrible master’s head had lifted, Harry had seen a face that chilled him to the bone and wakened him with a stifled scream upon his lips. The face had been his own.

TBC!!!
The mood in the Burrow that morning quickly turned dour and quiet. Although it was the Yule Solstice, and Diagon Alley was far away, theirs was a family that had suffered greatly during the war, and the word spread through the wizarding community like wildfire. Owls were fluttering across England by the thousands, and Firecalls were being sent and received until the Floo network was almost ready to collapse. The Daily Prophet thundered off an early edition full of wild speculations and lurid possibilities, and predictably there was no comment as yet from the Ministry, which was still investigating the event. Remus Lupin owled a hasty letter to the Burrow apologizing for his and Tonks’ absence, since she’d been called back to duty in the face of this most recent killing. Fear of the unknown, and possibly the unthinkable, was in the hearts of many, and even the stolid and dependable Weasleys were muted and on edge.

Harry had been quiet all day, showing little appetite and no urge for conversation, except for several hushed and secretive chats with the twins. Draco worried for Harry’s reaction, but Harry hadn’t shown any sign of rage since they’d woke, just a steely-eyed and quiet sense of resignation. Since quiet resignation was almost uniform amongst the Weasley family, it was hard to say whether this was safe behavior for Harry or not, but Draco was certain of one thing, and it was that Harry and the twins were planning something. Even though Harry was Gryffindor as hell, there was something decidedly Slytherin about the way he managed his time to ensure that he and Draco never had a moment alone for more than mere seconds. Draco was beginning to suspect that Harry had intended this as a means to avoid uncomfortable questions about his talks with the twins.

Molly saw Draco’s pensive and restless look, and mistook it for fear purely over the Dark Mark. Understandable, given Draco’s personal history, but she hadn’t guessed how serious matters really were, and with the secrecy surrounding Horcruxes at the center of it, Draco hoped she never would.

“‘There, there, love. This is the safest place in all of England these days, and no matter what comes we’ll be looking after our own, and that includes you. It’s Solstice, Draco. It’s a time of rebirth, and a time for celebration. In fact, that gives me an idea.’

Molly turned away and addressed her assembled family.

“‘That’s it! Enough of this moping about! I will not let this holiday be spoiled by a bit of ill news! The lot of you will move to the living room and gather about the tree. Presents will be opened a day early, and I don’t care a whit about tradition. We’ll see our gifts opened like any holiday, and we’ll have ourselves a decent meal when we’re done…and that is final!’”

When Molly Weasley was in high dudgeon, no one, absolutely no one, dared to gainsay her authority. The Weasley clan moved as one and quickly surrounded the tree, and Arthur took up his traditional role of handing out presents. Draco in particular seemed to be piled high with goods, and
since they were waiting to open them until they’d all been passed out, Draco wound up seated on the couch and almost overwhelmed by the gifts that surrounded him. His Slytherin impulses were quietly reveling at this windfall, and even though the initial cheer was forced, the mood in the Weasley household was quickly showing improvement.

Draco simply made out like a bandit. Molly had been knitting for months, and her need for green yarn weeks ago was finally explained when Draco opened his gifts. There were two sweaters of dark, emerald green, trimmed in silver, a set of mittens, a long scarf that looked like it would fight off any degree of cold, and a stocking cap that matched the sweaters. His suspicions about Harry’s Slytherin nature were borne up by the number of other gifts that strangely matched things he’d stared wistfully at in Diagon Alley, or had mentioned only to Harry. Word had obviously been passed to the others, since he received his favorite grooming products, fashionable clothes, a new cauldron and elementary potion making supplies, and any number of small items that were useful but had been unavailable to him because of his limited assets. He wasn’t really sure if it was dignified to cheer out loud, or just break down and cry, but muttering thank you and choking up every few minutes was wearing a bit thin.

Despite Harry’s secretive mood, even he looked much happier, at least to Draco, and there was something about the way Harry looked at him that hinted at mysteries. It was like he was laughing at some inside joke that Draco had been left out of, and it was slightly annoying. However frustrated he was by Harry’s unwillingness to slip off together for a bit of privacy, at least the mood had brightened a bit, and good meals took the edge off of his tension handily, especially since he always sat next to Harry, and when Harry smiled it was like the sun had risen.

Harry hadn’t really slept since his nightmare of that evening. It had been different. Very different from any of the haunting episodes that had worried at him over the last year or so. His scar hadn’t hurt like that since…since the day he’d killed Voldemort. The terrible news of that morning hadn’t set right with him either. It was connected…it just had to be. Any Death Eater could cast a Dark Mark, but it was an uncommonly daring act given the current climate. Announcing their presence that way was an incomprehensible act given the current climate. Announcing their presence that way was just asking to get caught.

It had to be LeStrange’s gang. A battered and shredded body hung from the entrance to Diagon Alley? Another victim marked up the way Draco had been. A vicious blend of whip weals, burns and vivisection cuts could only mean that they were behind this, but to make such an obvious move defied explanation. These were the people that had maimed his lover. These were people that, in his heart, Harry knew would never be stopped by anything less than death. Draco would probably protest any action he tried to take, but this wasn’t a matter that could be resolved by alternatives. LeStrange desperately needed to be taken out of this world, and MacNair…well…for what he’d done to Draco, Harry meant to make the bastard last awhile before he croaked. He hadn’t thought about these things since the last Diagon Alley incident, and then he’d been too overwhelmed by Draco’s needs and desires to worry over it for long, but they were at the forefront of his mind now, and they’d soon wish that they hadn’t been so bold.

He’d spoken quietly to the twins, and as soon as they got back to their place tomorrow morning they’d be making contact with every agent and informant they had in London. If LeStrange or one of his goons took a step out of line, they’d be watched all the way home…and Harry would be making a late night visit shortly after.

He knew full well that Draco was on to him. His boyfriend was a Slytherin to his little, cute core,
even if he’d grown a heart of gold since school. The world of subtlety was an open book for Draco, and it would take a bit of careful maneuvering to keep the subject of avenging him off the menu for awhile. It would have to be dealt with eventually, but Harry had no intention of spoiling his Solstice surprise for Draco. Hell, after his lover had gotten his final gift for the day, he might just be a little more amenable to Harry’s plans. Molly’s notion of opening gifts early had greatly improved the day as a whole, but he rather regretted that Remus and Tonks had cancelled, as he still owed them an apology for his outburst in the alley, and a profound thank you for saving Draco. The situation could have ended a lot worse if it hadn’t been for their timely help, and Harry still felt grateful to them for that.

It hadn’t been an easy day at all. So much secrecy and planning, so much silence and worry. He hadn’t slept but half the night, his appetite was ruined by the morning’s news, and he’d felt a faint tremble of tension inside him the entire morning and into the afternoon. He was surrounded by friends and family, and they were afraid of what the Dark Mark might mean for the future. He’d had enough of friends being frightened to last him ten lifetimes. They deserved a world where they slept in peace, never wondering if terror was on the horizon, and he meant to give that to them…soon.

The day passed in a blur, and his mood improved a little as it went. Seeing Draco open so many presents, smiling from ear to ear all the while, had done Harry’s mood some good, but it did nothing for the aching tension inside him. He’d dodged Draco’s questions all day, and even managed to hold down some supper, but to give Draco his last gift, he needed a little privacy, and that meant Draco getting a chance to speak seriously about things. As tense as he already was, Harry wasn’t looking forward to much of anything but the look he expected on Draco’s face when this last gift was opened.

The time inevitably came, and Harry steeled himself for it by hinting that a nice trek in the snow would be a good way to walk off dinner. Draco wasted no time piling into his new sweater, coat and mittens, then yanked his cap and scarf on, smiling at Molly all the while. He finally had enough green on to stand out in a house dominated by Gryffindors…no wonder he looked so happy.

They were out the door a few minutes later, and Draco had moved immediately into place at Harry’s arm, perfectly at peace with the idea of walking arm in arm with Harry. It was such a simple thing, but it was still strange for Harry, being so familiar and close after a lifetime alone. He was sure it was the same for Draco, so at least the both of them were getting used to this together. It had occurred to him that his gift was rushed into, and that it had meaning beyond simply being tasteful and generous, but he hadn’t cared about any of that. One thing mattered most, and that was Draco, and he only knew one way to show it.

“You’re thinking too much. It makes you all scowly and puts lines on your forehead. Relax and enjoy. A joyous Yule to you, Harry.”

“Sorry. I’ve had a lot to think about today, love. Hope you’re up for a speech. I didn’t really prepare it well or anything, but there are some things I should say before I hand over your last Solstice gift.”

Draco’s eyes sparkled with interest. “Another gift! For me?! Mmmm. This is soo my day. If there are gifts at the end of it, I can handle any kind of speech. Trust me.”

Harry sat down on the old stump in the backyard, and Draco sat beside him, watching intently while Harry stammered his way through the start of it. His interest was piqued, and he could wait just a little before talking about serious things…especially for presents!

“See…uh…well…it’s like this. I didn’t know what to get you…for Solstice. I gave a lot of ideas to other people, but I didn’t really think any of them were right for me to give to you. I just…I just wanted something really special and perfect.
See…I haven’t been…or I wasn’t…shite…how do I say this? I don’t know much about being gay, but I know I love you. I always grew up thinking I’d have a pretty normal life…once I got away from the Dursleys’. I guess being gay changes some of that. You know…no kids…no marriage…none of the things that say forever. So I thought of one thing I could still do that meant something, and I hope it’s right.

It doesn’t mean the same things it would for folks like Bill and Fleur, but it’s meant the same way, to symbolize something permanent. This is for you, love.”

Harry quietly slipped a small box out of his pocket, and flipped the lid open. A matched set of white gold bands rested inside, each spelled to fit the way wizard rings always were. They were simple, but elegant, unadorned and yet handsome on their own, and Draco noticed that his hand was trembling when he reached for one.

‘Sweet fucking Merlin! Rings! The sweet bastard bought us rings! I got him bloody clothes and a few trinkets, and he bought us rings! Like bloody marriage bands. Oh, my fucking Gods, he’s perfect!’

“Harry! I can’t believe…you…you…”

Draco lost it entirely and flung himself onto Harry, knocking the both of them off the stump and into the snow. The fact that ice and slush were creeping into the neck of his coat didn’t register for almost a minute. Draco poured the whole of himself into saying how he felt with a kiss, because no words could ever do more than limit what he was feeling right now. He was still beaming when he pulled away from Harry’s lips. Harry smiled with the shy intensity that Draco had learned to treasure, and offered up the understatement of the century.

“So, I’m guessing you like it?”

Draco contemplated lining the inside of Harry’s coat with snow, but settled for another extended snog. After a lousy start to the day, it was hard to muster any kind of outrage in the face of thoughtfulness like this. The rings said so many things. It announced to the world that they each belonged to the other, and spoke subtly that the other was important enough to merit this symbol. They spoke of permanence and commitment. It said that Draco hadn’t surrendered himself to a man who was just idly enjoying a teenage whim or making use of a convenient opportunity for sex. It said love, and Draco heard it loud and clear.

Draco curled up on Harry’s chest, comfy despite the slight chill that reddened cheeks. He sighed contentedly.

“I love my Gryffindor. I’m not sorry about one thing anymore. I’m not saying I’d want to be dragged through it all again, but if screwing up my life somehow got me here, then I guess it was worth it. Thank you, Harry…thank you.”

Harry answered softly, sounding just a little awed by his own words.

“I love you too. I never thought I’d be this close to anyone. Never. It just didn’t seem like something that would ever come true. I don’t know how you did it, but you made it all real. As much as you’re welcome, love, I feel like I should be thanking you. I think you’re the thing that’s been missing in my life since the beginning, and it took way too long to find you for my tastes.”

Draco leaned in, and they kissed again, this time longer than before. He laid his head on Harry’s chest afterwards, just watching the icy puffs of his breath swirl away in the breeze. There were things that needed saying, and this was not the ideal time, but he knew he had to say something. His
“I know you want to hunt them down. You know I know it, and you know what I want to say, so I’ll just say it. I don’t want you to go after them. We’ve both waited so long to have this, I don’t want it taken from us. Not by them, not by anything. Please, Harry. I’m begging you. Don’t. Let the Aurors handle this, or just give them information, but don’t kill. Not for me. Not even them. Let them go to Azkaban and rot forever. The world has enough death in it…I don’t want to be a part of any more. Please tell me you understand.”

Harry was quiet for a long while, and Draco closed his eyes, resigned to the fear that Harry wouldn’t listen when it came to this.

“I…I understand, love. I…want them gone. I could…I could try to take them…alive. I know you don’t want this, but this one is personal. They hurt you, and a lot of other people too. LeStrange and MacNair are the last members of the Inner Circle. No one has a better chance of catching them than I do. I have to try. You’ll never have to be afraid of them again. No one will. I told you before that I’d try not to kill again, and I failed you, but I have to try again, and this time, as long as you’re home and safe, I can stay in control of myself. This is the last time, love. I’ll call it quits when they’re off the streets. I’ll let the Auror service handle the rest…I swear it. Just…this time…it’s mine, and I have to do this.”

Draco sighed, biting back a tear, and Harry put a hand in Draco’s hair, stroking softly.

“Shh. No worries. I’m sorry, love. I can’t let them pass. Not this time, but when it’s done it’ll be done for good and that’s it for me. The rest of my life is booked up looking after you.”

Draco sniffled and rolled away, sitting up and looking at his ring. He wasn’t going to make any progress from here, and his heart just wasn’t in this right now. He had a beautiful ring, from a beautiful man, and there was a celebration going on in the Weasley Burrow right this minute, and not one of them had seen his ring. At least that would take his mind off of this impending crisis. He put out a mittened hand to Harry, who had stood up slowly and was dusting off snow.

“Let’s go on in. There are people who don’t know how wonderful your gift is, and I mean to fix that very quickly.”

Harry pulled him up and laid a kiss on his forehead. They strolled in hand in hand, and Draco made his peace with the possibility of desperate measures. It was damned cruel, that a moment of such happiness should be tainted by a duty he knew he couldn’t abandon, but there you had it. He was fighting for Harry’s soul, and if desperate measures were called for, then so be it.

Merry-making had returned to the Burrow, despite the days events, and Draco made a point of showing off his ring to every person within. Dula in particular looked touched, and pinched Draco’s cheek in a way that was reminiscent of grandmotherly affection.

“I am so very proud of you. It is a fine thing to give advice, but in the end, it was you who took action, who dared, who risked to gain, and it is you who won and won well. I can only count myself fortunate to have offered my help along the way. If you are gentle with each other’s hearts, you will not be sorry, Draco. Know that you have my blessings. Congratulations.”

