Oath Breaker

by GoblinCatKC

Summary

At the start of seventh year, the Malfoys perform a dramatic double-cross against the dark lord and Draco educates Harry in an old school of magic. With a wild dragon chase, narrow escapes and an unlikely romance as Draco is forced to reveal to a hostile wizarding world that the Malfoy family is dark.

Notes

Disclaimer: All characters and settings belong to J.K. Rowling.
Note: Dark magic originates from old Anglo-Saxo or Nordic terms, and will be defined after each chapter, along with other sundry notations.
Warnings: Although there is no major character death, minor deaths will indeed occur, usually in a manner most bloody.
From his vantage point behind the tapestry in his father's study, Draco safely watched the Death Eaters sweeping through the room trying to find him. In the chaos surrounding his father's betrayal, there was little risk they would find him. Their stomping and yelling gave him ample time to duck into the hidden nooks of the house until they'd gone again. The secret passages that honeycombed the estate were known only to the Malfoy bloodline, and now he was the only Malfoy left in the manor.

Once the room was clear, he stepped out from behind the tapestry and quietly crossed to his father's desk, opening drawers and rifling through the paperwork. In one of the first drawers was a devil's sack and a handful of loose galleons, and he marveled at his good fortune. He dropped all the coins into the sack and not a sound came from within as they disappeared into the dark void. If he managed to escape, these coins would be his only resource until he could safely get to the family vaults, and that might not be for several weeks.

Beneath a stack of old receipts he found what he was really looking for, a worn leather-bound journal. No fancy embossing or gold lettering stood out on the front but the mystic symbol on the front keeping the cover sealed told him it was his father's private diary. He slipped it into the devil's sack and stood out, heading toward the bookshelf when he heard the doorknob turn. He raised his wand towards the door, already muttering a curse.

He sighed in relief when he saw Severus, the professor's own wand held at the ready. "I didn't know you were still here," he whispered, lowering his wand.

"Not by choice," Severus whispered, closing the door behind himself. "I cannot apparate out and all the other corridors are blocked off. I was lucky to get here undetected."

Draco nodded once. That would make his task harder, but not impossible.

"There's still one way out they don't know about." He turned to the bookshelf behind the desk and pushed a row of ledgers out of the way, revealing a runic character. He leaned close and whispered "othala," and without a sound the bookshelf and the wall behind it became transparent. A lumos charm gave them a clear view of the rough rocky walls and stone floor that angled down into darkness.

"This chamber should be clear," he said, walking in. He paused to make sure Severus was following before sealing the entrance. "The old fireplace is connected to some cottage in the countryside. I don't know where."

"I can hazard a guess," Severus said dryly.

Draco smiled but didn't comment. Now was not the time for teasing. "You were there when the yelling started. Do you know how many Death Eaters went with father?"

"A good number of them," Severus said. "Perhaps a third. The Parkinsons, Goyle for certain. I didn't get a good look at who took the portkey, I only saw how many remained."

"Some of the Hogwarts parents, then?" Draco wondered how far the tunnel went. He'd never been inside before and he could barely imagine his father hurrying down such a dank space.

"Most of the Death Eaters with children are gone," Severus said. "Lucius better round up the youngsters quickly or else it'll just be a repeat of last time. Blackmail and hostages so the dark lord..."
doesn't have to waste energy with imperio curses."

"It won't happen. I've already told Pansy to gather all the students she could trust and escape. I was supposed to go with them, but..." he exhaled and looked down. "Father needs me here."

"To do what?" Severus asked. He put his hand on Draco's shoulder and half turned him. "What can you do against the dark lord?"

"Deprive him of the manor, for one. And there's a book down here father said he mustn't get his hands on. I'm to take it to Hogwarts myself." Draco couldn't help a puff of pride in his father's trust in him.

"'Book?'" Severus echoed. "Wait, what do you mean 'deprive him of the manor'? Lucius couldn't have told you to--"

"--burn it to the ground." Draco nodded once and started walking again. The tunnel soon opened into a small chamber with shelves chiseled out of the stone walls. The fireplace was only a round hearth barely large enough for a grown man to stoop inside. Draco scanned the walls. A few oddly shaped glass bottles and jars labeled in forgotten languages dotted the shelves and he quickly spotted the book under a mass of cobwebs. Without bothering to clear them away, he simply grabbed it and shoved it into his sack.

"That should be floo powder in there," he said, nodding at the only jar not covered in cobwebs.

"What about you?" Severus asked, already grabbing a handful of powder. "Even if you do destroy the manor, you can't fly out of here. I know you saw them break your broom."

"Spotted me behind the painting, did you? You always were good at finding my hiding spots."

Draco bent and picked up something from the floor. "Father told me about this once, but I admit I never thought I'd get to see it, let alone fly on it."

Severus looked down at Draco's hand. In stark contrast to his white, uncalloused hands was a bent and gnarled stick with several thin twigs bound around the end. It didn't look like a broom as much as it did a dried branch.

"What on earth?" He gently took it from Draco's hands and examined it. Dried leather straps bound several birch twigs onto an ash handle, but as dead as it looked, it was warm to the touch and felt so heavy that it might have been newly hewn.

"This is old magic," he whispered, handing it back. "There's no way of knowing how wild it is. I wouldn't try that unless my life depended on it."

"And mine does, I'm afraid," Draco answered, but he didn't look afraid at all. His eyes gleamed at the thought of trying out not only a family heirloom but a piece of wild magic so old that there was no chance of ministry regulations limiting its potential power. "It should obey me. I am a Malfoy, after all."

"You must be, you're all stubborn and reckless," Severus said. He sighed and his face softened for an instant. "You're sure you won't follow after me?"

"Wish I could but once I start the fire this room will be buried under tons of slag and scraps of broken charms. I'll have no other escape but to fly out. Once I'm far enough away, I'll try to find a place to floo to Diagon Alley."

Both of them knew how likely that was, but neither said anything.
Severus crept into the hearth. "I'll expect you in a few days, then. With any luck, I'll have word from Lucius before you arrive." Without waiting for an answer, he flung the powder down and clearly called out "Malfoy cottage, Serpentia." In a flash of green flame, he was gone.

Draco breathed out and paused for a moment. The thought of going back upstairs amongst the enemy terrified him and having a friend at hand had kept the fear away for awhile. He hefted his new ancient broom and sighed at how dead it looked, like all the energy had gone out of it. No doubt its maker, his distant ancestor, had created it out of green wood but now...did enough of its previous magic linger within it to let him fly?

Stuffing his small bag into his robes, he turned and carried the broom back up the tunnel, listening at the bookshelf for a few moments before unsealing the entrance and walking out. As he closed it up again, a tiny hand tugged on his sleeve and he jumped back with a shriek, banging his hip against the desk's edge. The frightened squeak that followed told him it was only his house elf and he glared down at her, scaring her back a few feet.

"Damn it, Filly..." he growled.

"Filly's so sorry, Master Draco," she said, wringing her hands. "But Master said for Filly to come and tells him when she's done warning all the portraits to get out, and Filly's done."

It was no use kicking her, he decided, when she'd finished everything he could've kicked her to hurry her for. Instead he crossed over to the tapestry and climbed into the dark passageway, but he hesitated, glancing over his shoulder at her. Traditionally elves were expected to go down with their house, but it seemed like such a waste when his father could simply rebuild and take them all on again without the nuisance of looking for new ones.

"Filly, I'm about to burn the house down--no, don't you dare scream or I'll curse you, I swear--you're not going to die, stupid thing." He waited until she got her tears under control before starting again. "Listen, get the other elves out. You mustn't go to another house, you still belong to us and you must keep our secrets."

"Oh yes, Master Draco," Filly said, nodding quickly. "Filly is keeping all the secrets. Filly is a good house elf, she is."

"Now listen carefully, you'll have to find my mother. I don't know where she went, don't bother asking me. The Naples estate, maybe, or the Paris apartments. Find her and stay with her."

"What if Filly can't find the mistress?" she asked.

"Then..." Draco ran a hand through his hair. He hadn't had time to put it back properly and it kept falling in his eyes. "I don't know. Go to the forest if you have to. Just don't get caught or I swear I'll make you wish you'd burned up instead." He ignored her grateful blubbering and pulled the tapestry back into place, then crept down the passage, using his wand for light.

There was no chance he'd lose his way in the dark. He remembered running through the manor walls as a child, popping in and out of shadowy nooks and startling everyone in the house. His father tolerated it since Draco was memorizing the labyrinth of passages when it was easy for his small body to fit around the jutting bricks and corners, rather than later when a wrong turn would mean several wasted minutes and added bruises from tight turns. His mother allowed his exploring, but she hated how he ended up ripping his robes and covering himself with dust and tiny spiders.

A memory struck him, and he smiled as he slid sideways down a narrow pass between the kitchen and dining room. He'd stumbled over a ghoul hiding behind these walls and nearly fell victim to its
jaws, barreling out into the parlor with its claws snagged in his robe and the house elves screaming in surprise as they tried to blast it off of him while his mother raged at all the grime he'd spread over her fine carpets.

His smile faded. All those fine carpets would soon be ashes, his father's extensive library and his mother's collection of rare herbs and potions would be smoking cinders. If only they'd had more time before his father had stolen so many of the dark lord's followers, revealing themselves as traitors as they grabbed his father's cane and portkeyed somewhere far away. From her bedroom, his mother had heard the raving Voldemort and somehow vanished before anyone could capture her, certain that her son would find his own way out.

When the wall widened enough that he could walk straight again, Draco stopped and gently pushed the hidden door aside, peering out from behind a tapestry. He didn't hear anyone but it was best to be cautious. A single censer burned in the center of the hall, the faint gold glow doing nothing to break the gloom. No one stood inside the long hall so he crept out, careful not to knock his broom against the wall.

Windows ran from ceiling to floor, taking up an entire wall with an unimpeded view of the rose garden. Blank portraits lined the other three walls. He walked softly across the marble floor to the center of the ancestral hall, unsettled by the silence. Not that this forebears ever shouted or cursed -- his mother often remarked on how well mannered the Malfoy family portraits behaved, and while he never got a straight answer out of her, Draco suspected the portraits of his Black ancestors were not so quiet -- but the hall had always echoed with the murmured conversations of past generations. Without their voices, the house seemed even emptier, like a corpse in need of burial.

He glanced through the windows for a moment. A sliver of moon behind the clouds showed him the silhouettes of the remaining Death Eaters scouring the grounds, for his father's followers perhaps. More likely for house elves to interrogate, he reasoned. He stared back down at the censer. Looking more like a large dish on a stand than a torch, it provided a night light for the portraits and enough of a glow for the elves to work by. Only he and his father knew that it also served as the focus of several wards throughout the manor, including protective seals, entrapment charms and a final solution to an invading enemy.

This last charm did not require his wand, only his flesh and blood. He put his wand away and shifted both the broom and bag to his left hand, holding his right hand high over the flame. In a whisper he began chanting words he didn't understand, only memorized under his father's tutelage, he reasoned. He stared back down at the censer. Looking more like a large dish on a stand than a torch, it provided a night light for the portraits and enough of a glow for the elves to work by. Only he and his father knew that it also served as the focus of several wards throughout the manor, including protective seals, entrapment charms and a final solution to an invading enemy.

Whatever incense his mother put inside the censor burned up instantly but even without fuel the flames grew stronger and smoke billowed out from the dish. He choked and coughed as smoke crept down his throat and stung his eyes. Long minutes passed and his heart raced in pain and dread that someone would notice the strange light in the hall. He came to the end of the chant but hesitated, afraid of the agony that would come from the last step.

The door behind him slammed open and he looked over his shoulder. His breath hitched and he froze. The dark lord himself stood facing him, his angry face twisting into a cruel sneer.

"Young Malfoy..." Voldemort hissed. "Your family has caused me a lot of trouble today."

Draco couldn't move. He'd never stood before the dark lord without his father's confident presence or his mother's arrogant poise to shield him. Even when bowing to Voldemort, his parents radiated an air of subterfuge that Draco had discovered was imperceptible to nearly everyone but himself, the dark lord included.
"Don't bother trying to fly away," Voldemort said, eyeing the broom. "The manor is mine. There is no escape for you."

As Voldemort stepped closer, eyes boring into Draco's, recent memories echoed between them. Draco again hid within the walls listening to his father address the Death Eaters in what was supposed to be a status report on the ministry but instead turned into their desperate gambit to escape. He felt his surprise and panic being savored and realized that he wasn't really remembering any of it, that Voldemort was instead pulling it out of his mind. An earlier memory was stolen, himself speaking with his mother who sat beside him on his bed touching his hair and telling him he was strong enough to take care of himself if he had to. Again it wasn't what Voldemort wanted and another memory appeared, this time in his father's study as Lucius explained their upcoming bid for freedom and the role he must play in it.

"There it is," Voldemort hissed. "This is what I want. Show me, little Malfoy. Where did you father go?"

Draco winced but there was no way to hide. Snape's lessons in occulomancy were useless when he was too scared to think straight. Voldemort heard his father's reassurances, heard him outline how he would steal away as many loyal knights as he could.

"Knights?" Voldemort repeated. "Knights...of Walpurgis..."

"...of Walpurgis," Draco whispered with him, unable to stop himself. His hand began to burn in earnest but he couldn't think to move it. "Serve..."

"They serve me," Voldemort growled, digging painfully into the memory until Draco thought he might shed tears of blood. "They're mine, now, and nothing any of you do can stop that."

But his father's face, scheming and haughty and kind, whispered something different and Draco focused on that, whispering his words with him and steadying himself until he could think to move again.

"Knights of Walpurgis serve no one."

Draco slapped his hand down into the censer, impaling himself on the spike in the center normally used to hold large candles and sealing the spell with his blood. As he screamed in pain, the windows all exploded out into the night and flames shot up along the floor and walls, engulfing Voldemort and creating a wall of fire between them. The dark lord screamed and flailed in surprise, drawing his wand but unable to see through the flames and smoke to aim a curse.

As he yanked his hand free, Draco thought only of flight and the broom instantly responded, taking to the air as he straddled it one-handed. No friendly cushioning charm greeted him. He sat square on the rough bark and hard edges as it picked him up off the floor and carried him through a window. Flashes of light whizzed by him as Death Eaters fired off curses but either the explosion had rattled their aim or he had remarkable luck in avoiding them. With a burst of speed more suited to chasing a snitch, he soared over the garden and into the sky towards the town nearby.

Once he was flying over the town with a mile or so between him and manor, he slowed down and glanced over his shoulder to look for pursuers. He saw nothing except his home burning like a great pyre on the hill, vaguely reminiscent of sunset. Draco wondered if Voldemort would send his followers into the flames to search for the book he'd stolen and how many Death Eaters would burn to death before he accepted its loss. He still held his devil's sack in his left hand and now stuffed it into his robes, hoping it would fit. Then a wave of nausea and pain overwhelmed him and he turned back to his injury. Without Voldemort in front of him to scare the pain out of him, it throbbed
Doubled over his broom, he tried not to throw up as he wrapped the end of his robe around his mutilated hand. Blood soaked through the cloth and dripped onto the broom, and Draco was sure that he'd broken a bone or two. The downside to dark magic, he decided, was having to use his own blood instead of someone else’s. His feet dragged along a rooftop and he guided the broom higher up before they crashed into a chimney. Only a few street lamps lit the corners but now several lights came on in the houses below. Muggles came out in their pajamas and looked up towards the hill.

He couldn't risk being seen and urged the broom higher. More responsive than his nimbus, it soared into the sky faster than he was used to and nearly dropped him as it went almost vertical into the clouds. Draco grabbed the handle as hard as he could and clung tight until it evened out again, but one look down and he kept his grip. Far below, the town became a grid with tiny lights dotting the surface, and the land spread out in all directions for miles. A few small clouds floated beneath him and he shivered. He'd never flown this high before, let alone on a broom of unknown charms.

He shivered again. He didn't have a scarf or gloves or clothes specially charmed against the cold and the air up here felt like ice. Something brushed his face and he gaped as snowflakes blew over him. There were only a few flurries around him but when he stopped his broom and turned around, he gasped. Thick black clouds coalesced over his burning home, spiraling like a vortex where storm mixed with smoke. As the storm grew in strength, the clouds pushed outwards, bringing stinging gales and snowflakes as large as saucers.

Hesitating for a moment, he watched the manor's upper stories break in the middle and collapse in on themselves. As the storm covered the village and the snow became a blizzard, he turned and flew north as fast as he could without falling off. This broom didn't have any charms to keep him secure. He had to hold on for himself as the winds buffeted him and ice struck his back.

Throughout the night, he didn't dare stop to search for a friendly wizarding house or tavern that could provide a floo straight to Diagon Alley. All the families this far out were either hidden by strong charms or held allegiance to the dark lord, and any public house almost certainly held hostile spies and agents. He didn't stop to sleep, although the thought of resting on cold earth felt more inviting with each passing hour. With the storm constantly pressing at his back, he had to satisfy himself with lying forward on the broom handle, his mangled hand pressed against his side while the other cramped as he hung on. Over towns and cities he had to stay high enough to pass for a large owl, but over the empty fields and hills he could afford to swoop low where the air was relatively warmer. Often he flew lower and lower, drowsing until he woke up skimming the grass and pulled himself up a few feet. He didn't have to wake up to avoid bushes or trees, however. Although lacking in several amenities, the broom easily navigated through forests. When passing through at high speed, Draco found it easier to simply close his eyes and try to regain some strength while the broom carried him through the night.

A gray sun rose the next morning. Blocked by the blizzard, its glare just made it more painful to look up, especially when the snowfall had not only caught up but surpassed him. His breath misted and he drew his arms and legs in close as he shivered. Without a charm to keep him on the broom at high speeds, he couldn't outrun the snow and settled instead for detours through the trees, where the branches helped keep the snow off him. He no longer cared if muggles saw him and over towns he barely skirted the rooftops. He'd long lost track of where he was flying and simply flew north, hoping to spot something familiar as he neared the school. At least his hand no longer hurt, numbed and lifeless at his side.

The long miles and cold were so numbing that he didn't notice he was being attacked until a second spell narrowly missed his head, striking a car and cracking it down the middle. He sat straight up and...
looked around, trying to figure out where he was and what was happening. Some time during the morning he'd flown into a town and hadn't even noticed. Snow covered everything, burying the residents in several feet and turning everything a painful white while more snow kept coming down. His broom jerked to the right and a spell from behind missed again, hitting a mailbox that burst into flames.

Wasting no time trying to see who was behind him, Draco put on a burst of speed and flew low to the ground, sending up billows of fresh snow behind him as a screen. He turned left, diving between fences and around a house where he nearly crashed into a pair of bins. Trying to avoid them, he jerked up too fast and went tumbling over the house, crashing in the backyard and sinking nearly entirely into the snow.

Whirling onto his back, he whipped his wand into the air with his left hand, aiming at the roof and breathing hard, expecting a Death Eater to pop up any moment.

Long minutes passed. When nothing happened, he sighed and lowered his hand and fell backward. The falling snow was soft and warm against his skin, and the town was so quiet that he could have fallen asleep. He glanced at the windows of the muggle house. The curtains were drawn and ice completely covered the glass. No one inside knew there was a fight going on outside.

"Idiots, the lot of them," Draco mumbled, gathering his broom again. Patting his robe once to make sure that his sack was still secure, he straddled the broom and kicked back into the air. Exhausted but alert, he slowly flew along the side of the house and scanned the street before taking off again.

He'd never traveled alone in a muggle city before and he was not impressed with what he saw. One blizzard and everyone stayed shut up in their homes, virtual prisoners of the weather. No brooms, no apparating, no floo network, not even heating charms, and he'd heard rumors that on extremely cold days their water froze solid and destroyed the very pipes that delivered it to their homes. Pathetic and inferior, all of them, he thought, which made it all the more galling that wizards were forced to hide from these creatures.

Now that he knew someone was hunting him, he soon spotted two Death Eaters flying slowly down the street and staring into trees and behind fences. Draco flew behind a large parked van and stared over the top, carefully aiming his wand at the biggest wizard. His tired eyes crossed and he shook his head to clear it, focusing all his hate and rage on the closest Death Eater. Little hexes like boils would not be enough and the dark spells he knew were tiring under the best conditions.

"Crepara," he said, and a pale gray light shot out of his wand, crackling through the air. At the sound of his voice the victim turned, but too late. The hex struck him dead on his face, and his frenzied screams filled the air as his skin dried and his muscles desiccated. He toppled sideways into the snow thrashing his dusty limbs so much that his arm snapped off like a twig and a deep crack ran down the middle of his body, nearly breaking him in half.

Even as the Death Eater fell off his broom, Draco turned around and flew down the street. A second later the van he'd hidden behind exploded as the second Death Eater abandoned her comrade and gave chase.

As his broom wobbled, Draco struggled to hold both the handle and his wand in one hand. The houses began to blur into each other the faster he pushed himself. At such high speeds he nearly spilt with every turn. Another spell missed him by several inches, exploding harmlessly in the snow. He glanced over his shoulder and spotted a flurry of black robes fairly close and getting closer. In a few minutes the Death Eater would catch up enough to stop missing.

When he noticed a large intersection in the road they were following, he broke right so fast and so
low that he sent up a huge burst of snow behind him. Using it as a split-second veil, he cast a light spell so that his pursuer could see its glow and follow it.

Blinded by snow, the Death Eater chased it blindly right into a wall, speed crumpling her body into the bricks. She fell into the snow and lay moaning with bones jutting out from her legs and arms, her back bent at an unnatural angle. Miraculously her wand remained intact in her shaking right hand and she tried to turn it towards herself.

Beside the wall, holding his lumos spell out at arm's length, Draco watched her feeble struggle to heal herself. He laughed once. Even if she could get the wand pointing right, her jaw was shattered and jammed up into her throat, choking her with blood and bone. Draco slowly flew close, hovering over her, and leaned forward so he could see into her eyes. Wracked with pain, his enemy was still sane enough to show fear as he pointed his wand at her face.

"Hemoragia," he whispered.

A reddish black spell struck her, and a fountain of blood gushed out of her eyes and mouth and skin as every last drop tore itself from her body, leaving her a mass of blood and tissue much like a squashed gourd.

Draco exhaled and lay along his broom. Tempted to steal hers, he decided not to chance any anti-theft jinxes she'd laid up on it and turned his own back to the sky. He patted his robes just to reassure himself that his sack was still safe before taking another breath and pushing forward.

No more wizards pursued him, only the blizzard and his own exhaustion. He wondered how Voldemort could keep up such strong weather and how far the storm extended. The entire landscape was white like a funeral shroud. Even the long stretches of coast he occasionally flew over looked icy. As the sun set, only a spark behind thick clouds, he began to despair. Thinking he could reach Hogwarts by broom in this weather was insane, that he could do it in a day or two was even madder. He could no longer feel his mangled hand and wondered if Pomfrey could do anything for it anymore.

As night closed in, he held his wand close and cast another lumos spell simply so he wouldn't have to fly in the dark. In the small circle of light snowflakes fell in and out of sight. He couldn't tell if he was still flying north or not and now just hoped not to fly so far over the ocean that he'd lose all sense of direction.

Brown feathers appeared in the light for a moment and vanished. He gasped and turned his wand to the left. A large barn owl flew beside him so close that if he veered at all he'd bump into it. Desperate, he gazed down to her folded legs and saw not only a message bound to her foot but a small burn in her side. Battle wounds, he thought.

"You're an auror's owl," he guessed. The owl looked at him for a moment before looking forward again. "So you must be headed towards Hogwarts." Or if not, he knew he could follow her and probably find safe haven wherever she landed.

He didn't know how long they flew together, the owl lazily drafting just behind his shoulder. He was glad for the company. An hour passed, maybe two, both of them using his lumos spell to orient themselves though he was sure she could see better.

When he saw the orange lights of Hogwarts in the distance, he was too tired to whoop for joy. He simply angled his broom down, staying well above the treetops of what he knew now was the forbidden forest. The owl disappeared as she flew out of the light and he came down on the snow covered familiar grounds where he often walked after classes. Hagrid's little hovel looked like a
bump in the snowdrifts. Draco leaned back and swung his leg over the broom, dropping to his feet. A second later he collapsed sideways in the snow, his legs too numb to hold him.

Sounds of laughter and clinking cutlery echoed down to him as he lay in the shadows outside of the warm glow of the windows. He stared at his body as if betrayed and felt hot tears prickling at his eyes. No, it wasn't fair! To get this far and not be able to make it last few feet to the school, it just wasn't fair! He reached up and grabbed the floating broom, but the rough wood was slick with ice and he slipped, falling back in the snow. His mangled hand, comfortably numb through most flight, now started to throb painfully. Draco groaned and relaxed, closing his eyes and telling himself that he was simply resting, gathering his strength for another try.

"Hello? Is someone there?"

Draco's eyes opened. That horrible voice was about as welcome as a Death Eater. Go away, he thought, I'd rather die than be rescued by you. But the crunching snow grew louder as Harry Potter ran towards him, unable to make out the gleaming white hair amongst all the snow until he stopped and knelt next to him.

"Malfoy," he gasped, looking over him and wincing when he saw the other boy's hand. Then he spotted the ancient broom floating beside them and looked back at Draco. "What the hell happened to you? Where've you been?"

If he'd had any strength left, Draco would have laughed and insulted him for being so stupid. Instead he relaxed again, his face turning to the soft snow as he passed out.

To be continued...
In which Dumbledore assures himself of Draco's loyalty

Burning, he was burning and he couldn't move, swathed in chains as fire raced up the long stake behind his back and slowly engulfed him. His skin blistered and blackened as he screamed. Why was it so dark? Had they blindfolded him? Or maybe they'd gouged out his eyes. The crowd murmured around him, marveling at the spectacle a burning wizard made, both afraid and jeering as they piled on wood and hay. "Witch!" they screamed. "Demon!" And greater than the pain of his body burning to cinders was Draco's deep hatred at the muggles, no, mongrels that had done this to him.

His eyes opened as he started awake. For a moment he still thought he might be burning, but it was only his sore muscles and the scorching blanket covering him. He breathed a sigh of relief and closed his eyes. He hadn't had that dream in months but it always came back as vivid as ever. Probably just triggered by the blanket's heat charm, he thought. He started to move his right hand to throw it off but stopped when an agonizing spasm tore through his palm and fingers. Wincing, he set it back down and used his left hand to push back the blanket. Someone had stripped off his robes, leaving little for his dignity, but the warm air felt comfortable enough.

The familiar smell of medicinal potions in Pomfrey's hospital wing, once faintly disgusting, now seemed like a blessing. He sat up, leaning on his left arm. His shoulders ached and his legs throbbed and his back felt frozen stiff, but everything felt much better than when he had passed out. His right hand was bandaged and he could curl his fingers slightly. How long had he slept? The windows were still dark so it couldn't have been more than a few hours. Snow piled up on the windowsill as more came down. If Voldemort meant to bury them all under ice, he was doing a good job of it, but Draco didn't care. His home was destroyed, his parents and friends all scattered, and he probably had a high price on his head now, but at least he was out of the blizzard.

A sudden thought made him panic. If his robes were gone, where were the books? He glanced wildly around but saw nothing on the table beside him. No robes, no devil's sack, no broom.

"No, no, no," he breathed, feeling chills colder than the wind outside. He'd flown across the country through a snowstorm and against two Death Eaters, escaping from the dark lord himself, but not five minutes in Hogwarts and he'd lost everything. He sat straight, gathering his strength to try to get out of bed.

"Where do you think you're going?" Pomfrey cried from the doorway. He looked up and, despite her scowl, he sighed in relief. Draped across her arm were his robes.

"The books," he said, refusing to lie down until he knew. "You found them? They were in a small sack, you might have missed them."

"If you mean that dark little bag of tricks," she said, "yes, it's in my office, along with your besom."

"Besom?" he asked, confused until he recognized the word from conversations with the portrait of his great great great grandmother Morgana. "The broom?"

"If you can call it a broom," Pomfrey said, setting down her tray of potions and dropping his clothes on the table before she sat down beside him. "I can't imagine how you managed to fly all the way here on that thing. Now get back under that cover."

"It's burning hot," he said and made no move to comply.
"No, you're still freezing," she said, but she tapped her wand against the cloth anyway. Immediately the blanket cooled to a bearable temperature and he grudgingly lay down again. "I may have been a bit too emphatic with the warmth charm, though. Is that better?"

He nodded. He had several questions -- had Severus arrived safely? did they know where his parents were? had Pansy sent an owl? -- but he didn't know exactly how much she knew and he couldn't afford to let any information slip. There was one question he could ask, though, as he watched her gently push the blanket back and hold his hand, pulling back the hasty bandages she'd wrapped around it to examine the damage.

"Do you think I'll ever use that hand again?"

Pomfrey hesitated, then picked up a purple bottle from her tray and tapped it into a small pestle. She tapped out several black stones from another bottle and ground them into powder, mixed it all together and turned back to him.

"I don't know," she said quietly. "The wound's had time to take, and the damage...what happened?"

"Impaled it on an incense burner about two days ago." He did not mention the dark magic going wild at the time and watched as she took off the last bandage. "It stopped hurting for awhile."

She nodded once. "The snow probably numbed all the pain out of you."

Tightening her grip on his wrist, she tapped her mixed powder onto his wound and then held him still as he hissed and tried to wrench out of her grip. The powder felt like bee stings for several seconds before dying down to dull taps. He moaned and turned his face toward the pillow. Still holding him, she touched his shoulder and leaned closer, speaking softly.

"Draco, I'm sorry I have to ask, but...the bruises around your legs. Did someone do that to you?"

"Bruises?" he frowned in confusion but quickly realized what she meant. "No, no one did that." He glanced at the door to her office, hoping he might see anything that belonged to him. "That's from the broom, I mean, the besom. It doesn't have any cushioning charm on it."