Molly and Arthur were a little surprised by the appearance of the rings, but Molly thought it a fine idea, and offered a bit of maudlin and motherly advice about the pitfalls of relationships between the young, which made Draco blush furiously. It could only have been worse if he’d been a girl. At least he wasn’t getting a speech about avoiding unexpected pregnancy!
The twins clapped Draco on the back, and George gave a discreet and serious nod that spoke volumes, but overall said ‘I approve.’ Ron just clapped his hand against his head and groaned.

“Bloody ’ell! Couples everywhere I turn. That cuts it…I’m inviting Eileen to New Year’s Eve. I’m bloody sick of watching all the other bleeding lovebirds! Especially Mum and Da! It’s been thirty bloody years, and they’re in the kitchen still mooning over one another. Sheeesh. It’s indecent, I tell you!”

The consensus was that Draco and Harry were both very fortunate lads, and was uniformly in favor of their entering into something lasting with one another, and that kind of affirmation did Draco’s mood a world of good, as well as putting Harry in a slightly better state of mind as well. It was very late when the last of the family made ready for bed, and Draco was yawning mightily when Harry finally nudged him and nodded his head in the direction of the stairs.

They drifted off together, rightly pleased with the day as a whole, and Draco started changing into his pajamas while Harry paused to use the bathroom. As soon as Harry was finished, Draco took his turn in the bathroom and set to completing his evening ablutions. Teeth brushed, hair combed down for sleep, and glass of water in hand, Draco headed back to their room. The first thing he noticed as he approached the door was the faint gust of icy air that struck a chill through him. What on earth was Harry doing opening a window this late at night?

He opened the door the rest of the way, and there was Harry, red-faced and radiating fury, pulling on his black fighting clothes and boots instead of making ready for bed. A couple of owl feathers were skittering across the floor from the breeze, and a parchment lay upon the bed, obviously opened and read just these past few minutes.

“Harry? What…what’s going on?”

Harry looked dangerous, wild-eyed and full of potential violence. He continued lacing his boots while the parchment floated through the air to Draco. Draco plucked the rippling sheet of paper from the breeze and read it carefully. It was as elegantly written as some ancient piece of calligraphy, and yet the message within was no less horrible.

My dear Mr. Potter,

We have never met formally, and yet our lives have been inextricably entwined. I was there when my Lord struck down your father, and I was there when your mother died to give you life when our Lord offered her his mercy. I languished in Azkaban while the faithless permitted you to reach adulthood, thinking that our master was gone from this world, and I was among those first at his side when he rose again and freed his loyal servants from Azkaban.

I witnessed the death of the Weasley girl, and my wife and I attended to the upstart Muggle bitch, Granger, as well. Always my Lord’s bidding, but suffice to say that I enjoyed it. My Lord had other tasks for me, or I would cheerfully have fought by his side, and you would have found me no easy foe to best. I am still, and always shall be, in his service, now and forever.

I have seen the tabloids prattle, and I know my little nephew is in your care. I hope you find his slatternly ways to your liking, for though he has little use as more than a rutting cushion, I am sure he brings you some small comforts through the talents I saw him taught. I suppose it must gall you, knowing that, however woolly-headed your feelings for him may be, we made good sport of the little tart first. His tears were our wine, his screams our symphony. Enjoy his attentions while you may; I assure you…he was well trained.

I write to challenge you at last. A new era is due to dawn, and I do not care if I am a part of it or not.
It is enough to tell you that I shall never cease in my pursuits, and I shall seek out and kill when and where I please until the day I die. This night, I shall allow you but one chance to stop me. Come and come alone, for if another is with you, or you are later than one minute past the midnight hour, I shall depart, and as you already know, I am not easily found unless I wish to be. Pit your skills against me, and let come what may.

And think on this: If you choose to ignore my summons, or send another in your stead, I will not settle for merely vanishing into obscurity. I swear that I shall seek out those left who are dear to you, and I will make their suffering a legend even in hell.

I trust I shall see you before the midnight hour, unless my Lord was correct about the softness and cowardice in your heart.

Rodolphus LeStrange, Esq.

Draco let the letter drop to the floor. The gauntlet of challenge had been thrown down, and Harry meant to answer it tonight. If he was to stop this madness, he would have to act and act fast!

TBC!!!
Chapter 65: Waiting For The End Of The World

Rodolphus LeStrange sat calmly in a chair, in the center of the circle of symbols he’d so painstakingly drawn upon the floor. He inserted a cigarette into the long filter he kept for special occasions, raised it to his lips, and lit it with a faint wisp of magic. The cigarette was a Russian brand, Sobranie, surprisingly subtle for something made by Muggles. For all he knew, it might well be the last cigarette he ever had. It might also be the last experience he savored before embarking upon a new reality with his revived Lord.

MacNair was in position near the door, waiting impassively. Hyde-Pratt fidgeted nervously, back a bit and to the left. There was but a quarter hour or so left in the old moon, and then the new would come. If Potter did not arrive, they would depart, this effort wasted, but he expected otherwise. Potter didn’t seem the type to disappoint.

He’d waited so long for this. Two years a fugitive, always with his Lord’s last plans in the back of his mind, awaiting fruition at his trusted servant’s hands. If it worked, if his Lord had been right, and still had the strength, then he would soon stand at his Lord’s right hand, exalted among men for the services he had rendered faithfully. If it failed, well…then it wouldn’t be a concern of his for much longer.

Such was Lord Voldemort’s true genius, that he had even foreseen his potential fall. Chastened by his initial encounter with Potter as a child, he ensured his survival with far greater care than before. His series of Horcruxes had taken great effort to craft, but they had vulnerabilities. To trump even that final possibility of defeat and death, he had entrusted his two most faithful servants with his wisdom. Bellatrix and Rodolphus. Not Malfoy, who bought his freedom with cash and sweet words, or Snape, the traitor that had called himself their spy. Not sniveling Pettigrew and not any of the other blind and simpering idiots that served him. Only his most faithful, most vicious, most deadly servants were entrusted with his final plan, and their directions had been quite specific.

He’d known of Dumbledore’s suspicions regarding his few weaknesses, and he had known of that bitter prophecy. This time, he had intended to remove the weakness before it could strike. Love. They had surrounded that boy with death and suffering, and heaped upon him every loss that they could manage. ‘Build in him a hatred,’ their Lord had instructed, ‘so deep that it cannot be unearthed, and he will be mine before we are done.’ They had done just that.

When Potter had attacked that final night, Rodolphus and his wife had fled for safety, carrying their master’s last orders in their hearts. Potter had played his part perfectly, the avenging friend and student, and with darkness and anger guiding his hand, their Lord’s death had been suitable for the making of a Horcrux. Voldemort survived once again, this time leaping the boundary between spirit and flesh, taking root in his living host, his killer, the so-called Boy Who Lived. It was a fine irony, or so Rodolphus thought, but it had some unexpected drawbacks.

Potter had been strong, and while he was full of rage and discontent, there had been some love left in
him. Their Lord had not risen quickly to the surface, assuming control of a weaker host. He had possessed influence, and Rodolphus had guessed at it immediately when Potter was reported as having killed Death Eaters under questionable circumstances. Their Lord was safe, but he was not yet the master of Potter.

This had necessitated the execution of his friends, and while it had certainly built in Potter a rage that ran deep, he had never quite lost control and surrendered his spirit to their master. The link between him and Lord Voldemort had always been strong, and Potter had channeled his rage into those who wore his old enemy’s Mark. It mattered not who he killed, only that he did kill, until he’d gotten lucky and tracked down Bellatrix. That had been a loss to their cause. He had separated from his wife only briefly, in the pursuit of their mission, and she had been trailed to their lair. Not that her loss truly bothered Rodolphus that much, but he missed her kittenish madness, and her appreciation for his arts. The woman had always pleased him, in many ways the one person he had been truly comfortable around, an equal in the arts of torment and suffering, and all the more precious for her rarity.

He’d gone underground, staying out of sight for awhile, and had recruited MacNair and Hyde-Pratt to his cause. They were tools and nothing more, but they had their uses. He would need allies other than himself, if this final gambit worked as he hoped. He could force his Lord to the surface, and let him wrest control of Potter once and for all, and in the fusion of their vast powers would a greater power be born. This new Lord would make mere shadows of all who had claimed the title Dark Lord before, and Rodolphus LeStrange would be that new master’s right hand.

Draco had been little more than a way to pass the time, and admittedly the boy was more of a survivor than expected, and fair enough to look upon, which had made the marking of him all the more pleasurable. It was a vexing coincidence that the little brat had made it into Potter’s care, and there was a coincidence at play that Rodolphus did not trust. It scarcely mattered, but he did not like loose ends, and Draco would have to be ‘stitched up’ as it were, at the first available opportunity. Dumping him in London had been an amusing joke, a final irony to match the many others, leaving behind the ruined product of the proudest wizarding heritage in the stinking gutters of the Muggle world. How he’d recovered and found his way to Potter, and lived despite the Mark upon his arm, well…those were questions that Rodolphus might never see answered.

He took a deep drag from his cigarette, and let the smoke curl away softly as he exhaled. It would all be decided in this next quarter hour. One way or another, this world was about to change, and he had been the catalyst. Short of immortality, not a bad legacy to have made for oneself, was it?

Harry was lacing his boots with careful deliberation, and his trunk was open in the corner. Harry was wearing multiple talismans and other charmed items, as well as weapons that Draco hadn’t seen before. Small knives for throwing, garrote wires, and small explosives that were of Muggle origin, as well as a few items from Fred and George’s shop that were routinely used by Aurors. The knife was out for the first time in weeks, resting on the desktop with an aura of sullen menace. Draco was panicking, breathing hard and fast in the face of this sudden change in Harry. He should be careful, handling Harry when he was like this, but there wasn’t much time. He needed to stall for time… desperately…but how?

“Harry…please! Don’t do this. It’s Solstice. You belong here, with us, not out doing this. Even for them, this isn’t worth it. I don’t care what he said about me. To hell with them. I want you…here…with me tonight. Please!”
Harry’s jaw tightened visibly. His face was a mask of barely contained outrage and fury. If Draco hadn’t been healed by Snape, he’d never have been able to remain in Harry’s presence like this.

“I won’t be long. I want you to go downstairs, be quiet about this while I’m gone, and not make a fuss about this right now. This ends tonight. Then I’ll come home. Understand?”

His voice was curt and controlled, and Draco barely dared to argue with a statement that almost commanded him to be passive. He was too panicked to think clearly. This was happening too fast. Harry was standing up, looking at him, obviously hovering on the edge of just leaving, and Draco had no plan. What to do?!

Draco broke down completely, shaking while tears quickly started to curl down his face. He shook the hand with the ring he’d been given in Harry’s face.

“What about this?! Does it mean anything…at all? I love you! It’s a sickness in you…killing. It’s Voldemort’s influence over you! You have to let this fucking diseased hatred go or it will never be over! Never! Please, Harry! If you love me, if you really love me, fight this! Let it go! You can’t do this! You can’t!”

Voldemort had regained the strength that had been sapped from him, and he’d waited carefully for the proper moment. When his host had read that fateful letter, he’d felt the first flicker of rage, and like a wind upon a burning ember, he brought that spark to life, feeding it until a bonfire of destruction and naked hatred filled his host. It felt glorious, to ride the crest of a wave of coming carnage once again, and when Potter finally broke, he would be there to take control at last!

Harry could feel the rage building higher in him, and it was an effort just to control himself when he was challenged or balked like this. His instincts were at war. On one hand, those who stood in the way of his power deserved to be brushed aside like gnats, or crushed utterly, but on the other hand, this was Draco. It was ripping him apart to endure seeing Draco act this way, but he wasn’t wholly in control of his emotions at the moment. All he could do was grit his teeth, and try to get out of here without hurting the people he loved. He’d save his rage to be vented upon those who deserved it… and he needed to leave…immediately.

“I…have…no…time…for…this.” The words were forced out tersely, while Harry felt his control slipping. “Get out of my way…and get out of it now. I’m leaving, and I will be back. MOVE! NOW! DO IT!”

Draco trembled while his mind screamed for him to run, and in a crazy and impulsive gesture that he couldn’t even remember thinking of, he just snatched the Dampener from Harry’s chest and flung it out the window into the snow. It couldn’t be traced by magic, and Harry had little time, and at the moment, he was just staring in wide-eyed disbelief at what Draco had just done. Draco probably wouldn’t have gotten away with it if it hadn’t been for Harry’s utter shock at what had just happened. The reality of it was slowly creeping in, and Draco wiped his eyes on his sleeve, panting heavily, and took a step back when he saw the look on Harry’s face.

The man he’d called his lover and friend only minutes ago looked like he was ready to erupt in a way that would make volcanoes look inconspicuous. Harry was faintly trembling, and the weird heat that rolled off of him was suddenly overwhelming. It was, metaphysically speaking, like standing next to the sun, and Draco wondered if he would actually burst into flame from being so close to the center of it. A faint tremor began to run through the entire Burrow, and likely the surrounding town as well, and small objects were beginning to rattle and move on desks and stands. Draco saw the faintest flicker of red in Harry’s eyes, and a sudden pain in his arm made him glance downward, yanking his sleeve back. His Mark, the one the Dark Lord had placed upon him, faded now for almost two years, was growing darker and displaying motion for the first time since Voldemort’s
death. Very real fear took Draco over completely, and he dropped to his knees spluttering apologies, hoping to pacify whatever was growing in Harry.

“I’m sorry! Please! Forgive me, Harry! I didn’t mean to… I… I wanted you to stay! I love you… I love you… please don’t be angry with me for that. I only want you here… forgive me! I won’t fight this anymore if you just calm down! Please!”

The same force that had once gently carried him upstairs suddenly slammed into him like a whirlwind, lifting him from the floor and pinning him to the wall, clutched in iron bands of magic that prevented movement. The building started shaking more obviously and the voices of the Weasley family could be heard downstairs. Draco hoped that they could stop this, and he prayed that no one would be hurt by what he’d unwittingly triggered. Just as a small vase was about to tumble from the nightstand, and footsteps were clear in the hallway, Harry waved one arm in a short chopping motion… and there was silence. A more complete and total silence than Draco had ever known. The vase that had nearly fallen was hanging in midair, paused in its fall, frozen in time, and so was everything else… except Harry… and Draco.

Harry possessed an icy calm now that was almost more frightening than his rage of seconds ago. He looked like he was fighting to decide his next action, and all Draco could do was hang in the air and struggle pathetically against the bonds that magic had placed around him. His wand was laying beside the bed, but he didn’t dare summon it to him. There was no telling what a challenge like that might trigger from Harry. Harry finally stalked forward slowly, and his voice was a chill hiss of menace.