Pomfrey turned pale and stared at him. "Merlin, I knew it was old, but...you flew on a glorified tree branch without any charms at all?"

Draco shrugged, about to answer when they heard the door open rather violently. Pomfrey stood up as if expecting an attack and Draco reached for his wand, cursing when he remembered he didn't have it. Snape walked into the hospital wing at a quick pace, wand drawn.

"Ask for sanctuary right now," he ordered Draco, sparing no time for an explanation.

"I...request sanctuary at Hogwarts School," Draco answered, glancing at Pomfrey but she looked as lost as he did. "Severus, what--"

A second later three men walked in. Draco didn't recognize two of them, but even if Cornelius Fudge had not led them, their stern faces and the way they held themselves, easy with authority and staring at him as if he wore a Death Eater's robes, told him they were from the Ministry. They strode in, wands drawn, bearing down on Draco but they were forced to stop when Pomfrey and Snape both stepped in front of him.

Fudge glared at all three of them. "That boy is a wanted criminal. Step aside."

"You have no authority--" Snape started.
"I may not be minister anymore," Fudge spat, "but I still have the current minister's official recognition in this. That boy is under arrest."

"Arrest for what?" Pomfrey asked. "He hasn't done anything wrong."

"'Hasn't done'--" Fudge sputtered. "He's killed two wizards with dark spells in the middle of a muggle town. His broom is illegal, he has in his possession dark artifacts and he's in league with You-Know-Who. And he--"

"And he has formally requested sanctuary at this school," Snape said over him. "You know the old laws as well as I do."

The minister turned so red that Draco thought he might burst into flames. "Sanctuary only applies during open war--"

"War is already upon us."

They all looked up as the headmaster walked in, looking at once haggard but rejuvenated, as if he was a battle-worn general who had just received very good news. Draco scowled as he noticed that Dumbledore wasn't alone. Harry Potter walked slightly behind him at his right hand and glared back in return.

"Whether you want to admit it or not," Dumbledore continued, staring at Fudge calmly. "War has been declared by Voldemort. Battles already rage across the country, although you try to hide them as personal attacks, much like your accusations against young Malfoy. His family has given us an unexpected advantage, at great personal cost to themselves I might add. I am happy to offer him sanctuary from his enemies."

"This will never hold up," Fudge said. "The boy's been up to his father's old tricks and the Wizengamot--"

"--has more pressing matters," Snape interrupted again, "than examining a student who was merely late to term and arrived on an antique broom made well before the ministry even existed."

Fudge paused, and for a moment Draco thought that was it. And then the minister stared at the headmaster with a gleam in his eye. "You know as well as I do what he is. What all blooded Malfoys are. You cannot deny his prowess with dark magic. If you give him sanctuary, you will be harboring a viper amongst innocents."

"Yes," Dumbledore said, "I know exactly what he is. And I know that he has sheathed his fangs, so to speak, for as long as he has attended Hogwarts. I assume that will continue to be the case?"

Draco looked away before Dumbledore met his eyes. No matter that his family had thrown their lot in with the old wizard and that he was reduced to begging safe shelter from him, his father had told him several times never to look at Dumbledore straight in the eye. The dark lord was a legilimens and every Death Eater knew that the headmaster was as well. Draco had no intention of suffering the mental anguish of his memories being ripped out again. He nodded once, and they all seemed to take that for an answer.

"Excellent," Dumbledore said, looking back at Fudge. "Now, as you have no proof of your accusations and sanctuary has been given, I trust you know the way out?"

"This isn't over," Fudge said, but he slipped his wand back into his robes anyway. As soon as the Ministry officials had left, heads held high as they tried to salvage their pride, Snape turned and faced Draco.
"I am relieved to see that you arrived safely."

Draco sat up despite Pomfrey's clucking that he should rest. "Has there been any word?"

Snape shook his head. "Nothing. But it's only been two days. It may be several weeks before we hear anything."

True, he thought, but not knowing stung. Draco glanced at the other three. "How much do they know?" he asked.

"I've told them everything," Snape said.

Draco stared at him with wide eyes. "Everything? Even you and my--?"

"Everything important," Snape amended, glaring at him. "And I'll explain it all after you've had more rest."

"I can't sleep," Draco said, sitting a little straighter. "Too tired. Maybe in another hour or so..."

"In that case," Dumbledore said, stepping up to the foot of the bed. "I have a favor to ask of you."

"And what," Draco asked, looking up only at the headmaster's robes, "could you want from me?"

"The reason why you are so studiously avoiding my eyes," the headmaster said. "Mr. Malfoy, you have my congratulations on the wonderful trick your family has played on the dark lord. It is the first good news I have heard in months and gives our side a much needed glimmer of hope. However, we all know what a risk I am taking by sheltering you, and I do not merely mean the Ministry's disapproval. I need to know that I can trust you."

"No one in their right mind trusts a dark wizard," Draco muttered, uncomfortable with the idea that the wizard considered him to be on their side. "You'll never trust me."

"Then it's true," Harry said, taking a step forward and staring at Draco like something out of one of Hagrid's classes. "Dobby was right about you. He said you were all dark wizards."

"Yes, that little sneak wouldn't care about keeping secrets anymore," Draco hissed. "Ungrateful little wretch--"

"If I may continue," Dumbledore interrupted, placing a hand on Harry's shoulder to quiet him. "I do not know all the facts surrounding your father's release from Azkaban and your escape from the dark lord. With the world itself at stake, I cannot afford to take the risk that this is some elaborate trap. I can only guess as to your father's motives and his plans, and as Professor Snape is fond of telling me, a Gryffindor cannot hope to understand the machinations of a Slytherin."

The hospital bed seemed uncomfortable again and the large room felt tiny and stifling. Voldemort's raking of his mind left deep wounds that refused to soothe and another legilimens in his mind made Draco wonder if he wouldn't be able to keep his mind intact, if every memory wouldn't spill out for the other wizard to examine at his leisure. If staying at Hogwarts meant giving over control like that, he'd take his chances with the snowstorm again.

"It shouldn't take long," Dumbledore said gently. "And I give you my word of honor that I will not stray from any memory you do not offer to me."

If only it was that simple, Draco thought. If only he could simply escape to some other refuge, but the storm outside was so fierce and he had no other place to hide both from the Death Eaters and the
Ministry. "Will it hurt very much?" he asked.

"It won't hurt at all."

"You're lying," Draco snapped, keeping his gaze locked on Dumbledore's robes. "I've already had my mind torn into once, thank you, I have no intention of a repeat performance."

"Torn?" Pomfrey asked, beating everyone else to the question. She sat down beside him and began mixing up another potion. "When? Does it still hurt? I should've thought to check..."

"The dark lord can look inside minds, too," Draco muttered, "only he wasn't kind enough to ask permission first. He...it was..." He cursed himself for breaking off but the memory still burned as clearly as when it happened.

To his surprise, Snape put a hand on his shoulder. Draco looked at it to make sure it belonged to the potions master and then looked up at him. In all the years he'd known him, Severus was loathe to show weakness in front of anyone except Lucius.

"The headmaster is not the dark lord," Snape said in a whisper. "It will not hurt. And if anything I taught you actually stuck in that lazy head of yours, you will easily keep any private thoughts to yourself."

Draco hesitated, looking between Severus and Dumbledore before nodding once. Taking a deep breath, he wordlessly met Dumbledore's eyes. Immediately memories flashed through his head, not haphazardly as before but in a steady flow that took him back farther and farther, beyond the escape and before the Malfoys put their plan into action, all the way back to the moment Draco set foot in Azkaban.

Less like a prison and more like a madhouse, shrieks and moans echoed through the stone corridors and disappeared into the walls. Draco kept his head high but also kept the hood of his cloak low, concealing his face. In one hand he carried a large bundle tied with a string, and in his other he held his wand. The cloak clasped in front so it would not open easily and no one could see his hands, but no one expected any trouble when he had an official release notice for his father. All he had to do was present it to the guards and they let him pass with only a jeer at his ashamed family name.

The shadows and screams did not bother him. He'd lived in shadows all his life, watching his father coax complex magic out of dark artifacts and assisting Snape like an apprentice, working with ingredients long forbidden by the ministry. Screams, his father had taught him, were nothing to be frightened of but were rather warnings of potential danger. And the danger here was the guards.

Two followed behind him at a healthy distance, drawn to a newcomer who was not yet beaten down by the gloom like everyone else, inmate and guard alike. Even the guards on secluded Azkaban must have heard the rumors about his family, and the youngest in a family of suspected dark wizards would make for a tempting target. Draco could not defend himself from attack and expect to be believed by the wizarding community, and now he wished that his mother had accompanied him. His only reassurance was that they would not attack someone who wasn't a prisoner. He swallowed once reflexively and forced himself not to turn around, even though he could feel them close by.

Up several steep staircases, down long halls that had no windows, he finally stopped at the last cell on that floor. Out of the corner of his eye he watched the guards stop at the staircase, well out of hearing range, so he turned back to the cell. The faint light in the hall did not reach into the cell, leaving it entirely dark. He dreaded looking inside and seeing what his father had become, so instead he steeled himself and stood at the bars, staring straight ahead at the guards.
"Father," he said, pressing the release notice against the lock. The parchment's charm sizzled against the lock and the cell clicked open. "I have secured your release. It's time to go home."

No answer, but he heard movement from inside the cell. He brought the bundle out from under his cloak and held it out. A moment later he felt it being pulled weakly from his hands and heard the paper being torn. Clothes were the only outside articles allowed in, but Draco brought not only his father's robes but his wand and a handful of potions as well.

Several cleaning charms were cast first. Draco listened as his father whispered charms he never would have guessed that someone as refined as Lucius Malfoy would know. Used by peasants and travelers to keep clean when no water was to be found, they were both uncomfortable and useless to modern wizards who never went far without an inn or public house nearby.

Glass vials shattered on the floor and dissolved, removing any evidence of his concentrated restorative elixirs. Instead of merely using the mandrake for an ingredient, he'd torn out its ethereal essence, the wisp of life that should have returned to nature after its death. Ripping out the essence of a plant and further warping its nature by adding his own blood as a kind of booster bordered on necromancy and, if discovered, could earn him steep fines, social stigma and even his own cell.

Finally Lucius came into the light. Leaning more on his cane than he used to, he took several unsteady steps as he reaccustomed himself to walking. His robes hung off him, showing just how much weight he had lost, and his hair, though now clean, was limp.

"How long?" he whispered, pulling his hood over his head and shadowing his face.

"Nearly six months," Draco said, keeping his voice businesslike. "Fighting's broken out, just skirmishes for now as each side gathers its forces. The ministry refuses to admit that it's war but lines have obviously been drawn and the sides seem even."

"I see." Lucius followed at his side for a few steps, his feet dragging slightly on the floor. His breath came out in rasps and he stared at the floor. He seemed like he might drop at any moment and Draco frowned when he saw the guards laughing between themselves at his father's state. To see him brought so low...

"Lucius," Draco snapped, using the same tone that his parents did whenever they rebuked him, "you are a Malfoy. Act like one."

Lucius froze as if slapped. He stared at his son with narrowing eyes and his grip tightened on his cane. He'd never struck his son with it, indeed he'd never struck him at all, but now he was sorely tempted. Such arrogance! To hear his name spoken so coldly by his own son, and after so long under such circumstances. In his anger he did not reply but straightened as they walked, still a little shaky but managing to hold his head high as they passed by the guards.

For now their reputation served them as they walked side by side, the former prisoner seemingly unaffected by his confinement, an amazing feat even without dementors flying around the fortress. The guards backed up and let them by. Throughout the prison, the occasional mumbling of the guards died away as two dark wizards walked among them, finally coming out into the moonlight.

Their private carriage waited at the entrance. Two black horses calmly waited as Draco opened the carriage door for his father. Once Lucius was settled, Draco walked beside the horses and whispered in their ears to take them home, then quickly joined his father and shut the door as they began to move, jostling them a little as it rolled across the rocky ground. A few seconds later the wheels left the ground and the horses pulled them through the air, their hooves still clopping as if they tread on the earth but the carriage itself stopped tilting one way or the other, riding smoothly on the wind.
Several seconds passed. Lucius stared out the window at the ocean as if watching the sea serpent following beneath them, but Draco knew his father well enough. He pushed his hood back and stared at him, wishing he would say something. As the silence grew unbearable, he blurted out "forgive me, father, please forgive me. I just couldn't stand those monsters staring at us, laughing. I wouldn't presume...I mean...you know I'd never dare--"

Draco's mouth snapped shut as his father sighed and slowly turned to look at him. Although his father had never hit him, he sometimes wished he would. Lucius' anger and disappointment were a thousand times worse than any blow could have been. Draco could often sweet talk anyone into getting his way, a skill put to great use these last few months, but for some reason he could only stammer under his father's look.

"Why are you here instead of advancing our cause?" Lucius asked, his voice neutral. "You have not sworn loyalty to the dark lord?"

"No," Draco said, considering his words. "I have not yet been asked. Mother deals with the Death Eaters. So far they occasionally use our manor but they have no use for me until I come of age."

"I see." Lucius nodded once to himself and looked back out the window.

"No you don't," Draco whispered. He stared at the carriage floor and forced himself to continue, not looking at his father for fear that he would lose his nerve. "I'm not joining them. Ever. Not after this, not after what they've done to us."

"Draco--"

"Mother stands with me in this. So does the rest of the family, the ones in the portraits, I mean. I know you've served the dark lord faithfully, father, but--"

"Draco!" Lucius snapped. "The Malfoys belong at his right hand, you know that. It's only because we served him that we are still alive."

"Serving him saved us once, but it will only destroy us now," Draco said. "I will not serve him."

"How dare you cross me," Lucius whispered. "If I thought you truly meant this, I would beat some sense back into you."

"But I do mean it--"

"Enough!" Lucius hissed, slamming his cane against the seat so hard that Draco winced. "Enough of these tests! Have I not proved my loyalty already?" He stared at Draco in a mix of betrayal and exhaustion. "Must even my own son try to trap me in treason?"

"Test?" Draco echoed, and it occurred to him that his father had kept him so sheltered from the machinations of the inner circle that he didn't know much of what went on in Voldemort's purview, the ways in which Voldemort determined their loyalty. "No, father, this...this isn't some test. If the dark lord finds out, it will only be because you tell him."

"I have not lived this long by being naive," Lucius said with narrowed eyes. "That my own son turns against me would not be all that farfetched."

"I haven't turned against you," Draco said. "You're the one who always told me 'family before all else'. I'm a Malfoy, not a Death Eater."

Lucius stared at him for several seconds, his gaze losing its anger and slowly turning suspicious. "Let
me see your arms," he said at last.

Draco unclasped his robe and pushed his sleeves up, revealing unmarked skin. When his father reached forward and pushed his loose collar aside, Draco held still, tilting his head slightly to show him clearly that he had no marks on his shoulders or back. And then Lucius roughly grabbed him and dragged him forward, holding him with both arms. His grip was weak but Draco returned his embrace, closing his eyes. His father had only held him once before. This was nothing short of miraculous.

"I was so afraid for you," Lucius whispered. "I was so sure you'd suffer for my failure."

At first Draco didn't answer. He didn't want to let go. But as nothing was said, Lucius realized what his son's silence meant and drew back, staring at him. "What is it?"

Draco refused to look up, instead burying his face in his father's shirt. "I don't know. Mother says the dark lord is furious and wants to punish our family, but she doesn't know how he means to do it yet."

Neither of them spoke for several minutes. Lucius briefly considered spiriting his wife and son away but that was as impossible now as when he'd first thought of it, when the dark lord reappeared. There was no safe place, no possible refuge for dark wizards. "There's no escape," he said softly. "Not for us."

"Yes, there is," Draco said, sitting up slightly. "There's a way. It's not easy, and it'll be damn hard hiding it from him, but we can do it."

Slowly he sketched out a rough plan involving portkeys and subterfuge. He named the Death Eaters who seemed most willing to escape and explained how he'd organized the older students into their own tight group, ready to sneak the children away at a moment's notice. He told him that Severus had promised safe haven at Hogwarts if they needed it while offering his own help. When he finished, he looked back at his father, willing to throw it all away if it did not meet his approval.

"Clever indeed," Lucius said, obviously thinking it over. "This was your mother's idea?"

"No," Draco said. "It's mine."

"It's overly simplistic and borders on madness," Lucius said, so lost in thought that he didn't notice his son's crestfallen expression, "but vaguely inspired. It might actually work, if we can keep the dark lord from finding out. The sooner done, the better." As he spoke, he released his son and gently pushed him back.

"I've been looking for a place we could hide everyone," Draco said. He reluctantly withdrew and sat on the opposite seat. "So far I haven't found anything suitable."

"We will have to create a place," Lucius said. "That will take time and considerable effort, however. I'm not strong enough to help yet."

His previous exhaustion showed clearly in the moonlight and Draco again felt a stab of guilt. "Father...I am sorry for what I said in there. I didn't mean to snap or--"

Lucius gave a wan smile. "Guards be damned, I nearly smashed your head in for that. But it wasn't the disrespect that angered me so much as..." he sighed. "Being told to act like a Malfoy...I felt like a child in front of my father again. Damned gallant feeling."

"You annoyed your father?" Draco asked.
"Not nearly as much as my son does," Lucius said.

They rode in silence for the rest of the way. When his father fell asleep, Draco kept vigilant, minding that the horses didn't run off course and that no one was stalking behind them on brooms. He hadn't liked dropping so much information on his father right after getting him out of Azkaban, but better that he knew of their planned treason now than believing he still had to serve Voldemort.

When they arrived at the Manor, the carriage coming to rest at the door as the sun rose, Narcissa stepped out and took Lucius' arm, helping him inside while Draco ordered the house elves to tend the horses, put away the carriage and above all else, let no one know that the master of the house had returned. He didn't follow his parents, leaving his mother to take care of his father while he returned to his bedroom.

The house elves had been busy in his absence, cleaning up the mess of papers and quills that littered his desk and somehow getting out the ink he'd accidentally upturned on the carpet. Looking at that desk no longer filled him with disgust now that his father was free. For the past several months he had worked to call in every favor, use every dirty secret he knew, to work his own magic with ministry officials and secure his father's pardon. Amelia Bones' assassination at the hands of the Death Eaters made manipulating the Wizengamot easier but with his father imprisoned, he'd had to establish his own presence as just as threatening and malevolent as his father's, until Draco Malfoy was every bit as feared as Lucius Malfoy.

Perhaps worse. Lucius, cautious to keep his intimidation secret, used subtle threats so as to avoid detection. Draco became a blonde demon, letting rumors of bribery, corruption and incompetence slip through the ministry until everyone was so frightened of an inquiry that his merest insinuation sent them into a tailspin of compliance. A few officials were impossible to manipulate. Coercing Arthur Weasley would have been useless in terms of his influence but limitless in personal satisfaction. However, everyone already knew about his lax behavior regarding magically altered muggle items so charges of incompetence didn't affect him as much as others. In every way, that family was useless to him and it only infuriated him when he thought about it.

He stripped off his robes as he made his way to the attached bathroom, stepping over the tile floor towards the sunken bathtub. Filly had already drawn his bath, so he carefully stepped down into the hot water, wincing slightly as he sat down, the water coming to his throat. Unlike the baths at Hogwarts, every tub in the Manor had symbols carved into the sides. Bathing was not merely for washing or relaxation. For the Malfoy family, bathing involved purification of whatever amount of dark magic still clung to them. If he didn't dispel it, it would interfere with spells, attract dark creatures and eventually eat at their soul.

Clasping his hands together, he took a deep breath and began chanting in a whisper. The spell rhymed but only to make it easier for him to remember. A minute passed, then two. Then he leaned backwards, submerging himself entirely before coming up again. He quickly turned, wiping the water from his eyes, and spotted his shadow lingering on the water's surface. It floated for a few seconds and then dissipated.

That done, he sighed and leaned back. One of the perks of dark magic was an excuse to take a long hot bath every day. Later he would contact Pansy and bring her up to date, but there was no rush to do anything just yet. The Death Eaters would not return to the manor for several weeks, busy with assassinations and destruction across the country, and the dark lord was off as usual, coordinating everything from his own secret hideaway. For now, Draco could afford to rest.

It was only much later, three weeks after his father's return and convalescence, that Draco learned about the history of the Knights of Walpurgis, the role he would play in their escape and what he
must be prepared to do. Severus proved invaluable in the planning and seemed to never leave the manor, and indeed his father--

Draco shook his head. No, that was off-limits, a family matter that didn't concern the war. He shook his head again to clear it and looked up. Dumbledore stood before him with a broad smile.

"It seems I underestimated you," the headmaster said. "Sometimes the brazenness of youth can find means that years of experience consider impossible. Again, my congratulations. It is most deserved."

Congratulations for being better schemers than the dark lord? Maybe from a Slytherin he could accept it. From a Gryffindor, it was nothing more than a backhanded compliment. Draco just nodded uncomfortably and looked up at Severus. "How long was that?"

"A few minutes," Snape said. "Now, since that is finished, you will get some sleep. I will bring something more appropriate for your hand than that weak snake oil--" he ignored Pomfrey's indignant snort "--and tomorrow, ah, excuse me, later today we will get you settled."

"Wait," Draco said, refusing to lay down just yet, "the books, they're safe?"

"You mean your devil's sack?" Snape asked. "Yes, quite safe. I'll take them with me for safekeeping until you wake."

That was as far as he was willing to tolerate Draco's stubbornness, and they all left him as he settled back under the blanket. Draco laughed derisively when he heard Dumbledore's voice fading away, explaining to Potter what devil sacks and dark books were. For all his pretended goodness, the headmaster certainly knew enough about dark magic, and for all of Potter's success against Voldemort, he was woefully ignorant about wizarding culture.

Pomfrey blew out the candles and quietly closed the door, leaving the hospital wing nearly pitch black. Scant moonlight shone through the windows and the wind howled while hard snowflakes hit the glass like tapping skeleton fingers. He pulled the blanket higher and turned his face toward the pillow. Despite his father's exasperation, his mother's gentle assurances and Snape's derision, Draco had never shaken his fear of the night. A stupid thing for a dark wizard to be afraid of, but it wasn't the dark that he feared. Working in shadows was second nature, and he preferred a hand of glory to a common lumos spell. No, it was what lurked within the shadows that scared him. He curled up and told himself it was only because he was cold. The room felt icy and he would have called out to Madam Pomfrey, but he felt ridiculous when he'd complained before about being too hot. He tried to relax and ignore the creeping chill.

When he finally fell asleep, he dreamed of hurrying through a snowstorm with his robes clutched around his throat. Stumbling through deep drifts, he constantly looked over his shoulder and hoped to make it through the forest and onto the main road before the muggle mob caught up to him. In the blizzard, made black by the thick clouds across the moon, he spotted their torches like fireflies not too far away. His wand was broken, snapped in his struggle to escape, and the cold was starting to fade as he grew tired. As they came closer, he threw aside the robes and ran as fast as he could. Like a deer before hunters, he gave up caution and plunged through the snow, desperate to get away from those rabid, hateful, filthy animals baying for his blood.

To Be Continued...
Halfway during the night, Severus woke Draco to shove a vile concoction down his throat and then sternly command him to both keep it down and get back to sleep. Used to the man's bedside manners, though, Draco just nodded once and went back to sleep, ignoring Pomfrey's voice as she lectured Severus about rough handling the students and his refusal to tell her what was in that potion. Draco didn't care as long as it didn't nauseate him too much, and even better, it saved him from his nightmares. Usually he dreamed of running from muggles only every few months. Two dreams in one night unnerved him.

He woke again later with sunlight glaring in his eyes and someone's rough hand shaking him. With a mumbled curse he shooed them away and sat up, blinking a few times.

"This better be damned important," he growled.

"Just as charming as your father in the morning," Snape said, standing straight. "Get up. You're wanted in the headmaster's office."

"What? Already?" Draco glared at him and didn't move. "I flew across the country to get here, you think he could let me sleep in a bit."

"You've been asleep for almost two days." Snape picked up the robes on the table and tossed them onto Draco's lap. "Get up. The sooner we're done there, the sooner we can get you settled back in Slytherin."

"Two days?" Draco threw on his robes and turned to sit at the edge of the bed. "Has there been any--?"

"No word yet," Severus said. "But remember, both your father and Pansy have large groups to move without being detected. They don't have the luxury of simply flying to Hogwarts."

"Didn't feel like a luxury to me," Draco muttered. By the time he was dressed and ran a comb through his hair, he noticed that his right hand curled easily now, although it still hurt to move. Whatever mix of potions and spells Pomfrey and Snape had laid on him had apparently worked.

"Here," Severus said, handing Draco his wand. "Pomfrey doesn't know I stole this off her desk yet, so keep quiet."

Draco closed his hand satisfyingly over his wand, the familiar twists and indentations in the wood fitting his hand like an extension of his arm. Even the short time without it left him feeling empty and unprotected, and he tucked it into his robes with relief. It had saved his life twice now and he resolved not to let it out of his reach again. After his escape and the Death Eater attack, even the Hogwarts hallways did not feel safe.

Despite the war, classes continued as usual, although from what Draco heard as they walked through the school, the material had taken a more militaristic bent. Defending against dark magic and finding weaknesses in hexes and jinxes became more important than simply turning teacups into mice. Looking in the occasional open door, he spotted students practicing shield charms and counter curses. He glanced at his mentor's face and found a similar scowl.
"Has anyone told them that Death Eaters know more than just curses?" he whispered.

"I've brought it up several times," Snape said. "But they think they know best."

Draco didn't answer except to rub the sleep from his eyes. Two days of sleep and he still felt exhausted. Probably had dark circles under his eyes, come to think of it, and every movement felt like he was fighting the cramped position he'd flown in for so long. He wondered how many people knew he was back and if Voldemort knew he was safe in Hogwarts. Well, as safe as anyone could be here. For all the wards Dumbledore and the staff had set throughout the grounds, undoubtedly there were ways to bypass them.

They stopped at the gargoyle and Severus told it "cherry bombs." As the door opened, he noticed Draco's nonplussed look. "Some ridiculous new candy from the Weasley shop. Whatever you do, don't take any from the dish on his desk."

As they went up, Draco heard voices and quickly realized that this would not be a private meeting. He expected Potter's voice but scowled even further when he heard the mudblood and the Weasel loudly protesting something the headmaster had just said. At least he had Severus with him. As noble as Gryffindors were supposed to behave, he didn't trust any of them to have his interests at heart. Dumbledore would probably give him a stern lecture about how he would monitored at all times to make sure he didn't cast any evil magic or try to slip out unnoticed with information about their defensive spells.

When they entered the office, Dumbledore nodded once at them and gestured toward a fourth chair. Draco had to steel himself to walk inside and take the empty seat. The office hummed with the old wizard's magic and although his father could enter without quailing, Draco did not like being inside. He felt like a deer walking into a gryphon's den.

"Good morning Professor Snape, Mister Malfoy," Dumbledore said. "I'm happy to see you recovered so quickly."

"He is not entirely recovered," Snape answered before Draco could. "He should have a few more days' rest."

"Quite understandable," Dumbledore said, looking at Draco and not mentioning how the blonde refused to meet his eyes again. "I'm sorry to have woken you, but there are a few things that I still need to ask."

"I thought you saw everything you needed last time," Draco said, glancing at the other students. They all looked upset at having to spend time near him, but Potter seemed absolutely murderous. Draco looked away to hide his confusion. He hadn't even done anything wrong yet.

"Your memories reassured me that your family no longer serves the dark lord," Dumbledore said. Ron snorted but the Slytherins only glared at him as the headmaster continued. "And I am confident that you will not harm any of the students here. However, you have brought something dangerous into the school and I am reluctant to allow it to remain."

"You mean the book?" Draco asked.

"I assure you, sir," Snape said, "the book is not dangerous in the right hands. And regardless of the war, Malfoy must complete his apprenticeship."

"Besides, it's safe in the bag right now," Draco said. "If we just keep it there--"

"I have every confidence that you both can manage your grimoire's magic," Dumbledore said. "But
"Well, yes," Draco said slowly. "But the devil's been securely bound. There's no way it could get free."

"Normally I would agree." Dumbledore took a long silver key from on top of his desk and unlocked a drawer, then pulled out a wooden box and unlocked it with the same key. Gingerly he lifted out the same bag Draco had carried during his long flight and set it before him. "But I'm afraid there has been a complication."

As if something inside was alive, the bag squirmed and pushed out in all directions. All of them startled and Ron scrambled for his wand, but the headmaster waved him down.

"I don't think the devil has gotten loose," Dumbledore said. "I examined it as best I could without opening it and the confinement charms seem to be intact."

"Then..." Snape watched the bag twist and turn on the desk. "It's leaking," he realized.

"Oh hell," Draco said, forgetting about headmaster as he understood the problem. "The destruction spell I used to destroy the manor. It must have interfered with the magic on the bag."

"Not just your family's destruction spell," Dumbledore said. "But the collapse of all your family's charms, the shattering of several dark artifacts the ministry had not previously discovered, and your mother was a great collector of rare potions ingredients, yes? No doubt those ingredients scattered in the midst of such a sweeping spell."

"Not to mention the ancient magic on that broom," Snape said, "and then that enchanted blizzard that followed you."

"Serves you right," Ron muttered.

Dumbledore shot him a stern look but didn't scold him. "In any case, such large amounts of wild and destructive magic affected the seals on your devil's sack. I doubt it affected the binding on the devil, but since spells of this nature are chaotic at best, I am tempted to merely destroy it entirely."

"No," both Severus and Draco said at once. Draco fell silent as Snape clamped a hand on his shoulder to still him, but he didn't have to argue.