“You. How dare you?! You think the lack of some trinket will change this? You think I need it? I can break wards on my own. I can tear down buildings, or cities. I could extinguish the sun if it pleased me to do so. I wonder what you think…”

Harry paused, looking cold and calculating, wild-eyed and ruthless. An idea flickered in his mind, and quickly became real.

“What you think… I can see your mind… lay it bare, take what I please. Let us see what lies in your heart.”

Draco was already white as a sheet and shaking, unable to break free, and he tried to plead with Harry, but it was almost hopeless at this point.

“Don’t! Gods, love! Please! Harry! I’m sorry’msorry’msorry! NO!”

And then his mind was pierced by Harry’s presence, alien and hot with fury, scouring his brain for answers. Every secret was laid bare, every scrap of his plans made clear to the outraged powerhouse in front of him. Seconds later, Draco was flung to the floor violently, and the cool and calculating creature was gone, replaced by a look of stunned hurt and growing wrath. His arm ached, and when he looked up, the eyes of green he treasured were nearly pure red.

“YOU WHORE! YOU FUCKING FILthy SLut! I TRUSTED YOU! ABOVE ALL OTHERS I TRUSTED YOU! YOU’RE ALL AGAINST ME! ALL OF YOU! RRRRAAAAAAGGGHHHH!”

Harry stumbled back, clutching his head while Draco collapsed into tears below him, making barely comprehensible pleas. Every fiber of his being demanded blood and death for this offense, but in his heart, a tiny flare of the love he’d known made war against his rage. Panting for breath, teeth gritted, Harry growled out his final edict.
“There…there’s somewhere…I have to be. Get out. If you want your life…take your things and
don’t…be…here when I return. No one here will move until I break this spell…only you. Pack…and leave. I have business to attend to.”

Harry grabbed his knife from the desk, and with a muted crack, Harry was gone, and Draco was alone, in a house of silence and enchanted stillness, mourning what his indolence and cowardice had brought him.

‘Oh Gods! Merlin! It happened…it’s happening. It’s him, and he had control of Harry. That can’t be my Harry. It can’t! It’s my fault. I should have told him everything then…when it happened. Maybe he’d have thought I was crazy, but I wouldn’t have been lying to him. I wouldn’t have betrayed him. I made it worse! I made him angry, and I ruined everything. I’m so stupid…and selfish. I just wanted to be happy…I didn’t want to fight with him, or upset him. I did this. I’m weak…I was always too weak. I don’t know why anyone ever thought I could do this! I’ve ruined everything. Everything…’

Draco remained on the floor, sobbing alone in a deathly silent house. When his tears had ebbed, a cruel certainty came to him. He didn’t want to live. Not without Harry. Not with this knowledge hanging over him. He couldn’t bear it. The envelope from his uncle’s letter was on the floor next to the bed. An address stared back at him, taunting him with a final escape. He could go, follow Harry, find him, and risk his wrath. At least he’d die trying, and never have to live with his failure, or what it might well cost the entire world. Draco crawled to the letter, and clutched it to himself, his sides aching from the sobs that had just racked his body. He pulled himself up and took his wand.

Reality came to him as he reached and took the wand into his hand. A hand that wore a ring that Harry had put there. A wand that Harry had seen to the making of. All around him was a life that held Harry, the real Harry, at the center of it. He’d been a fool, and maybe he had been weak, and afraid, but who wouldn’t have been? He didn’t need to die, he needed to find Harry, set this right, and if he lost his life in the bargain, so be it. It was his life, and it had been hell until he’d found this place and these people, and this was worth fighting for.

His rational mind took over, now that Harry was gone and he wasn’t overwhelmed by that towering presence. He needed to get the Dampener from the yard, and quickly. He needed to Firecall out of this house and give this address to the Aurors, and he needed to go after Harry…but how? He was lousy at Apparition and always had been. He couldn’t possibly hope to get it right aiming for an unknown street address in Muggle London. He was sure to splinch himself.

The rings! Wizard rings were spelled against slipping off, spelled to fit, and spelled to aid in finding the other wearer! He could use Harry’s ring to match Harry’s point of arrival! Without the Dampener, Harry could be tracked just like anyone else. Even if he could smash through wards without it, he was no longer hidden from scrying! Draco ran the hall, brushing past Ron and Charlie’s frozen forms on the stairs. The others were frozen in the living room, looking confused, rising from seats or rushing to the stairs, and Draco passed them all, dashing out the door and into the snow.

He conjured light, and illuminated the area beneath the open window from which he’d flung the amulet. He stumbled, shivering and sniffing, through the drifts and clumps of snow, searching frantically for any sign of the artifact that could protect him just a little on this suicidal errand of love. A minute later, the light bobbing above Draco glinted faintly off of silver, and Draco snatched up the thing and ran back to the house.

The Floo roared deafeningly in the eerie silence of the Burrow, and Draco screamed into the Minister’s office as soon as he saw people working late in the flickering firelight.

“HELP! This is Draco Malfoy! Rodolphus LeStrange is behind the killings! Harry has gone to try
and stop him! Get everyone you can call in and get to the address on this paper…NOW!!!”

Draco flung the paper through and into the Minister’s office, then yanked himself back and let the Floo whisk out. He was shaking, bleary-eyed, and still dressed in snow-dusted pajamas. He had one of the most mysterious artifacts ever made, and a wand that was a match for any in the world…and he had love. If he’d had only love, he still would have tried, but with these, just maybe, there was hope, and Draco clung to that crazy hope with all his might.

He focused on the ring, trying to concentrate and feel Harry’s presence, and he recited the address carefully in his mind, over and over again. With a soft and muffled crack, Draco Apparated away, and the Burrow waited in pristine silence, patiently waiting for the end of the world…or the beginning of a new one.

TBC!!!
Beautiful Screams

DISCLAIMER: Warning! I make no claim to any property of J.K. Rowling's, and am in no way profiting by this. I do offer her my sincerest thanks for allowing us this garden of the mind in which we play. Further Warning! This story...and likely any I ever write...are dominated by gay themes and characters. That's how it is, if this in any way makes you uncomfortable...do not read further.

Redeem Me…by Samayel

Chapter 66: Beautiful Screams

On a dimly lit street in a warehouse district of Muggle London, Harry Potter Apparated into place, just a few dozen feet from the building he was soon to enter. Whatever he’d originally intended, only death would satisfy the black and ugly rage that filled him now. He would heap upon these men the whole of his hideous anger, and in many ways they had been responsible for it. The sting of betrayal still burned in him. Molly had schemed alongside Draco, who had conspired with Snape and Dula and even Dumbledore’s portrait. There had been talk of ‘containing’ him…as if they could!

He’d been a weak-hearted fool to let these strings of love attach themselves to him, and now he needed to shake them free, once and for all. For this pain he felt, someone needed to pay…and in the building in front him, three black and fetid souls waited to be extinguished, removed from this world forever, but first…first he would make them suffer, and their suffering would be a sweet, sweet music to him.

----------------------------------------------------

Rodolpus whispered softly, and in the quiet of the warehouse, the others heard him.

“He’s here.”

It was a minute to midnight. The wards were already buckling under a massive assault, and Anti-Apparition wards had been put up around the entire block. He rose from his seat, whisked the chair out of his way, and ground his cigarette out beneath his foot. He stood calmly, wand in hand, in the center of the circle of arcane symbols, while the others waited nervously, poised for action.

The door at the front of the room simply exploded, brick edges, mortar, plaster and wood scattering quickly, and a dark shadow could be seen behind the cloud of dust, a shadow that moved in quickly, faint glints of red barely visible through the haze. Rodolphus privately rejoiced. Their Lord was very near the surface! It couldn’t have worked more smoothly if he’d overseen Potter’s every move himself!

MacNair opened fire immediately, blasting out curses in his own ham-fisted way. The sinewy figure in black flickered and vanished inexplicably. An illusion of some kind? Then, just a few feet from MacNair, as the one image vanished, the real was revealed, and Potter was wielding not a wand, but a knife, and a large one at that. His movements were spare, calculated and involved no waste of effort. MacNair was taken by surprise, and despite the advantage of height and weight, he was no match for the swift and ferocious attacker that was upon him.

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Hyde-Pratt was panicking, throwing hexes into the mix, but they slid off Potter’s shields and wards like melting butter. Rodolphus watched calmly, motionless while Potter struck like a starving tiger, shredding his way through MacNair’s defense easily. Several feints and small cuts to confuse and distract, and at the first opening of worth, a single deep and low slash that opened MacNair’s belly
like an overripe fruit. Glistening coils slid free, falling from MacNair’s hasty and fumbling grasp, while the man cried out in shock and alarm. His hands were lowered for the task of holding his own guts in, and Potter’s next slash neatly opened the jugular, blood spurting bright and sharp into the air. MacNair didn’t even have time to fall before the hilt of that black blade thunked wetly into his forehead, the tip of the knife erupting, gore-drenched, from the back of his skull.

Potter kicked the man dismissively, and the body of MacNair tumbled off of his blade and slumped to the floor. Hyde-Pratt was still flinging useless spells against Potter’s shielded form, and the red-eyed man in black slowly turned his attention toward the man who was annoying him with petty spells. Then he smiled.

A blast of pure force flung Hyde-Pratt off his feet and into the air, backward, almost a dozen yards into the far wall. He struck with an impact sufficient to crumble the old brick of the building, smashing half through it, and only two limp legs remained visible, dangling pitifully across the bricks. Faint moaning could be heard.

Rodolphus reveled in this moment. He was truly alive, every nerve afire with readiness for what would come next. The strength of his words would decide if he lived or died, and Potter was only a few yards from being within his grasp. The prize was almost his…he just had to reach out and take it.

“Nicely done, Mr. Potter! What a lovely show you’ve put on! Most impressive! You haven’t disappointed me at all.”

The knife was in his hand, still dripping red from MacNair’s lifeblood, and Potter poised himself for his next assault, grinning with feral amusement while he stalked a few steps forward. His voice was a guttural growl when it came.

“They were appetizers…you’re the fucking main course! You wanted me here? I’m here, and you’re going to regret that invitation in a few seconds…that is, if you can stop screaming long enough to form thoughts.”

Rodolphus grinned like a shark, all teeth and no joy. “Did you ever think, Mr. Potter, that that was precisely what I desired? Perhaps I’m sick of a world in which my Lord has no place. Perhaps I hunger for death. Will you give me what I desire? Can you? Kill me. Kill me as you did my master!”

Rodolphus opened his shirt, exposing his chest, eyes glinting with challenge and amusement.

“I want to die, Mr. Potter, and I want to die by your hands. Kill me…if you dare!”

The lust to kill was overwhelming, and Harry growled out a few final words.

“I can grant that wish…FUCKER!”

He lunged forward, his knife hand back and ready for motion, while the rest of him flew forward propelled by muscle and hate…and then he crossed the line of symbols.

Harry tumbled to the ground, twitching and screaming. The knife skittered back across the floor. His body flexed and arced in weird contortions while fire danced through his every nerve. This wasn’t Cruciatus, but it was felt far deeper. This was a pain purely of the soul. Rodolpus LeStrange took a few quiet steps and knelt next to the writhing body in front of him. He spoke firmly but with a faintly worshipful tone of awe.

“It hurts, doesn’t it, Mr. Potter. You must be wondering why. The line you crossed is a Soul Line. Old magic, the kind that children such as you rarely study these days. Inside this barrier, you must
confront your own true soul. Some might expect that a man such as I could not bear to be inside such a thing, but they would be wrong. You see, I am perfectly at peace with what I am, and thus I am quite comfortable here. You, however, carry two souls, and you are most definitely not at peace with what you are.

You may not think so at the moment, but it is my desire to help you reconcile this little matter. It will hurt. Oh, yes...it will hurt, just as the birth of a child brings pain to the mother, but from that pain will be born something greater. I hope you’ll remember that while I help you along your way. Traditionally, I loathe the crudity and unoriginality of Cruciatus, but I’m afraid it is the most comprehensive of pain-inducing spells available, and it suits my purpose now. You need pain, Mr. Potter. You must suffer for us all, and when all hope is gone, you will be ready for him.

Can you feel him? Have you felt his majesty and power beating in your own breast? Or have you remained utterly unaware all this time? It matters not. In a few seconds, you’ll know him quite intimately. Farewell, Mr. Potter, and give my best to our new Lord before you go.”

Rodolphus leaned close while the young man in black shook and groaned in agony, mouth agape in a silent rictus of pain. Rodolphus leveled his wand carefully, and whispered the word like a benediction.

“Crucio.”

And Harry’s world descended into an inchoate hell of anguish and suffering. His scream was cut off when the pain rendered his vocal cords insufficient for expression, and only muted noises slipped from him while his body spasmed violently upon the floor. Darkness slipped over Harry’s vision, and consciousness slid away, replaced by a silent and strange place of the mind, an empty void where nothing mattered, and he was alone. And then there was another, and that presence was dark and smug, with a voice like oiled silk. A voice he knew well in memory, but never thought he’d hear again.

“Ahhh, my dear, little Harry. It’s been some time hasn’t it?”

Standing before him, while Harry was flopped upon the ground in exhaustion, was Voldemort. This night wasn’t turning out at all like he’d expected, and frankly, Harry had been pretty sure it couldn’t get any worse. Until now.

-----------------------------------------------------

Kingsley Shacklebolt was on the way back from the loo. He’d been up since well before dawn, owed to the panic caused by the Dark Mark and the latest London killing. So far they had no suspects and no real leads, except the firm knowledge that this crime was perpetrated by yet another rogue Death Eater. It was a bloody disaster, and the faint illusion of safety that the public enjoyed had been shattered. The press had gone into a feeding frenzy, spouting off wild theories that ranged from Voldemort’s return to Harry Potter as the new Dark Lord responsible for every killing since the war ended, and they had butchered Kingsley as incompetent and completely out of touch with the situation. He’d had Aurors working around the clock since dawn, and frankly he was just damned tired.

In the hall on the way to his office, a junior secretary came dashing toward him, waving a sheet of paper in his hand all the while, skidding to a halt when he finally reached Kingsley.

“Sir! Sir! We just got a Firecall tip from Draco Malfoy of all people. He said that Rodolphus LeStrange is our man, and he passed us this address before ending the call. While we waited for you, we ran a quick auto-scry for magical presence, and the place is off the bloody charts! Fluctuating
magic like we haven’t seen since the war! This might be legit, even if it is from Malfoy. What should we do?”

Kingsley looked at the address as he hustled back to the office. He had his mind made up by the time he walked in the door.

“We’ve got nothing else to go on…what’s to lose? We’re going! I want every man and woman we have on shift ready to leave in ten minutes! Full details, all assignments. Curse-breakers, wardwrights, medical and combat ready personnel. Hit-wizards and Unspeakables too! What are you all waiting for? GO, GOD DAMN IT! WE LEAVE IN NINE MINUTES!”