"Only tempted," Dumbledore said, his smug smile firmly in place. "But with young Malfoy's help, we should be able to safely retrieve the contents."

From the other side of the office, Hermione shook her head. "I don't understand, sir. How can Draco do something that you can't?"

"Blood," Ron said, staring at the bag as if it was a loathsome creature Hagrid might like. "Dark wizards like tying their property to their family."

"All purebloods link their estate to their lineage," Draco snapped back. "If they have anything of worth." He quieted again as Snape tightened his grip on his shoulder. This was neither the time nor the place for a squabble, but more importantly he didn't want to upset his mentor.

"Take the knife," Snape said softly.

Draco blinked. On the desk the headmaster had conjured a simple knife with a black handle. Risking a glance into Dumbledore's eyes, Draco looked up to see if he really wanted a demonstration of dark
magic. When Dumbledore nodded once, Draco sighed and gingerly took the knife with his injured hand. To his right, Hermione and Harry stiffened in their seats while Ron merely looked away as he pressed the blade against his left palm, grasped it, and jerked it upwards. Blood trickled along the edge but the cut was not deep enough to bleed freely. He set the knife down and used his bloodied hand to reach into the bag.

As if by some unseen hand, he felt a book pressed into his fingers. He grasped it and gently drew out his father's journal. He reached in again and felt another, heavier book placed in his hand, and as he pulled it free, he heard the three Gryffindors gasp in unison. Even Dumbledore seemed put off by its presence. Draco looked at it for a moment as he set it down. The Malfoy grimoire, handed down through countless generations, wore a cover of human skin with stained brown ink showing along the uneven pages. A thick leather belt with a lock held it shut but even with that restraint, the book seemed to breathe, restlessly rustling its pages.

While they stared at his heirloom, he reached in a third time for the galleons he'd stashed. Instead he felt a smooth glass bottle pushed into his hand. Frowning, he drew it out and stared at it. On the label he read in his mother's swirling script 99 tincture base.

"It's from her potion store," he said, mostly to himself.

Snape reached down and took the bottle, examining the clear liquid inside. "Definitely one of Narcissa's supplies. Handy, but I take it you did not expect to find this?"

"No, I only took the two books and several galleons." Draco reached in again but recoiled as another hand touched his, rough and scaly with sharp nails that scratched his skin. As soon as he'd pulled free, Dumbledore drew the strings shut, tossed the bag back in the box and locked it up tight.

"The seals have definitely broken on this," Dumbledore said. "I trust there is nothing else you'd care to retrieve?"

Not with a devil grasping for him. Draco shook his head. Without any other questions, Dumbledore placed his wand on top of the box, said something very quickly, and then smoke poured out from the small lock. Although Draco despised losing the sack as they were rare and difficult to come by, he took solace in the fact that he'd retained the two books and picked up a tincture base that would probably have cost triple the amount of galleons he'd saved. A sparkle from his father's diary caught his eye and he spotted the edge of a coin stuck within the pages. He tugged a single galleon free and stared at it, the last remnant of his home and all the wealth saved from the now decimated manor. He didn't look away from it as Severus quickly healed his small cut, accustomed to the potions master mending his minor wounds.

"Now that we've taken care of that," Dumbledore said, setting the box aside, "we may discuss more important matters. Your father and the remainder of his knights have vanished entirely. I'm sure they can take care of themselves. However, the whereabouts of Pansy Parkinson and several youngsters, many of them our own students, are also currently unknown. Do you have any idea where they might be? If we could get a team of aurors to help them--"

"She'll never let you get near," Draco said, shaking his head. "I told her not to trust anyone except herself until she got back here. We just have to wait until she brings them close enough to safely send for help."

Dumbledore looked up at Snape as if imploring him to convince Draco otherwise. To the wizard's dismay, Snape shook his head.

"If we send help, they will see it as a threat and scatter," Snape said. "Doing anything at this point
would only hurt them."

"But they're all alone," Hermione said, intruding again. "How can they possibly make it across the entire country?"

"Dark magic," Ron said as he crossed his arms and leaned back in his seat. "How about it, Malfoy? Are they slaughtering muggles to keep hidden?"

Both Harry and Hermione stared at him in surprise, but no one else seemed taken aback. Draco leaned towards him with a nasty smile, certain that he wouldn't try anything with the headmaster and Snape there.

"Don't be silly, Weasley, you know that purebloods make the best sacrifices."

"That will be enough from both of you," Dumbledore said as Ron started to stand. "If you are to work together, I expect some degree of civility."

Feeling as if he'd been punched in the chest, Draco stared at the headmaster with wide eyes. Help them? After everything they'd done to him? He quickly noticed he was the only one surprised and realized that this must have been decided earlier and with his mentor's consent, as reluctant as that might have been. And he was safely beyond the Ministry only due to the old man's kindness. He slumped in his seat and glared at Potter.

"Well, no wonder Potter looks like he wants to hex me into the ground," he mumbled. "What do you want me to do, join the golden trio on some merry adventure risking life and limb to save the school and win Gryffindor another thousand house points?"

"Not quite so dramatic as all that," Dumbledore smiled. "My request is two fold. Professor Snape's potions have been our side's salvation on many an occasion. I request that you assist him in this. You will have free reign of the school's resources and the forbidden forest insofar as you can avoid the centaurs. Our side is always in need more potions."

"What, healing droughts and antidotes?" Draco asked. "Hardly worth the effort."

"Not from you," Dumbledore said. "The younger students are mass producing those. I had in mind more offensive mixtures."

"They're all offensive," Potter muttered.

Malfoy ignored him for the moment as he considered what the headmaster meant. Poisons, acids, vapors? He glanced up at Severus but didn't have to ask the question.

"Precisely. Our normal fare."

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"They're all offensive," Potter muttered.
"In other words," Severus said, his voice more righteous than usual, "pretending that dark magic is evil and shoving it out of sight has finally come around to bite the ministry."

"Quite," Dumbledore said. "And Hogwarts now houses the only two known dark wizards on our side. We would be foolish to let your knowledge go to waste. We probably do not have enough time to disseminate your information throughout the school, but..." he glanced at Harry. "I would like you to teach Mister Potter as many spells as time permits."

Draco's shock went unnoticed as Dumbledore continued to explain why the Boy Who Lived needed to be exposed to as much dark magic and their various counter spells as possible. Draco glanced at Ron and Hermione, who both looked put out and glared at him as if daring him to hurt their friend, and then he glanced at Severus, who looked like his mother did when forced to attend Quidditch games among wizards that looked down on her kind. And he was about to protest when a wonderful thought occurred to him.

He could throw dark spells at Potter. Draco Malfoy had Dumbledore's permission to fling countless curses and spells of the darkest nature at Harry Potter. He started to smile. Even if he didn't try to kill him, accidents always happened when jinxes and hexes were involved. Potter would be in the hospital wing every day and he didn't have to do anything but what Dumbledore wanted. He glanced at Severus whose scowl slowly turned into a small smile as the potions master saw the positive side of the arrangement.

The headmaster noticed their building glee and waved his hands quickly. "No no no, not like that. I'm sure there are more ways to teach dark magic than treat the apprentice like a target."

At that, Draco bitterly scoffed. "If there are, I haven't seen them."

"We prefer more direct methods than you do," Severus said, "but I'm sure we can alter them if Mister Potter feels that he needs protection."

Crepara, bubonia, crawenen, rotianan, haetus heorte, a multitude of spells rushed into Draco's mind. All of them were nasty, but some were more vicious than others. He wondered what the Gryffindors would think when Potter learned to cast them. Would they accept him still? Or did their natural hatred of dark magic run deep enough to cast even the hero of the wizarding world out of society?

"And finally," Dumbledore said, breaking his train of thought, "the question remains about your role here at Hogwarts. The laws of sanctuary are quite old and don't make allowances for a school providing shelter. Sanctuary was a private affair conducted by small groups of families."

"Yes," Draco nodded once. "Generally frowned upon by the rest of society because it let innocents escape vicious mobs and political enemies. I know its history quite well." Many of his dreams involved desperate flights toward sanctuary, most of which ended in failure.

"Then you know that you cannot remain here as a student. You are a guest, and thus not allowed to take up the work expected of students." The headmaster sighed. "Indeed, if you were to do so, your actions would probably be cursed and rebound upon you until you stopped."

"I admit," Draco said, "I don't particularly mind missing classes."

"Of course not," Dumbledore smiled. "However, I encourage you to sit in on classes you would have taken regardless. You will not be held to the assignments but you can at least participate and perhaps take your NEWTS later on, if circumstances allow."

"I've already drawn up your schedule," Severus told him. "I'll go over it with you later. If there is
anything else, headmaster?"

Dumbledore shook his head. "Merely my thanks to both of you for agreeing to help us."

As if Voldemort winning would serve any of them, Draco thought. He stood to go but Dumbledore abruptly raised his hand again.

"Forgive me, Professor Snape, I suddenly recall something that I do need to discuss with you. Mister Malfoy, if you would be so kind to show Mister Potter where the Slytherin common room is. The dungeons can be labyrinthine and I would hate for him to get lost." Over both Draco's and Snape's startled protests, he continued. "It will be best if you instruct him in your dungeons where other students will not see, and your common room seems the safest choice. In fact, I must impress upon all of you the utmost secrecy required about this. I'm afraid dark wizards have always suffered most when sorely outnumbered by the rest of society, and with Slytherin empty at the moment, Mister Malfoy undertakes this at some risk to himself."

Hermione nodded dutifully but Ron hesitated a moment, nodding only after she looked sharply at him. Harry merely stood and sullenly waited by the door, his arms crossed and his gaze fixed on the floor. Draco thought he looked remarkably like a scolded child and wondered if he and Dumbledore had argued about this. With one last look at Snape that only told him there was no way out of this, he stood up, leaving his books and tincture for Severus to examine. He idly twirled his gold coin between his fingers.

"Down to your last galleon, Malfoy?" Ron asked, ignoring the look Dumbledore shot him. "They've frozen your family's account at Gringott's, you know. How's it feel to be poor?"

Golden trio was right, Draco realized, if they were bold enough to act up in front of the headmaster. Had they saved the school again over the summer? He'd been so busy freeing his father that he'd left the dark lord's machinations against Hogwarts entirely to his mother's scrutiny. Mimicking the disaffected look his father preferred, Draco glanced at the redhead and tossed the coin through the air to land in Ron's lap.

"Don't worry for my sake. Malfoy's are never so poor," he drawled, "that we cannot give to charity."

Hermione grasped Ron's arm, holding him still before he could stand. With all three of them glaring at him, Draco swept out of the room and down the stairs, trusting that Potter was at his heels. Fortunately classes were still in progress so he didn't have to worry about running into students in the halls. Painful twinges ran through his hand and shoulders and his legs shook as he walked. Even his long rest couldn't fix everything, and he tentatively flexed his hand. Pomfrey and Snape had done their best, but his fingers wouldn't curl completely and his smallest finger felt nearly numb.

"Have you always been a complete bastard?" Harry snapped, catching up to him.

"I give your friend gold and this is how you thank me?" Draco asked. "My family's always given to the less fortunate wizards among us."

"You arrogant little monster." Harry wheeled around in front of him, putting his hand on the wall to block his way. "But you're all alone now, no Crabbe or Goyle to back you up. How are you going to handle it, on your own with no mommy or daddy to help you?"

Draco flinched as Potter stood over him. Over the past two years Harry had steadily grown several inches while Draco remained even slighter than his mother, and he keenly felt the absence of his two burly friends.
"I don't know," he snapped, "how've you handled it so far without yours?"

If it was possible, Harry's face looked like it might turn redder than Weasley's. His fist clenched and Draco remembered just how hard the boy could throw a punch.

"Hit me and you'll get to explain to Dumbledore why you hurt a guest under his protection," Draco hissed.

For several seconds Harry visibly struggled with himself but ultimately lowered his fist.

"Just once, Malfoy," he growled. "Step out of line just once and I swear I'll send you back to your dark lord in pieces."

"If he was still my lord," Draco said, "I wouldn't be here, that's kind of the point. Or were you so busy sulking that you didn't hear the whole 'switched sides' part of the discussion?" He sidestepped Harry and continued walking towards the dungeons.

Beside him, Harry kept pace. "You only left Voldemort because your family was in danger. You're still dark wizards and nothing will ever change that."

Until they passed most of the classes and stepped into the shadowy hallways that led to the dungeons, Draco didn't answer. Instead he kept his head low and welcomed the cool, damp air, familiar and reassuring as his footsteps echoed around him. He resisted the urge to rub at the soreness building in every muscle. He could take a long hot bath when Potter finally left--

A second pain in his chest, much like the one he'd felt in Dumbledore's office but stronger, sent him to his knees. He put his hand over his heart and felt it racing, beating harder with each pulse. At the same time he realized that even if Pomfrey had cast a cleaning charm on him, he had not had a bath in four days.

"Malfoy?" Potter stared down at him suspiciously. "What the hell are you doing? If this is a trick--"

Ignoring him, Draco stood up again, leaning against the wall for support as he raced towards the common room. His own dark magic, he mentally tallied, along with Malfoy Manor's destruction and all the old dark magics crashing down on him, along with Voldemort's magic chasing him back to Hogwarts...

"What's wrong with you?" Harry asked, catching up. "You're gasping."

"Stupid Potter," Draco hissed, closing his eyes as muscle cramps tore through his body. "Stupid, stupid..." A coughing spasm took him and he fell again, wracked with pain as he tried to breathe.

To his surprise, he felt an arm snake around him and force him back to his feet, and despite himself he leaned against Harry for support. When Harry tried to turn him around, though, he nearly pulled free.

"What are you doing?" Harry berated him. "You've got to see Pomfrey--"


"But--"

"Dammit, you wanted a lesson in the dark arts," he whispered hoarsely, "here it is. It fucking hurts. Now get me to Slytherin or you'll be taking your lessons from a dead dark wizard."
This time Harry didn't argue. Following Draco's directions through the twisting corridors, he brought them to the entrance within a few minutes. He opened his mouth to ask what the password was but Draco beat him to it, coughing out "Ilmauzer" and stumbling inside before the doors fully opened.

The only light in the room, the crackling fire in the hearth fought a losing battle against the cold. Their breath misted in the air as Draco pointed vaguely at the side arch where the dorms lay. Harry looked around as he half-carried, half-followed Malfoy through the dungeons. Bricks and mortar gave way to hewn rock and stone so that Slytherin was nearly entirely comprised of a natural cave. By the time they reached the showers, Harry expected to see stalactites.

There were no cavernous formations, just a low ceiling and shower fixtures set directly into the rock wall. Draco stumbled into the first stall, loosening his robes and throwing them off before turning the hot water on full. He kicked off his shoes but another bolt through his heart made him start the ritual, not caring that his pants and top shirt were soaking through. Aware that Harry was still standing behind him, he clapped his hands together.

"Sithenes sceandu kasta..." he whispered, "an niht ic dragan, heonon ren an cleonsian min sawol."

At first the pain did not stop and he feared he had not made it in time. He repeated the spell, his hands clenched so tight that blood trickled from his palm as he reopened his wound. Leaning against the stall, he groaned as another spasm rocked through his back. He closed his eyes and said the spell one more time.

Harry's gasp told him he was saved. He looked down and saw thick strands of darkness sloughing off of his body like mud, splattering the green tiles and slowly slipping down the drain. The cramps disappeared and he swayed with the sudden lack of pain, nearly falling backwards. Instead he was caught and helped to the floor as the water continued to wash away all the accumulated magic.

"What on earth is that?" Harry asked, staring at the dark steaks down Draco's face.

"Residual magic," Draco answered, breathing deep. Exhausted, he turned over his hand and showed the other boy the black mud sliding off his clothes as if they weren't there. "I nearly didn't get it off in time."

Harry grasped his hand to see it closer, but he yelped and drew back instantly. "Ow! You're scalding yourself!" He reached forward and violently twisted the cold water faucet, bringing the temperature down to something bearable.

Draco didn't bother to mention that he couldn't feel the heat for all the dark magic still pouring off him, or that he was so tired he could have boiled to death and not cared. He merely relaxed, his comfort outweighing the fact that it was Potter holding him upright, especially since Pansy wasn't here to take care of him.

"What was that spell you said?" Harry asked. "That sithens kast thing."

"I'll explain it to you," Draco said between clenched teeth, "when I'm not half-dead. Give me a few minutes."

For a moment neither of them said anything as Harry contemplated what he'd just seen and Draco mourned the absence of his Slytherin friends who would have known what was going on. And Draco mourned Pansy's absence most of all, especially her intuition about when to shut up as Potter started on again.

"Dumbledore wanted me to see this," Harry realized, looking back down at the residue on the wet
"The pain, the ritual, the darkness...he knew this was going to happen. He wanted me to see the drawback of dark magic."

"'Drawback?'" Draco hissed. "You think this is a drawback?" He angrily shoved Potter back and stood up, wobbling as he leaned against the wall and shook off the last black drops. "Stupid Potter, you really don't know a damn thing about us, do you?"

"I know you're evil," Harry shot back, getting to his own feet but sliding a little on the wet floor. "Dark wizards are nothing but bad. You don't care about anything or anyone once you turn from the light."

"Do you know anything about us yourself or can you only repeat the usual lies that everyone's told you?"

Pushing by him, Draco gathered his robes and shoes and walked unsteadily back into the dungeon. He shivered in the dungeon air and hurried back to the common room where he sat down by the hearth and tugged off his shirt.

"If they're lies," Potter continued, "I never seen anything to make me think otherwise."

"Says the boy with glasses," Draco said. "On the warm stones in front of the fireplace, he set out all of his wet clothes except his pants. "If dark magic's so evil, why are you going to learn it?"

"So I defend against it," Harry said naturally. "Unless you expect me to negotiate with it like Umbridge wanted."

A nasty smirk spread over Draco's face. "There's a fast way to lose your head." Feeling warmer now and painfree, his mood improved and he smiled. "Fine, then I'll teach you every dark and evil spell that I know, every way to hurt someone and curse them and kill them. And when I'm done, you'll be lucky if even that mudblood stays with you, because friend or not, every insufferably good pureblood hates the dark ones among them. Now then..." He nodded towards the main door.

"Dumbledore only wanted me to lead the little Gryffindor by the hand so he wouldn't get lost coming to Slytherin. You know where it is now, so push off."

For several seconds, Harry stared at him without speaking. The only sound came from the fire and the echoes from the lake. After awhile, Draco grew uncomfortable and looked away, staring at the floor so he didn't have to see Harry's piercing green eyes or the assured tilt of his head. When Potter started speaking again, it was almost a relief.

"I'm not like you," Harry said slowly. "I don't enjoy hurting people. But if I ever hear you call anyone a 'mudblood' ever again, I will hurt you, guest or not."

And with that, he turned and walked out of the common room. Draco silently glared at him until the wall closed up behind him. There was no doubt in his mind that Harry meant that, and as much as he despised being threatened, he had no friends to stand behind him and look menacing. It just wasn't fair. He could manipulate the entire Ministry of Magic into paroxysms of fear and confusion, but Potter usually managed to ignore every slight and insinuation. Only his anger ever got away with him, it seemed, and Draco was not that desperate to see Potter infuriated.

His pants were nearly dry so he stood up and walked across the room, stopping at the glass wall. The lake did not move as usual, its surface frozen and its deep waters calm. Its light turned pale gray in the constant snowfall so that he could see his reflection clearly in the glass.

When had his hair grown so long? It wasn't like his father's yet, but the ends nearly touched his
shoulders. He hadn't noticed that he needed it cut, too busy freeing his father and then betraying the
dark lord. He hadn't eaten much either, he noticed, his torso and arms too defined, his whole body
too thin to be called whipcord. But his face...he sighed and tilted his head. Dark circles made his eyes
look hollow, his skin was still an unhealthy pale, and he noticed several scratches that he hadn't felt
before. Probably from sleeping as he flew between trees, he thought.

Hogwart's house elves seemed to have done a good job dusting the furniture so he pulled out a chair
and sat down, resting his head on the table he used to do his homework on. Not so long ago he
would have thrown everything he had into helping Slytherin's heir and wiping out every muggle and
mudblood from the country, the planet even. And now...?

"Why did the dark lord have to be insane?" he whispered.

Rallied together, the dark wizards and witches of the world would have stood against the light,
putting their petty jealousies and rivalries aside as they took their chance at evening the scales long
tipped in favor of the followers of Merlin, ever since the great battle between light and dark. He
stared into the frozen waters of the lake for a long time, wistfully imagining what could have been if
Mordred had not lost, if Voldemort had been worth following.

Chapter End Notes

The spell Draco uses to dispel magic is rendered in mostly Old English, with some Old
Norse tossed in. I make no apologies for the horrendous grammar.

sithenes sceandu kasta en niht ic dragan
heonon ren an cleonsian min sawol

since shadows cast and night I draw
hence rain and cleanse my soul

Sounds better in old English, huh?
In which Draco grows acorns

Dried vervain, pulverized oak root, crushed snakes fangs, a multitude of potions ingredients filled Snape's private stores, categorized and carefully inventoried, and Draco knew every single item hidden away in the lonely office. His mentor's idea of rest and recuperation involved long hours spent examining every bottle, re-labeling jars where the tags had faded or fallen off. Different handwriting covered the jars for the first few hours, written by students suffering Snape's detentions, but as he progressed into the rare or dangerous ingredients, including hen's teeth, adder's venom, and poisoned dragon's liver, he only saw his mentor's handwriting.

Now on his third day of inventory, he sat in a niche of the office, well hidden behind the cabinets as he examined the ingredients Snape hid from the rest of the faculty. Dumbledore probably knew about them but no doubt the Ministry did not. Some of them were common like raven's feathers or merely expensive like cockatrice eyes, but taken together, the cobwebs and belladonna and sea serpent's fangs comprised some of the universal components of a dark wizard's ingredient cabinet.

He picked up a bottle missing a label and held it to the candle light. Something red and thick swirled around inside but he couldn't tell for sure what it was without opening it, and considering the amount of dust accumulated on the top, no doubt the contents were sealed with a preservation charm to keep it from drying out. But then very few liquids needed charming, so he simply wrote 'blood, unknown' on a new label and set it back on the shelf. The jar next to it read 'will o the wisp' but when he picked it up, he found it empty. Severus must have used it up recently, though, since he spotted glowing residue on the air holes poked into the top.

By the time he finished, his shoulders ached and his head pounded, but he knew what they had to work with in the coming months and could easily find his way around the shelves for when Severus sent him hunting for refills. Which, of course, was one of the privileges of being a master with an apprentice.

Draco looked out the nearest window and saw that there was still some daylight left. Done with his chores and sick of being cramped inside the dungeons, he gathered a knapsack and two extra jars, left a note and locked the office behind himself.

Without any other Slytherins passing through the halls and filling it with their whispers, the dungeons felt like a coffin waiting for a body, but the silence was preferable to the clamor of the rest of the students. No one came down into the dungeons to bother him. Up in the main part of the school, he carefully avoided the crowded halls and took secondary routes, walking through neglected passages that showed his footsteps in the dust. Forgotten even by the house elves, the quiet halls lead him past locked doors that muffled soft rustlings and murmurs from inside the empty rooms. The scattered paintings here were black and smoky and he did not care to look at them.

As he neared the main hall, the voices of other students grew louder until he stood at the last corner, just out of their sight. He grasped the hood of his cloak and drew it low over his face, quietly thanking Severus for buying a handful of robes for him. The only drawback was that Snape's taste in clothing was as severe as his personality. Although his new robes were expensive, they were also simple, the cloak more utilitarian than elegant. It didn't surprise him, his father was the one with the more refined taste, but it was a little annoying.

Waiting for a lull in the voices, he finally stepped out and headed quickly for the doors. Cold wind
blew over him as he stepped outside. Voldemort's blizzard had finally stopped the day after he arrived, but the snow refused to melt. Sunlight glimmered on the white ice covering the trees and ground. He followed the worn path down to the lake, and as he got closer, he heard the sound of laughter and teachers yelling at students. When he could see the lake clearly, he saw students skating on the frozen surface. A tight ring of teachers kept watch, but no one seemed worried about a surprise attack.

The lack of green scarves made his stomach clench.

"You better be alive," he whispered to his absent friends. Only an empty wind answered.

Turning away from the lake, he trudged through fresh snow and walked along the treeline. Finding anything on the ground would be next to impossible, but for now the wind and cold air broke up the monotony of sorting through ingredients. It also gave him time to brood.

His friends were wandering the countryside in this weather. He'd nearly died coming to Hogwarts and he didn't want to think he was luckier than Pansy right now. His father held tenuous command over a group of traitorous Death Eaters, who may or may not consider their rank as Knights of Walpurgis more binding than their loyalty to Voldemort. And God alone knew where his mother was. He pulled his cloak a little tighter and sighed.

"Stupid child, how on earth did you survive long enough to get here?"

Draco startled back, biting off his angry retort when he recognized Snape's voice. Preparing himself for a scolding, he turned around.

"Don't bother sulking," Snape said. "I would have thought that your flight here would have made you more cautious. Obviously I was wrong if you're so wrapped up in your daydreams."

"My apologies, sir," Draco said. "Should I go play with the other, more vigilant students?"

With a snort, Snape glared at the lake and all the students skating in loops and falling into each other. "The headmaster is convinced that the students need downtime more than ever. He's placed all his trust in the various warding spells around the campus." He looked back at Draco. "And what are you doing out here? Have you finished your work already?"

Crossing his arms, Draco gave a small toss of his head to throw his hood back. "Of course. And when I realized my master was in a worse mood than normal, I decided to come up here like a good apprentice and let him take it out on me."

Severus stared at him for several seconds, then groaned and closed his eyes.

"Insufferable Malfoys," he muttered, but in a long suffering tone that indicated more fondness than real exasperation. He glanced back at him with his usual scowl, however, and narrowed his eyes. "Why are you out here?"

"I finished up in the office and needed to stretch my legs. I'm still a little shaky." Draco looked over at the forest, just as dark and foreboding during the day as it was at night. "And...I don't think Potter will be putting off his lessons for much longer. Unless I want him throwing spells at me, I need something for target practice."

"It has been awhile since you needed targets, hasn't it?" Snape asked. "There should be some acorn trees nearby, just don't wander too far."

Draco nodded once and watched him stride back across the ice, picking up two students that had
fallen and slid away from the rest of the group. Left alone again, he continued to walk around the lake, staring at the tree branches for familiar clumps of acorns. Frozen by the blizzard, the dead leaves all remained on the branches only by the smooth ice coating everything in sight, but with every passing breeze they cracked and fell so that the whole forest seemed to be raining leaves.

Finally he spotted a few acorns on a young, scraggly oak. He bent and dug through the snow to the hard ground where he found dozens more scattered about, most of them rotted or cracked, but a few were in good condition. As he filled his first jar, he occasionally stuck his hands back into his cloak, specially spelled against the cold weather, and muttered to himself about Severus forgetting to add gloves to his wardrobe.

He slowly walked around the tree, gathering all the acorns he could find. Another, taller oak grew just beside this one, bearing even more acorns, and then he found another oak just a little further into the forest. By the time he'd filled his second jar, the sun was setting and the forest had turned nearly black with shadows.

"What're yeh doin' out here?"

The booming voice made his heart skip a beat. Scrabbling for his wand, Draco froze as he looked up and found a crossbow bearing down on him, an arrow primed and ready to fire. Easily towering over him, Hagrid stared at him suspiciously and glanced back at the trees to make sure they were alone, as if Draco had legions of demons waiting on him.

"I thought yeh weren't to leave the castle," Hagrid said, his voice rumbling angrily around them. "Yer not even supposed to be around the students."

If the crossbow hadn't been aimed at his face, Draco would have turned and ran, or better still, cast a spell and then run. Something that big might take two or three curses to kill. He mentally cursed himself. Severus had just berated him for letting his mind wander and yet he did it again. He tore his look away from the arrow and up at Hagrid himself...and for just a moment, the gigantic man flinched as their eyes met.

That little motion changed everything. Very slowly and without any sudden moves, Draco stood up and forced an arrogant smile onto his lips. After all, his father always told him that his arrogance could be his greatest weapon, if he only used it properly. Perhaps he could put the fearful rumors about dark wizards to use.

"I'm not a prisoner, I'm a guest," Draco said as if speaking to a child. "I can come and go as I please."

Hagrid stared at him for several seconds. "Dumbledore said yeh weren't goin' out of the dungeons."

"Knowing you," Draco said in his best drawl, "you didn't understand what he was saying. Let me put it to you simply. My stay in the dungeons is not to keep me locked up, it's a reprieve so I don't have to waste my time with you lot."

"You..." Hagrid growled. "You rotten little..."

"Dark wizard," Draco supplied. "You know, the kind that steals souls and grinds up muggle children to make my bread?"

By the way Hagrid tensed, Draco knew that the half-giant had indeed heard every rumor and probably believed them all. Hagrid lowered the crossbow but kept it cocked and ready to fire.

"I don' know why Dumbledore's lettin' yeh stay," he said, "there's enough evil around nowadays..."
without inviting it in."

He's letting me stay because your side needs me, Draco thought, but he knew if he mentioned the lessons he'd be giving Potter, the secret would race around the school before morning.

"Well, unless you intend to explain to your headmaster why you killed a guest, I need to go back inside," he said. He turned as if to walk back to the castle but hesitated, glancing over his shoulder at the trees. "Come on then."

"I'm not going in," Hagrid started.

Draco pulled his hood up again to hide his smile. "Oh, I wasn't talking to you." And with that he walked out of the forest, laughing to himself as Hagrid looked wildly around for strange familiars and spirits. Once he was out of sight, however, his laughter died and he glowered as he walked.