His secretary was already grabbing the Floo powder when his adjutant yelled a question before running to grab field gear.

“Minister! You’re going too? You’re the Minister of Magic! You should be here!”

Kingsley smiled for the first time all day.

“Not tonight! Tonight I’m just a pissed off Auror who hasn’t had enough sleep! Now move it!”

Draco popped back into existence in the heart of Muggle London, amazed that he was still intact. It had worked! He’d Apparated over a long distance for the first time ever, and he wasn’t missing any parts. He’d have congratulated himself, but his heart was still palpitating, and the address on the building in front of him was the very one he was looking for. Not that it took much guesswork, since Harry had blasted an eight foot hole through what had once been the entrance. Draco hurried forward, and ward-fire crackled along his nerves, signaling their presence, but protected by the Dampener as he was, they did no harm to him.

He heard the pitiable, animal-like cries before he made it through the door, and what he saw when he crossed the threshold gave him immediate pause. Harry was at his uncle’s feet, writhing in muted agony, past the point of articulating even proper screams. MacNair’s blood-drenched corpse was only a few feet from Draco, and the stench of blood and gore was fresh and sharp in the air about him. His stomach immediately roiled, and the sight of Rodolphus LeStrange in all his glory, leering and triumphant over Harry, brought Draco right to the edge of naked terror again. The face that had haunted the worst of his nightmares was only a few dozen steps away, but Harry needed his help… immediately.

Draco raised his wand and started forward, hoping his uncle wouldn’t see him until he was in close enough range to guarantee a solid hit. One shaking step, then another, wand clenched in a hand that was trembling like a seizure victim. He passed the fallen hulk of MacNair, trying hard not to take in the sight of his ruptured skull and spilled entrails. A moment of panic now and all would be lost. LeStrange’s gaze flickered as a pale form approached from the door. He turned just in time to dodge the hex that went sizzling past his head. Wand up and ready, his Cruciatius interrupted, Rodolphus looked on in amazement and vague amusement at his pajama-clad nephew, who held his wand in a hand that shook visibly with fear. It was both astonishing and hilarious. He hadn’t even imagined that Draco might have the strength to come here, much less confront him with a drawn wand, and the laughable part was that the little brat actually believed that such a gesture might have meaning!

“Well, well, well. If it isn’t my errant nephew. Young Mr. Malfoy, it is a pleasure. How fortunate
that you’ve returned to me, so hale and hearty. I’d thought you of no further use, but someone has clearly taken the trouble to patch you back together. What merry sport might be made of you now! You should know that a broken part is never as strong again as a whole one…but what a joy it will be to break you again…as only I can.”

Draco took another step forward. His instincts screamed for him to take flight, but Harry was only a dozen steps away, motionless in the aftermath of the Cruciatus Curse. He flung a desperate hex at his uncle.

“Expelliarmus!”

Rodolphus blocked the spell neatly with a calm flick of his wand and half-muttered spell.

“Pathetic. I was almost certain that you could do better than that. The only reason I didn’t allow you a wand before was to ensure that you had no means by which to take your own life. IMPERIO!”

Draco blocked the spell carefully, and the strength of his new wand prevailed, dissipating the curse well before it struck. Rodolphus nodded with amusement and vague approval.

“I see you have improved your skills in some respects. I assume your other ‘talents’ are still intact. One gets the impression that Mr. Potter now benefits from what was so painstakingly imparted to you. Does he say that he loves you…for the pleasures you bring him? Does he rut to repletion in that tender, if a trifle well-used, little arse of yours? Or is his affection pure and chaste, covering for the cruel knowledge that he wouldn’t sully himself with a whoring faggot’s favors?”

Draco hissed while his mind flinched away from words he’d so often thought to himself, notions he’d carried as deep fears and insecurities, now laid open and voiced by his uncle. He only wished that his voice had sounded steadier when he answered.

“Doesn’t matter. I love him. DO YOU HEAR THAT, HARRY? I LOVE YOU! You could never understand what I feel for him. Say whatever you want. I’m not your toy anymore! I won’t let you hurt him! REDUCTO!”

Rodolphus deflected the spell, sending it careening off into the wall, shattering windows and the boards that were over them. Draco felt his uncle’s answering curse nearly graze him, and the amulet was hot against his skin. It was warding him somewhat, and had taken the edge off of the spell that had almost clipped his shoulder. His uncle looked far less amused now, and Draco took another step forward.

“I beg to differ, boy! I have seen what lies within your pretty little skull, and I know your every weakness, your petty lusts, your vanities and your delusions. You claim to love? The pity of others may have spared you, but your willingness to offer up your body has bought you so much more! You worked your way to the one person powerful enough to offer safety and comfort, and your wiles purchased his tolerance. Will you serve him so well when he rises as your new Lord? Will your favors avail you then? Or will he give you to me, the servant who brought him back to our world, powerful and whole again?

I will make all that you think you have endured PALE in comparison to the new torments I visit upon you. You will come to look upon our previous time together as a happy and carefree time of peace before I am finished with you! You think I’ve exhausted my arts? You weren’t worthy of the whole of them! I will feel no such compunction henceforth! You insolent little whelp! Put down your wand and submit, or what you endure will be told of in whispers for ages to come!”

Draco was trembling violently, and his fear was very real. He wasn’t really a match for his uncle
magically, and the Dampener couldn’t protect against everything. Sooner or later he’d fail, and his uncle would have him cold, and the realization that this could happen made Draco’s balls shrink back for the safety of his body cavity. If Harry didn’t come to consciousness soon, he’d be alone with Rodolphus, and he would surely lose.

His uncle flicked a subtle spell his way, and Draco ducked his head and fired back with a hex that sizzled by too far to the right. His uncle hadn’t even flinched. Draco gambled on calling out to Harry again, praying that Harry wasn’t already lost to him, hoping his message reached the right soul.

“Harry! Love is the answer! Love, Harry! You have to forgive him! I love you, Harry! Remember that! I LOVE YOU!”

Rodolphus pieced together the motive behind his nephew’s pretty speech, and his eyes widened with alarm. To confirm his suspicions about this improbable plan of his nephew’s, he threw a brief barrage of curses, keeping Draco off his guard, but his mind was swiftly working toward a single goal. Wandless Legilimency.

Draco’s hopes and plans were at the surface, easy to read, but Rodolphus encountered something he had not expected at all, and he almost fumbled with the blocking of a spell because of the revelation. Now he knew precisely what to do.

“Uncanny! Someone…someone has warded your memories! Your bravery is borrowed, boy! Let us see how you fare without such a gift, eh?”

Draco paled, realizing what his uncle had seen in his thoughts. A simple spell couldn’t block a true Legilimens, and utter horror crept over Draco in a weird flash.

“NO! NonononoNO! PLEASE!”

A shattering blast of force struck Draco’s mind, and the carefully built work of Severus Snape collapsed. A flood of memory tore through Draco’s mind, carrying every nightmarish experience, every hated touch, every burn, every cut, every thrusting cock and every cruel blow with it. It all came whirling back, blinding him to the world. His wand clattered to the ground while he stood wide-eyed and slack-jawed, numbed by all consuming horror. Then Draco dropped to the floor, curled into a ball and clutched himself tightly, and began to scream uncontrollably.

Rodolphus LeStrange summoned Draco’s wand, noting its fine make, and thought it might make a perfect gift to a new Dark Lord. He turned and cast Crucius upon Potter once again, this time laughing exultantly over his nephew’s terrified screams.

TBC!!!
“It was always moving toward this, Harry. In the end, it was always supposed to be you or me…or was it?”

Voldemort’s image subtly shifted until the withered creature had become a man of mature years, dark haired and powerful, the intensity of his gaze the mark of his power…and its source. Harry felt the pain of the Cruciatus Curse and the Soul Line even through his dream state. Even unconscious and drifting, his imagination piled agony upon him. All he could do was gasp for air like a fish out of water, feeling Voldemort’s scrutiny upon him.

“Was it always supposed to be you OR me, Harry? Why do you think we were cast as opposite numbers, doppelgangers bound to end in destruction? Was that really necessary? I once thought so…but I’ve had time, Harry. Time to think. Time to dream. Time to understand. There was another option, one they dared not voice aloud to either of us. I was mad then, Harry, but not now…now I understand what could be. Us. United. Our souls and our power tied together for all time. We could become something more powerful than the world has ever seen. Think of it! Ultimate power. We could change everything! Every unfairness made right, every weakness crushed, every betrayal punished. All you have to do is let me in. Not as a passenger…as an equal. Let me in, Harry, and this torment will cease.”

Harry twisted on the dark floor his unconscious mind had created, and struggled to form his answer.

“No! N-never! I hate you! You…you fucking monster! My parents! My friends! You took them! You! Fuck you! You belong in hell!”

The pain of Cruciatus took its toll, and Harry’s breath was spent. Voldemort clucked his tongue and smiled.

“Harry…really! That was then, and this is now. You have to live in the present, Harry. You have so few choices. You can wait until your will breaks, in which case you will die and my spirit will take this body before it expires, or you can join with me, let us become one, and know the world again…this time as its master! What else do you have? A boy you nearly killed only minutes ago? A backstabbing strumpet? A cluster of oddball Muggle-huggers that make good use of your power and fame? You could have been so much more, but they’ve tied their strings to your heart, and they tether you to the world of limits and boundaries! I can give you so much more than that. I can give you the world, and everything thereof! Think clearly, Harry…the choice is obvious.”

Harry’s muscles clenched violently, even in this realm of dreams. He began to weep haltingly. The cruel reminder of what he’d lost bit deep. He had nothing to go back to. No love, just betrayal and fear. They feared his power, though he’d never used it against them. In his rage he’d even driven away Draco. His first and only real love was gone. He’d almost killed Draco when he’d forced open his lover’s mind and read its secrets, and even now, betrayal, secrets and all, his heart ached with
emptiness for what he’d lost.

“Dra…draco.”

“There are a million like him, Harry. Women, men, so many will beg for your favor that you will never want for company. You could take your pleasure with any of them, as often as you please. You’ll never want for anything, Harry. Never again. No cupboards, no hunger, no aloneness. It will be dark when you wish it, and light when you don’t. You can kill or grant mercy, rule with an iron fist or a velvet glove, but you must choose. If you don’t…I’ll choose for you. It’s all up to you, Harry.”

The pain of Cruciatus suddenly lessened and vanished, and Harry caught his breath once again, suddenly able to concentrate despite the pain of his conflicted soul. Somewhere, far off in the distance, Harry heard a voice. It was familiar, and treasured, and it called out through the darkness, frantic and full of urgency.

’DO YOU HEAR THAT, HARRY? I LOVE YOU!’

Harry gazed at his own hand dazedly, looking to the ring he wore on his finger still. Even in rage he hadn’t abandoned it, and Draco hadn’t abandoned him. Maybe it was a trick of dreams, or some glimpse of his subconscious, but it was something, wasn’t it? He loved Draco, and in his heart and soul, he wanted nothing more than to see and feel that loved returned. The only thing in a lifetime of loss and grief that had brought happiness back to his heart had been love. Draco’s love. It was real. It had to be! Draco’s voice meant he was near…near LeStrange! He’d come here in spite of all that Harry had done, in spite of what he’d been told, at the risk of his life…for Harry! Even if he’d kept secrets, what kind of betrayer would risk their life to say those words one more time! Harry mustered his answer, feeling stronger than he had only seconds ago.

“No. Maybe…maybe I’ll die, but I’ll take my power with me. You’ll never use it to hurt anyone. Not anymore. Never again. The answer is no.”

Voldemort looked outraged as well as utterly dumbfounded. His teeth were grinding, and his eyes bulged with fury. The mask of subtlety was gone, and the face of his hatred and rage was back in place. This was the Voldemort he’d always known. A creature of wild passion and incomprehensible evil.

“You animal! Lower than the Muggle whore that whelped you! You’re dirt! Filth! You’re unfit to host me! I’ve offered you everything and still you rebuff me? For what? Some petty emotion? Some deluded notion of doddering poets and schoolgirls? For this you would die? Then die! I’ll take the flesh you leave behind, and I’ll sate my hunger with the souls of every fool that nurtured this cancer in you!”

Harry crawled to his hands and knees. That blessed voice came to him again, faint in the fog of his mind, but the words rang like a bell in his soul.

’ Harry! Love is the answer! Love, Harry! You have to forgive him! I love you, Harry! Remember that! I LOVE YOU!’

And Harry understood. For the first time ever, Harry truly understood his role, and Dumbledore’s words rang true one final time. Even Voldemort’s…Tom Riddle’s, own words betrayed his weakness. The creature in front of him hadn’t dared speak the word love even once. And there was more. Harry had been shown so much by Dumbledore, memories and recollections of young Tom, each showing a tiny fragment of a complicated young man. A young man with a lust for power, a taste for the fear of others, and so many fears buried in his heart. Tom Riddle had never loved, and
had never been loved.

He hated what he feared most in the world. He feared what he could not or would not understand. In fear was his hatred of love first born, and in love could the power he’d taken through fear be broken. Harry wasn’t here to kill Tom Riddle, he was here to show Tom what love was. In that moment, Harry let all hatred slide from him, and abandoned the grudges he’d clung to so blindly. This was freedom…this was letting go. Only now could he voice what needed to be said. Harry stood up, smiling beatifically, the love that had been shared with him his entire life radiating from the core of his being. Even hurt, even threatened, even manipulated to evil ends, that love had never been extinguished, because his foes had never truly understood it. Tom Riddle took a step back, confused by this sudden and gentle defiance.

“I forgive you.”

The stately image of Voldemort the man shifted and morphed, and the image became the teenage Tom that Harry had met in the Chamber of Secrets.

“What?! What is this prattle? You’re a corpse, Potter! You’re just too stupid and stubborn to know it! I am a GOD! I will destroy you…and I’ll bring ruin to every pathetic creature you ever cared for in your entire miserable life!”

Harry shook his head gently.

“No. You won’t. I didn’t understand what he was trying to show me…Dumbledore, that is. He was trying to show me what he missed. The mistake he regretted his entire life. It bothered him right up to the end. I understand now. I’m sorry, Tom. I forgive you.”

Tom had begun to shake with fury, waving his fist while his face turned scarlet.

“I AM LORD VOLDEMORT! I’ve crushed babies beneath my boot heels…torn the life from maidens, and cast spells so foul that decent folk cover their ears when the names of them are spoken aloud! I am immortal! Eternal and undying! I have become Death, destroyer of worlds! How dare you mewl to me your pathetic forgiveness. How dare you!”