"Stupid, overgrown servant," he muttered. "Just as dumb as the animals he cares for. Probably thinks I've already bargained my soul away. Just wait 'till he finds out I'm teaching the soddin' Boy Who Lived, wish I could see his face when he does. Primitive savage, that's all he is..."

But he was the savage that had held Draco's life in his hands for a few moments. Draco clenched his fists and only felt more frustrated when his right hand refused to close entirely. He was a dark wizard, damn it, powerful, capable, cunning enough to kill two Death Eaters while wounded and exhausted...although he didn't think he'd tell anyone that he nearly slept through the attack. Maybe his mother, if he ever saw her again. But then she talked to his father and Severus about nearly everything and he could just imagine the three of them sitting together at tea and laughing at him.

"There he is!"

He looked up like a frightened deer as his dream of being chased through a wintry forest washed over him. Expecting a screaming mob armed with rocks the size of their fists, he breathed out shakily when he only saw Ron pointing at him from across the lake, Harry and Hermione at his side.

"That's it," Draco murmured, composing himself as they came closer. "No more daydreaming unless I'm safe inside the dungeons."

He pulled his cloak a little tighter like a shield and blamed his nerves on his dreams. Why were his nightmares so frequent and vivid now? He'd have to ask Severus later.

By the time they reached him, skating smoothly on the ice, his heart no longer pounded and he managed to watch them with a disdainful air. Harry came to a clumsy stop, kept upright only by his friends’ hold on his arms.

"Never skated before, Potter?" Draco asked, openly chuckling.

"Where've you been?" Harry demanded. "Snape wouldn't tell me where you were and Dumbledore's been after me to start lessons."

"Already?" Draco asked. "It's only been three days."

"Five actually, you were asleep for the first two," Hermione said. "And every minute counts. An attack could come any day now."

"Which explains why you're all out enjoying the winter weather," Draco said.

"Quit stalling, Malfoy," Ron said. "Are you done hiding in the dungeons?"
"I won't be done 'hiding' since I'm helping create potions for your side," Draco said. "As for Potter's lessons...I suppose Snape will let me begin now. Coming inside then?" He walked by them, following the edge of the lake while they skated beside him.

"Oh come on," Ron said to him. "Everyone knows how to charm their shoes into skates. I don't want to have to shiver in this cold waiting on you to walk all the way around."

"You shouldn't be here in any case," Draco said. "I'm only supposed to teach Potter. Unless you'd like to learn dark magic, Weasley. Think your father would approve? Then again, your family's got enough children, I doubt they'd notice if they disowned one."

"You rotten little--" Ron said, lunging at him, but Harry grabbed his arm to keep himself from falling sideways.

"Don't, Ron," Harry said, his feet sliding together as he wobbled. "He's not worth getting into trouble over."

"I'm not so sure," Ron said, but he didn't lunge again.

The rest of the students were inside, leaving the lake quiet as the sun set on the horizon. The creeping shadows and brightest stars in the violet sky made all of them nervous, although Draco refused to show it while the others looked over their shoulders as they walked. As they finally made their way up to the castle, changing their skates back into shoes as they stepped off the ice, Draco walked a little behind them, pausing at the main doors as he looked back out over the snow. Glistening in the moonlight, the trees and lake shone like silver but the wind bit cruelly at his face. Without the sun, the night grew bitterly cold. He hoped his friends were not relying solely on charmed clothing as they traveled north.

Quiet murmurs caught his attention and he turned to find the majority of the school in the main hall taking off their coats and gloves, mumbling to each other as they paused and stared at him. He knew exactly what he looked like to them, standing in his black cloak that reached to the floor and the hood that shadowed his face. He knew what they'd all seen in their fairy tale picture books when they were much younger, that he was the perfect example of the dark wizard that came at night to put families into a bewitched sleep while he stole babies out of cribs. Their fear made him smile, but he remembered the murderous fear on the mobs in his dreams too well.

"This way," he said to Harry, heading for the side corridor.

"Wait," Ron said, but Draco cut him off.

"No audiences," he snapped, then whispered so only they heard him. "Unless you want to learn as well."

Hermione looked tempted and took a step to follow, but Ron's startled gasp of her name made her stop. Draco smiled and turned to leave. He didn't have to turn to know that Harry was following. In the silence, he could hear his footsteps behind him.

When they were safe inside the empty hall, he put his hood back and exhaled, slouching his shoulders. His heart longed to see Crabbe and Goyle and Pansy again. He was in desperate need of allies.

"Why did they do that?" Harry asked, coming up beside him.

"You mean stare like I was a wild animal?" Draco laughed humorlessly. "Didn't you ever read fairy tales when you were little?"
"Not really," Harry said. "Just a few stories in school. Why?"

"I can't imagine what muggle drivel you may have read before, but our fairy tales usually have a good hearted hero of the light vanquishing an evil dark wizard and rescuing a fair maiden and any stolen children to boot." His voice turned deceptively lighthearted as he spoke. "We soulless monsters live in dark caves and hide from the sun, but when the moon shines on the land we come out and devour travelers who've lost their way. And you can always tell a dark wizard at night because they were long black capes and hoods that look more like woven shadows. Of course we wizards just catch people out on the road. The dark witches have much more fun. They ride livestock and horses to exhaustion and take their pleasure from sleeping men." Draco glanced at him to make sure he was listening. "You should see the picture books, they're quite imaginative."

Harry was silent as they passed by empty echoing rooms and blank portraits. "Is any of that true?"

"Even the worst lies have a bit of truth to them." Draco remembered the deep cave and hearth that stretched out of his father's study. No doubt the ancient Malfoy family had once lived inside that earthen lair before building what would become the manor. "I haven't been able to read the Prophet since I arrived, but no doubt everyone knows what I am now. Of course they'll stare."

"Probably just curious knowing your manor is gone," Harry said. "The Prophet hasn't reported much. Dumbledore hasn't told them anything, so they don't know what happened yet."

Sharp footsteps behind them made them turn. Her hands holding her heavy coat, Hermione ran up to them and stopped to catch her breath. Even if he was a little confused, Harry smiled to have a friend nearby. Draco scowled.

"What are you doing here?" he asked. "I told you--"

"No audiences unless I'm learning, too," she said, tilting her head defiantly. "And I am."

"Hermione--" Harry started.

"I'm not leaving you alone with him," she said. "Besides, I want to see this."

"What about Weasley?" Draco asked. "He didn't seem too keen on letting you."

"I'll deal with him later," she said. "Now, are we going or did you want to argue some more?"

Instead of answering, Draco led them through the maze of hallways that would eventually take them to the dungeons. Despite himself, he listened to Hermione's conversation with Harry about how Hogwarts often changed its inside architecture on a whim and that many paths and rooms were lost over the years, only to be rediscovered as the castle shifted itself around again.

"In fact," she said, "some of the portraits in the rest of the school say they have no idea where their real portraits are. They went visiting other paintings, the castle shifted, and they lost track of where everything was."

"So where do they stay, then?" Harry asked.

"Wherever they like, I guess. Most of the pictures of parties were originally blank landscapes." She looked around at the black canvases and shuddered at how the paint writhed without a picture. "I imagine the portraits wouldn't want to come back even if they knew where they were."

"Must not be eager to leave their parties," Draco said, taking them around another corner that led down a steeply angled hall. "After all, this hallway is right off the main entrance, which begs the
question, Granger, are they really lost or does everyone just not like to admit this part of Hogwarts exists?"

"What do you mean? Of course they exist," she said crossly. "We're inside, aren't we?"

"Yes, but it's a little like Knockturn Alley," he said, his smile turning smug. "Everyone knows where it is, but no one likes to talk about it."

Hermione opened her mouth to argue but Harry beat her to it. "And why would we talk about it? There's nothing good there, just evil witches selling human fingernails or teeth or cursed things."

"Fingernails," Draco started, "processed properly can treat several different skin problems. Human teeth, especially the canines and incisors, are excellent for protective amulets."

"Really?" Hermione asked. "I've never seen them listed in any potions or charms books."

"That's because with fingernails I can also create a poppet that will suck all the life out of you," he said with a smile. "And teeth... well, in the wrong hands, what's left of the victim would be very messy."

Harry and Hermione grimaced and didn't ask anything else.

They finally came to the dungeons, but Draco did not take them into the Slytherin common room. Instead he chose a classroom off to side and led them in. Dusty desks lay pushed up against the far wall where the last lesson, a recipe for some forgotten potion, still faintly covered the blackboard. He opened one of his jars and took out a handful of acorns, and then carefully placed them on the floor several feet away from each other.

"The first thing you have to learn," he explained as he set the acorns down, "is that dark spells, as such, are not exactly like the spells you've been using."

"Dumbledore said they can be like throwing shadows," Harry said. "But that they take a lot of power."

"They are very tiring," Draco admitted. "Part of why I was dead exhausted when I arrived was because I had cast several spells earlier."

"To get rid of the Death Eaters chasing you?" Hermione asked.

Draco remembered the broken face of the second Death Eater just before he killed her. "Mm. Not entirely. But dark spells can be like shadows in that it's very hard to get a grip on them. A better way to explain it is that the dark arts are like a hydra. Cut off a head and it will twist around and become something stronger."

Standing over by the Gryffindors, Draco aimed his wand at the nearest acorn and whispered "risana." A blackish green light streamed out of his wand across the room at the nut.

Gnarled shoots grew out of the acorn, twisting together as they rose up and forming a thick trunk before tangling into a knot at the very top. Draco took a breath and stared at it. He hadn't created a target in years, and this one leaned a little to the right with a lopsided head. To his surprise, a few leaves sprouted out of the wood, bright green spots in the grey room.

"You'll need targets to practice on, so you have to master this spell first," Draco said to Harry. "I suggest you skip all your homework for a few weeks."
"Weeks?" Harry asked incredulously. "You expect me to waste time learning how to turn nuts into trees?"

"It's not turning a nut into a tree," Draco said. "Does that look like a tree to you?"

Hermione answered for him. "It looks like a bunch of skinny branches all curled together. What did you do to it? That's not a normal charm."

"Of course not, it's not your school of magic." Leaning against the front desk, Draco shrugged off his cloak and tossed it on the nearest chair. "Your charms are based mostly on Latin. If you need to alter a spell, you just add another word."

"Like mobiliarbus and mobilicorpus," Hermione nodded, oblivious to Harry's warning look.

Draco gazed sharply at her. "When did you need to move a body?"

"It's nothing important," Harry said, covering for her. "Just another adventure that earned Gryffindor a thousand house points."

"Right..." Draco said, unconvinced. "Well, anyway, yes. That's roughly the way your magic works. Ours, however, works purely on intent. I don't have to add another word. Risana means rise, but depending on the way I feel, I can make it mean to grow, like with that acorn, or to twist stone like liquid, or if I'm fighting someone, I can use it to boil their blood."

Eyes shut, teeth clenched, Hermione clutched her coat a little tighter, not out of fear but to settle her stomach as she imagined what that would look like. "Rise...you...you mean raise their body temperature?" she ground out.

"Exactly."

"That's not like our charms," she said, nodding once in agreement. "I might change someone into an animal, but I don't actually change their nature."

"What do you mean?" Harry looked between them uncomprehending. "Hermione? What do you mean, change their nature?"

"Change a hedgehog into a pincushion," Draco said, "all you're really doing is just giving the hedgehog a different outer form. If Granger here turned you into a lion, you'd still be Potter, just with fangs and teeth. But when I change something, I alter it. If I changed you into a lion, you'd be the Cat Who Lived. You'd forget who you used to be and run around eating your friends."

"Like a werewolf, Harry," Hermione said. "They're normal usually, but when the full moon comes and dark magic gets a hold of them, they completely forget themselves."

"And that is why dark magic requires so much power," Draco said. "Come to think of it, if I really did turn you into a lion, I'd probably be knocked out for a few days." He gestured at the acorns still lying on the floor. "It'll probably take you a week or two before you can cast risana and still have enough strength left to learn another spell."

Harry looked at Draco for several seconds. No doubt the blonde boy remembered his previous threat since he'd never gone this long without insulting Hermione's parentage or bringing up "the weasel," but he was also acting far friendlier than ever before. Far from charming, of course, but without the vicious insults or bullying condescension, this Draco was at least tolerable. But the change worried Harry. As happy as he was that these lessons would not be the torture he'd envisioned, any change in Malfoy's attitude made him suspicious.
"If you don't trust me," Draco said, thinking Harry's hesitation was about the spell, "you can try it right now. Aim at one of the acorns and want it to sprout vines."

Hermione hesitated, but Harry raised his wand, aimed and said "risana." His spell's light paled in comparison to Draco's and when it struck the acorn, only a few vines sprouted, making it look like a deformed spider. To his surprise, Draco nodded once.

"Not bad for a first try," he said. "Feel anything when you cast that?"

Harry glanced sideways at him. Draco sounded genuinely curious. "I don't know, but something was different. It felt...heavier. I could actually feel the spell's weight in my wand."

That reminded Draco of something he'd forgotten, and he sighed and closed his eyes. "Weight, right...dammit."

"What's wrong?" Hermione asked.

He swallowed his laugh. How to explain forgetting something he'd nearly lost his life to only days earlier? He'd lived under the threat of dark magic eating him from within since he was old enough to hold a wand. Narrowly avoiding a painful death, while frightening, was just a normal part of life for him.

"This has something to do with what happened before, doesn't it?" Harry asked. "When I had to help you back to Slytherin."

"That extra weight you felt," Draco said, looking at him, "it's what has to be cleansed every night. If you go too long without getting rid of it, it'll devour you. It's the price we pay for such powerful magic."

"With such a high price for failure," Harry said, "is it even worth it?"

"Of course it is!" Draco snapped, hissing in his displeasure. "You won't understand until you've practiced these spells, but the dark arts are far more satisfying, more...more..." He fumbled for a word to describe it but gave up. "The only reason it hurt me was because I had powerful spells from my family's entire history, as well as the dark lord's, swirling around me and I couldn't stop to take a bath in the snow."

"So how do you get rid of it?" Hermione asked. "Is it just taking a bath?"

"Water is necessary, yes," Draco said. "But there is a ritual and a...I guess you'd call it a prayer." He closed his eyes again and ran his hand through his hair. Stupid, stupid, how could he have been so stupid to forget that he'd have to teach these ungrateful Gryffindors the ritual? If Voldemort didn't kill him, his father might.

"Look," he started before they could tell him to hurry up and teach them, "I know you don't have any respect for dark magic, but I swear if you tell anyone the spell I'm about to show you, I won't teach you another damn spell, war or no. Every pureblood family has their own version of it and we never tell anyone what it is."

Hermione tilted her head, obviously thinking of something, but she didn't answer except to nod once. When Harry nodded too, Draco recited the spell and then slowly went over each word until they could give it back to him flawlessly. Unaccustomed to the different language, they struggled with the pronunciation, especially when he refused to tell them what the words meant. Once they could manage the harsh consonants and lyrical rhythm, he waved his hand dismissively.
"It'll do," he said, stifling a yawn. He pushed two jars of acorns across the desk towards them. "Here, you can use these to practice on. Don't bother coming back until you've learned risana well enough to make at least something resembling a small child."

"Child?" Hermione echoed. "Oh Malfoy, isn't there any way to skip this spell? We don't have time for this and--"

Draco cut her off with a laugh. "Yes, of course there's a way to skip this. You could just aim spells at each other and hope your counter spell is good enough. Here, you want another one to practice first?"

He raised his wand, aimed at his slightly lopsided target and called out "haetus heorte!"

The spot where the target's heart would have been burst into flames, neatly burning a fist size hole through the chest so they could see the back wall through the blackened ash. Before the smoke cleared, Draco cast a crepara spell on the target. Instantly the tangled vines dried up, shriveling into a tight mass before crumbling to dust. He glanced back at the Gryffindors, whose twin expressions of revulsion had less to do with the target and more with imagining those done to a person.

"What..." Hermione mumbled, "what were those? I've never heard of those before. That first one wasn't Latin..."

"Most of our spells are from the old languages," Draco said, not bothering to hide how her reaction pleased him. "Your school of magic sided with the Roman invaders, so we didn't exactly take to Latin like you did. As for the words themselves...you'll learn them later. Still want to skip the risana spell?"

Harry just stared silently at the destroyed target. Hermione, however, grabbed one of the jars of acorns and wrapped it in her coat.

"Well, I'd better go," she said too quickly. "I told Ron I was going to the library to finish my homework." She waited for a moment at the door but when Harry didn't move, she left on her own. Her footsteps quickly disappeared.

Draco turned his attention to Harry, who hadn't moved. "Granger doesn't seem to like dark magic. Think I scared her?"

"You've used these before," Harry said. It wasn't a question and he stared at Malfoy as if reconsidering him.

"Of course." Draco met his gaze for a few seconds but looked away at the far wall. Why did Potter's eyes feel like knives? His stare was as unrelenting as the dark lord's. "I used crepara on a Death Eater to get here."

"And the other spell?"

"No, I used another one, but it's hard to make a bunch of vines hemorrhage blood so I showed you something a little more spectacular." He fought the urge to squirm. Had something happened over summer to make Potter's stare so unbearable or was he just now noticing?

"Why didn't you use these before?" Harry asked. "You've wanted to hurt me for years, even kill me. Why not?"

Father would've killed me, Draco thought, but he didn't say it. Potter didn't know how much he valued his father's opinion and revealing that would probably get a lifetime of jeers from the seventh-
"One dark spell would've undone my whole family," he said softly.

To his surprise, Potter didn't argue.

"So you sheathed your fangs," Harry said, "just like Dumbledore said."

"Not exactly fangs, but yes. No blowing up the students allowed."

"What do you mean, 'not exactly fangs'?'" Harry took a step forward and Draco noticed that he still hadn't put away his wand. "You Malfoys are very clever with your words when you want to be."

Despite having the Boy Who Lived deliberately coming closer, Draco held his ground. "Ah ah ah, we Malfoys can also keep family secrets pretty well when we want to. Now are you finished with your interrogation? You have spells to practice."

Harry stared at him for a few seconds longer, than gathered up the second jar of acorns, turned on his heel and left. For awhile Draco listened to his footsteps echo through the hall, and then he was left alone staring at an empty classroom. He quietly picked up the acorns he hadn't used, disposing of Harry's failed acorn with a quick incendio, acutely aware of every stray sound his rustling clothing made as he left the room. If Crabbe and Goyle were here, he could have had them laughing as they went back to Slytherin where he would have flopped onto his favorite couch in front of the fire, his head in Pansy's lap. They would have smiled and indulged him as he complained about Gryffindors and mudbloods, and later their conversation would have lulled him into drowsiness, roused only by their occasional questions.

The entrance to Slytherin slammed a little harder than usual behind him, startling him out of his daydream. The fire had dwindled, leaving the room cold, but he ignored it, instead settling on the couch he'd turned to face the lake. The cushion made for a good enough pillow and he pulled his cloak over himself as he lay down. Moonlight reflecting off the water, moving slower now that the surface was frozen but still enough to notice, played over his face as he waited for sleep, another nightmare, and another day.

Chapter End Notes

1. Poisoned dragon's liver comes from the Disney movie Bedknobs and Broomsticks, which you would probably like if you haven't seen it already.
2. Yes, I'm borrowing Snape's "hydra" description of the dark arts.
3. risana, from the Old English risan, to rise
4. haetus heorte, from the Old English hætu, heat, and the Old English heorte, heart
5. crepara, from the Latin crepare, to crack
6. hemoragia, from the Latin haemorrhagia, to hemorrhage
In which Draco meets a baby hydra

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

False Serpent's Flora: In a small dish, crush two hemlock leaves, add a pinch of arsenic, and fold in one small cockatrice egg. In a cauldron, boil one pint fresh water, add three belladonna berries and stir counter clockwise five times. Once it turns pale green, add the egg mixture. Stir clockwise over a medium heat for fifteen minutes. After the liquid darkens, add one wyvern's claw. Boil down into a concentrate and bottle immediately. Makes a dozen poison phials or one lethal vapor. Store in a cool, dark place.

Draco reread the recipe just to be sure he knew it. This potion would not be graded but he would hear from Severus or Dumbledore if it did not work on the battlefield, and any failure of his would be a strike against his mentor, not to mention an ugly mark against his own reputation. He yawned as he reached for the water and ingredients. Snape kept a severe schedule and insisted on brewing several potions in the early morning before classes, but when Draco had seen the list of poisons, powders and acids that Dumbledore wanted, he didn't argue about the hours.

In the Slytherin common room, safe from distractions and prying eyes, Draco and Severus stood on opposite sides of the largest table, working on their own respective potions. Draco recognized the ingredients in Snape's work as the basis for a venomous acid, but he didn't recognize the recipe itself and after a warning glare from his master to focus on his own work, he ignored everything else but his assignment.

Despite its complexity and volatile nature, false serpent's flora was a mindless poison to create, just add ingredients and stir at the right moment. While he counted off the minutes, watching the simmering liquid turn darker shades of green, he picked up the small bottle containing three wyvern's claws. Quick and vicious creatures, wyverns usually escaped from hunters so even if someone had the money, wyvern parts were rarely on sale, and he wondered how Snape had procured this many.

"Anyone we knew?" he asked softly, staring at the white claws no larger than his smallest finger.

Snape glanced at him and shook his head. "Those came from a dead wyvern Hagrid discovered in the forest. Most of it was rotten, but those were salvageable."

Draco took out one claw and held it close to his eye, turning it over so the light could reflect off its white surface. It gleamed like mother of pearl and the tip looked wicked, but the sides weren't sharp at all. It was purely a hook, not a real talon. "A half-breed wouldn't have turned back, would it? After dying, I mean."

Although he was aware that his apprentice knew the answer, Severus did not snap at him. He added ingredients to his own potion as he answered. "If the wyvern had been a half-breed, then 'turning back' is redundant. A half-breed is as much a wyvern as it is human."

Draco stared at it a little longer, scraping the tip against his skin to see how sharp it was, but death had dulled the talon's point. With a last look, he let it slip into the cauldron. While he waited for the potion to boil down, he glanced through the handful of jars Severus had brought with him to the common room. Most of them were for their morning work, but he noticed a few off to one side that had nothing to do with Dumbledore's list. Old coins, a small handful of human incisors and the bottle of unknown blood sat on a corner of the table. They had nothing to do with any of the potions on Snape's list.
"What are these for?" he asked.

Snape, waiting for his own potion to turn colors, watched him look over the surplus items. "Ingredients I don't have time to use. There are a few other things in my office that I need to get rid of to make room, but I'd rather not let them go to waste. Do what you will with them. If you make something useful, I might be able to fence it in Knockturn Alley."

Taking that as permission to create poisoned curses he'd never tried before, Draco glanced at the two books in the far corner of the room. His father's journal lay on top of the Malfoy grimoire, which didn't lie flat on the table but expanded and contracted slowly as it breathed. Hundreds of spells and potions lay within those books, and he wished he could take those to his classes instead.

Beside the books stood his besom, its wood looking less gray and its twigs seemingly fuller, as if he had added more. The leather holding them together looked and felt soft and strong, unlike the dried, frayed scraps they'd been when he first found it. If he kept using it, he wondered if it would sprout leaves. The small collection of Malfoy heirlooms radiated immense power, and he wished he could spend the entire school year in seclusion as he bent that power to his own will.

"Don't daydream," Severus scolded him. "Once that's boiled down, you'll have to go to your classes." He found a slip of paper among his notes and pushed it across the table to him. "Just sit in the back and keep your head down. Everyone should leave you alone."

"And if they don't?" he asked as he picked it up, easily imagining all the ways a lone Slytherin could find trouble.

"Then handle it yourself," his master said testily. "You're not a child and I have more important things to do than lead you by the hand when you don't need it."

They hadn't picked up any textbooks or supplies since Draco would only be sitting in, but even so he hoped his master had not given him anything horrible like divination. Draco looked over his schedule and sighed. Advanced Runes, easy. Care of Magical Creatures, that was useless. A free period, perfect for an early lunch and a stop at the library. Charms, thank God he didn't have to do the work. Potions...what? "Who's this Slughorn person?"

"A new professor of questionable ethics," Snape said. "A Slytherin, but he's distanced himself from our house out of expediency. Don't trust him. He gathers the best and brightest students around him so that he may leech off of them later on in life." He glanced sideways at Draco. "Maybe you'll have nothing to worry about."

"And maybe I'll be beating him off with a stick," Draco retorted, but he doubted it. "I'm surprised you didn't give me Defense," he said to change the subject.

"You already know most counter curses," Snape said. "What you need is more practice, and you'll be getting that as you teach."

Draco hated anti-curse work as it meant a lot of split-second timing, and the more obscure the curse, the harder to deflect. His preferred method of defense was a sneaky offense like ambushes and tricking speeding witches into brick walls. Although Draco's stealth was improving, he didn't like the idea of facing an older, wiser, far more experienced wizard in a duel of sheer strength and cunning. He resolved to spend his library time researching old tricks and deceits.

The bell rang as he finished filling the phials of poison. After he corked the last one, he grabbed the jar of coins. Covered in rust and grime, they each needed to be polished before they could be used, and that would give him something to do other than pretend to listen to the teachers. Severus said
nothing as Draco left and he walked through the dungeons in silence, trying to remember the odds and ends in Snape's office that he might be allowed to use.

He took the back corridors and less traveled paths for most of the way, but the runes classroom lay in the middle of a long hallway that, in the early rush, was packed with students. Rather than try to push through, he waited for it to clear a bit so there'd be fewer students to gawk at him. He pulled his hood back over his face and told himself that he wasn't hiding under it, he just didn't want to talk to anyone.

Long minutes passed and he sighed impatiently. People always moved out of the way when Goyle and Crabbe flanked him. He'd gotten so used to their looming presence that he'd forgotten how much taller some of the other boys were, and he hoped the other boys didn't notice until his friends came back. He nodded once to himself. His friends would come back. He was alone without them. Snape was his mentor, family even, but some things could only be discussed with a fellow student.

When just a handful of students still milled about, he walked a little too quickly to class, ignoring everyone even though he felt their eyes on him. Inside the classroom, conversations stopped and the room turned quiet but he didn't look up as he took his seat in the very back.

To his surprise, someone had left a Daily Prophet on the chair next to his so he took it and spread it out. "Ministry Sabotage" read the headline, but he chuckled to see that it was only about a series of jinxes that had turned their flying messages into guided missiles. The photograph showed a poor wizard endlessly assaulted by the little things, ducking as they whizzed over his head. All ministry business was on hold until they could dispel the jinxes and work without injury.

Ridiculous, he thought. Practically a fluff article when there was a war on.

Someone sat down heavily in the chair next to him and he turned to glare, hoping it would make them sit somewhere else. Hermione would not budge, however, and didn't even seem to notice.

"Good morning," she said, not bothered when he didn't answer. "You're on page three," she said, nodding at the paper.

He flipped over the first page and froze. A photograph of his destroyed home smoldered in front of him while aurors picked over the wreckage, but it was the picture of himself, his father and his mother further in the article that held his attention. He didn't remember when it was taken -- his father's reputation meant that photographers were always trying for family shots -- and he figured that he was three years younger in the photo. He gazed at himself, still brazen and energetic, before his father's imprisonment, the months in the Ministry and his long absences from Hogwarts. His father lay a hand on Draco's shoulder and smiled at the viewer as if presenting his son, not proudly, but with the assurance that Draco would become more than his slight build and cocky attitude presaged. Behind him, his mother did not touch either of them but stood reassuringly close. He tilted his head. Well, it was reassuring to him. No doubt anyone else watching would only see a cold sneer and distant disdain. Lightly touching the edge of the photo, he forced himself to look at the rest of the article.

"The Ministry of Magic released new details this morning regarding the destruction of Malfoy Manor, home of the convicted yet recently freed Death Eater Lucius Malfoy, also a former Hogwarts school governor. 'The blaze seems to have been intentionally set while people were still inside,' said Edward Breakgate, chief investigative officer for the Ministry's Department of Arson and Flaming Curses, confirming the rumors that this was no accident.

So far three bodies have been recovered, all of them charred beyond recognition. 'After a brief
examination, we concluded that we have no reason to believe that they are Mr. or Mrs. Malfoy,' Breakgate said. 'Further investigation is required before we know exactly who they are and what happened. If anyone has any information, we ask that they come forward to answer our questions.'

Little other information was officially released. However, the Daily Prophet has received news that at least one Malfoy escaped the flames. Draco Malfoy, Lucius Malfoy's only son and heir, currently resides at Hogwarts School for Wizards, but not as a student. He has invoked the old hospitality laws and lives as a guest, enjoying comfortable sanctuary. Our more legally savvy readers will note that this implies that the Malfoy family requested said sanctuary during a time of war, a controversial stance for headmaster Dumbledore to take when the Ministry has consistently refused to declare anything more than a limited auror action. Of even more concern is the Malfoy family's influence on the school, as now it seems that the child of a Death Eater with ties to both You Know Who and headmaster Dumbledore now resides among hundreds of innocent students. Requests for an interview with the headmaster, any faculty member or Draco Malfoy himself have been consistently denied.

Without access to a potential witness, the Ministry has few leads in this case. If any of our readers has any information in this matter, please owl Mr. Edward Breakgate, Ministry of Magic, Department of Arson and Flaming Curses, Front Office.'

"Idiots," Malfoy whispered. He glanced at the photo of his parents again, both of them looming protectively over him. Not caring that the sound would disturb the class, he carefully tore the photo out of the newspaper, making sure the frame wasn't broken. Once he had his living memory in hand, he secreted it away in a pocket.

Nothing else in the newspaper interested him so he crammed it into the desk and forgot about it. The lesson in today's class dealt with the othala rune and its various magical uses, something he already knew inside and out, so he spent the rest of the class polishing the first coin, cradling it in his weak right palm while shining it with the edge of his robes. Bit by bit, the rust and grime came off in clumps and the silver edge gleamed with faint Latin lettering along the rim.