“No one should go through life feeling unloved. No one deserves that. Not you, not me, no one. You were just a little boy. You couldn’t have known then. Dumbledore was a busy man, but he cared in his way. If he’d realized how scared you were, he would have tried to help. He wasn’t looking closely, and before he knew it you were grown. It was too late then. He carried that failure with him the rest of his life, knowing that if he’d just shown you a little more, helped you find people that cared for you genuinely, you’d have found love.”

Tom was frothing at the mouth, screaming invectives at the top of his lungs, past the point of logical speech now.

“THAT MISERABLE OLD CODGER! WATCHING OVER MY SHOULDER! DIE, YOU OLD BASTARD! DIE! I HATE YOU! YOU! POTTER! YOU’LL PAY LIKE HE DID! YOU’LL SEE! I HATE YOU ALL! I’LL DESTROY YOU! ALL OF YOU!”

Harry stood calm in the face of the tirade, radiant and as gentle as a lamb. His green eyes shone faintly with the first hint of tears that weren’t for his own pain, but for someone else’s.

“Your mother loved your father so much. She never really gave you up. Not in her heart. She was dying, Tom. She made sure you’d be fed and clothed and looked after. She adored your father so much that she couldn’t keep living without him. She never wanted you to feel like this. She never
wanted you to be alone in the dark. She loved you. She loved you enough to let go.”

“SHUT UP! SHUT YOUR FILTHY LYING MOUTH! YOU DON’T KNOW ANYTHING! YOU HEAR! YOU KNOW NOTHING! NOTHING!”

Tom Riddle ran out of breath, clutching his chest, and dropped to his knees, racking noises sounding in his chest, almost sounding like he was about to vomit, but then they shifted subtly, and Harry knew that they were sobs. Tom Riddle grabbed his curly hair and balled his fists in front of his eyes, fighting what was boiling inside of him.

“NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!”

“I forgive you. You were afraid. A lot of people let you down. I know what it means to be afraid. I know what it is to be alone… in the dark. I grew up without a mother, or a father, and I was afraid for a very long time, but when someone offered me their love, I didn’t push them away. I love them all. Even the ones who hurt me. Some meant it, some didn’t. I love them all. I hope they have better lives. I hope whatever made them do those things changes for them, and I hope they treat the people they care about better than they treated me. Love has nothing to do with getting anything in return… it’s about what you become when you give it freely. I… I love you, too. Not what you became, and not what you’ve done, but I love who you are, what you could have been. You were special, and powerful, and you could have done so much more… if someone had just fought to make you understand that they cared about you. I forgive you… and I love you.”

The figure blurred and shifted a final time, and now Tom Riddle was a little dark-haired boy, pale and shaking, while Harry stood above him, watching him weep. Harry could feel the pain of Crucius strike his flesh again in the real world, but here he did not care. Here in the heart of the Soul Line, he’d made true peace with himself, and no force on earth could shake the certainty and clarity that he now possessed. The little boy croaked a hoarse whisper.

“I don’t want to go. I have to live forever. I’m afraid. It’ll be dark. I don’t want to go. What will happen to me? Where will I go?”

Harry knelt down beside Tom, smiling sadly, brushing tears away from the boy’s cheeks, and shrugged.

“I won’t lie to you. No one knows where we go until we get there. We’re all afraid of the dark, but you can’t stay anywhere forever. Forever is a very long time. I can’t say for sure, but I thought I saw my parents a few times, thanks to magic. When I was scared of dying, I used to think about them waiting for me. I never got to know them when they were alive, but I know they loved me. Like your mother, they did what they could do to make sure I’d be alright, and then they were gone. It didn’t work out perfectly, but I know they tried. I’m not mad at them at all. I like to think I’ll see them again someday. Besides… who said it’s going to be dark there? For all we know, it could be light all the time.”

The little boy looked up quizzically, and saw no guile or deceit in Harry’s face. He asked his questions haltingly, as if he’d never spoken them to another before.

“Do you… do you think my mother is waiting for me? If I wanted to be where the light is, would they let me stay?”

“I said I wouldn’t lie to you, Tom. I won’t know until I get there. I know we all have to leave someday. Everyone. There must be others. I can guess that you won’t be alone. Even if it was dark, it isn’t so bad when you make friends with others. Nothing is ever so bad when you have a friend, even being in the dark. And besides that, we’re wizards! When it’s dark, we cast Lumos! Right?”
“Yeah! I know how to cast that! Harry? You’ll remember me, won’t you?”

Harry laughed and ruffled the boy’s hair. “I can absolutely promise you that! I’ll never forget you, Tom. I will always remember you.”

The little boy looked at Harry somberly, tears gone, and his voice was very soft when he finally spoke again.

“I’m sorry. I can’t take it all back, but I’m sorry. I wish I could stay with you. You’re nice. I think… I think I have to go now, but… I’ll miss you. Th-thank you, Harry.”

Harry suddenly found himself on the receiving end of a very fierce hug, and he responded in kind. Tom was shaking, and he felt very small, almost wispy, and Harry realized that he wasn’t quite real or solid anymore, if anything in this dreamscape could be called real. Tom’s nervous whisper called his attention one last time.

“I think…I think I love you too, Harry. Goodbye.”

“Goodbye, Tom.” And Harry realized that he was alone. The energy that had sustained him slipped away, and Harry felt himself tumbling into darkness. He wasn’t really afraid anymore, even though he wasn’t sure where he was going, or if he was even alive anymore. If this was the end, he hoped he’d see his parents again. And Dumbledore and Sirius, Ginny and Hermione… all of them. Most of all, wherever he went, he hoped he’d see Draco again soon.

Draco had gone past the point of coherence within seconds of his memory returning. At first all he could utter were screams, and then inarticulate howls and low keening noises. Now he was reduced to short, barking pants for breath while cruel visions of days past slid before his mind’s eye.

The stink of that terrible cell was in his nostrils, and the pains that lanced through so much of his body were real again. The vague horror as he looked at the infected track marks that needles had made on his arms. The nausea that came in the aftermath of having gratefully lapped the come from MacNair’s prick just for a shot to take away the pain. The bland resignation at the end when they came for him. Each day had been a new hell, until he’d seen so much that nothing could really shock him anymore. He wandered limply to his fate, past the point of even hoping for death. He made the appropriate noises when MacNair pounded into him. He appeared to respond to the hot irons or the knives, but they could tell that something had shifted. Something had broken. That’s why they had thrown him away. Not so much because of Harry. Because they’d taken everything from him that could be taken.

If it hadn’t been for one weird month among the Muggles of London, fed and healed and clothed as best they could manage, that final rape wouldn’t have shocked his mind to wakefulness. In his mind’s eye, every man was a creature of black and terrible lust, waiting to pounce and tear and hurt. To pin and penetrate, whether gently by nearly forced consent, or violently and with a sick pleasure taken from the cruelty of it, they were all the same. And what then was Draco, who had lusted for such a thing from Harry?

Harry.

Harry was just a few feet away.

He’d lived with this pain before, and endured and functioned in the face of these horrors for a long
time before Snape had healed his mind. Harry needed him, and he had to fight this if they were to have any hope of living though this. Draco fought through the fading horror of his mind, shoving the best memories of Harry he had to the forefront.

Harry gently floated him from the stairs to a chair. Harry offering his hand and his help in the hallway. Harry holding his hand when he was frightened by the nightmares and memories that terrified him again now. The softness of Harry’s lips in the cool dark of their room. Harry carrying him to bed after Dawlish had drugged him silly. Harry, his face full of awe, beneath him, grateful for the power just to touch someone he loved this way. Harry was at the core of everything that Draco loved about being alive, and the Harry that he loved with all of his heart and soul would surely die if Draco didn’t fight this.

Draco peeled open his eyes, and the dim electric lights of the Muggle building burned. Tiny flashes of degradation and violation played in front of his eyes, but he turned his head and saw Harry. Rodolphus LeStrange knelt above Harry’s prone form, every so often casting a new Crucius Curse. Draco had no wand on him, but his uncle’s back was to him. He had to try.

Rodolphus LeStrange knew something was wrong. His Mark had blossomed full and strong, black as the day it was forged into his flesh, but less than a minute ago it had waned, and finally it had faded more than it ever had before. Something was terribly wrong. He flung curse after curse into the body of Harry Potter, and still the bastard didn’t so much as twitch! He was almost ready to try another spell, when the unthinkable finally occurred.

Potter groaned mightily, his back arching and crackling as he spasmed, and an oily darkness slid from his mouth and nose, only to evaporate slowly into the still air of the warehouse. His body collapsed completely, and Rodolphus knew almost by instinct what had happened, but he still couldn’t believe it!

“No…no…it…it just…it can’t be! My…my Lord! NO! Unacceptable! Impossible! You…YOU WORTHLESS, INSOLENT, INSIGNIFICANT BRAT!”

The moment of lost control fell away, and Rodolphus was shaken by his own emotionality. Dead. His Lord was gone. Potter had won. The unfathomable had become reality, and he would have to flee. There would be no Dark Lord. This time…the war was truly over, not merely the battle. It was done.

Something cold and ugly flickered back to life in Rudolphus’ fevered brain. This was an affront that couldn’t be forgiven. Blood cried out for blood, and if the world would have no Dark Lord, he would see that it had no hero of the Light.

“Very well, Potter. I congratulate you. I’ll never know how you did this, but I don’t care a damn. You’ll follow my master to the grave! Farewell, Mr. Potter.”

Rodolphus leveled his wand at Harry Potter’s brow, gathering his considerable will, and selected the curse that would finish the matter once and for all.

“Avad-URK!”

Rodolphus looked down while his mind slowly processed the incredible pain that lanced through his back and chest. The black steel tip of Potter’s knife was jutting out of his bared torso, and a slow,
thick trickle of red was dribbling down, staining his shirt. He could feel the last panicked flutter of a heart that had burst when steel tore through it, and Rodolphus LeStrange died before he could form another thought.

The body tumbled to the side, revealing Draco, who had just let go of the knife’s hilt, small crimson smears covering each hand. Draco wanted to grab Harry, shout out his love now that they were safe, but the blood on his hands hypnotized him.

He’d killed. Even if it was his uncle, even after everything that had happened, he’d wanted there to be another way. He hadn’t had the nerve to kill, or the humility to beg for help, when he was sixteen, and in that instant his entire life had been irrevocably changed. Tonight, he had taken a life, and even if it was for Harry, even if it had been to save the entire world, his stomach turned and his mind reeled at what he’d just done.

His blood-stained hands were shaking uncontrollably. He tried to wipe them on the floor, get the stuff off of him, but it only smeared and ground into his palms. The copper-iron tang of it was in his nostrils, choking him with the smell of death and mortality. He’d killed. It was real. He’d stabbed a man to death.

Draco frantically crawled the few feet to the wall, away from Harry, just in time to vomit spectacularly, voiding his stomach of food and the bile that fear had brought. Through the heaves, sobs slipped in, and tears burned hot trails across his cheeks, dripping from his face alongside snot and bile. He was so tired. So very, very tired. Then he heard the noise of something scraping along the floor.

Harry was dragging himself to Draco’s side, eyes bloodshot and out of focus, but with the pained ghost of a smile on his face. Draco found it briefly funny that, at a moment like this, he was still possessed of enough vanity to feel embarrassed that Harry was looking at him snot-nosed, blood-stained, and bleary-eyed. Harry chuckled hoarsely. His voice was a jagged mess from the screams that Crucius had forced from him. He sounded like ash and gravel, but his words reached Draco’s heart as Harry propped himself against the wall.

“Glad…you could…make it, love. Too bad…y-you missed…the party in my head. Good news. N-no more Dark Lord…just…just someone…who hopes…you still love him.”

Draco wiped his mouth and chin on his pajama sleeve, sniffling and coughing for breath, then crawled to Harry, and curled himself into Harry’s arms, scrunched up between Harry’s long legs. Harry’s movements were jerky, and he couldn’t quite grasp Draco tightly, but that was the aftereffects of the Crucius Curse. Draco burrowed close into Harry’s warmth, still shivering as much from the cold as from the trauma he’d endured. Pajamas were almost useless in December, especially in London after midnight. He didn’t care that his flesh crawled from touch, all he wanted was Harry. He breathed in the scent of Harry’s sweat, and the faint aroma of the Burrow and the cheap soap that Harry always used. It smelled of home and safety and sanity, and these were things he craved desperately.

Draco closed his eyes and wept softly, and every so often Harry could hear Draco’s voice croak out promises of love, mingled with frantic apologies for the deceptions he’d committed.

Harry stroked the tangled blond locks gently, staring at the far wall with eyes that could barely focus, and tried to comfort Draco as much as his limited breath would allow.

“S’okay, love. I…I understand. I know, love. I know. You tried…tried to save me. In spite of everything, you…you came for me. I heard you, love. In my soul. I heard you. You…you gave me the strength, love. I think I’d have died…if it hadn’t been for you. I love you so much. Understand? I
love you more than anything. Power, money, life...anything. I love you, Draco. Forever and always. I love you.”

The wards Harry had put in place to prevent escape by Rodolphus or his minions shattered. Shouts and booted feet could be heard everywhere. Aurors in full combat gear flooded into the building, and in less than half a minute it had been declared safe for non-combatants. The medical staff and investigative teams moved in, and behind them came Kingsley Shacklebolt and a full complement of specialists. Kingsley strolled up to Harry and Draco, nodded silently, then turned to face his crew.

“Ten minutes! I want this place spotless! I want every neighbor and even the damn cats in the alley Obliviated! No witnesses, no mess, nothing! Until I say something happened here, the word is NOTHING happened here! We’ll sort this out at headquarters, and I want Healers working on these two...NOW! Move it!”

Nymphadora Tonks marched up, towing the stabilized and magically bound form of Hyde-Pratt behind her.

“This one’s alive, Minister. I’m taking him to the Security cells as soon as we have him healed up. Full interrogation?”

Kingsley grimaced at the sight of Hyde-Pratt.

“Good. Get that trash out of my sight. And order a cavity search with that interrogation. Thorough. Tell them to keep reaching until they can feel the bastard’s teeth!”

Tonks gave Harry an amused and meaningful wink, and snapped a smart salute to Kingsley.

“Yes, sir!”

Harry didn’t even have the strength left to chuckle, but he was aware of spells being cast and heard potions being uncorked. The Healers were ready, and it would probably be a long, long night before they saw home again.

TBC!!!
From The Ashes

DISCLAIMER: Warning! I make no claim to any property of J.K. Rowling's, and am in no way profiting by this. I do offer her my sincerest thanks for allowing us this garden of the mind in which we play. Further Warning! This story...and likely any I ever write...are dominated by gay themes and characters. That's how it is, if this in any way makes you uncomfortable...do not read further.

Redeem Me…by Samayel

Chapter 68: From The Ashes

Harry sat, numb and quiet, pensive and full of restless thoughts that wouldn’t stop bubbling up through his conscious mind. What a week it had been. Now he was here, at Hogwarts, waiting for Draco to return. Currently, Draco was in the dungeon with Severus Snape, who had only just been invited back to Hogwarts and had taken up residence in his old suite less than two days ago. Harry was seated outside the Headmaster’s Office, and when Draco returned, they would be visiting Dumbledore’s portrait together. There were so many things that they both needed to say, but for now, all Harry could do was wait.

Surreal. Surreal was a good word for the days that had passed since the Solstice. In just two days the New Year would be rung in, and Molly was planning her celebration cautiously, aiming for something quieter than usual, since Draco would have a rather serious headache by then. Today, Severus Snape would be inspecting Draco’s mind carefully. This evening the procedure would be undertaken once again, and hopefully this time it would last until Draco had had many years to recover fully.

It hadn’t worked out badly at all, largely thanks to Kingsley Shacklebolt, who covered things handily with a well-stitched together mixture of truth and exaggeration, embellishment and omission. As far as the press knew, LeStrange’s gang had cooked up a mad, doomed scheme to revive the Dark Lord, and it involved the sacrifice of both other Death Eaters and innocent victims. Harry’s crimes had been neatly pinned on the rogue Death Eaters, and he hadn’t been charged at all.

In fact, Harry had been described in glowing terms by Kingsley, who slyly revealed that, since Harry was fond of Draco, the only surviving former victim of LeStrange’s, LeStrange had specifically called out Harry for a duel, and cited a few portions of LeStrange’s letter. Harry, of course, had defended his loved ones with exemplary courage, and had unfortunately been trapped by LeStrange using magic both ancient and black. Draco had come to the rescue, having found the letter and having figured out where Harry had gone, and promptly saved the day, just in time for the Aurors to show up and take in the remaining member of LeStrange’s crew. The subject of Horcruxes never emerged.

The Minister actually knew the entire story, but had allowed only Tonks and himself to conduct the interviews with Harry and Draco. Hyde-Pratt’s Veritaserum confession was attributed to the raving of an insane Death Eater, and the matter was buried in the filing cabinets of the Ministry. Once Kingsley knew that Harry had been burdened by the spirit of Voldemort…for two years!…he’d understood that Harry’s conduct hadn’t been his fault, and the man took many steps to ensure that secrecy enveloped the truth. He also pulled a final favor for Draco, a peace offering of sorts, given the tension of their last meeting, and arranged for a Citation for Meritorious Service to the wizarding community.
The press ate it up. They had a love story with a touch of scandal, a dash of tragedy, a villain, and love conquering all. In a perfect about face, The Daily Prophet launched a series of reports and editorials regarding the killings and the eventual closing of the case, and Draco of all people, who had once been spat upon and kicked in Diagon Alley, was painted as the hero. Not that he didn’t deserve it and then some, but Harry supposed that it was just too early to expect the press to completely shift their opinion of him after calling him a murderer for a year. Besides…they’d been right.

Harry had a hard time with that part. He didn’t quite feel like talking about it just yet, but he’d needed nightmare wards just to sleep lately. With Voldemort gone, there was no haze to his memory anymore, and no influence pushing justifications into his conscious mind to excuse his actions. He had killed so many people. Even if they were Death Eaters, even if Voldemort had pushed from within, Harry had given Voldemort the trigger to push. He’d channeled that terrible and demonic rage into killing people he once believed were expendable. His hate and anger had cost dozens of people their lives, and his memories were newly full of cold-blooded executions and frenzied killing sprees. He’d done it all, and now he had to live with what he’d done.

He’d heard the death rattle in the throats of men and a few women. He’d been up to his elbows in gore, drenched in the blood of the people he’d slaughtered. Some of them had never done anything worse than hexing Muggles for sport. They’d fled the Ministry and Harry after the war, and the fear that they’d felt had cost them their lives. At the core of his being, Harry carried an enormous debt, and while it was surprisingly easy to forgive others for being human, he hadn’t found a way to forgive himself for unleashing such a dark and terrible hate upon the world. All that had kept Harry from falling into complete self-loathing and despair was Draco.

Draco had been remarkably chipper since that night. He was shaky as hell, and spooked easily without potions to calm him. He didn’t feel comfortable being surrounded by happy Weasleys who congratulated him and often had to be restrained to keep them from hugging him. In spite of all this, he tended to smile a lot, he laughed when a joke or mocking comment was made, and he seemed to have little or no fear of Harry, even though the touch of others terrified him and his sleep was still warded against nightmares along side Harry’s. Draco clung to Harry like a lifeline, as soothing as healing balm upon a painful wound, and almost constantly sought out physical closeness. Not sex…since he wasn’t ready for that by a long shot, but small symbols of intimacy like a hand to hold or a shoulder to lean against.

In some ways it was worrisome, since it seemed a little clingy, but Harry had no problem with that. These last few days it had been all he could do not to break down and throw himself at Draco’s feet while spouting praise. Draco knew how he felt, and they’d spoken several times when they had privacy, telling every last detail that they’d once kept from each other, and reasserting their desire to remain together. If Draco was clingy, then so was Harry, and he was already nervous just waiting upstairs without his boyfriend for an hour.

There had been much confusion in the aftermath of the Solstice, not the least of which took place at the Burrow. When Voldemort had passed on, his power had left the world as well, breaking the enchantment that kept the Burrow in stasis. Several small items had crashed to the ground, including framed pictures, and something had slipped loose in the old Weasley clock, likely a gear or spring, and when they found themselves moving again, there was no sign of Harry or Draco, just an open window in the boys’ bedroom and a lingering feeling of dread. Tonks was busy, but she did take time to have a clerk Firecall the Burrow and let them know what had happened. Molly had been in a state of panic until Harry and Draco returned home sometime near dawn, having spent the night answering question and receiving medical attention, while Kingsley worked out what to tell the press. Harry in particular had been a mess, since the aftereffects of a prolonged Cruciusatus were extremely debilitating.
Harry had gotten the scolding of three lifetimes for haring off after Death Eaters on a whim, Draco caught hell for leaving the house in his pajamas, and the Burrow had been roused early for breakfast by Molly’s hysterical tone. After letting Molly vent, the whole story emerged, with the subject of Horcruxes carefully dodged, and the Weasley clan listened in awe as they realized that the last shred of Lord Voldemort had been carried in Harry’s soul all along. George in particular had little to say, uncharacteristically silent and thoughtful. The knowledge that revenge and brutality had been inspired by the Dark Lord’s presence had not set well with him, and that forgiveness and love had destroyed Voldemort forced a certain contemplativeness upon him. George and Fred exchanged looks that said ‘We’ll talk later.’ and that was that, for now.

There had been happiness too. Dula had known more than he ever let on to Harry, and he privately congratulated both of them, also spending a lot time listening to Draco ramble sleepily about the Solstice night. Harry knew all of it. But there was a friendship between Dula and Draco that had grown stronger during the past two months, and it was good to see Draco trusting someone other than Harry with his innermost thoughts. After her initial fit of temper, Molly gushed and fretted over Harry and Draco like a mother hen, and for at least the first day after their return, every meal was served to them in bed. Just being seen in bed with Harry was enough to make Draco blush furiously, and there was a certain sense of relief that came as the Weasley family members who were visiting slowly departed one by one.

Bill and Fleur went back to their home first, with Percy departing shortly after. Charlie and Dula made their farewells and returned to the preserve, and Fred and George Flooed back to their apartment suite, leaving only Ron, who was now in the process of moving the contents of his flat back home. His new work only took up three hours a day, and Ron found himself picking up the slack and helping Molly clean up the decorations and put the rooms back in order, since Harry and Draco obviously couldn’t be asked to help in their current condition. This elicited a few good natured grumbles about ‘gold-bricking layabouts’, but Harry knew perfectly well that Ron was kidding. They’d been teasing each other since they were eleven years old, and this was nothing new.

When they were finally feeling better, and Draco felt up to making the Firecall, he contacted Severus Snape, only to learn that he’d accepted the post of Professor at Hogwarts once again. The appointment was made, and while they waited they discussed Draco’s conversations with Albus Dumbledore’s portrait. It was then that it was decided. A meeting with the image of Dumbledore, which Harry had inexplicably avoided during the war and the years after, was long overdue. Harry understood now why he’d felt such hesitance about seeing Albus’ image. Voldemort had known full well that any advice from Albus would run counter to his interests, and Harry had been subtly influenced to avoid returning to Hogwarts. Now he found that he dearly missed the place, almost as much as he missed Albus himself.

It was all so clear in retrospect, what his old friend and mentor had tried to teach him. It was something that could only be experienced, not merely told or recited by memory. Love wasn’t a thing of books and formulas, it was thing that had to be lived and known in one’s heart to be understood. Albus had done all that he could to show Harry the little experiences and memories that held clues to Tom Riddle’s birth and formative years, but he could not make Harry understand how to express love in the face of anger and loss. Harry knew it wasn’t all his own fault. He’d been sixteen years old when the war broke out. His godfather, his mentor, Ginny and Hermione had all been killed in the conflict between Voldemort and Harry, and it had been so hard for him to accept those losses and move forward from them. In truth, he probably wouldn’t have been working through it this quickly…if it hadn’t been for Draco.

In Draco, Harry had found an equal, a partner, a mate and friend that was always at the forefront of his heart and mind, and who brought a new understanding of love that Harry could never have fully grasped without entering into a relationship as an adult and opening his heart completely. Draco had
sacrificed everything to protect Harry, knowing that exposure of his plans might destroy any hope of continuing as Harry’s lover, and had fought and fought hard to break Voldemort’s hold on Harry. It was a rare person that could put the best interests of another ahead of their own desires, and Draco had done that and more. Harry knew he was far luckier than he had any right to be. He’d escaped death a dozen times and more, found a family of people who cared deeply for him, escaped possession or worse, and ultimately gained a friend, lover and confidant who was smart, beautiful, talented and wise. He’d always been lucky, even if it had been hard to tell sometimes, but this was good fortune of epic proportions.

Harry heard footsteps in the hall and flicked his head up eagerly. Draco rounded the corner, shaggy-haired and cheerful, if a little wistful, and promptly moved into place by Harry’s shoulder, neck craned for a quick kiss.

“Good news, love. Snape says it won’t be as bad the second time around. My brain adapted to having those wards in place, and it won’t give me headaches for more than a few hours when he puts them back up. He was fairly pissed about his work getting spoiled, but you know how he is.”

Harry sighed with relief. He hated the idea of Draco going through the entire process again, but he hated seeing Draco suffer even more.

“Thank Merlin. For that matter, thank Snape. I hate to admit it, but the man is good at what he does. I still can’t believe he’s back at Hogwarts. They have enough problems getting students back without hiring the man who killed the last Headmaster. Minerva has guts, but I still didn’t think she’d ever forgive him.”

“Come on, Harry. Don’t be lowbrow! You know Albus’ portrait has been in contact with Snape the entire time. Maybe he is a portrait, but he still has clout where it counts. You’re right about the parents though. I heard the early numbers for enrollment are way down. That reminds me…those of us who never finished our seventh year are entitled to ‘finishing classes’ and NEWT examinations when we wish. I’d like to come back next summer. It would only take a few months and I’d be certified and accredited. You might think about doing the same. Especially since it would be nice to pass notes or snog between classes. Just a few things I never really got to do properly while I was here. You know, tying up loose ends and the like.”

“God! I hadn’t even thought about that the last couple years. It’s taken so long to get this place staffed and open again. Maybe I should. I mean…I’ve got plenty of money, but I haven’t any idea what to do with the rest of life. I guess it would start with getting my NEWTs finished. Plus…hallway snogging…always good!”

The stone door clicked and opened for them, ending the conversation before Harry could make a few further comments about hallway snogging. Minerva McGonagall stepped out, prim and proper as always, but her eyes softened and a small smile creased her face when she looked upon Harry and Draco.

“Do come on in, lads. Albus has been in high spirits since he heard you were coming. Especially you, Harry. It’s long past time for you to have come for a visit. As for you, Draco, he’s spoken of you so much lately that we shall be very fortunate if he doesn’t unravel his canvas or tumble from the wall. I hope you don’t mind if I stay whilst you chat. I’ve finally moved into the office now that the school’s governors have seen fit to make my appointment permanent. I’m afraid I have a bit too much paperwork to do to simply toddle off for awhile, but there is fresh tea and some nice iced biscuits, if you’d like them?”

They thanked Minerva politely, and it didn’t really matter if she was there or not, and Harry had business that might well involve her too. The Dampener was no longer needed. Harry no longer felt
a desire to keep such a temptingly powerful artifact to himself. It could remain one of Hogwarts resources, saved for some distant crisis. Harry had lost nearly half his power when Voldemort had finally left the world. Even so, he was still one of the most accomplished wizards of his day, as well as a gifted Legilimens and Occlumens. He had all the power anyone could want, and he had no desire for more.

Dumbledore was beaming down at them from his frame as soon as they entered. Harry had to admit that the capable looking, cheerful old wizard was comfortably reminiscent of the man he’d known through his adolescence, and not the tired and sickly Dumbledore of that last terrible year at Hogwarts.

“Harry! Draco! Bravo, boys! Bravo! Well done, indeed! I’ve missed you both so, and don’t be fooled by the oil and canvas…a portrait can worry too! I cannot tell you what it means to see you both hale and hearty again. I heard the joyful news only a few days ago, and I could scarcely wait to congratulate you. Poor Minerva, I suspect my prattling about it nearly moved her to ship my frame to the Weasley Burrow.”

Minerva smirked ever so faintly and poured tea for all, placing the tray of biscuits within easy reach.

Draco spoke first, sensing Harry’s reticence. “Thank you, sir. I don’t think any of this would have turned out so well if you hadn’t helped me the way you did. It was still fairly awful, but at last it's over…this time forever.”

Dumbledore looked faintly sad, and Draco was confused a moment, sensing some dire statement, until Harry spoke up.

“It’s never really over, is it, sir? There’s always someone, somewhere, who lets fear and hate rule their heart or mind. All we can do is try. Leave things better than we found them. Not perpetuate the cycle of hurt and revenge. It will last all of our lives, and the lives of children now, and their children…into infinity. That’s what he means, Draco.”

Dumbledore bowed quietly, looking very comforted by Harry’s words.

“You understand now. A single gesture of kindness can ripple throughout decades, and a solitary moment of cruelty or neglect can wreak untold harm for generations. Our world suffered under the threat of Tom Riddle for almost sixty years, because so many people could have made a difference, and did not. That you understand this, Harry, tells me how much you have gained…and how much you have lost. Suffice it to say, I could be no prouder of you if you were my own child. And you, Draco, as well.