"So no one suspects what I am?" he whispered so that only Hermione heard him.

Loathe as he was to speak with the mudblood, she was the only one he could talk to who knew everything. Severus had told him nothing except to be patient and be quiet, Ron wasn't even worth considering, and Potter...was simply not someone he could talk to.

"No more than before," she answered, not glancing at him as she copied the notes from the front of the class. "Although everyone wonders how you got your father out of Azkaban. Did you..." she paused and lowered her voice even further. "Did you curse people?"

"Ministry officials?" he scoffed. "Bunch of incompetents terrified of losing their cushy jobs...waste of a good curse."

He smiled rather like a snake opening its mouth to show off its fangs. His mother and Severus both knew what he'd done so he couldn't brag to them, and he could only stammer out a halting explanation to his father. Here he could finally boast about his accomplishments and remind Dumbledore's faithful soldiers that even though he was fighting alongside them, he was not one of them.

"Father already had dirt on several officials," he started softly. "Did you know that the Chief Officer of Military Defense and Charms likes weekend flings with young muggles in London?"

"There's nothing wrong with liking muggles," Hermione argued.
Poor taste aside, I don't think her husband would like it. So she arranged for several documents that included my father's record to be misfiled and incinerated." As he spoke, he dug grime and dirt from the front of his coin. A woman's face slowly appeared under his thumb. "The chamberlain of Magical Exchange and Trade, he's skimming off confiscated contraband. To keep me quiet, he did me a favor with a legal amendment that allows convicted Death Eaters to--"

"--to receive a second trial in a lesser court due to tampered evidence and biased judges," Hermione said with wide eyes. "I was so confused when I saw that. I couldn't understand why he'd do it. Or how it passed."

"Fear," Draco said. "They're all afraid of what I know. The Senior Investigator in the Elimination of Dark Artifacts is so scared someone will find out that he doesn't know how to do his job that he lost all the evidence against my family. With no evidence, no witnesses called and three warlocks in judgment that owe my family thousands of galleons to keep the tax collector at bay, the hardest part was keeping the rest of the Ministry quiet. And there's hardly a person in the world who isn't afraid of something coming to light."

It all sounded so simple when he said it, but the memory of his sixth year was anything but. Hounding the Ministry was like a dragon herding scared rabbits that darted every which way in panic. For weeks on end he wrote letters of polite threats, reminders of debts past due, promises to forgive those debts and warnings of what happened to those who forgot their promises. For months he backed up those threats with visits to the Ministry offices. Physically smaller than everyone else, his name and his wealth of secrets towered over nearly everyone. And for a year he barely slept, lost too much weight and fell atrociously behind in his normal studies.

The bell rang. He waited for the class to empty and walked out, avoiding everyone's eyes as he moved through the school. Where he walked, conversation stopped, whispers followed at his back, and students stepped out of his way. For a moment he wanted to relish their fear, but he couldn't, not when he knew they didn't fear his abilities so much as they feared that the darkness around him might rub off.

Kind of like being a leper, he thought. They're afraid of me, but not for the right reasons.

Cold wind and the relative quiet of the grounds was a welcome relief. Someone had cleared a path through the snow but white flakes drifted lazily from the gray sky, turning the path to ice. He passed several students who'd stumbled and fallen into their rush to get to Hagrid's hut, but he dragged his feet and never slipped. Eventually he walked off the trail and into the snow that surrounded the little hovel.

Most of the class stood in a circle outside the hut, huddled together in waist deep snow and shivering in their scarves. His own cloak kept him comfortably warm, and he remembered that not everyone could afford specially spelled clothing. He frowned. He couldn't afford it either, but he promised himself that he would, with or without his family's account. And soon.

He didn't care what monster Hagrid was showing off. The half-giant could have done a class on himself. But there was no place to sit and his legs were still tired and sore, so he walked around the back of the circle so he could lean against the hut, and in the process gave himself a good view of Hagrid's subjects. No one stood too close to the large wooden box set on top of the snow because dozens of snakes writhed at the bottom.

"It's all righ'," Hagrid tried to reassure them, but no one looked convinced. "They can' get out. It's so cold out here tha' if they leave the box, they migh' freeze."

"What are they?" a sixth year Ravenclaw asked. "Plain old snakes?"
"Not at all!" Hagrid beamed proudly at the hissing serpents. "They're baby hydras. Very rare, yeh usually only see these around the Mediterranean. That's why I got 'em in the box. It's spelled to stay warm inside, else they'll freeze in this weather. I ordered 'em before the blizzard, so we'll have ter have class inside next time to see 'em righ'."

Hydras? Draco couldn't help taking another look. Blackish green in color, they slithered around showing off three heads per body. Their eyes glittered a bright red as they looked around at the faces surrounding the box. He thought they looked cute, waving their tiny heads and making little hisses. The frills around their faces looked like baby bonnets.

"They're real friendly," Hagrid said, not noticing that no one believed him. "For the firs' few months, anyway. Then they start eatin' their nestmates 'til' only one's left."

A Ravenclaw girl edged a little closer, reassured when she saw they couldn't reach the top. "Is it true they're poisonous?"

"If a hydra bites ya', yer more likely ter die from the stab wounds," Hagrid said cheerfully. "But yes, they are poisonous. At this age, though, one bite won't give yeh more than a headache." He pushed the box towards her. "Go on, try an' pet one."

"What?" she gasped, eyes wide.

"They're real friendly righ' now," he said, gently patting one on the head. The hydra rubbed its head on his hand and ruffled its frill in pleasure. "Just be nice an' they'll be nice back."

Draco watched with a little longing as everyone gathered around to pet the hydras. Figures, he thought. The first time the big oaf brings something interesting and I'm not really a student. And from the way Hagrid was ignoring him, he wouldn't have a chance at all to touch them. No doubt Snape had mentioned something about hydras being wonderful sources of ingredients and scared the half-giant about losing one of them.

No matter. His legs were starting to tremble and his hand throbbed where the spike had run through. With a small sigh, he rubbed his hand in small circles trying to work out the soreness. If he wasn't a real student, then maybe he could leave early, but he didn't want to attract any attention either. He'd try to wait until the class finished. If he starting shaking too badly, though, he'd leave immediately and head for Pomfrey's office.

"Hey, Malfoy."

Draco stiffened. How on earth had he missed Ron being in the same class? The red hair practically blazed when surrounded by all that snow.

"What do you want?"

"Out of this class," Ron said in a low voice. "Dumbledore rearranged our schedules so one of us is in each of your classes. I was taking charms before he shunted me off here."

"Don't blame me," Draco said. "I don't want you here at all."

"I noticed you haven't gone to touch the hydras, Malfoy." Ron raised his voice a little so that anyone could hear, and many of the closer students glanced at them. "Afraid of getting your arm torn into again?"

"I don't think Hagrid's all that keen on letting me near them," Draco said. "Snape would love to get his hands on one."
Ron opened his mouth to say something else, but there was a scream and a loud crash as one of the girls next to the box staggered away, clutching her bloody hand close to her chest. Her robe had caught on the corner and as she stumbled, the box tipped sideways and the hydas raced out onto the snow.

"Don' panic!" Hagrid didn't need to shout as his voice boomed loud enough. "They're jus' startled. Help me pick 'em up--ouch--try not ter grab their tails, they can turn their heads righ' quick--ouch--"

Most of the snakes didn't get very far, slowing down once they hit the snow. Several slithered under the students' feet where the air was warmer and tried to dodge the grabbing hands. While Ron and the rest of the students began gingerly scooping up hydas, snagging them just behind the base where their heads met, Draco idly watched them jump to avoid tiny teeth. The sight of everyone hopping around, with a half-giant hopping around with them, made him laugh, earning him several glares.

A loud hiss caught his attention and he looked down at the ground. One more hydra, the largest one and the one that had bitten the girl by the looks of the fangs in the biggest head, curled around his feet to get off the snow. Its heads all hissed in unison at him, rearing up as if to strike.

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A few feet away, Ron noticed the serpent threatening Draco and raised his wand. "Stay still, Malfoy, I'll get it--"

Ignoring him, Draco bent and slid his hand under the hydra's body, lifting it gently into the air. It wrapped its tail around his arm and let him hold the base of their necks so that they could strike wherever he wanted them to. Idly he patted the biggest head, knowing that everyone was watching him and that Snape was going to ream him horribly for this later.

He looked up at Ron and said softly. "Honestly, my family crest is a serpent. Did you think we chose that just because we liked snakes?"

Hoping his legs wouldn't give out, he took the hydra back to its box and let it crawl back in, withdrawing his hand before it decided to turn and bite him anyway. The hydra might have trusted him, but he'd seen animal handlers mauled by pets they'd have sworn would never hurt them and that hydra looked old enough to have developed a nasty bite.

Figuring that he'd attracted enough attention, he turned and started walking up the path to the Hogwarts. As he passed the class, he heard them whispering to each other, asking if they'd heard what he'd said to Ron. Fortunately no one seemed to have heard him, so maybe Snape wouldn't be too hard on him. To his surprise, Ron hurried to catch up.

"What do you want now?" Draco asked.

"I don't have a choice," Ron said, walking beside him. "Dumbledore wants us with you in every class."

"Oh, for the love of..." Draco sighed in exasperation. "I know I'm dark and evil and eat half-bloods for breakfast, but I promised I wouldn't do anything bad."

"A dark wizard's promise," Ron muttered, but as they walked into the school he looked closer at Draco. "You don't get it, do you? We're not here to protect the students, we're here to protect you."

Draco stopped and stared. "What?"

Screwing up his face as if doing something disgusting, Ron grabbed Draco's arm and pulled him into a corner in case anyone passed by. "Merlin knows I don't trust you, and I don't know what on earth Dumbledore saw that makes him think you're worth anything--"
"How dare you--" Draco started, but Ron cut him off.

"--but even you must have noticed that everyone's watching you. Hermione says you saw the latest Prophet. Everyone suspects, Malfoy, and if they figure out you really are a dark wizard, you're going to need help. An attack might come from a student, a parent, might even come from someone just walking into Hogwarts looking for you."

"What do you care?" Draco asked, pulling out of Ron's grip. "As if you'd mind seeing me dead."

"And don't you forget it," Ron said. "But I saw the pile of potions you and Snape made up this morning. It's more than he could do alone, so as much as I hate it...we need you almost as much as you need us."

Draco stepped back and drew on his hood, shadowing his face. "Push off," he mumbled. "Class is over and I can get to Pomfrey's without a babysitter."

"Fine," Ron said, sounding quite relieved. "And next time you better avoid another stunt like you just pulled. Everyone's going to be talking about how you handled that thing."

"That...had nothing with being dark," Draco said slowly. "And I think you know it. Or is your father really that useless at his job?"

"Being useless to you is a high compliment," Ron said, and his smug smile told Draco that Ron knew his father had been one of the few Ministry officials not susceptible to blackmail. "But yeah...there are rumors about you Malfoys. I always thought they were just stories to explain why your family is so rotten."

"Fortunately for us," Draco drawled, even though he knew he was risking provoking the red head where no one could see them, "being rotten is still profitable." And he turned on his heel and walked away, not lingering to see if Ron was more willing to punch a guest with each accumulating insult.

He reached Pomfrey's office before classes actually ended, reaching the door before too many students rushed out to their next class. Seeing that she was busy with another student, he sank into one of the seats by the door and waited his turn. Now that he was out of the cold, his whole body began to tremble in earnest, and he drew his cloak tight around his shoulders as he hunched over a little.

In a few minutes, Pomfrey sent the girl off to lay down and made sure she was warm and covered before turning her attention to Draco.

"I thought you might be in today," she said, standing in front of him. "What's the matter?"

"Everything hurts," he mumbled, "and I can't stop this shaking."

He held as still as he could as she looked over his hand. The faint scar stood out in the pale skin, a jagged line on both sides of his hand.

"Make a fist," she ordered. He tried to, but his fingers would not curl all the way around. She put her hand on his forehead. "You're probably going to be like this for awhile. What you did really took a toll on your body and it's going take longer than just a few days to improve."

She went behind her desk and began pulling several bottles from her cabinet. "I know Professor Snape likes to think his potions are best, but honestly..."

As she poured the ingredients together, a large shadow fell through the door. Draco glanced
sideways and watched Hagrid step in with the bitten Ravenclaw girl in tow. He ignored them while Pomfrey nodded them over to the chairs next to him, but to his dismay Hagrid valiantly put himself between Draco and the student, which forced the half-giant to sit next to him. Draco winced and tried to stop shaking. He couldn't be a scary dark wizard and a trembling child at the same time.

Pomfrey paused in making his potion to heal the girl's cut and give her a simple draught for her headache, then sent her to lie down. "Did you need something, Hagrid?"

"Ah...just summat for all these little hydra bites," he said, showing off the tiny punctures covering his hands. "They got riled up in class."

She nodded once and seemed to decide that the less said, the better. To Draco's relief, she went back to his potion and finished mixing it together, finally pouring it into a small bottle that she labeled "Malfoy." After corking and shaking it for several seconds, she handed it to him. "Take a sip now, and then come back every time you start feeling bad again. I can't let that out of the office, it's got illpop roots."

The taste nearly made him gag, but he swallowed down a mouthful and recorked it. A few seconds passed before he noticed the ache in his hand slowly fading and the shaking went back to being a mild tremor. He gave the bottle back to her and watched where she put it, but he decided not to leave immediately. He didn't have a class this period and he wanted to avoid showing the whole school how weak he was. If Ron hadn't been lying...he shook his head slightly. Why would Ron lie? The blood traitor hated him, he was sure of it.

"Is tha' why yeh left?" Hagrid suddenly asked him. "'Cause yeh were sick?"

Draco hunched over a little more. "Just needed to come in out of the cold, that's all."

"Oh...I though' maybe tha' hydra'd bit yeh, too. Never seen one just let itself be handled like that. O'course I figured yeh'd have kicked up a fuss if it had." Hagrid stared at him. "Yeh won't be after 'em, tho'? 'Cause after what Snape said about 'em bein' good for spare parts--"

Draco winced as Hagrid went on about what he'd heard dark wizards did with hydras. God, could this be any more awkward? He suddenly stood and flipped his hood over his face. Nodding with a quick "thank you" at Pomfrey, he left the office quickly and headed for the library. Let Hagrid think he was rude and dangerous. It was better to be left alone than hear how evil he was again.

The school was different when he was the only one in the hallways. His footsteps sounded too loud and the muffled sound of classes echoed around him. He was pleased to see that he was the only one in the library and took his time browsing the aisles aimlessly. In the bestiary section, he spotted a book devoted to hydras, so he picked that out and sat down in a corner. The book seemed old but a glance at the front showed him that no one had ever checked it out.

He flipped it open to the table of contents and scanned the chapters, whispering the titles to himself. "Hercules: the Hydra in Legend, the Historie of Hydras, Hydra Hemispheres: Mediterranean and South American Varieties..."He looked ahead and spotted what he wanted. "Hydra Dissection in the Dark Arts." The yellowed pages crinkled as he flipped to the back and pressed the book flat. His hand no longer hurt so he began polishing the coin again as he read all the different uses that a dead and dried out hydra served.

As usual, the tone of the chapter annoyed him. Books written by normal wizards about dark wizards tended to be overly dramatic with their condemnation. If he believed everything this book said about him, then he was a lying, scheming monster that skinned hydras alive, stole hatchlings from their mothers' watchful eyes, and created 'poisons most foule and cruelle' simply for the fun of murdering
good wizards.

Which was ridiculous. Why murder them when he could simply make them painfully sick and watch their suffering? Much better for extortion and revenge.

By the time he'd finished reading, not only did he understand how a dead hydra would facilitate their potion-making, but he'd also completely polished two of his coins. The silver sparkled nearly white, and he stared at the vague outline of an unattractive woman's face, her nose a little too big, her chin too prominent. He didn't like reading Latin but he could in a pinch, and he slowly made out each faded letter circling the coin. The dates were long since eroded, but he made out enough of the name that he smiled in recognition.

"Cleopatra..." he whispered, tracing her outline with his finger. "History's been good to you."

The bell rang. He looked up, expecting to see the usual handful of Ravenclaws filing in to check books out before heading to lunch. Instead he saw several students clustered at each table, heads quickly turning back to their work as he looked around. The shadows stretched farther than they should have at noon, and he glanced outside at the sun. He winced. It shouldn't have been so low.

Muttering curses under his breath, he shut his book and re-shelved it, then walked towards the door. As he passed the desk, he ignored Madam Pince's disapproving look and spotted the clock hanging over her.

"Damn it," he whispered. He'd missed Charms. Not that minded, but his master now had two things to ream him over.

He made it to the potions room before the bell rang again. Since he probably wouldn't be expected to participate, especially if what Snape had said about this new professor was true, he felt comfortable taking a seat all the way in the back. He spotted Hermione and Ron several seats ahead, but no Potter. Hardly surprising, he thought, since this was an upper level class. But to his surprise, Harry came in just as the bell rang, out of breath and glaring at Draco as he dropped his book on the desk.

"Where were you?" Harry whispered harshly as he sat one desk over. "You were supposed to be in Charms last period."

"Lost track of time in the library," Draco said. He leaned back when Harry narrowed his eyes. "S' the truth. If it's any consolation, I missed lunch, too."

That did seem to mollify Harry, although he still seemed upset. "What was so interesting that you'd miss class? Snape asked about you in the hall. He looked angry that you'd skipped."

"I didn't skip!" Draco snapped. "And I was reading about what kind of poisons you can make with hydras."

"You better not," Harry said, angry again. "Hagrid adores those things. I swear, if you try to make off with one--"

"I won't have to," Draco drawled. "You'll bring them to me. You don't honestly think they're all going to survive, do you? And it'd be such a waste not to use them for 'the cause'."

Harry didn't answer. Draco leaned forward to press the issue, but didn't get the chance. He stared at the new Potions master as he walked in, laughing and joking with a couple of Hufflepuff students as he set his book and bag of ingredients on the front desk. Briefly Slughorn's eyes met Draco's and the professor grew serious, but he quickly looked back at the rest of his class with a smile.
"Today I've decided to give you something a bit more challenging," he said, opening his book to a page he'd marked. "Hallucinarium, which I think you can guess what it does. Did anyone read ahead in their books?"

To no one's surprise, Hermione raised her hand. "Hallucinarium causes the victim's worst fears to appear before him. But sir, the recipe wasn't in the books."

"And for a good reason," Slughorn said. "Five points to Gryffindor. Hallucinarium is a bit like having a boggart in your pocket, except your victim can't cast riddikulus at it. Only the antidote can stop the hallucinations, but since the antidote takes about a week to brew, most sufferers often go mad before help arrives."

He picked up his book and began writing the recipe on the board. "Since this is rather nasty stuff, it's not covered in your books, but it's a good idea to not only know how to make it, but also how to make its antidote. We'll start with the poison itself. I've already got a batch of the antidote prepared in case there are any accidents, but as long as you don't drink it or boil it, there should be no problems. Now pair up and try not to poison each other."

The class laughed and broke apart to begin gathering ingredients. Meanwhile Draco leaned back and read over the recipe. No wonder he'd thought it sounded familiar. He'd seen his mother prepare this when the Death Eaters occasionally visited, proving to Voldemort that his family was still useful and that killing both of them would be premature.

"Oh dear," Slughorn said as he walked around the room, stopping at Harry's desk. "Miss Bobbin is the hospital with a bad case of feverfew ache. I'm afraid you're the odd man out, Harry. Not to worry, though, I don't mind helping." In fact, he even had all the ingredients with him, which he plopped down on the table.

Draco frowned. He might not be a real student, but not only had Snape and Dumbledore implied that he should do the work, but he damn well wasn't going to sit back and be ignored.

"I can partner with him," he said suddenly, drawing several looks and a glare from Harry. Obviously loathe to speak to him, Slughorn looked over his shoulder in Draco's general direction. "You are a guest, not a student. There's no need for you to do the assignments."

"Is that what Dumbledore told you?" Draco asked. Any idea of trying charm or social niceties to get this teacher's attention left Draco's mind. He didn't need or want anything from him, and he would not see the Malfoy family treated like scum after losing nearly everything. "I heard something different from him. Should we run up and see what he says?"

"Well--if Mr. Potter doesn't mind--and don't think you have to say yes, Harry--"

"I don't mind," Harry said, sounding exactly the opposite, but he sat next to Draco regardless. The look in his eyes betrayed his torn feelings. On one hand, he seemed glad to be rid of Slughorn, but on the other he was now saddled with Draco. As soon as Slughorn walked away, with a slap on Harry's back and a mention of how sporting he was, Harry leaned close and whispered harshly, "what the hell are you doing?"

"Learning a new poison," Draco said, pulling the ingredients close. "Mum never let me try this one myself, and I've been too busy with more complicated stuff with Severus."

"I thought Slughorn said this was complicated," Harry said, watching him sort out the asphodel roots, crocodile eyes and lovage stems, while setting aside the hellebore and raven's blood. Their
cauldron already had plenty of fresh water.

"It's just a potion in two parts," Draco said. "I made a similar potion this morning. Given an accurate recipe, there's very few potions I can't make." He pushed blood and hellebore across the table to him. "Here, mix these while I work."

As he began pulverizing the eyes, he glanced at the recipe again to make sure he was doing it right. Not only did he want to rub Slughorn's nose in this, but his master's reputation was also on the line. A good apprentice should be able to make anything with decent recipe in front of him.

"So what can't you make?"

Draco paused and looked up. "What?"

"You said there's some potions you can't make," Harry said, reluctantly stirring his leaves into the blood. "What are they?"

At first Draco didn't answer. He dropped the roots in the cauldron and added the powdered eyes, then chopped the lovage stems as small as he could and dropped it in. As he stirred it, three times clockwise with a reverse quarter-turn, he glanced at Harry.

"Nothing your side will need in a fight, so it doesn't matter."

"Right..." Harry set aside his bowl and pulled out a book full of scribbles and writing in the margins. When he found the page he wanted, he glanced back and forth at it and the blackboard as if comparing them. "It's just odd that Snape's apprentice can't make something."

Draco didn't think he needed to explain how Snape had tried everything to make him learn how to brew love potions of all sorts, to the point of nearly beating the formulas into him. No matter what the potions master did, though, Draco simply did not understand how they worked, and every attempt usually ended up with him making a Neville-worthy mess.

"Not as odd as you just being here," he snapped. "I thought you hated potions."

"I hated Snape," Harry said, "not potions. Besides, I need it to be an auror."

Draco nearly stopped stirring as he looked up. "You want to be an auror?"

Harry nodded.

"Why on earth would you want to work for the Ministry?"

For a minute Harry didn't know how to answer. It wasn't that he hadn't thought about it, but Draco seemed so genuinely mystified that he was surprised.

"It...it seems the best thing," he said. "I have to face Voldemort, so I might as well be trained."

Draco winced when he heard the name. It brought back memories of escaping the inferno of his home. He took the bowl Harry had mixed and added it to the cauldron. The liquid inside turned a pale white and began bubbling despite there being no fire beneath it.

"Aurors don't play quidditch," he said softly.

The look on Harry's face told him that the Boy Who Lived had already thought about being the Auror Who Never Played.
"There," Draco said, sitting back. "Done."

Leaning forward, Harry studied the potion still bubbling softly. "Are you sure?"

"Have a taste," Draco said with a smile. "He's got the antidote."

Harry gave him a look. "Funny. I know you didn't follow the recipe exactly. You kept giving it small stirs the other way."

"Very astute, Potter. Certain ingredients need an extra turn or they might not mix properly."

"Why?"

Draco looked around to make sure no one was listening, and although a few people were watching and waiting for them to break into a fistfight, no one could hear him.

"It is our belief," he whispered, and Harry knew exactly who Draco was talking about, "that when dealing with parts of animals, a quarter turn towards the west, where the sun sets, eases their pain and passage into night. Otherwise their spirits linger in the potion and may even make it unstable."

"What happens if it's unstable?" Harry asked.

He opened his mouth, but an explosion from the table behind them answered for him. A sickly white cloud quickly spread over the classroom like fog, enveloping the nearest students before they could move. Draco tried to get to the door, but he couldn't see anything and bumped hard into someone who started screaming.

Panic spread. More students began screaming and crying, some begging for their mothers. He heard them stumbling into each other, heard screams of pain as someone panicked and began beating anyone nearby with a chair. Incendio spells flew across the room. He heard someone screaming about spiders, someone whimpering nearby. One scream stood out among the others.

"Dark wizard! The Malfoy whelp among the children, kill him! Find him!"

Instinctively he dropped to the floor and backed up quietly until he hit a wall. The howls for his blood grew louder and more numerous until he was sure all of Hogwarts was hunting him. His heart beat faster and faster and his whole body felt like ice. He clutched his wand tightly but cast no spells, instead slowly moving along the wall and hoping to find a door. There were no windows but the dungeons were a maze he would hide in until he could escape the castle. Belladonna, his distant ancestor, had successfully hid in the fog when it covered the moors behind her house, and even though she watched her mother stoned to death, by staying quiet and moving slowly she escaped the mob searching for her. Everything he'd learned from her in his dream he used, at last finding a door and opening it just a crack.

The door was wrenched out of his hand as someone threw it open and cast a dispersing charm in the air. Draco tried an expelliarmus spell to clear his way but not only was his spell blocked, he was also yanked out of the room and tossed onto the floor, losing his wand as he hit his head. When he reached for it, the same person accio'ed it away. His hand landed on something soft and as he sat up, he found the bodies of his parents beside him. Bloodied and broken, they lay like ragdolls with eyes staring distantly into nothing. So the mob had found his parents and come for him. He would have cried but he was too scared. Wandless and trapped, fully expecting to die in the next moment, Draco looked up in betrayal.

"Severus...?" he whispered. "Why?"
Snape stared at his apprentice. He had no idea what the boy was hallucinating, but it had left him shaking in fear on the floor, incapable of moving. All around him, the few students who hadn't been affected knelt by the rest of the class as they were each dragged out, trying to make them swallow the antidote. Severus knelt in front of Draco, putting a hand on his shoulder to keep him from bolting. "All is not as it seems," he said softly. "You have been poisoned and you must take the antidote."

Draco gasped and shuddered as he shied away. "You killed them," he whispered. "You've turned..."

"I did not kill them," Snape said, playing along. "I would never turn from you or your father. And you must drink this quickly or you will follow them."

Draco stared at the vial in his master's hand. Severus had never lied to him before. Still crying, he took the vial and drank all of it. It burned going down his throat, but as it went through him, feeling like fire in his blood, the bodies of his parents faded and vanished. The cries for his death disappeared and all he heard were students wailing and more teachers gathering to calm them down enough to take the antidote. He looked around, hardly believing the change. Ron lay curled in Hermione's arms as she coaxed him, telling him the spiders would go away. One of the Hufflepuff students he'd seen joking with Slughorn earlier lay in a bloody heap with burned clothes and Madame Pomfrey leaning over her. "What...what happened?" he asked.

Snape stood up and grabbed his collar, yanking him to his feet as if he was still a child. "Someone's hallucinarius exploded and the smoke hit nearly everyone. Listen to me. Go open up the Slytherin dorm. Everyone here needs to take a shower as soon as possible and it's the closest place. Take Potter with you." And he handed Draco back his wand.

Nodding absently for a moment, Draco looked around for Potter. Harry stood against the other wall, staring at the floor, taking deep breaths as he composed himself. He didn't seem as scared as everyone else shaking off the poison. He seemed resigned to the effects. "Go on," Snape said, giving him a push as if he'd forgotten which way to go. "Severus..." Draco glanced up at him. "No one else here knows what I am, do they?"

Snape gave a soft "ah" of understanding. "No. Aside from the handful that you know about, no one else here knows. Now go on."

Obediently Draco nodded and started down the hall, glancing over at Potter who fell into step. Wordlessly they headed for Slytherin, and Draco gave the wall same password he'd used before, revealing the Slytherin entrance. This time he also added a bracchia charm so the door would stay open. When he went inside, though, Harry stayed put. "Come on," Draco said, not wanting to be alone in the dark. "We both have to take a shower."

"I need to wait for them," Harry said stubbornly. "They don't know where it is."

"Severus will bring them all," Draco said. "And you need to wash up before the residue makes you relapse."

Harry didn't shudder or groan, but his face tightened. "Relapse?"

"Smoke got all over us. If you breathe in any of the dust on you, you might start seeing things again."
As he waited, Draco wondered why Severus wasn't bringing anyone down yet and decided that his master was still trying to sort the wounded from the merely traumatized.

"What did you see?" Harry suddenly asked.

Any other time, Draco would have sneered and walked away. But not only had Potter just seen his own nightmare, but Draco couldn't really talk about this to anyone else and his mother was not around to hold him.

"My family dead," he said. "And everyone around me screaming for my death."

Harry stared at him, and this time his gaze was not so piercing. "Funny. That's almost about what I saw."

Chapter End Notes

1. bracchia -- Latin, to brace
In which Draco and Harry Meet Awkwardly in the Kitchen

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Though fully robed, Draco turned on the shower and let the hallucinarium dust rinse off of him. In the stall beside him, he heard Potter stripping off his soaked clothes and dropping them on the floor. Neither of them spoke. Draco didn’t know what was going through Potter's mind, and he didn’t care. For now the hot water pouring over his head and down his body was all he wanted to think about. He used to believe that re-living his ancestors' memories was nightmare enough, but after seeing his father's lifeless eyes, his mother's blood on both of them, he understood that his nightmares were just lessons. Nothing had prepared him for the shock of actually seeing them dead.

"But they're not dead," he whispered, closing his eyes as he leaned his forehead against the cool stone wall. "They're not dead. It was just a dream. A bad dream."

The worst part was that he didn't know for sure. Somewhere in the world his parents might be dead, discovered by Voldemort and tortured to death. Perhaps he'd been lucky that he hadn't seen Pansy stacked on top of his parents. Pansy, and Goyle, and Crabbe, and Theodore, and... He choked down a sob. He hadn't cried before. He would not cry now, not with Potter right next to him.

He put his hands together. "Sithen--" His words choked as he remembered his father's eyes staring vacantly at him, but he forced himself to focus. "Sithenes sceandu kasta en niht ic dragan, heonon ren an cleonsian min sawol."

The body of his mother still lay before him. He repeated the chant. Wisps of darkness slipped off of him, but soon he was chanting the words over and over without any magic left to cleanse. The chant became a prayer and a wish for rain of a different sort, a meditation to destroy the images burned into his memory. Over and over, he whispered the words to the water washing over him, and gradually the words forced out the memories of his hallucinations out of his mind. He knew he'd remember them again, perhaps in a nightmare or during a lonely moment in the empty Slytherin common room, but at least for now they were gone.

Light footsteps pittered behind him suddenly, and he turned around and spotted several elf silhouettes running back and forth behind the curtain. He turned off the water and toweled dry, but when he bent to pick up his robes, he discovered that they were gone. Only his wand remained on the wet tile. With a grumble, he tied the towel around his waist and stepped out.

A dozen house elves busily set out towels, bath robes and sandals at each shower stall, preparing for the rest of the students in Slughorn's potions class that could walk or stumble to Slytherin. Draco grabbed another towel to dry off his hair and dropped it in a heap as he tugged on a white robe. The towel was gone and replaced before he finished dressing.

Beside him, Harry squawked in surprise when he found that his clothes were gone. He came out holding the towel rather loosely around his hips and squinting as he put his glasses on one-handed. Water dripped down his hair and chest, and Draco took the opportunity to look Harry over before he could notice. A few old scars marred his skin, and a couple of light pink slashes across his chest were so recent that he wondered what Potter had done to get them.

"Didn't know you were an exhibitionist," he drawled.

Harry just sighed as if dealing with him was not worth the effort. "They took our clothes, didn't
they?"

One of the elves stopped and nodded with a big smile. "Oh yes, Master Potter, gone to be properly cleaned and made safe. Not to worry, though, we's bringing student clothes from the dorms so's you can dress." And he ran off again with his armful of towels.

Harry picked up the nearest robe and winced. "This can't be right. This thing is tiny."

Chuckling, Draco looked down at himself. The bottom hem went to his mid-thigh and tied at the waist, leaving a fair amount of his neck and chest revealed. Whoever had chosen this must have had a love of Asian aesthetics and he didn't think it was too revealing, but Potter certainly seemed to think so.

"Well, I don't have to worry. My own robes are in my room."

With a glance back at the shower stall, Harry considered hiding inside until an elf came round with his clothes, but both of them knew that all the showers would have to be free when Snape finally brought the other students in. Draco's derisive laugh at Harry's shyness dwindled as he began to consider what had just happened, now that the blinding fear and despair had faded.

The hallucinarium explosion had come from behind him but the poison cloud had spread so quickly that no one would know whose cauldron exploded. Not only that, but Draco Malfoy, suspected dark wizard with ties to Voldemort, had insisted on participating in class and partnering with the Boy who Lived. Dumbledore could not hush up an accident like this and tomorrow the Prophet would probably run the headline Hogwarts Potions Disaster, Malfoy Heir Implicated. He looked at Harry again.

"You can borrow one of my cloaks," he offered. "They should fit you."

Harry looked at him in surprise. "Really?" Then his eyes narrowed and he frowned. "What's the catch?"

"Nothing horrible," Draco said, waving for him to follow as he headed for his room. "You just make sure you tell Slughorn and anyone else who asks that it wasn't our cauldron that blew up. They'll believe you."

The Slytherin dungeons meandered and broke off in various directions to different chambers, but his room was only a few doors down from the common room. Resembling the Gryffindor bedrooms in that it held five beds, four of them were empty at the moment. He opened the trunk at the foot of his bed and drew out the largest cloak, one that had been tagged as his size but was actually one size larger. When he had complained to Severus, though, his master did not acknowledge any mistake but dryly responded that "hope springs eternal." Draco hadn't brought it up again.

"Here, try this," he said, holding it out.

As if expecting the cloak to come alive and wrap around him, Harry gingerly took it and held it at arm's length for a moment. Once he knew it was safe, he spread it around his shoulders. It only came to his ankles and rode high on his wrists, the collar choked and it fit too tight around the shoulders, but at least it closed entirely in front.

While Potter dressed, Draco quickly threw on his own robe and locked his trunk again before Harry could see his lack of personal possessions inside. He could coax gifts and luxuries out of his parents, but whining never worked on Severus. Until he had his own spending money, he could forget about fancy smudge-proof quills that self-inked, comfortable robes of a more fashionable cut, and some of
the more decadent chocolates and candies from Devil's Delights, his favorite shop in Knockturn Alley.

"Are all your rooms like this?" Harry asked. He looked around at the unfinished stone walls, cold brick floor and scattered green torches. Although the beds and furnishings were as fine as any in Gryffindor, the dormitory itself felt isolated and confined.

"Some of the chambers are bigger," Draco answered, "but the girls have most of those. Otherwise, yes. Why? There's nothing wrong with them."

"You're not afraid they'll flood?" Harry asked. "I mean, you are under the lake--"

He didn't know if Potter knew he was referring to the old insult that Slytherin needed to be washed out, but even if he didn't, the familiar saying rankled.

"Slytherin flooding," Draco said coldly, "is about as likely as Gryffindor falling off."

He rose to his feet and walked out of the room, making sure Harry followed him out before closing the door too loudly.

By the time they came out, they heard the slow shuffle of shell shocked students trudging into his house. The house elves escorted the students, carefully taking their robes as they went into the showers. Spotting his housemates, Harry moved to join them but a hand on his shoulder pulled him short.

"You can see them after they come out," Severus said. "Both of you, come with me."

Head down, expecting a scolding, Draco followed his master. Harry walked beside him, and Draco was a bit surprised that Harry kept his head up, a frown on his face as if he intended to argue. Not that Draco wasn't prepared to defend himself, but he'd found that antagonizing his master was never a good idea.

Inside the common room, Slughorn stood explaining matters to Dumbledore, who idly turned a wrapped candy over in his fingers but did not answer him.

"Ah, there you are," Dumbledore said when he spotted them. "Severus assured me you were fine, boys, but I admit, I'm glad to see for myself."

"I think I'm starting to get used to accidents," Harry said, tugging on his collar to loosen it.

"Calling it an accident may be a bit too hasty," Slughorn said. He glared disapprovingly at Draco and Severus. "There have been no accidents in my class since I took the post, but on Malfoy's first day a dangerous poison explodes in his cauldron--"

"Ours didn't explode," Harry said. "It was whoever was sitting behind us."

Startled by Harry's interruption, Slughorn paused for a moment, obviously considering his next words.

"Are you sure?" Slughorn asked slowly. "After all, you were exposed to a large quantity of hallucinarium. You really shouldn't trust your memory--"

"I'm sure," Harry said. "It was just bubbling in the cauldron while we talked--"

"'Bubbling'?" Slughorn repeated, eyes wide. "It's not supposed to--well, it could, but only if--no no,
"Proves nothing," Severus said. "You know that hallucinarium has three states, inert, oxygenating and corrosive. Obviously Draco made the second type, which, given your recipe, would have been the best anyone could have hoped to make."

"I stand by that formula," Slughorn said, "and the inert state--"

"Is better created using an alcohol base," Snape interrupted again, his irritation warring with his smug satisfaction. "Did you honestly expect any of them to succeed? You obviously never expected them to create something dangerous or you would've had more of the antidote prepared."

"'More'?" Harry asked. "Wasn't there enough?"

Dumbledore shook his head sadly. "Two students had to be apparated to St. Mungo's, which fortunately keeps a steady supply of most antidotes. Unfortunately they don't store Halcyon, hallucinarium's specific antidote, since it's rarely needed, so they'll have to make do with a more generalized therapy."

"How long will that take?" Harry asked.

"Less than a week," Draco reasoned. "I doubt they'll go mad, but still, not the way I'd like to get out of classes."

"We're getting off track here," Slughorn said. "We need to discover whose cauldron exploded and why, and the fact remains that on a dark wizard's first day, we had an explosion."

Though sorely tempted to look around and make sure no one else was in the room, especially after his own hallucinations, Draco steeled himself not to react. But he took a little satisfaction in Harry scanning the room quickly and even in Dumbledore's raising his hand to reassure Snape before his master could wind up.

"This dark wizard," Dumbledore said, "also promised not to hurt anyone, and I believe he has not broken that promise. Hogwarts would be better served by investigating this matter without automatically targeting one student."

Still irate, Severus turned to his apprentice and snapped, "did you follow the recipe exactly?"

Used to his master's temper and sure that it wasn't aimed at him, Draco kept his voice even as he answered. "Of course not. I chopped the stems smaller, pulverized the eyes finer than it called for, and added the quarter reverse turn for every three full."

"And how," Severus continued, "would you alter that recipe if you wanted to make it combustible?"

It suddenly occurred to Draco that his master knew exactly what had happened, but he was taking the moment to rub his apprentice's knowledge in Slughorn's face. He wondered if Snape wasn't a little jealous that Dumbledore had chosen a new potions master rather than asking Snape to shoulder both Potions and Defense Against the Dark Arts, and wondered if Snape wasn't a little hypocritical in calling the Malfoys arrogant.

"I would...leave out the quarter turn," he said slowly. "And...I suppose I could add..." He considered. Something that had to react with the existing ingredients and yet could not be immediately noticeable to the students mixing them together. He tried to remember what they had in their inventory and only thought of one solution. "Parts from an animal that hunts ravens. Necromulas, perhaps." By Snape's small smile, he knew he'd guessed correctly.
"Necromulas?" Harry asked. "What are those?"

"Very small spiders," Dumbledore said, "hardly big enough to even see, but in large numbers they form delicate, powerful webs that can run for miles. There are a few in the forbidden forest, but they usually die out in cold weather."

"They chiefly hunt small birds," Severus said, "but ravens would not be out of the question. And considering that dried hellebore matches dead necromulas in color, cross-contamination would hardly be noticed."

"Impossible!" Slughorn said. "I rinsed that hellebore myself, and besides, it didn't come from the forest. There was no chance of cross-contamination."

"Not accidental contamination," Snape said softly. "But you don't lock up your class materials. Anyone could have gone in during the night and tampered with your ingredients."

"You think this was deliberate?" Dumbledore asked.

"Almost certainly," Snape said. "And I doubt that whoever did it would wait around for the explosion."

"But that means someone in the school is an enemy agent," Slughorn said. "A saboteur. How could they get inside, let alone remain undetected?"

"Questions that must be answered," Dumbledore said, "and soon. But we must be sure to apprehend our true enemies, rather than suspect others simply because they are more convenient targets. And we shall have to continue this discussion at another time, as it seems that the students are coming out."

Two Ravenclaw girls appeared, one of them still sniffling as the other gently sat her down on a couch and spread a blanket around her shoulders. Neither of them spoke or even looked at the small group in the corner. Draco suppressed a sigh and thought that Severus did as well. Both of them wanted everyone out of their house, but there wasn't really feasible until they were all properly dressed. Dumbledore called over a house elf to make sure everything was going smoothly and then left, assuring them that he would do his best to discover their saboteur.

"Well then," Slughorn said after the headmaster had left, "I'd best get back to my office and see that nothing else has been tampered with. If you'll excuse me."

He made his way out of the common room and back into the hallway, clearly intending to get out of his old house before anyone remembered that he was a Slytherin, too, but before he could get far, Snape followed and stepped in front of him.

"Just a moment," Snape said, blocking his way. "I'd like to have a word about biting off more than even you could chew."

As the wall slid closed again, they barely caught Snape's menacing voice just before the pair disappeared. "Slughorn, you know what I was, but you'd better remember what I am and that you'd make a great amount of spare parts--"

Once the common room was quiet again, Draco walked over to the table beside the lake window and sat down, pulling his father's journal and the grimoire towards him. To his surprise, Harry came and stood in front of the window, staring into the glass. Frozen solid at the top, the lake seemed more like a marble tomb as pale silver light rippled through the slow undercurrents beneath the ice.
"Do you ever see the squid?" Harry suddenly asked. "Or the merpeople?"

Draco shrugged. "Sometimes. Not very often."

"Oh." Harry watched a few bubbles rise from the bottom of the glass to the top, disappearing in the faint light. "It's beautiful."

"You should see it when the lake's not frozen," Draco said slowly. "The fish come quite close."

"I imagine the water's green," Harry said. "Must match the decor."

Around them, students trickled into the common room, sitting down amongst each other and looking around curiously. Their murmurs filled the room and Draco lowered his voice.

"You've already seen the bottom of the lake," he said. "I doubt you're interested in small talk. What do you want?"

Glancing at the other students self-consciously, Harry pulled the other chair out and sat down, leaning forward. When he spoke, it was in a whisper.

"You said that giving that little stir for the ravens was a dark magic thing, right?"

Cautious, Draco nodded once.

"Then why didn't Slughorn say anything about it? He had to have noticed."

"Of course he noticed." Draco sighed and put one elbow on the table, resting his head on his arm. "They know about spirits and souls mixing together, they just like to pretend that they don't. They think it's wrong to admit that something of the animal's left after they kill it, so they leave out quarter stirs and such and botch their work up, and then they say us dark wizards must be doing something different and evil to make our potions come out right all the time."

"But then why not just write the turn into the recipe? They wouldn't have to say why it's there."

"Yes, they would. Someone would notice that you only reverse turn with some ingredients and start asking questions. Your half-blood girlfriend, for instance."

Stiffening, Harry glowered and sat straight. "She's not my girlfriend."

"Oh?" Draco smirked. "You prefer your redhead boyfriend?"

"He's not my--" Cutting himself off, Harry's jaw clenched and he stood up.

For a moment Draco was afraid he was going to punch him, but then Ron and Hermione came into the common room, both of them dressed in short bath robes, and Harry stomped off to join them on a couch. Ron complained loudly about the Slytherin uniform Harry was wearing and made sure to mention how small it was on him, but Draco steadfastly ignored them.

More and more students trickled in. Bored and preferring not to meet anyone's eyes, he pulled his father's journal from beneath the table and opened it. Written in swirling gold ink, the words For My Grandson Lucius decorated the inside cover. On the front page, the Malfoy crest of a rearing winged serpent, fangs bared, hissed lazily at him. His father's youthful scrawls, quite different from his present-day elegant cursive, began on the second page. From the expensive look of it, the pages probably wrote when spoken to and corrected the spelling automatically. Specially enchanted so that the writing at the beginning compressed to make room towards the end, the entries expanded and
became legible as he flipped each page.

December 26, 1964 -- Received this for Christmas. I have no idea what to write in here. Grandfather says all growing children should have a diary. I only like diaries when I'm reading someone else's.

February 20 -- Grandfather says I should try to keep writing in this. I think he just wants to read it.

February 27 -- New tutor. Would get rid of her but don't dare, not after what I did to the last one. Don't expect this one will last very long either.

March 25 -- Didn't have to get rid of the charms tutor, father did it for me. Grandfather and father had a big fight about a whole lot of poisons that turned rotten yesterday and forgot the tutor was still here. Father had to obliviate her and send her off, but I don't see why he had to scold me for it. Grandfather said father's just angry and it wasn't my fault. There's so few of us left that we have to risk hiring outside the community.

April 2 -- Father says no more tutors. I'm far enough along to begin my apprenticeship in earnest. Grandfather will be my master, and he was father's master, too. Quite excited. No more tutors beating grammar and spelling into me.

April 4 -- I hate it! I don't have to watch myself around outsiders now, but grandfather's working me harder than a house elf. My hands hurt from all the plants he has me pulling up and the acids and vapors he makes sting my eyes. I even have to sweep the workshop. I hate it. It's servants work. Malfoys don't sweep. Malfoys don't weed.

April 7 -- Learned a potion made from weeds and sweepings. Grandfather says it gets rid of blisters and whining. Resolved to hide this diary better.

April 11 -- Father received an invitation to the Minister of Magic's banquet. Hope we don't go.

April 14 -- Grandfather spoke to the ravens today. He says he listens whenever a bunch gather in the trees and a whole flock of them was sitting in front of the manor today cawing like crazy, but he wouldn't tell me what they were saying. When do I get to learn that spell?

April 17 -- Found out we have to go to the Minister's banquet after all. Don't know what for. Witches like talking about my mother when they think I can't hear.

April 20 -- Still too sick to leave bed. No one tells me why, they just say go back to sleep.

April 24 -- Can finally move around a little. Grandfather told me someone slipped chylapodaen venom into my glass at the banquet. Whoever did it wanted to see if father would take me to St. Mungo's like a good wizard or ran into the forest like a dark one. I don't remember anything except falling and being carried to the coach. Once we were well out of sight, father took us off the road and into the woods to make an antidote. Grandfather said I should write the recipe so I remember it.

Spider's Dying Rescue: Mix one fresh crushed black widow spider, three belladonna berries, and seven drops of blood in a cupful of wine. Stir well. Makes three doses of poison or one antidote to chylapodaen and arachnid venoms.

That's why I'm still sick. Even if it's an antidote, it's still a poison, too.

April 28 -- Still tired all the time so I'm reading in bed. Father said he found out who did it.

May 5 -- Almost back to normal. Grandfather is starting me on antidotes and amulets. Very interesting. I've been studying long into the night, but father gave me a new hand of glory so I won't
disturb anyone. It should last awhile. It looks freshly severed.

May 10 --

"Your attention," Snape's voice interrupted his reading and Draco looked up. Standing at the top of the steps so everyone could see him, Severus ignored the house elves moving amongst the students as he spoke.

"Now that your clothes are here," the Slytherin head told the students, "you can get changed and go to dinner. And make sure you don't leave anything behind, as I will not be opening the dorm up again."

Somehow the elves knew which robe went to which student, and they handed them out quickly. Eager to get away from Snape, the students threw their house robes over the white bath robes and hurried out. Harry dropped his borrowed Slytherin outfit on a couch and walked out with his friends after making sure his wand was still in his pocket.

A tiny hand tugged at his sleeve and he looked down at the elf at his side.

"Master Draco," she said, holding his laundered clothes. "we's cleaned your robe. The picture inside got's all soggy, but we's fixed it right up."

He took the offered robe and the picture he'd torn from the Prophet. He'd forgotten all about it after the accident. His shower had smudged the ink and frame badly but the figures inside were clear, and he stared at his father and mother beside him. Perhaps it was an aftereffect of hallucinarius, but looking at the picture only seemed to make his anxiety worse.

As soon as the common room emptied, Severus removed the charm holding the doors open and watched with some satisfaction as they shut again, sealing Slytherin from outsiders. Finally he could turn his attention to his apprentice and he crossed the room, standing over him in displeasure. Draco shut his father's journal and braced himself for a scolding.

"You missed Charms," Snape said.

"Yes sir," Draco said. "I lost track of time in the library." He nearly added that he'd missed lunch as well but decided that his master probably wouldn't care.

A raised eyebrow. "And what was so interesting that it caught even your attention?"

"The use of hydas in potions."

There was no point in adding extra excuses or explanations, so he kept quiet and swallowed once. Snape was an excellent master but his temperament and wit often left Draco's feelings in shambles. Fortunately, the excuse worked.

"For once," Snape said, "you've finally shown a little foresight." He turned and headed for the shelves in the corner, opening one of the cupboards that held Dumbledore's list and the ingredients for the evening's potions. "Get over here. We have several vapors to create before we're done for the day."

Draco gave a silent sigh of relief. No scolding tonight. Perhaps Severus had not heard about the mishap in Hagrid's class or his stop at Pomfrey's office yet. In any case, he was not about to tell him. Setting aside his father's journal, he glanced at the clock on the far wall. Dinner was well underway now and he doubted he'd finish his work in time, but it didn't matter since he didn't feel safe in the great hall. His stomach growled as he read the list and noted the work Severus had assigned to him,
and he reluctantly pulled out his ingredients.

By the time they finished, the curfew bell had sounded. Draco put his last batch of wisprian vapors into their phials, pushed them next to the pile of completed work, and then lay his head tiredly in his arms as he watched Severus finish his own vapor. A sour scent of dead vegetation hit him and he winced. Vapors were like potions that turned into potent fumes once they were bottled properly, and their strong smells while brewing always gave him a headache.

"Nearly halfway done," Snape said once he finished, checking over their finished potions and crossing out items on Dumbledore's list. "If we keep up this pace, we should finish well before the week is out."

"Does that mean we get a break or another list?" Draco asked.

"Another list, which will probably be longer when they discover how fast we can work." Severus sighed and rolled the parchment back up. "Go get something to eat, but don't dawdle. We're waking up early tomorrow."

With a nod, Draco pushed himself to his feet and gathered his cloak from the corner, drawing it low as he walked through the dungeons. He doubted that he'd meet anyone in the halls, but concealing his face felt comforting. He wondered what being a Death Eater felt like, casting spells while looking out of a mask without fear of anyone recognizing him. It must be fun, he knew. His parents always looked so exhilarated after roaming around at night, flinging mudbloods through the air and wreaking havoc on the wizarding world.

He frowned. Except for the last time, when the dark mark had suddenly been cast into the air. Everyone had fled, Death Eaters and wizards alike, but his parents had been truly afraid, rushing into their private carriage, flinging off their masks and cloaks as if Voldemort might come through the shadows, as his father pulled back his sleeve to reveal his mark, once faded, coming back to life.

Shaking off the memory, Draco turned the corner down a particular hallway lit only by a single dim torch. A handful of doors lay before him, and he looked over his shoulder to make sure that he really was alone before opening the nearest one. This was one of many Slytherin secrets in the dungeons, but it was his favorite secret and one the entire house guarded jealously. The room was small, hardly more than a closet, with only a ladder carved into the wall. He began climbing and soon put a hand up when he thought he was close to the top, and he brushed the rough wood with his fingers. After fumbling in the dark for a moment, he found the latch on the side and pushed up the trap door, then climbed up into the kitchen.

Few elves worked here at night, instead tending to the cleaning and maintenance, but a handful of them busily put away washed pans and prepared for breakfast in a few hours. The trap door lay in a far corner, well out of their way, but as he stood and brushed off his robes, one of the elves hurried towards him, a covered platter already in her hands.

"Daffy knew Master Draco'd be back tonight," she said, putting the dish down on the table before him. "So's Daffy kept dinner warm."

He sat down on a stool that the elves stood on to reach the hanging copper pots and took off the cover. Roast beef and mashed potatoes lay before him, piping hot rather than just warm, and on the side lay several tarts, one of which he ate first. Not as sweet as his house elf Filly made, but then the Hogwarts elves hadn't cooked specifically for him for his whole life.

As he finished eating and pushed the plate away, intending to take the desserts with him back to Slytherin, the wall a few feet away suddenly swung back, revealing part of a hallway filled with
paintings of fruit. Harry stepped inside before looking up and freezing.

"Malfoy?" Standing in threadbare pajamas that had grown too tight over the summer, his hand over his eyes as they adjusted to the light and his hair even messier than usual, Harry looked tired and grumpy that he wasn't alone in the kitchen. "What are you doing here?"

"Eating," Draco snapped.

"In the middle of the night?"

"You expect me to sit alone with the rest of the school? And what about you? I don't see a prefect badge. Do your friends know you're out?"

A sore point, Draco decided, as Harry hesitated before answering. He probably had to sneak out just to enjoy a little privacy. No wonder Harry was annoyed to see him here, but he didn't seem willing to give Draco any satisfaction by leaving.

"Not that I have to explain myself to you," Harry said, "but I was hungry."

He picked up a tray of desserts that seemed to be left on a nearby counter just for him, but he paused at the open door. There were few places he could eat safely in the castle at night, and going back to Gryffindor meant unwanted company again.

Thinking that Potter was abysmal at hiding his feelings, Draco thought of a dozen insults about his friends that would rile him up, but as he opened his mouth to start, he reconsidered. After all, if the Weasel hadn't been lying and he had to spend part of every day with Potter, he couldn't afford to be too antagonistic. A year of underhanded politics had not only taught him how to wield fear, but it also taught him to handle some problems with an iron fist, other problems with a velvet glove.

"You don't have to leave," Draco said.

"What?" Halfway out, Potter stopped and looked at him sideways.

"You obviously need time away from your friends," Draco said, "and despite popular opinion, I can be..." He fumbled for the right word. Pleasant? Friendly? That didn't seem right. "...courteous."

Harry snorted. "You poisoned these, didn't you? You just want to watch when I keel over."

Despite himself, Draco smiled. "I would never poison desserts. And I would much rather see you alive, at least until you've killed the dark lord."

Harry stood a little longer, but curiosity won out and at last he closed the door again, then grabbed another stool and sat across from. For a few minutes they ate quietly, listening to the last handful of elves in the kitchen bedding down in hidden nooks in the cupboards. Both of them sat awkwardly looking away from each other. Strange circumstances of war and politics had brought the two adversaries if not onto the same side then at least against a common enemy, and neither of them was sure how to deal with the other.

"Why do you call him the dark lord?" Harry suddenly asked. "It doesn't seem like he's the lord of dark wizards, after all."

"He..." Draco looked down at the table as he thought. Damn. Trust Potter to ask the really stupid, hard to answer questions that everyone else took for granted. "It just happened that way."

"What do you mean?"
One look at Harry's face and Draco inwardly cursed again. How to explain an entirely opposite point of view when the other person had no idea that it even existed?

"He already calls himself a lord. When he started working against the ministry, the dark community embraced him." He sighed and slouched a little. "We thought he was the one we'd been waiting for, the lord of all dark magic to save us from the light."

"Lord of all dark magic?" Harry repeated, sitting a little straighter. "That sounds like it came out of prophecy."

"Stupid things, prophecies," Draco said, not noticing Harry's look. "You never know what they mean until they happen. No, the dark lord isn't a prophecy, it's a hope that someday a truly powerful wizard will rise, one that we could all rally to, like Mordred reborn. Someone who could unite all the families into one force." He set down a half-finished tart as his appetite left. "And in some kind of sick cosmic joke, the dark lord turns out to be insane."

"Who's Mordred?" Harry asked. "The name sounds familiar."

"Proof that even here you only get an approved version of history." He pushed his plate aside and leaned forward. "And now it's my turn to ask a question. Why do you roam the school at night?" He laughed at Harry's half-hearted denials. "I'm not stupid, Potter, the elves had dessert waiting for you. And though I was half-dead when I arrived here, I remember enough. It's odd for Dumbledore's favorite Gryffindor to walk alone outside in a blizzard."

Falling silent, Harry lowered his head and stared at the table for several seconds. "I can't tell you."

"What, don't want me laughing at you?" Draco asked. He shrugged. "Fine, I promise not to mock whatever it is you're doing."

"It's not that," Harry said slowly. "I won't tell you because I don't trust you."

Draco froze as if slapped. Of course he knew Harry still hated him for the past six years of torment, but damn it, he'd given up his home, his wealth, possibly his friends and family to fight Voldemort. What more did they want, him leaping in front of Harry during a fight to take a killing curse? So what that he'd made Potter's life difficult for years? Potter had done the same to him.

But that was not the real source of his anger and admitting the real reason surprised him a little. For a brief moment, he'd simply forgotten that he was alone in a crowded school when he shouldn't have been anywhere near Hogwarts.

If it had not been for Lucius' insistence that Draco destroy the manor himself, then the youngest Malfoy would never have come to Hogwarts alone. He would be with Pansy now, leading a large group of children across the countryside searching for shelter and safe passage to the school. He might even have found his father and the other Knights of Walpurgis and taken up the fight under his father's command. Either way, he would have been surrounded by friends and allies.

He raised his head slightly. Friends and allies, but most importantly fellow practitioners of the dark school of Morgan le Fay. Unlike his earlier confrontation against Hagrid, when he'd forced his arrogance and used it as a shield, his pride was now unforced.

"You shouldn't trust me," he said softly. "I'm not on your side." He continued, even though he knew that Harry probably wouldn't understand anything else. That didn't matter. No doubt Potter would ask Granger about it later. "The dark lord's death will change nothing between the followers of Merlin and Morgan. When this battle is over, the war will continue to rage for another thousand
No longer hungry, he stood and walked to the wall that Harry had appeared from, pushing it open. He had no intention of revealing the Slytherin entrance to the kitchen.

"Wait," Harry said, half-rising in surprise. "What are you going on about? This started with Voldemort."

"If you believe that," Draco snapped, "maybe you should try reading history instead of sleeping through it."

With that, he swept out of the kitchen, but he was not too preoccupied with his anger to take note of exactly which painting held another hidden entrance. As he walked, he slowed down and tugged his cloak closer. With only a few torches lit, the castle became so cold that he could see his breath.

He knew he shouldn't have lost his temper, or as Snape liked to say, let his foolish Malfoy pride get the better of him. Of course Potter wouldn't trust him. He was stupid to think that his family's sudden switch would earn him any respect in Harry's shortsighted green eyes. Lucius served as Voldemort's right hand for years and Draco obeyed his father in nearly everything. But the losses they had suffered in turning, the destruction of his home and any hope of a normal life for years to come, surely that had to count for something? Even Dumbledore trusted him, and for Harry not to believe the old wizard about Draco's sincerity seemed like pure spite.

"Hardly proper behavior from a good little Gryffindor," he muttered to himself. "Stupid sodding scarhead, doesn't even know who Mordred is. Ignorant muggle lover. Bet he never even reads a book except for homework. Probably has to cheat off Granger for everything."