The wisdom that has been born in each of you was brought into this world by pain, but its power will endure far longer than even the memory of that pain…if you use what you’ve learned wisely. Like Fawkes, who rises from the ashes of his own destruction, all the more beautiful for the flames he endured. Our only hope for a better world is in learning well from our mistakes, and then living what we learn. I learned long ago not to act rashly or with haste, but my occasional hesitation to act became the mistake that set Tom Riddle against the world, and ultimately, led to my own demise.

Every parent wishes better for their children than for themselves, and this I wish for you. Live well and wisely. Love freely and trust though it sometimes opens you to disappointment. Pursue your dreams, and let them be made into your reality. Be happy, and share that happiness with all you meet along the way.”

Draco was getting misty-eyed, and reached for a handkerchief from the desk. Harry nodded peacefully, and looked back to Albus’ image with a quiet look of regret.
“I’ve missed you. For a long time. Feels like longer than it really was. Thank you. For everything. For helping Draco, for everything you tried to teach me, and for everything you did for me to help me along the way. I never really got a chance to say, but I loved you too. The only thing I really regret about being raised in the Muggle world is that I didn’t meet you until I did, and then I only got a few years to know you before you weren’t here anymore. I can’t even count the number of times I wished I could hear your voice, or just ask you a question. You’re everything I thought I would want to be. I’m sorry I disappointed everyone. If I hadn’t been too young…or too stupid…”

Dumbledore cut Harry off with a gesture before Draco could interrupt.

“Harry. Too much was put upon you, at too young an age. However you may have erred along the way, the world is still here, and life is still as much as we make of it. We have you to thank for it all. The prophecy was clear, and if I could have found a way to keep you from harm, I would have, but you were our only hope…and you have by far exceeded all our expectations. Have a good life, Harry. You earned it. And don’t let me hear you chiding yourself…or I’ll have Minerva send my frame to your house!”

Draco smiled and held back a chuckle. “You know you’ll always be welcome if the scenery here bores you.”

Harry pulled the Dampener from his pocket and held it out to Minerva.

“Here. Put this behind glass and write ‘open in case of emergency’ on it. I won’t be needing this anymore. No one needs that much power. Besides, I already have the only thing I could ever need.”

His shy, sidelong glance toward Draco wasn’t missed, and Draco broke form and kissed Harry right through McGonagall’s tsk-ing noises and Dumbledore’s chuckles.

They whiled away a few hours with good company before returning to the Burrow and waiting for Severus’ arrival. The New Year would be a blessed time, with Draco’s memories warded once again, and a world of possibility stretching endlessly in front of them. The New Year would come soon enough, and with it came the hope for better days. At least now they were easy to believe in.

TBC!!!
Chapter 69

George Weasley’s trench coat, which had cost a small fortune in Diagon Alley, and marked him as a man to be reckoned with, didn’t do quite enough to keep the December chill off of him while he walked through the snow, boots crunching softly on the half frozen slush of winter. He passed headstone after headstone, until he reached the one he’d come to visit. Ginny.

George squatted down rather awkwardly, then abandoned all pretense of keeping the snow off of himself and just knelt down beside the stone marker. The flowers he’d brought wouldn’t last very long at all in this weather, but then, they never really did. Once you cut them, they were already dead. Not that different from people, really. Death was irreversible. Once a person’s spirit left their body, they were severed from the ones who loved them…forever. Like Ginny. The awkward, gawky little girl in a house full of noisy, rowdy boys. Their only sister, cut down in the prime of her life because some assholes with a Mark needed to make a point about their precious Lord Voldemort. She’d died for nothing.

George peeled away the elegant metal track that held his enchanted eye in place. It was a ritual for him. He didn’t come here to live in the present, he came to remember the past, when he hadn’t worn this thing, and he’d looked from two healthy eyes at a brother whose face wasn’t scarred and lined, and he’d looked at a sister who was whole and healthy, and as bold and sassy as one might expect of a daughter of Molly Weasley.

‘Been a little while, sis. Things have been…strange. They’re changing…I’m changing. Mostly…getting older. Maybe wiser. I hope. I still miss you. We all do. You wouldn’t believe your eyes these days, what with Harry and Draco Malfoy a couple, and the press loving every minute of it. Hardly like the world you remember. It’s only been a couple of years, and everything is changing…faster than I like most of the time. Guess that brings me to the point.

I made a promise, and I tried to keep it, but I wonder now if you’d even have wanted me to. There aren’t that many of the bastards that did this to you left free these days. You could count the number left on two hands…and still have a couple fingers left. I tried. Harry did the dirty work, and Fred and I did the quiet part. It got done, and I thought that was what mattered. It’s a safer place than when you were here last, and at least I’m sure of that. Not sure of much else anymore.

I learned some things recently. About vengeance, about killing, and more. Weird things, things I never guessed at before. I don’t think I can do this anymore. I thought I could. I thought I could keep going and see it finished, but I can’t. I hope you’ll forgive me. I’m giving the information network over to Tonks. She’s the best of the Aurors, and with this kind of network, she’ll make a name for herself fast. Fred and I are done, and so is Harry. For us at least, it’s over. I’d like to think that, wherever you are now, you understand. I really hope you do.
One thing hasn’t changed at all. We all miss you, and we love you.’

“Oy, brother mine! You coming? It’s freezing out here, and dinner at Mum’s is on in half an hour. I’m ready. You?”

George returned his metal track to its usual position around his head, and rolled his eye flippantly. He clambered up off his knees and stumbled back through the snow to Fred.

“Merlin! Do you think with ANYTHING but your stomach? Yeah, I’m done. Let’s be off.”

‘So long, sis. I’ll be around again from time to time. Just don’t ever think you’re forgotten. You aren’t, and never will be.’

With the muted cracks that marked Apparation, the Weasley twins were gone, and a handful of flowers remained, snow gently drifting its way over them as the chilly winds of December blew.

------------------------------------------------------

Harry was watching Draco from a slight distance, while the Weasley house celebrated the incoming New Year. No one was staying overnight, but everyone had Flooed or Apparated in for the occasion, and would remain until just after midnight. The house was busy to bursting, this time more so than even before. Draco was in the middle of a very animated conversation, despite the faint headache he was still recovering from. It hadn’t been bad, and Snape had done his usual best, but Harry still saw Draco wince every now and again, and it made his hands itch to wrap themselves around his lover and offer comfort.

Draco was chatting with Eileen, Ron’s girlfriend, and having a pretty good time at that. Eileen was easy on the eyes, with red hair that was considerably darker than the average for the Weasley house, and blue eyes that were uncommonly bright. She was vivacious, forward and intelligent, which explained readily how she’d worked her way to the middle levels of a serious charitable institution before she was twenty-one.

Harry thought she made a nice match for Ron, but he could tell Molly wasn’t too sure just yet. She’d always been protective of her boys, and woe betide the woman who didn’t meet Molly’s standard for her children. For now, Molly was grudgingly willing to admit that the young woman seemed nice, and that was all she was likely to grant for now.

Eileen was Irish by birth, but had lived in England since she was only a few years old, and her father had been a Quidditch star for Ireland some twenty years before. Her passions were education, Quidditch, and charitable works, and that put her in good standing with Draco, who seemed comfortable with all the subjects at hand, and felt a certain kinship with the ‘newcomer’, since he was comparatively new to the Weasley household, and only Eileen was newer.

Harry’s eyes flicked across the room. Ron was in a scorching wizard chess match against his father, the ultimate opponent, and Percy and his fiancée, Penelope, were watching intently while chatting with Bill and Fleur. Molly was busily moving about, keeping the cider and pumpkin juice and tea flowing. Remus Lupin and Nymphadora Tonks were conversing very seriously with Fred and George, and Harry steeled himself to join the trio that made up the last of their guests. It was only polite after all. Charlie, Dula, and Severus Snape were near the fireplace, and Snape seemed to get along passing well with the only Durmstrang student in the house, Dula.

Harry still wasn’t sure why Snape had chosen to remain after rebuilding Draco’s wards yesterday, but the man made him uncomfortable as hell, just standing there, sipping from a metal flask every so often, dark eyes flicking about the room and revealing nothing of his thoughts. He’d thanked Snape
politely enough yesterday, but Molly had asked him to celebrate the New Year, and against all expectations, the greasy git had said yes. Harry strolled up to the little cluster, patently ignoring Snape’s taut grimace at Harry’s approach.

Dula spoke of old spells and curriculum differences at Durmstrang, and Harry stuck to the edge of the conversation, silent when he had nothing of worth to add. First Charlie drifted off in search of fresh cider, and to harass his youngest brother, who had finally lost the chess game to Arthur, and then Dula very politely excused himself to make use of the bathroom. Harry found himself standing by the fire on New Year’s Eve, drinking cider with Severus Snape. It was at about that moment that he flirted with the question of whether he’d really gotten the better end of the deal against Voldemort.

Severus rolled his eyes and sipped from his flask, giving Harry a withering glance before he spoke.

“What? If there is something you have need of saying, then by all means spit it out, Potter!”

Harry bristled at the tone of the man. The same condescending air he’d endured for most of a decade.

“I just wondered what you have in that flask. I haven’t seen you drink anything else all night.”

Severus gave Harry a conspiratorial glance, looking carefully around the room before whispering.

“Polyjuice. I’m not really Severus Snape, and I’m actually an agent of Voldemort here to kill the Boy Who Lived.”

Just as the hairs on the back of Harry’s neck were rising and his own incredulity peaked, he noticed several things wrong with that statement. One, Polyjuice wasn’t sipped every few minutes, but every hour or so. Two, the man looked like his face was going to rip in half from trying to restrain an evil smirk…while intoxicated. Snape guffawed! Snape!

“Oh, do come off it, Potter! You’ve been staring cross-eyed at me since you were eleven, trying to work out how everything from the rise of evil to your first flourish of acne was connected to me. It’s unfathomable that you could even fall for that for the few seconds that you did. I swear I’ll never know what Draco sees in you!”

Harry sniffed the air while Snape drawled.

“You’re…you’re drunk! You! How? Why? I didn’t think you ever drank! What’s in that flask?”

“It’s schnapps! I brewed it quickly last night from some apples of Molly’s that had gone a bit off. Bloody marvelous stuff.”

Severus took another swig, and Harry watched with incredulity.

“Potter…it’s New Year’s Eve, I’m surrounded by Weasleys, Voldemort is dead for good, and I spent yesterday trying to repair work that should have lasted for years. If ever there were a day that cried out for schnapps, this would be the one.”

“If being here bothers you so much that you have to drink, why stay?”

Snape stood to his full height, took a deep breath, and sighed, speaking with a tone that quietly implied the complete idiocy of the listener.

“Because Molly Weasley asked me to do so, and because Draco reiterated her request…and because I felt like it! I’ve been in Germany, Potter! Germany! Do you have any idea how much I loathe speaking German! If I never use another guttural, I shall be the happier for it. It’s good to be in
England, Potter. I’m celebrating. I’m told it’s what people do.”

Harry reeled. Severus Snape was tipsy…and almost cheerful…no wonder he was sticking to his own company as much as possible. The idea of a cheerful Snape was more than most people could handle and keep their heads screwed on straight.

“Well alright then. Good for you! Sorry to interrupt, I just…I’ve never seen you…happy…before. Looks good on you. Keep it up.”

“Well that’s just life, isn’t it? It’s always pass or fail.”

Snape hiccupped, then looked mortified by the fact that he had just done so. He was also mortified by Potter’s statement. Because it was true.

“My earlier assessment was correct. You are not completely without potential, Mr. Potter.”

Harry smirked. “And you’re not completely without a sense of humor. Here.”

Harry held out his glass of cider. Snape took it with a look of confusion.

“What, pray tell, do you want me to do with this?” He queried acidly.

Harry grinned widely. “It’s almost midnight. Hold my cider while I kiss my boyfriend.”

If Snape’s glare at Harry’s retreating back could have shot daggers, the Boy Who Lived would have looked a pincushion.

Arthur had returned the Weasley clock to its place of honor after making the necessary repairs, and it had had a sheet over it since its return to the house that very morning. Arthur Weasley tapped his glass, drawing the attention of the assembled celebrants, and launched into the little speech he’d prepared.

“Ahem. Weasleys one and all, friends, loved ones, celebrants and miscreants alike. This evening, we say farewell to the year gone by, letting go the hurts and sorrows that assailed us during its passage, and we greet the new one with our hopes and dreams intact. We have among us some who have never before celebrated a New Year in this house, and they will bear witness to an event we revere and observe with great awe and the respect that it is due. When someone dear to us, dwelling here among us, also saves the life of one our family, it is our tradition to install their name as a part of our household, so to honor them for the kindness they have done us. This past year, such a thing has happened. It gives me great pleasure to unveil for you the Weasley Clock, which has seen eight generations of this family through the many years since its creation. It has borne witness to every crisis that this family has known, and stood beside us through every celebration. In a few seconds, the midnight hour will sound, and alongside our wishes for the new year, we will offer our congratulations to Draco, who has more than earned his place of honor upon this ancient device’s face.”

Arthur whisked away the sheet, revealing the modification he’d made to the clock just as it began to strike the midnight hour. Draco’s name had been added to the many hands, or rather, spoons, that marked the face, in addition to the hands that told the time, and soft applause filled the room while Arthur bowed to Draco. Draco was so floored that he almost forgot his midnight kiss, until the need to hide tears reminded him that Harry’s lips were a ready and able way to camouflage his distressed
In the warm and hazy comfort of home and good spirits, laughter and cheer, Draco lost himself with Harry for a moment, fusing utterly with his love. He came back to himself slightly embarrassed, since it dawned on him that the applause had shifted to polite chuckles while they watched him snogging his way to near senselessness. Propriety took over, and Draco stammered out thanks, hoping he didn’t sound too fatuous, but he was sure that he couldn’t adequately express how he felt about this.

The Weasley clock had come to bear the name of a Malfoy. If that wasn’t a sign of drastically changing times, then what could be? The old spoon that carried his given name was a symbol of so much more. This, more than any place Draco had ever been, was his home, and these people were his family, and always would be.

Much later, after cider had loosened inhibitions and many tearful farewells were given and received, Draco led Harry upstairs by the hand, somewhat rosy-cheeked from the dangerous combination of alcohol and high spirits. His headache had long since receded to no more than a faint heaviness about the skull, and he hadn’t dared do more than curl up or snog with Harry since the Solstice. To be both precise and accurate, it would have to be said that Draco was just insanely horny. The many joys of that evening had tempted him to crown the New Year with still more happiness, and he gave in to that temptation immediately. Harry was hurrying to keep up on the way to their room, and Draco’s grip was like iron around his hand.