He was still cursing when he reached his common room.

Chapter End Notes

chylapodaen -- from Chilopoda, class of arthropods including centipedes
In which Draco saves a friend

In the back of his runes class, doing his best to ignore Granger noisily scribbling notes, Draco stared out the window for the entire class, paying no attention to the lesson but remembering his conversation with Harry several nights before. He hadn't expected Potter to declare him a friend and spill his heart out to him, but he hadn't expected such a slap in the face either. In hindsight, he should have, but still...he scowled.

Stupid scar faced son of a mudblood ignorant bastard thinks he knows everything...

Worst of all, he didn't know why Potter's dismissal stung so badly. Why Potter's stare always made him look away when he could easily stare down Ministry officials who were comfortable in their authority. He sighed. Why on earth did he get angry at Potter merely for showing as much ignorance about dark wizards as anyone else?

An icicle smashing against the windowsill startled him and the rest of the class from their thoughts. The sound of breaking ice was starting to become routine now that the blizzard was over and the sun was slowly melting all the snow. Voldemort's weather manipulation created a strange time between winter and summer, uncomfortably cold but glaringly bright. The in-between feeling reminded him of dusk, the odd space between day and night, and like dusk it made him feel antsy and impatient, waiting for something unknown to happen. Classes blurred into each other during the day while the potions ran together at night. And every day without word from his parents or his friends whittled at his hope.

His father's journal helped ease the feeling of distance. In his spare moments after classes and before Snape's work, he'd stretch out on one of the couches in his common room and quietly read. Page by page, his family's life slowly unfolded in front of him. After the poisoning incident, his father's childish whining stopped and an eagerness to learn new spells and secrets grew. A fascination with curses developed. Even the messy handwriting became more practiced and elegant.

To his satisfaction, Draco noticed that his father was nowhere near as good with potions as he was. Young Lucius struggled with the potions that a fifth year should have been capable of and even his grandfather gave up trying to teach him the more advanced concoctions. He simply did not have the patience for long brewing times and never found the various ingredients interesting. During his years at Hogwarts, Draco had come to understand that in order to excel at potions, he actually had to fall in love with the subject. Under Snape's mentoring, it was inevitable that he did so, sometimes losing himself in the huge store of ingredients that Severus had to drag him back to work. Of course he felt his father's inevitable influence in his own inability to create love potions.

On the other hand, he seemed to be following in his father's footsteps as far as curses went. Hexes and jinxes came naturally to him, but although he found the effects of his dark spells immensely satisfying, his father seemed to find them absolutely enthralling. Lucius devoted long passages in his diary to the smallest details of a curse's effect on a victim, going so far as to cast impedimentia so he could watch skin slowly dry and crack, watch the eyes turn into fonts of blood. He showed an almost obsessive pleasure in tracing out complex incantations that sounded like songs, each of them powerful enough to affect nature itself but too long to use in a fight. Each one that Draco found tucked in the margins, with words scratched out and lines rewritten, he longed to try, and he always found himself mouthing them as he read.

He could not read the diary in class, however. The gold edging along the yellowed pages and the leather cover made it stand out from everyone else's textbooks, and he did not want the rest of Hogwarts too curious. After news of the potions class disaster circulated around the school, there
were few places he could read without being watched, turning the castle into a prison. Even the Slytherin common room felt confining.

The bell rang, and he stood and left the class without looking at anyone. Instead of heading to the great hall where Hagrid would hold his classes until the snow completely melted, Draco headed for the library. Severus did not mind if he skipped that particular class and knowing that Ron was forced to sit in a class he didn't want to attend in the first place made skipping that much more enjoyable.

As usual, Madam Pince glared at him when he entered, but she didn't say anything. Snape had made it clear to the entire faculty that Draco had his permission as both the Slytherin head and his guardian to access any part of the castle at any time. Severus had also told Draco that if he did anything that reflected badly on himself or his master, he'd serve as a guinea pig for their more experimental poisons, but no one else knew that Draco had to be on his best behavior and he was determined to keep that a secret.

Rather than speak to her, Draco walked past her and into the Restricted Section. Being a guest meant he could not enjoy some of the privileges that the students did, but it also gave him a few perks, and free access to this section was one of them. He had no doubt that Pince had ranted and shrieked at Severus when he told her and she still openly treated him like a monster, but she had to allow it. Even Dumbledore had given his permission, although the headmaster was so accommodating that Draco wondered if the old wizard wasn't up to something. Draco found Dumbledore's constant cheerfulness disturbing.

Skimming over the shelves, he settled on the section reserved for research into trickery and tricksters. *Coyote, Loki and Kurent: Mastering Trickery, Parsing Grammar to Cast Lies Within Truths, Bargain a Star To Win the Moon*, and on the titles went, dozens of texts before him. Most he recognized from his father's once extensive library, now nothing but ash and cinders, but some of the titles were unfamiliar. Lingering over them, he found his choice difficult but finally settled on *Deceiving the Will o' the Wisp*, a guide promising to teach him techniques for capturing the most elusive creatures, successfully lying to the wiliest tricksters and overcoming the most sinuous spells.

He didn't believe a word of it, but the book's introduction was worded so confidently that he wanted to study exactly how the author had written such a convincing con job that it ended up in Hogwarts. He checked it out under Madam Pince's disapproving gaze, but as he turned to sit down at one of the tables, he noticed a certain redhead looking around the shelves for him. Draco ducked back into the Restricted Section and watched Ron from between the books.

Draco winced. Should have known the weasel would eventually come looking for him. He waited until Ron disappeared around a corner and then snuck out the main door, turning a corner down another hall before breaking into a run. He didn't know when Ron would give up searching the library and come down to the dungeons and he wanted to be long gone by then. When he reached the common room, he grabbed his broom and the cloak he'd left draped over a couch and ran back out again.

A few minutes later he was outside in the courtyard. Gray icicles hung off of every surface and the snow was dirty and muddy. His breath misted in the cool air and he whirled his cloak over his shoulders before he could feel the chill. With his book tucked safely away, he straddled his broom and gently kicked off.

The wind whipped around him as he flew up past the castle spires and circled high among the clouds. He knew coming outside like this was risky, but he desperately needed time out of the cramped dungeons and crowded halls. From up here, the castle looked like a dollhouse and the quidditch pitch looked like a toy added on to the side.
While he was looking down, a red dot appeared in the courtyard. Draco hissed in surprise and flew up above the nearest cloud, hiding even though he was sure Ron couldn't spot him this high up. No wonder Potter walked around at night, he thought. If Ron was this tenacious looking for someone he didn't like, Draco could only guess how he dogged his friends.

But he couldn't hide up here forever. If nothing else, his legs were starting to hurt as the broom handle aggravated fading bruises. Hoping Ron wouldn't spot him, he angled down towards one of the battlements out of sight from the rest of the castle. But because his shoes were not made for ice he slipped sideways as he landed, slamming his shoulder into the masonry.

Groaning, he slowly sat up and heaved a sigh. It wasn't fair! Voldemort's evil blizzard couldn't finish him off so the damned ice was trying to break his neck. He kicked the broom away and smacked the ice with his hand, but that only hurt his knuckles. And now the bruise on his shoulder started to throb painfully.

"It's not fair," he muttered, pulling his knees up to his chest.

He lost his house, his parents, his friends, his wonderful Nimbus 2000 that had proper charms on it, and for what? To hole up by himself like a scared little snake in a burrow fiercely hissing at the passing animals, trying to trick them into thinking he was venomous. He put his hand on his shoulder but it only made it hurt more and made his eyes tear up. Furiously he wiped them dry and looked around out of habit. If Severus heard that his nearly of age apprentice was carrying on like this, the potions master would promise to give him something to really cry about.

The wind picked up and blew his cloak back, and he hurriedly wrapped it around himself tighter. How stupid to think he could read up here. It was cold enough that he was surprised it didn't start snowing again. From the look of the forbidden forest, it was hard to believe that they were at the tail end of summer. The trees were nearly all barren and covered with ice, and even in the sunshine the forest looked dark. Dozens of crows perched on the cold branches, huddled together and cawing loud enough to drown out the wind.

"So here you are."

Draco jumped in surprise. Behind him on his firebolt, Harry flew up and settled on the battlement, stepping off his broom without slipping. Draco frowned and looked away.

"I don't need protecting up here," he snapped, "and I'm in no mood for company."

"That's kind of obvious," Harry said. He sat down beside him anyway.

How the hell did he find me? Draco thought. He did his best not to look at Harry or even acknowledge his presence. Why were they so dead set on following him all day?

"Here," Harry said, shoving a bag in front of him.

Draco leaned back and didn't touch it. Anything could have been inside and he knew that Harry was friendly with Ron's twins. "What? If you think I'm going to fall for a bloody trick--"

"Get off it, Malfoy," Harry said, shoving the bag into his hands. "I'm not like you, there's no tricks inside."

Scowling even harder, Draco silently untied the knot holding the straps together and looked inside. Instantly his scowl faded and he laughed in delight. Two dead hydras lay curled together at the bottom.
"They died this morning," Harry said. "The big one killed them and Hagrid was going to give them to you, but you didn't show up to class."

"Give them to me?" Draco echoed. "He wasn't sobbing about me or Severus killing them?"

"He was crying," Harry admitted, "and don't you dare throw that in his face. But he's not stupid, either."

"That's debatable," Draco said softly, but he didn't say it loud enough for Harry to hear. Still smiling, he tied the bag back up again and set it aside.

"That's your broom?" Harry suddenly asked, and he leaned back and stared at it.

Draco hesitated. He wasn't ashamed of it, really, but it wasn't a modern broom and after all the bragging he'd ever done about his Nimbus, his present broom seemed like a poor comparison. "A besom, actually," he said, not mentioning that he rarely thought of it as such. "A family heirloom."

"I didn't get a good look at it that night," Harry said. "It looks like it's still alive."

Just lifting the broom told Draco that. Heavier than before, the wood looked newly hewn and the twigs looked like they were developing the tiny nubs that would become leaves. It even smelled fresh, like green wood. He ran his fingers over the handle and pulled it a little closer to himself.

"How did you not fall off?" Harry asked. "Cross country in the middle of a blizzard and with a broken hand."

Why does he keep asking me things? Draco thought. Either Potter was trying pump him for information or someone had told him to play nice after finding out about their little argument in the kitchen, since upsetting their assistant potions master -- well, he wasn't a master yet, but he'd settle for being an adept -- was not good for the war effort. Regardless, it set him on edge. He didn't answer but kept his eyes focused on the quidditch pitch. And a thought he'd been trying to push back rose up fully formed in his mind.

Stupid, he knew he was stupid to dwell on the fact that Slytherin would have to forfeit every single game this year. Stupid to dwell on that when the team itself might not survive the trip to Hogwarts, that their parents could be dead, that Voldemort could destroy the ministry.

He glanced back at his besom. Stupid when he didn't even have a proper broom. Then again, it had carried him across the countryside and through one skirmish. Who knew what else it was capable of?

"When's your first game?" he asked.

Harry blinked. "What?"

"Quidditch," Draco sighed as if Harry was dense. "Who are you playing first?"

"Oh...um, Hufflepuff I think. Next month. And then...oh."

Harry's tone turned sorrowful as he realized what Draco was thinking of. Not that he hadn't thought of it before or that the Gryffindors hadn't been cheering over the upcoming forfeits, but seeing Draco's resigned face made the loss seem like a little casualty of war.

He was saved from having to reply. Neither of them heard the lunch bell but they saw the students coming out into the courtyard, milling around and tossing the last bits of white snow at each other. Draco grumbled as he watched them. He didn't want to attract attention, which meant that he'd have
to stay up on the battlements until lunch was over. Then again, if he could find an open window nearby...

Luck was with him. The astronomy tower window was wide open. He stood and picked up his broom, tying the bag containing the hydraz to the handle. Beside him, Harry scrambled to his feet and grabbed his own broom.

Draco felt a little silly flying inside the tower, but it was better than landing in a courtyard full of staring students. The classroom was empty and he landed on his feet. To his irritation, Harry landed behind him and showed every intention of following him through the castle.

"Don't you have anything better to do than chase after me?" he snapped. "Go practice bloody quidditch or something. Go show off your new dark spell to your friends--"

"I wanted to talk to you about that," Harry interrupted. "Hermione and me have that risana spell down pretty well. She figures it's time we got another one."

Already? Lunch forgotten, Draco turned to hide his wince and started walking down the tower to buy himself time. He hadn't expected them to learn that spell so quickly and did not have the next spell picked out yet. As he walked, keeping ahead of Harry so he didn't have to look at him, he figured that he'd have to pick out several spells for the next few months.

Start easy, he thought to himself. He could always teach him a couple spells offhand and spend the night going through the grimoire to select more for the coming weeks. And hopefully they wouldn't notice that the next spell didn't need the target spell they'd spent so much time learning.

"Crawenen," he said softly to himself. He turned around and looked at Potter. "Fine," he said. "Meet me by Hagrid's little hovel in ten minutes. I'll teach you a new one."

Without waiting to see if Harry agreed, Draco continued his walk to the dungeons and to his relief, Potter did not follow him.

Once inside his common room, Draco tossed his library book aside and fished out a wooden box from inside one of the many cabinets. A quick caldea spell, and the inside of the box froze with a thick layer of ice suitable for keeping the hydra bodies from decomposing. He left a note on top in case Severus returned down here before he did and then went back upstairs, taking his usual route away from most of the students and slipping away through one of the side doors.

He spotted Hermione's bushy hair before he spotted Hagrid's shack, and he sneered. "Oh wonderful," he muttered under his breath as he walked towards them, "just had to call his filthy little mudblood. Can't do a thing without that damn know it all."

She was already frowning at him when he reached them. No doubt she'd seen him complaining to himself and even though she hadn't heard the words, she could probably guess what he'd been saying.

"You're late," she said.

Ignoring her, Draco looked at Harry, who was sitting on a frozen pumpkin. "Not here," he said simply. "Follow me."

With them in step behind him, he followed the edge of the forbidden forest, keeping an eye on the trees. Crows filled each one, but always in distinctly numbered groups. He glanced at Harry who followed at his right shoulder.
"This spell works on magpies, crows," he said, "any bird as long as its black. But you want to find the right number. Different numbers will change what you hear. There's a rhyme for it to help remember."

"Oh, I know this," Hermione said. "It's the magpie poem, isn't it? One for sorrow, two for joy, three for a girl, four for a boy--"

"No," Draco said, smiling as her mouth clicked shut in surprise. "Muggle poems are worthless pieces of garbage, twisted from our spells and as useless as the people who use them. Now listen carefully. 'One for sorrow, two for mirth'," he began to recite, slowly and deliberately. "'Three for death, four for birth, five for heaven, six for hell, seven for a witch's spell'."

He stopped at a small gray sapling nearly breaking from the weight of seven heavy crows perched on its branches. The crows stared back.

"You're not divining anything from them," Draco said to Harry, making sure Hermione knew she was being ignored. "You're just trying to hear them accurately. Less than seven and their words will twist according to their number."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked.

Hermione stood beside him and glared at Draco. "That if you ask two crows about the weather, they'll just laugh at you."

Draco fumed but didn't reply except to raise his wand and softly say "crawenen." Harry and Hermione both did the same. For a moment nothing seemed to happen, but gradually the harsh cawing turned into whispers that echoed around them.

"...children aren't going away..."

"...they might throw stones at us..."

"...then we'll peck out their eyes, rotten humans, all of them..."

"...fine feast they'll make, when they stop thrashing..."

"...so hard to tell when they're dead sometimes..."

"...chase you off just as you get a mouthful..."

Shuddering, Hermione turned to Draco. "When does this spell wear off?"

He shrugged. "For you, five minutes. For me, half an hour."

Harry was going to ask why that was but the crows drowned him out.

"...insolent children to talk over us..."

"...wasn't going to talk to them anyway..."

"...supper's nearly ready in the forest besides..."

"...owl's still thrashing, not ready yet..."

"...worth the wait, though, worth the wait..."
Draco blinked. "An owl?"

"...it wants our owl?...

"...it wants our feast?...

"...can't join the feast!" One of the crows flapped its wings furiously. "...our feast, our feast!

"...we waited, it's ours, it's ours...

"...insolent children wanting our owl...

And as one, the seven crows flew up into the air and turned a broad circle before flying into the forest. To Harry and Hermione's surprise, Draco ran after them, cursing that he hadn't brought his broom. As the gryffindors struggled to keep up, the slytherin leaped over fallen tree trunks and forced his way through brambles, immediately unclasping his cloak when it caught on a thorn bush. Fortunately the dense trees kept the birds from flying too fast and he managed to keep them in sight until they swooped to the ground in a circle around a large gray owl.

"Get away from him!" Draco yelled as he stumbled into them, nearly hitting one as he swung clumsily at it.

Cawing angrily, they flew out of reach into the branches and stared at him as he knelt beside the owl. His eagle owl lay prone on a patch of dirt and wet leaves, and scratches in the dirt showed where it had both crashed and tried to get up again.

"Ilmauzer..." he whispered, touching its outstretched wing.

Mistaking his touch for a crow's, it gave a loud screech and flapped its wings but couldn't move from its position. He cast a sleep spell and then gently folded its wings and cradled it in his arms.

"Ilmauzer's your owl?" Harry asked, suddenly understanding the slytherin password. "Why is it out here?"

"Pansy must have sent him back," Draco said, and sure enough he spotted a tiny slip of paper attached to the owl's leg.

Shivering, he started walking back to the edge of the forest, ignoring the crows who called him "thief," "evil child" and other epithets. The crows followed him all the way to the edge of the forest, and a couple even tried to fly close and peck at his face, but they were scorched by Harry's incendio spells before they reached him.

Every student stared at him as he walked through the courtyard and into the castle. Whispers started flying and it was impossible not to hear them.

"...look how he's holding that poor owl...

"...a real dark wizard wouldn't care...

"...you think he's a dark wizard?...

"...got to be, you read the Prophet yourself...

"...and you know who his father is...

"...but his father was cleared of all charges again..."
"...Dumbledore wouldn't let him stay if he was dark..."

Let them suspect, he thought. They wouldn't try anything if they only suspected. Too many falsely accused wizards and witches still burned in their collective memory. No one would try anything until they were sure of what he was, and he was determined not to prove it to them. He was mean, yes, petty, spiteful, cruel and sometimes scary. But dark? They weren't sure. Yet.

Madam Pomfrey was alone in her office when he walked in and set Ilmauzer on the nearest bed. Startled at seeing an owl in her hospital, she rushed over and looked down at both it and Draco.

"You should've taken it to Hagrid," she scolded. "I treat people, not--"

"I don't trust him with Ilmauzer," Draco said, not budging an inch. "There's got to be something you can do."

Staring at him for a moment, she hesitated before snapping out "Malfoys!" and went digging around in the cabinet behind her desk.

Something soft was pushed into his hands, and he looked up at Harry, then back down at his cloak. "You picked it up," he said, a little surprised.

"On the way back," Harry said. "You didn't look like you'd remember."

After shaking it free of leaves and ice, Draco draped it over his cold owl and spread it evenly so it wouldn't ruffle the feathers. Ilmauzer visibly relaxed as he warmed up.

"You really care about it, don't you?" Harry said.

"He was a gift from my father," Draco said in a tight voice.

His owl was more than just a gift, though. After all, he wheedled gifts from his parents often. But his father had given him this owl as a surprise, almost like a coming of age present. Those types of gifts were far and few between, and he treasured each sign of his father's pride. Absently he twisted the silver ring on his right hand. Emblazoned with the serpent of his family crest, it was his father's gift to him for his thirteenth birthday.

Despite her repeated protests that Hagrid should be treating the owl, after a few minutes ministering to it Pomfrey stood back and sighed. "Aside from some mice and some rest, it should be fine. I wouldn't move it for awhile, though, let it get some sleep for now." She stared Harry and Hermione. "And you two should get ready for your next class. The bell's going to ring any minute now."

"Already?" Hermione gasped, looking around for the nearest clock. "Oh no, my assignments are all up in the common room."

"You'd better hurry," Pomfrey said.

Hermione dashed out, but Harry hesitated by the bed. "How did you know it was your owl?" he asked Draco. "How'd you even know you should teach us that crow spell today? It doesn't have anything to do with the target spell you taught us."

"I didn't. It was just lucky." Draco glared at Potter but he didn't have the energy to put any real emotion behind it. He shrugged, and he winced as the motion felt stiff and sore. "Go on, you've got classes. Push off already."

"You've got a class, too," Harry insisted.
"No, he doesn't," Pomfrey said, giving Draco a disapproving look for his attitude. "Go on. He's safe here and you don't want to be late."

Looking at Draco with narrowed eyes, Harry left the hospital with one last glance over his shoulder at him. When they were finally alone, Draco heaved and sighed and sat back. "Is it really that obvious?"

"If you know what to look for," Pomfrey said. She found the bottle full of his particular medicine and brought it over to him. "Here. Remember, one sip. And then you'd better lie down and take a nap. What were you doing outside, honestly?"

"Running through the forest without a cloak," he answered. He swallowed without gagging, which after years of swallowing Snape's potions wasn't that difficult.

"Yes, I suppose that would cause an attack," she said, taking the bottle back.

"Do you know what brought my owl down?" Draco asked.

"Probably just flew too far in the cold," she said, but she didn't sound sure. "It might have been jinxed down, though. There's no way to tell now. Come on, lay down. I'll wake you after the last bell."

Not the way he'd wanted to skip charms and potions, but it was better than being miserable in his classes. While she went back to her desk, he finally turned his attention back to his owl and the note around his leg. He slipped it free and took it with him to the bed directly across, and as he lay down, he unrolled the scrap of parchment and read.

*Can't say much. Afraid of wolves. Went warren. Will hop out when the wolf eats. P.*

Their familiar code made a small smile creep over his face, and he clutched Pansy's message protectively under his pillow. His friends were not safe yet but they were still alive and weeks of worrying slipped from his mind. When he fell asleep, for the first time in several days he did not dream.

A few hours later, a rough hand shook him awake. "Get up, you lazy child."

Despite Pomfrey's annoyed chastising going on in the background, there was no mistaking his master's voice. Blinking away sleep, Draco wordlessly offered Severus the slip of paper in his hand as he sat up. If Snape was really upset, then Pansy's note might calm him down a little.

"How long was I asleep?" Draco asked, noticing how far the sun had set.

"Enough to miss two classes," Severus snapped.

"Not long enough," Pomfrey answered, glaring at Snape. She put a hand on Draco's forehead. "No fever or shaking...all right, you can go now. No more running around in the forest, hear me?"

He nodded once and swung his legs over the side of the bed, waiting for Snape's scolding. It didn't come, and as he looked up he was surprised to see his master smiling just a little. "Sever--?"

"Get up," Snape said, already walking towards the door. "And get your owl."

Hurrying like a good apprentice, Draco rushed over to Ilmauzer and pulled off his cloak. To his relief, his owl hooted and stood, stretching its wings out before hopping onto his outstretched arm. When he reached the door, however, he spotted Severus walking not towards the dungeons but
towards the front of the school. He hurried and caught up, grimacing slightly as he kept his arm up under his heavy owl.

"Where are we going?"

"To the headmaster," Snape said. "To deliver this message personally."

Draco's eyes widened and he walked faster so that he could see Severus' face. "But...she wrote that so no one but us would understand it!"

"Exactly."

They came to a stop in front of the headmaster's office and the old password of "cherry bombs" opened the door again. As they went up, Draco heard voices in the office and sighed. Harry and Granger were already there. The Slytherins came in quietly and so heard the tail end of their conversation.

"--sure I saw a message with his owl," Hermione said.

"But then we noticed Draco was shaking," Harry said. "So I forgot all about it."

"'Shaking'?' Hermione asked. "Are you sure? I didn't--"

"Why don't we ask them," Dumbledore said, smiling behind his desk as he waved in the pair. "You've caused quite a stir today, Mr. Malfoy."

"There was indeed a message, sir," Severus said before Draco could reply. He handed the slip of paper to Dumbledore, who scanned it quickly with a furrowed brow.

"Can't say much. Afraid of wolves. Went warren. Will hop when the wolf eats. P." Dumbledore looked up, somewhat baffled. "I can surmise that Miss Parkinson was worried about someone catching the owl, and I assume that the wolf eating refers to the new moon...but went warren? I'm afraid I've never heard that phrase before."

"You wouldn't," Severus said. "It's a phrase peculiar to dark wizards' children, somewhat like nursery rhymes or made up languages. We usually forget them after a few years."

"Ah..." Dumbledore said, as if suddenly understanding something. "This has to do with the way the children are brought up, hidden from the world."

"Specifically, they are treated like animals," Snape said, sneering at Hermione's gasp of revulsion. "Until they are capable of defending themselves, they must be camouflaged like fawns and hidden like rabbits in a warren. It is only very recently that we have begun to let them out to attend school. That is what she meant. They will come out when they feel safe, when the new moon rises and the night is dark enough for them to move."

"But why didn't she just say that?" Harry asked. "Any other dark wizard would have understood it, so what's the point?"

Dumbledore sighed and leaned back in his chair. "That we would not have understood it," he said, staring at the message. "Miss Parkinson is telling us that she does not trust anyone except Mr. Malfoy. Not even me."

"I warned you that the war will not end with the dark lord's death," Snape pressed on. "Even if Lucius leads his knights side by side with your aurors, the moment the death eaters fall, the two sides
will turn on each other just the same as the last thousand years."

"No," Dumbledore said. He took off his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose as if he had a headache. "Worse. The forces of light will be emboldened by victory and the forces of dark will think to strike immediately while we're off balance. The result..." his voice trailed off.

"A butcher's bill I imagine you don't want to pay," Severus said. "Even Hogwarts would not be spared. I guarantee the dark children will turn just as quickly. Their memories are kept fresh by their nightmares."

No one spoke for several seconds. Draco glanced at Hermione, who's face was drawn up as if she was trying to solve a puzzle and realizing she didn't have all the pieces. When he looked at Harry, he blinked. Potter was looking straight at him. For a moment he held his stare, but Draco soon turned away. Harry's damn eyes were so vivid they seemed to look right through him.

"And you?" Dumbledore asked, catching Draco's attention. "You've been a student here for a little over six years now, met the children on the other side, so to speak. Could you kill those who were once your classmates?"

Although he was facing the most powerful wizard of that side, Draco didn't hesitate. Lying to Dumbledore was useless anyway.

"I wouldn't be their classmate anymore," he said. "I'd just be another dark wizard." His voice lowered to a hiss as he thought of the old war flaring up again. "And I'd show them exactly why they're so afraid of us."

Dumbledore nodded as if he'd expected that answer. "Severus, thank you for bringing this to my attention. I would like to speak with you further about this, but not tonight. It's been a long day for all of us."

With a clipped nod, Snape turned to leave. Draco kept his eyes on his master's back so he wouldn't have to look at Potter again. As they left the office, neither of them spoke. Draco had a hundred questions -- how will Pansy get here? why hasn't my father sent a message? do you think my mother's still alive? do you really think we'll go to war again so quickly? -- but he knew his master had no answers and would only be irritated if he asked.

When they reached the stairs, though, Draco walked a little nearer to Severus and held Ilmauzer closer. Classes had not let out too long ago and students still filled the hallways. When everyone saw the pair of Slytherins walking amongst them, conversations stopped and people stared out of the corner of their eyes, watching them go by. Behind their backs, whispers followed.

"...heard he got sick saving his owl..."

"...but he's still a Malfoy..."

"...but they're against You-Know-Who..."

"...maybe..."

"...maybe..."

By the time they reached the dungeons, the silence felt like a tangible relief. Draco shifted Ilmauzer to his other arm and gently stroked its feathers. He knew he should send it up to the owlry but he wanted to keep it close for awhile.
"Well," Snape said, eyeing the bird, "at least your foolishness should subdue the more persistent rumors in the school."

Draco didn't argue. Running into the forbidden forest after a murder of crows was foolish, no matter what his reason. He was lucky that the crows hadn't been lying, or that death eaters weren't lying in wait for him, or simply that he hadn't run into any centaurs.

"What rumors?" he asked.

"You haven't heard them whispering?"

"I hear them, but they stop when they see me."

"They suspect what we are," Severus said. "But because your family is so damn flashy--"

"We're not flashy!" Draco argued.

"Blowing up the manor was low-key, then?" Severus scoffed. "You're as bad as your father. Whenever a Malfoy gets into trouble, it's always spectacular. I'm amazed Lucius managed to keep your family's allegiances a secret for so long. Money can pay people to look the other way but considering the way you two act, you'd have to pay them to be blind."

It was an old argument that Draco had heard Snape have with his father, so he simply kept his mouth shut and let him vent. Once inside the common room, Draco set Ilmauzer to perch on the back of a chair.

"Potter gave me two of Hagrid's hydras earlier today," he said, nodding at the box.

"I saw them," Severus said. "We'll dissect them tomorrow morning. For now, stay inside Slytherin. I'll have your dinner sent here since I know you haven't eaten today."

Stay inside? Draco looked up with wide eyes. "I...I haven't done anything wrong, have I? I know I shouldn't have run into the forest like that but--"

"It's not that," Severus said, pausing near the fireplace. He considered his words carefully before he spoke again. "Today I examined Slughorn's stockroom. Very few of his ingredients have been compromised, but the items tempered with were all earmarked for your potions class."

Several seconds went by before Draco understood the full implication. "You think I'm being targeted...or is someone trying to frame me for an accident?"

"Either would serve the dark lord's purposes," Snape said. "If you were not killed in an accident, you could still be accused of causing it. The rumors against you are already strong, especially outside Hogwarts."

Draco sunk into the nearest chair and rested his head against his hand. "And an incident could bring the good wizards of the world storming into Hogwarts screaming for my head."