As soon as the door to their room was closed, and a suitable spell intoned to guarantee privacy, Draco all but mauled Harry with an intensity born of a hunger that woke days ago, but simply couldn’t be sated at the time. Between the headache and the celebrations underway, Draco had been stuck with only his imagination and a few good snogging sessions to keep him content, but now there was nothing holding him back.

Harry stumbled to keep up, trying to match Draco’s tipsy ferocity and ardor, but wound up being pushed onto the bed and divested of his clothes by a lover who was drowning Harry’s conscious mind with deep, strong kisses and hands that explored with an eager passion and instinctive deftness. Draco peeled away his own garments in a matter of seconds, and settled himself on top of Harry, launching a new assault on Harry’s lips and neck. Harry quickly made the journey from excited to rampantlly erect in a matter of minutes, and coaxing him on was a litany of affection from Draco, not to mention the softness of Draco’s skin slithering against Harry’s own.


Suddenly Draco’s lips were gone from Harry’s mouth, and Harry opened his eyes just in time to see blond hair moving down his chest, and Draco’s tongue ran a wet little trail from just above Harry’s heart, right down to his groin. Harry had long since discovered that he was a little ticklish, not being all that used to being touched there, and the sensations brought by that small, pink tongue darting between his legs were exquisite.

“Huh! Ahh! Draco, love! Wha…mmm…love you. ‘S good. MERLIN!”

Harry hadn’t had half as much cider as Draco, but his tolerance for alcohol was famously low. It was hard to form coherent thoughts, especially when Draco kept doing things with his tongue that defied easy description. A velvet soft hand gripped Harry’s erect cock and held it still, pointed upwards, and a hungry mouth employed itself at the task of teasing Harry mercilessly. Neither of them spoke more than a few garbled words at random interviews, hushed and feverish with desire, but they each knew precisely what the other had meant, and that was more than enough. This wasn’t a time for conversation, this was a time to speak without words, where hands and lips and tongues made subtle statements of desire and respect in the darkness.
As tempted as he was to just sate himself by savoring Harry’s orgasm, drinking it in and claiming it as his own, Draco had another reckless urge welling up inside of him, a gnawing hunger that had remained unfed since that first and only precious night between them. Draco paused in his motions, leaving Harry hanging cruelly on the edge of repletion, groaning softly with the restless need to come. A small vial sailed through the air at the command of a whispered Accio, and Draco’s hand carefully and pleasurably worked the slick stuff onto Harry’s cock. It was pulsing, hot and heavy in his hands, like fire and silk, soft skin flushed with the heat of urgency.

Harry bit his lip throughout, fighting the urge to surrender to pleasure and just come right then. It was obvious what Draco wanted…and then Draco surprised him. All Harry got in the way of warning was a faintly indecisive look, before Draco laid down, at rest on his back, and drew his knees up, gently working the lubricant into himself. Harry understood Draco’s unspoken plea perfectly.

‘Please don’t say anything about this. It isn’t as easy for me as it looks…this way. I want this, but if you say something…anything, I don’t know if I can keep my nerve up and actually do this. Please do this right. Please?’

Harry sat up quickly, and lavished Draco with every caress and distraction that he could muster, soothing away the tension that came to Draco with a position that held the implications of surrender. The blackest memories had been taken from him, walled off by wards, but the association was not dead, and Draco urgently needed this new first to be right in every way, an affirmation of the trust he’d placed willingly in Harry. Harry did not dare disappoint him. However passive the position appeared, Draco was making a bold and aggressive move toward living his life without compromises, as well as without fear, and Harry would have sooner died than trample over that wonderful courage.

It was as achingly slow an affair as it had been before, and Harry found that Draco’s knees felt wonderful around his chest, and looking into his lover’s eyes between kisses was a pleasure that transcended positions. Cold feet on his back were another matter, but they were a small price to pay for the incredible warmth and slick tightness that slowly enveloped his cock, and the look on Draco’s face made it clear that entry was not only welcome, but also needed and desired desperately.

When Harry was finally flush against him, Draco reveled in their union, savoring all that he felt at that moment, physical and emotional alike. He felt uncomfortably full and yet wondrously close at the same time. Stretched and yet stimulated. Harry’s arms were under his knees, making it easy to keep his legs up and out of the way, and the physical sensations of entry were occasionally distracted by the soft kisses that Harry was devoting to Draco’s neck. It quickly became apparent that the slight, but noticeable upward curve of Harry’s erection served a useful purpose from this position, since it unerringly seemed to graze against a place inside Draco that left him quivering and incoherent except for tense little moans of pleasure.

Harry’s athleticism was showing itself quickly. He was steady and sure, despite the constant care he took not to handle Draco too roughly, and the pace of hips was slow and languorous. Much of it was guesswork, mere instinct in the absence of actual experience, but it was more than enough for Draco, whose knees had tightened around Harry’s torso, and who was almost delirious with pleasure. This was what he’d been cheated of, and had found again. This was what he’d waited for for so long, wondering if it was right, or good, or moral. Here, now, there were no more questions, and confusion over his own wants or their relative worth ceased to exist. Harry was as gentle with the power Draco had given him as he would have been if handling something fragile, which, in a manner of speaking, he was.

When Draco came it was with surprise and shock, crying out suddenly and clawing at Harry’s back with eyes wide. He’d been riding waves of pleasure, flowing as gently as water, caring about
nothing but the feel of his lover inside him, and the spontaneous eruption from his groin, unaided by his hand, or Harry’s mouth, for the first time in his life, caught him completely off his guard. Harry was at first terrified, thinking he’d done something wrong, until he saw and felt the sticky fluid spilling onto Draco’s stomach, even as the muscles inside Draco’s body clenched and spasmed tantalizingly around Harry’s cock, grasping and pulling an orgasm from him despite his best efforts to control himself. He idly wished that something more manly than a whimper had emerged from his throat, but the sensation of his suddenly sensitive cock being gripped firmly by muscles that faintly seemed to ripple was just more than he could take and remain stoic and reserved.

It was almost a minute before they could do more than stare at each other in amazement, eyes wide and guileless, genuinely floored by the capacity they possessed for pleasing one another.

And so it went, long past the hours at which other revelers found their beds and rested, Harry and Draco made the most of this first night of the New Year, smashing the spirits of old and ugly memories upon the anvil that was their abiding love and desire for each other.

In the small hours of the morning, Draco was breathing softly into the crook of Harry’s arm, and Harry was hovering on the brink of sleep as well, but a sense of wonder had kept him up past Draco. His cock was sore and limp, and as he was naked and on his side, it flopped gracelessly between them now, and even the temptation of the soft flesh held close to him couldn’t rouse it any more. Draco had been insatiable, fighting the urge for slumber until the last, choosing to assert over and over again that they were and always would be lovers. Harry was pensive and full of reflection even now, eyelids sagging while he continued to look in amazement at the pale and slender young man in his arms.

‘Draco Malfoy. Draco is my lover. Sometimes it’s still hard to believe that this actually happened. All of it. Like a dream. It’s over. The bad times are done, and this is the rest of my life. All this started when my parents were killed saving me, and it all came to this…me…here…with him. So perfect. Happy. Finally.’

Harry drifted to sleep with Draco curled into his arms, thoughts of love borne aloft in his dreams. It was a fine omen for the year to come, and though neither knew it, it might just as well have been an omen for the rest of their lives.

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Molly Weasley sat down to rest in her kitchen, cup of tea at the ready. What amazing things these past months had wrought since the new year had come. So many changes, and all for the better. It was quiet in the Burrow, save for the faint rattle of the ghoul in the attic, and Molly sighed softly, rather enjoying the peace, but missing the crowds that had once graced her kitchen.

Harry and Draco had moved off on their own, into the Black estate at Grimmauld Place. She could remember when Harry had hated to think of the place, as it always reminded him of Sirius, and of the Order at wartime. Harry didn’t seem to let those memories bother him anymore, and when the time had seemed right, he’d announced that he meant to fix the place up when he wasn’t studying at Hogwarts.

The boys had taken the courses necessary to finish their long overdue NEWTs, and had passed them with flying colors in the main, save for a few average scores here and there. That accomplished, Harry had hired Dobby the house-elf away from Hogwarts, and had set to turning the old Black estate into a proper home. Draco still worked for the twins in the same capacity, but he only needed a few hours every two or three days to keep up now, since the hard work of organizing it all to his
liking had been done months ago. With time on his hands again, Draco had taken up some of the causes he’d heard about from Eileen, championing them publicly and helping to arrange funding when he could.

Ronald had become a part of it as well, the spokesperson for a program to fund new students at Hogwarts with complete tuition. Not every magically inclined child looked forward to a Hogwarts education, but Draco, Eileen and Ron had been working to move more students toward Hogwarts, and to date, both Minerva McGonagall and the board of governors for the school were pleased. Harry had built a trust fund from the fortunes he’d inherited, and Draco had carefully invested it so that it might last in perpetuity. Eileen administered the day to day operations of this small foundation, and Ron sought out good candidates and spent much of his time meeting eager parents, or charming the skeptical ones with his open smile and good nature. It was a fledgling thing, but they all seemed so earnest about it, and it certainly seemed to be working. One could hardly find fault with something like that, and the press had taken quite a shine to the whole idea, so that was that.

Bill and Fleur had a beautiful daughter now. Helena was only a month old, but she’d charmed everyone effortlessly, showing a charisma that defied her few weeks of life. Ron was engaged to Eileen, and Molly had made up her mind some time ago that the girl was quite possibly the best thing that could have happened to her Ronny. Come spring of next year the youngest of her children would be married, with Ron following fast in the footsteps of Percy, who had married Penelope Clearwater at last, right on the heels of a promotion. As joyful as the occasions were, something faintly rueful touched her heart now and again.

All grown. All gone. There were visits, and dinners, and holidays to look forward to, but all the young ones were taking care of themselves so very well. It was the kind of thing that said she’d done right, and raised them well, but she missed the raising and the teaching and the looking after more than she’d imagined was possible. She had always been a mother, practically since she’d been an adult, and how to define herself when the children were gone? Who was Molly Weasley now, with no one to be a mother to?

The Floo flared bright and high, and Arthur Weasley stepped out, dusting off his coat and coughing. Molly made to stand and fetch a cup for tea, and a question was on her lips before her husband waved for her to sit.

“Needn’t get up love, I’ll grab my own tonight. Just came home early for once. Left Jenkins looking after things at the office. I’ve been nose to the grindstone for over thirty years. If I feel like coming home to my wife early now and again, I’ve bloody well earned it!”

Molly smiled quietly, and Arthur poured himself a cuppa and found his seat next to hers. “Now then! How’s my Molly-O today?”

Molly smiled wanly and shrugged. She’d always told Arthur just what she thought, and today would be no different. He wouldn’t mock her for the strange things she thought or felt at times.

“At a bit of a loss, dear. Things are well enough, but…I just can’t seem to get my cheer these days. All the lads are gone. Such wonderful boys, the lot of them, and this lovely old house seems half dead for the lack of them. Arthur, love…I’m not sure I know who I am, without someone to look after. Who am I, really…now?”

Arthur had been listening intently, and quite out of character for a moment, he simply snorted with derision. Molly took umbrage at first, surprised that he would do anything so insensitive, but Arthur caught himself and headed off her coming tirade with a nodded head and a smile.

“Well…you certainly asked the right fellow for the answer to that one! Can’t say I’m happy that you
don’t know the answer, but I’ve known it since the day we met. Molly Prewett Weasley is precisely who she was then, and always will be. The loveliest and boldest woman I’ve ever had the pleasure of meeting, and the only woman who could capture my fancy for even a minute. Children grow up, love, and grandchildren will do the same in time, but you’ll still be my Molly-O, same as then, love.”

Molly blushed furiously, even after thirty odd years of listening to the same silver-tongued devil she called a husband. Worries were suddenly for another day, because Molly still had the same fine thing she’d had nearly all of her life. She had love, and it had indelibly marked her life as a good one.

And if that red-headed scoundrel she called her husband kept that kind of flattery up, she might just be thanking him for it tonight!

THE END…

A/N: Redeem Me, for a number of reasons, has been the most popular fic I’ve written so far, and the response to it has continually amazed me. I owe some of its success to carefully pre-planning the plot months before I actually wrote it, since this resulted in something more coherent and well thought out, and readers and reviewers noticed the difference right away. I learned something very valuable about putting that extra work into a fic, and I thank everyone who reviewed for helping me to understand what builds a more enjoyable read.

Special thanks go out to a number of people, and although there are many who shall remain nameless and deserve more credit, I have only so much space and time, and can only list the folks who have made the largest impact.

To Jennavere, for getting me started, thanks, love!

To Lady Aubrey, the official beta of Redeem Me’s second half. I started on my own, but out of the kindness of her heart, she leaped in and showed a thorough and skillful hand. Thank you very, very much!

To AspenInTheSunlight, creator of Scaradicate Salve, featured in the H/D classic ‘A Year Like None Other’.

To the small army of reviewers on so many sites, I thank you. That you cared enough to share your thoughts, thanks and feelings with me is a slash writer’s only real reward. There isn’t a proper way to express how much I appreciate the kindness you’ve all shown. The best I can do is to thank you here, and try to keep writing fics that bring you enjoyment. Thank you all so much.

To Aikirangel, whose art is the moody and murky, sultry and dreamy stuff of slash heaven, thank you for the many renderings of things inspired by Redeem Me. For those interested in art inspired by Redeem Me, do try to visit his LJ page, though I believe you must friend him as a user before you can see many of his paintings and sketches. http://aikirangel.livejournal.com/

To Selija, who designed not only a gorgeous piece of art, but also the banner ad for Redeem Me, I thank you so much! It’s the first time I’ve ever had a fic with a banner, and I blush with pride every time I see it now. Discriminating readers may notice that it closely resembles the scene at the end of Chap 67: Love Is The Answer, which was written with this image fixed in my mind as a fine ending for the final conflict. Selija’s LiveJournal page can be viewed at: http://selija.livejournal.com/2867.html

To Lemonade8, who crafted these little jewels:
Thanks, love! They’re pretty darned cool, if I do say so myself!

My own LiveJournal can be found at this web address, and updates regarding new fics or chapters are available every few days to every week or so. http://samaelthekind.livejournal.com/

Finally, I’d like to comment that this has been a work of fiction about people confronting their fears and hatreds, and reaching out to others in spite of them, or allowing others to reach out toward them. It is also about the quality of the human soul that allows us to become better human beings despite enduring things which might embitter us and make us into creatures of rage and hate. If this fic has done anything of worth, I hope it has pushed forward the notion that we are capable of amazing things even in the face of great adversity.

Even if I have never met you face to face, you have all my love, and deserve it, too!

Peace and Love, Samayel

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!