"Quite possibly." Severus stared sternly at him. "So in the future, do not try to escape your escorts during the day. If nothing else, they serve as witnesses that you're not jinxing students."

"Wonderful," Draco muttered.

He watched his master leave but didn't move until dinner popped onto the table in front of him several minutes later. He didn't even taste it and finally pushed it aside for Ilmauzer to finish.
The library book he'd checked out earlier lay on the table, so he grabbed it and crossed over to the fireplace where he flopped down on the longest couch, propping himself up on his elbows as he opened *Deceiving the Will o’ the Wisp* to the first page. Eventually he grabbed his cloak and threw it over himself as the night grew cold.

*Chapter One*

A complete understanding of the nature of deception in both animals and wizards is vital to casting deceits and overcoming them. Much like magical camouflage, such as a will o' the wisp's distant flicker, nature's deceptions depend on the intended victim never discovering that an illusion is being perpetrated. If the illusion is even suspected, clues become obvious and the illusion fails. The slightest mistake destroys the whole charade.

Similarly, illusory spells must be carefully balanced between hiding too well or betraying their true nature. A wisp must appear close enough to an unwary traveler as to seem like a friendly lantern but remain at a distance so the traveler never sees its vaporous form. In this manner a wizard conceals his own illusion within his victim's own false perception.

Mere illusion is surpassed by true trickery, however, when the two worlds come together, creating subtle disguises that defy detection and that, even when guessed, do not allow their true nature to be revealed except through the most extraordinary circumstances.
In which Draco is chased through Hogwarts

HOGWARTS POTIONS DISASTER: MALFOY HEIR IMPLICATED

"The Daily Prophet has received disturbing information of not only a horrific explosion during a Hogwarts potions class, but also of a cover-up reaching all the way to headmaster Dumbledore himself. The incident took place nearly three weeks ago but information is only now forthcaming of an explosion of hallucinarium that poisoned an entire class of children, resulting in the hospitalization of two students who did not receive the necessary antidote when their teacher, Horace Slughorn, failed to produce enough in the event of just such an emergency. Information on other injuries is sketchy, but interviews with students confirm that several children were burned by incendio spells and one student was nearly bludgeoned to death by a chair in the hands of a panicking child.

"Everyone was screaming and crying," said one student who wishes to remain anonymous. "I just remember a loud bang and then the whole room went white."

That white color was a dense cloud of hallucinarium which quickly swept over the students. Hallucinarium, a poison that creates vivid delusions that have been known to drive wizards mad, is not covered in any school textbook, and indeed sources confirm that the lesson was unapproved by the Ministry of Magic's Department of Educational Oversight. This reporter wonders what other lessons might be going on at Hogwarts that have not been approved, placing students at great risk in the name of an unofficial war declared only in the heads of the headmaster and faculty.

More disturbing, however, is that Draco Malfoy, only son of former death eater and Hogwarts's governor Lucius Malfoy, was not only present during the class but also insisted on participating as Harry Potter's partner. No word on whether he was affected by the explosion and resultant cloud of poison, but sources confirm that he was very close to the initial blast. Whether this was an attempt on Potter's life remains to be seen, but little else will be revealed to the public as Dumbledore has only released a short statement invoking his rights as headmaster to conduct the investigation himself, and thus shielding Malfoy from questioning and disallowing impartial Ministry officials into Hogwarts.

The only reason this disaster has come to light is due entirely to a handful of Hogwarts students who bravely broke their silence. We can only hope that no further harm comes to the students, or indeed, that no harm has already befallen our precious children.

Repeated requests for interviews with the Hogwarts faculty, Draco Malfoy or Albus Dumbledore have gone unanswered. If you have any information, however scant, about this or other disasters in the school, please owl Ms. Thomasina Brandlehanks, the Department for Educational Investigatory Services, Second Office, or Rita Skeeter, Daily Prophet, Lead Office. Names will be kept confidential if you are afraid of reprisal."

Draco tossed the newspaper aside. As annoying as it was, he had to admit he was impressed that Dumbledore had kept the attack a secret for so long. He'd already been assured by the headmaster that he was safe from attack in Hogwarts, at least as far as enraged parents or the ministry was concerned, but Severus had told him that Dumbledore could be excruciatingly optimistic sometimes and he'd damn well better keep alert.
Fortunately the only things that might hurt him right now were safely on the other side of the great hall where Hagrid held his class. Each student had a leash with three collars and tried to coax their hydras into slithering across the room to the saucers of milk set for them. No one had succeeded, and most of them were holding their leashes out at arm's length so that the hydras couldn't bite them.

Alone in a corner of the Slytherin table which had been pushed up against the wall to make room, he sat hunched over a bronze coin. He'd already pulverized the spare human teeth that Snape had given him and he was now busy melting the surface of the coin and sprinkling it with fine powder before it could cool again, laboriously creating an amulet that would protect against hexes meant to mutilate. Four finished amulets rattled in his pocket. He had one more to do before he could start on his next project, and then with any luck Severus could fence them in a dark arts shop and he'd have spending money again.

When the bell sounded, Draco didn't have to hide his work from the students as they rushed by. Everyone knew by now that he was helping Snape supply Dumbledore with potions, and any odd work in his hands was probably meant to help aurors against the death eaters. As long as he carefully concealed any obvious dark ingredients like human body parts, no one was the wiser. And no one could tell one white powder from the next.

He hardly noticed Ron walking behind him with a disdainful hiss. Since Snape told him to stay put in his classes, he was stuck listening to the redhead's insults and comments every day.

"Found a coin?" Ron asked. "So desperate for money you're picking up stray knuts?"

"Working, actually. And how was your favorite class?" Draco asked, sliding the coin out of Ron's sight. "Better than useless charms?"

"You're the one who likes playing with snakes. I can't believe I'm stuck babysitting you, Malfoy," Ron said, spitting out his name like an insult.

"Really?" Draco smiled and looked up from his seat. "Then why don't you just leave Hogwarts like your brothers did? They're managing to survive with only a handful of OWLs between them. Or are you afraid you're as worthless outside of school as inside?"

Ron's hands curled into fists, but before he could take a swing a hand fell on his shoulder and he turned in surprise. "Harry?"

"Don't hit him," Harry said, dropping his books on the floor. "It'll only get you into trouble."

"Yes," Draco said cheerfully. "Don't hit the evil Malfoy, I'm actually producing something."

With a furious scowl, Ron stomped off, leaving them alone in the great hall. Harry sat down across from Draco and set his potions book in front of himself.

"Tell me, Malfoy," Harry said, "do you try to be a rotten snake or does it just come naturally to you?"

With a small flourish, Draco flicked his wand over the molten coin and cooled it instantly.

"You'd be surprised," he mumbled to himself, pocketing the coin.

The last step in the process was to soak it in blood for a day, but that would have to wait until he was alone. For now he couldn't show off dark magic ingredients where students might see.

At least spending his spare time in the great hall was useful. He banged his hand on the table and
instantly lunch appeared before him. Since he often missed breakfast, eating lunch made working with Severus every evening more hospitable. Neither of them was even-tempered to begin with and it didn't help that Draco tended to become irritated when hungry. And now that he was eating both lunch and dinner, he was starting to regain some of the weight he'd lost in the past few months.

To his surprise, a second dish popped up in front of Harry. Draco blinked. "What the...?"

Without looking up, Harry put his book aside. "Dumbledore doesn't want you alone during lunchtime, so I'm eating now. Dobby didn't mind making mine early."

"Dobby?" Draco asked, narrowing his eyes. "Our house elf?"

"Your escaped elf," Harry corrected.

"He's working the kitchens here?" Draco grimaced and pushed his plate away untouched. "Damn, this is probably poisoned."

"Oh honestly." Harry switched their plates so he had Draco's and Draco had his. "He doesn't care that you're here."

"Mm." Draco eyed the plate before him but finally caved in and began eating. "Bet he's told all our secrets to anyone who cared to listen."

"It took more time to smash his head against the wall than tell what he knew," Harry said. "He told me you were all dark wizards. And that you treated him horribly."

House elves are just there to clean and be kicked, Draco thought, but he didn't say anything because he wanted to hear what else Dobby had said.

"He also said you were careful to keep your house elves from certain places. They weren't allowed in the chamber under the dining room, and they weren't allowed in the bathroom while you were inside. And that every few years, you or your father would go into the biggest bathroom in the manor, lock the door and not come out for a week."

Draco tried not to look worried, but Harry noticed anyway. The slightly widened eyes, the quick picking at his food and the way his arrogance slipped off of his face were all subtle but clear signs to anyone who'd watched the youngest Malfoy for as long as he had.

"He also said," Harry continued, "that he thinks that's why you stayed over at Hogwarts that one Christmas break. Something happened and you couldn't ride the train home."

"Damned unnatural elf," Draco muttered.

"He's earning wages," Harry said cheerfully. "Just a galleon a week, but it's something."


"Must you be so petty?" Harry said. "At least they're not as shallow as you, always bragging about how much money you have."

For a moment Draco looked up at Harry with wide eyes. When as he realized that Harry was serious, he started laughing. "Oh, don't be simple, Potter. You think they're less materialistic than we are? What, that they're pure-hearted paupers with the quiet dignity of the poor?"
"They don't go waving their money in other people's faces," Harry said, remembering the way the Malfoys had supplied the Slytherin quidditch team with brooms.

"Only because they don't have any money to wave around. Good Lord, you're serious, aren't you?" Draco smiled in wonder and shook his head. "You can't tell me that in all the years you've known him, Ronald Weasley hasn't once complained about being poor? And I'm not talking about a passing annoyance with poverty, either. The boy really takes being poor as a personal insult."

As satisfying as Harry's sullen glare was, Draco took more pleasure in pulling Potter's emotional strings. After all the years Voldemort spent waving around curses, all it took to rattle the champion of the wizarding world was some fine goading.

"Don't forget the twins, either, with their gaudy robes. So nouveau-riche it's painful to look at them."

Struggling to keep his temper in check, Harry clenched his fists at his sides. "At least they didn't need to buy their way onto a quidditch team," he snapped.

Eyes widening, Draco clutched the table's edge so hard that his fingernails dug into the wood. "How dare you," he hissed. "I earned my place--damn near broke an arm doing it--you think it was easy being the youngest member on that team--?"

Harry sat back slightly. He'd expected Draco to get angry but not to sputter in rage. His pale face flushed light pink and his gray eyes gleamed, reflecting the cold sky through the windows.

"Hit a nerve, Malfoy?" Harry said. "Why else would your father buy brooms for the whole team?"

"To give us an edge," Draco snapped. "To make good with their parents, to say he was supporting school programs, not to mention one hell of a tax write off--" He cut himself off with a deep breath to calm down. Staring hard at Harry, he continued much more evenly. "You'd better re-think that accusation, Potter. If I'd bought my way onto the team, then what would that say about your flying when it's so hard to win against us?"

"That you're in love with cheating," Harry said readily. "And you are, don't deny it."

"Cheating's half the fun," Draco said without an ounce of guilt. "Has perfect Potter never broken the rules?"

"Not in quidditch," Harry said. "It's better to play fair."

"You'll never get far with that attitude. If the world was fair, you'd have your parents, I'd have my manor, and the ministry would be nothing but burnt cinders."

As Harry shook his head in disgust, Draco glanced out the window. Thick clouds covered the sky but here and there the sun poked through, making the view look a little like the gray lake through Slytherin's glass wall. He rolled his shoulders as if working out a cramp. For some reason he felt edgy, but he didn't know why. It was probably just from sitting next to Potter, but it didn't feel the same.

"And 'mudbloods'?" Harry asked. "Would they be dead in your 'fair' world?"

Draco laughed but didn't look down. "Even in a fair world, I suppose they wouldn't simply roll over. No matter, I'm sure we could get rid of them one way or another. They're still human, after all. They'd make wonderful spare parts."
"I just don't get you," Harry said, pushing his half-eaten plate away as he lost his appetite. "Why do you hate muggle-borns so much? Why is being pureblood so important?"

His smile disappearing, Draco let his gaze slip from the window to the table, staring at nothing as he thought for several seconds. "Have you ever seen a squib child?"

Frowning, Harry shook his head. "What's that got to do--"

"A child born to wizards, yet can't work magic himself," Draco continued as if Harry hadn't interrupted. "They grow up watching their parents perform little miracles as if it's nothing special. Their parents apparate through the town, make inanimate objects come to life. They read books that write when spoken to and play with toys that talk back.

"And as the years go by, the parents notice that nothing happens around the child. Little accidents that happen around the other children don't happen around theirs. They start wondering, they try to provoke a reaction, they try to find some glimmer, some hidden spark that makes their child magical. And there's nothing. All they can do is send their magicless child away into the muggle world, where there are no miracles in the kitchen and fairies are only in storybooks."

Harry stared at him. "It's not bad not having magic. You make it sound like the muggle world is lifeless."

"Potter..." Draco looked up at him. "How do you tell your child that you can fly on a broom but he can't?"

The great hall was silent for a long time as neither of them spoke. Draco pushed his own plate aside, and softly the plates disappeared.

"For some reason," Draco said, "as wizards marry muggles, more and more squibs are being born. We don't know why, it just is. What we do know is that it's starting to affect pureblood families who never married outsiders. And that threat to our lineage is the final twig off the broom. We might have stayed on the fringes of our world if only the ministry left us in peace, but if the mixing of wizards and muggles affects us no matter what we do, then we have no choice."

"But you're killing muggles and muggleborns," Harry said. "It's not fair to stop them if they're in love."

Draco shrugged. "And there's the problem. Your kind is willing to consign your children to magicless lives. My kind is not."

"It can't be that simple," Harry argued, "not when you said this war's lasted hundreds of years."

"Of course it isn't that simple, there are other reasons. You only asked why being pureblood is important."

Draco stood up and stretched, arching his back out of the cramped position he'd been in while ignoring Hagrid's class. He didn't have textbooks or supplies for any of his classes, just his wand and his dark arts work, and he waited as Harry gathered up his homework and books.

A shadow in the window caught his eye and he looked up, a horrible chill running down his spine as he stared at the small scrap of black in the sky. He didn't know why he'd spotted it, hardly bigger than a distant raven above the forest, but it flew straighter than any bird and occasionally dipped before rising again, as if gliding instead of flying. He took a step back. The tiny shadow, all but concealed in the clouds, grew larger and larger, never turning away from Hogwarts. A second shadow appeared at its side, drafting behind in the wind.
"Malfoy?" Harry came around the end of the table and followed his look. "What are those? Big ravens?"

"Not ravens..." Draco whispered.

His blood felt like ice, his breath turned shallow, and yet he felt no urge to run. In fact, running felt like a bad idea. He looked around for a safe place to hide, something small and dark and close to the ground, but with the furniture pushed aside to make room for Hagrid's class, he couldn't see any suitable hiding spots.

And then the first shadow came out of the clouds with wings unfurled, roaring so loud that even in the distance it sounded like thunder. The second dragon followed with its own roar, and then they drew their wings in tight and swooped in so fast that Draco saw the glimmer of their scales before Harry grabbed his arm and yanked him towards the door.

Halfway there, the great hall's outer wall exploded inwards and Draco stumbled to his knees as the floor shook. Stone cracked as the dragons' claws slammed onto the floor, and as they shook their heads free of dust, Draco stared at them with wide eyes. Their heads nearly touched the ceiling, their tails whipped in a frenzy and their jaws spit small flames of annoyance as their wings bumped the walls. On their armor-like scales, someone had written long strings of runes that crisscrossed their snouts, backs and chests.

"Get up," Harry whispered harshly, dragging him to his feet. "Run!"

Draco didn't move, paralyzed by fear. Their claws cracked the floor and their teeth flashed like ivory knives.

"Dammit," Harry cursed, trying to pull him to the door. "Since when do you have trouble running?"

Drawn by the sound of Harry's voice, both dragons snapped their heads around and stared not at the Boy Who Lived, but at the blonde beside him. Their eyes narrowed and the floor shook again as they moved towards him, roaring and shaking loose dust and mortar from the ceiling. The big one lowered its head and breathed out a huge stream of flame directly at him, and all the while Draco couldn't look away.

"Scellean impervius!"

A shell of white light enveloped him and Harry and the flame passed harmlessly over them. As soon as the fire dissipated, a strong hand grabbed his arm and pulled him through the door, then pushed him in the direction of the hall. Draco turned and found Severus with Dumbledore behind him sealing the door.

"Stupid child!" Severus raged, and he grabbed Draco's shoulders and shook him once. "You're not an animal. Snap out of it and run!"

Hesitating as Severus pushed him back and went to help the headmaster, Draco had a brief thought that, as strong as they were, they wouldn't be able to hold out against two dragons for long. Harry's furious pulling made him turn and follow, but once they reached the stairs, an immense crash made them both look back.

"Stupid child!" Severus raged, and he grabbed Draco's shoulders and shook him once. "You're not an animal. Snap out of it and run!"

The door and the wall holding it lay in rubble on the floor and both Severus and Dumbledore were on the other side of the dragons as they jostled each other trying to get out. A purple light struck the larger dragon's eyes and it reared backwards, landing out of sight in the great hall, but that gave the small one the chance to lunge forward and race towards the boys. Finally Draco felt a spike of
human fear.

"Draco, for God's sake--" Harry started, but when he turned he saw that he was standing alone.

Already on the staircase, Draco ran up the steps but stopped suddenly, nearly losing his balance as the staircase turned and swooped towards a different door. He looked over his shoulder at the same time the dragon inhaled for another jet of flame. With no time to second-guess himself, Draco looked over the edge and leaped off the staircase into the air.

His timing off by a second, he slammed sideways into the staircase one flight below, then nearly slid off the steps worn slick over the years. Grabbing the last bit of railing, he hung on by one hand and looked up. Harry stood at the very top of the stairwell screaming and waving his arms and doing his best to get the dragon's attention, but it wasn't looking at anything except Draco. The staircase nearly jolted him off as it turned again, and he gasped as the edge moved towards another door, threatening to crush him if he didn't move.

Letting go as the dragon plunged over the side, he landed on a walkway just beneath and sprang sideways through the doorway. Behind him, two staircases shattered as the dragon broke through, catching itself on the walls before it could fall too far. Draco stood and ran down the hall, losing his footing whenever the dragon grabbed the wall hard enough to shake the castle. He turned another corner as the dragon burst through the doorway and started after him again.

It would be damn ironic, he thought, if he was killed by the animal he was named after. If he survived this war, he hoped he'd have the sense to name his children after something more peaceful. Pegasus, maybe. He didn't care if it sounded stupid, since he was sure that he could handle being chased by a pegasus much better than the monster rounding the corner he'd passed a second ago.

Surprised he had made this far without being burned, he put on a burst of speed when he saw the angled corridor that led to the dungeons. The ceiling dropped a few feet and the walls narrowed considerably. He didn't dare turn around to see how close the dragon was, and he didn't have to. Scales sliding against stone told him that the dragon was having a hard time squeezing behind him, but the sound of stone flakes hitting the floor meant that it was pushing through regardless. Hearing it inhale again, he sprinted the last few feet to the bend and leaped to the right. Fire passed over his back as he hit the ground, but the dragon couldn't breathe deep in the cramped halls and the scant flames couldn't even singe his clothes.

Thinking he might be able to lose it in the dungeons, Draco took several winding twists and paths and started to forget where he was. After two more turns, he ran face first into a brick wall and landed on his back on the floor. Groaning, he held his head and stared dumbfounded at the wall. Impossible, he thought. He knew he hadn't taken any wrong turns, he knew the dungeons inside and out, at least as much as anyone could considering how often it moved.

"Not fair!" he cried, painfully getting to his feet. "How am I supposed to get away if you move!" The dragon's labored breathing and heavy steps echoed around him, impossible to pinpoint. Tired and winded, he leaned on the wall and moaned. "God, even the castle wants me dead..."

He landed on the floor doubled up in pain before he realized that the dragon had been on the other side of the impromptu wall and punched through, hitting him at the same time. The thought that the castle had tried to protect him disappeared as a long spiny arm shot through the narrow passage and landed on his chest, claws on either side of his head screeching on the stone floor as it dragged him closer. He tried to push the paw off but it didn't budge. In a few seconds, he'd be close enough for it to bite.

His gray eyes met the dragon's green, and for a moment they stared at each other. Draco saw nothing
but hate and anger, a consuming desire to destroy him that had nothing to do with the runes written on its scales. Though he was certain the dragon was a tool of Voldemort's, he knew that if this creature had known of his existence, it would have hunted him just as doggedly. As before in the great hall, Draco felt no urge to run, simply to hide, and now that no one was screaming and distracting him, he gave into the urge and let his instincts swallow him.

The world changed. The dragon grew a thousand times larger, the ceiling looked as far away as the sky. Even his cloak and robes became cavernous and he slipped out of them with ease, slithering across the floor and into a tiny dark hole barely large enough for him. Winding into a coil, he lay his head down on his white scales and watched the dragon rip into his robes, biting them furiously without realizing he was no longer inside.

Not sure how much time had passed, he glanced sideways down the hall when he heard footsteps but he didn't move for fear of drawing attention to himself. Several pairs of feet ran by him and a slew of spells silenced the dragon and held it still.

"Oh Merlin, I think it killed him," someone said. To Draco's new shape, her voice sounded as if she was underwater.

"There's no blood," someone else said. "I'm sure he got away somehow, Severus."

His master ignored them and walked up to the sleeping dragon, pulling the cloak and robes from its grasp and shaking them out. Other voices asked why he was doing that but he didn't respond.

"Bloody hell," came Ron's voice, and Draco would've hissed at him but he was afraid of being spotted. "You think he's running around starkers?"

"Of course not," Severus snapped. "Fan out. He must have hidden somewhere."

Once the last seals were placed on the dragon, everyone walked away, leaving only Severus nearby. When the last footsteps faded and he was sure no one could hear him, the potions master looked around at the floor.

"Draco?" he whispered. "Are you in here?"

Draco didn't move except to close his eyes. He couldn't stand the thought of his master finding him like this, tiny and fragile and weak. He was almost of age, he would finish his apprenticeship soon, and here he was hiding like a pathetic child. And after Severus had said he wasn't an animal, too.

"Draco, I know you can't have gone far," Severus said, his voice turning impatient. "Answer me, damn you. I don't have time to search for a wayward snake."

"Who are you talking to?" Harry asked, quietly coming up the hall.

"Ah, now you show up," Severus said, drawing himself to his full height. "You are supposed to be with him at all times."

"Come off it, even the dragon couldn't keep up." Harry gave a humorless laugh. "I don't know anyone who can keep pace with him once he gets going."

"So what, then? You ducked into a classroom and huddled with the rest of the students?"

"No," Harry said, audibly bristling. "I nearly got roasted when that big one charged again. When you let it by, as I recall. Too busy ducking in a corner?"
"Don't you dare call me a coward," Severus hissed. "That the headmaster and I got that one sealed by ourselves is damn near a miracle."

"Oh, did you strain a muscle attacking it from behind?"

The two continued arguing, their voices growing more and more heated as they tightened their grips on their wands, echoing painfully on the stones. Draco turned away from the noise and winced and wished they would both go away.

At once, Harry stopped arguing and looked around. "Draco?"

Severus quieted. "You heard him?"

"Is he in here?" Harry looked up and down the corridor but saw no one. He waved his arms around to see if Draco was invisible.

"Draco Malfoy, I know you're in here," Severus said, kneeling and ignoring Harry as best he could. He lowered his voice even more when he heard footsteps on either side of the walls. As loathe as he was to let Potter in on the secret, he had no choice but to act quickly or else the entire school would know before the day's end. "Come out before anyone else comes back."

Peeking out first even though he knew they were alone, Draco slid out of his hiding spot and darted across the floor, hissing at how cold it was. He raced up Severus' offered hand and coiled his tail once around his master's wrist to steady himself.

Beside them, Harry gasped and leaned closer. "That's him? That little white snake? How did he...?"

"You must not tell anyone about this," Severus whispered. "Anyone at all. They'll kill him if they find out."

Hardly paying attention, Harry watched as Draco reared up and looked back at him. To his new eyes, Draco saw the world in stark black and white, and Harry was a bunch of lines and shadows. Snape pulled his hand a few inches from Harry and Draco extended his wings for balance, wishing his master would take him back to the Slytherin common room so he could figure out how to turn back again.

"Why would they kill him?" Harry whispered. "He's so...his wings are bloody gorgeous."

Draco blinked and stared at him, tilting his head curiously. Gingerly flexing his wings, they looked so thin as to be transparent with slender bones arching over them to give them shape. So delicate that they were more of a handicap than a means of flight, he folded them up with a little puff of pride. Useless or not, Harry was right about them being gorgeous.

"Oh, for the love of..." Severus drew Draco close to his chest and concealed him with a flourish of his robe.

Even though he was used to his master's brusqueness, Draco found that being hidden away stung his pride. He coiled up in Snape's hand and wished he could hear what the two were saying, but all he heard were their voices muffled through the cloth.

Intense vertigo made him sway as Snape suddenly lowered his hand and set him on one of the couches in the Slytherin common room. His cloak was also dropped onto the corner and he slithered into its warm folds and disappeared, barely poking his nose out to see his master and, to his surprise, Harry beside him.
"Don't you dare hide again," Severus snapped. "Change back immediately, or I'll have another set of wyvern's claws for my potions."

"Wyvern?" Harry asked, kneeling down to peer into the shadow Draco was hiding in. "Is that just a winged snake?"

"Of course not," Severus said, glaring sideways at him. "A wyvern is fallere draconis, a false dragon. That's why those two Welsh Greens were after him so badly."

Inside the cloak, Draco realized that Snape wasn't going to take Harry out and give him some time to change back. With a hiss that sounded suspiciously like a sigh, he burrowed under the cloak and concentrated. As much as he didn't want to face either of them right now, especially when Harry was making his master even angrier, he didn't have a choice.

He didn't like changing, either. Without the distraction of a dragon trying to eat him, he felt his skin writhe and tingle uncomfortably as his body reformed itself, as if the dark magic that always threatened to swallow him had turned tangible and covered him like oil. Curled up in a tight ball under his cloak, he coughed a few times and slowly reached up to push the edge from his face. Slytherin's torches glowed softly and the air felt warm, but all the same he started to tremble. His side hurt from where he'd landed on the staircase, his arm hurt from holding him up, and his chest and head ached from the fall and the dragon's claws on top of him. Escaping from dragons didn't compare to running through the forest, but it hurt all the same.

"Here," Severus said, pushing a bottle against his hand. "Take that before it gets worse."

Blinking against the light, Draco sat up to take a sip and resealed the bottle before he looked at the label. He raised an eyebrow at Pomfrey's medicinal mix that wasn't to be taken from her office. She probably didn't even know his master had snuck it out. He meant to put it on the end table near his head, but his hand slipped and the toppled sideways. He winced, waiting for a crash, but instead he watched Potter catch it and set it back on the table.

Draco looked away. Hard to be arrogant and superior when he lay naked save for his cloak, too sickly to coordinate himself, about to appeal to Potter's damn mercy.

"You won't tell anyone, will you?" he whispered.

"That you're an animagus?" Harry asked. "I don't think anyone would kill you for it."

Biting back an insult, Draco instead snorted. "I'm not an animagus," he said. "I'm a half-breed. There's a difference."

"'Half-breed'?" Harry echoed. "Wait, so you're not a pureblood?"

Groaning in frustration, Severus looked down at Harry as if he was Neville on a particularly bad day. "I refuse to stand here and educate you in basic wizarding culture. I'll be outside getting rid of those dragons. Draco, make sure he doesn't touch anything," he said and walked out of Slytherin, leaving them alone.

"Could've left me something to wear," Draco mumbled, tugging the cloak securely around himself. But he knew that an angry Severus was not a considerate Severus and he was probably lucky Snape hadn't shouted at him in front of Potter. He spotted his shredded robes on the table so he reached over and fished his wand out, delighted that it was intact. A quick engorgio charm made the cloak twice its size, easily larger than the blankets on his bed.

"If you're not a pureblood," Harry continued with a look of disgust, "then you're an absolute bloody
hypocrite. The way you talk about killing muggles and hating muggleborns, and then being one yourself--"

"I'm not a mudblood," Draco growled. "If anything, my blood's more pure than almost anyone else's."

"How the hell do you figure that?" Harry asked. "You're half animal--"

"Blooded Malfoys have been half-breed wyverns for over eight hundred years," Draco said. "And we never married anything except other purebloods since then."

"That makes no sense, it would've bred out by now! And if you're part animal, how on earth can you say you're not a muggle--" Harry suddenly stopped and considered what he'd just said.

"Starting to think?" Draco asked snidely. "Try not to hurt yourself."

"So...being part animal is better than being part muggle?" Harry asked.

"Not just any animal. Animals that are powerful reservoirs of pure, wild magic, like wyverns, dragons...I think there was a family that had thestral in their blood. If the woman can survive the initial mating and birth, that magic becomes tied to the family."

"Why would anyone do that?"

"For one thing, no Malfoy child has ever been born a squib. And our blood's powerful enough to keep us from becoming inbred. If some of us purebloods didn't have wild magic in us, we'd have all gone the way of Salazar's descendents."

Harry stiffened noticeably at the mention of Salazar Slytherin's family but he didn't say anything about them. "Ron's a pureblood," he said slowly. "I've never seen him change."

"Well, of course not," Draco said as if it was the most obvious thing. "He might be pureblood, but he's certainly no dark wizard. This is purely our custom."

"And that's why you'll be attacked if anyone finds out," Harry said. "They'd know for sure you're dark."

Draco waved his hand idly and fidgeted on the couch, but then grabbed his cloak before it could slip down too far. He sighed and wished he hadn't made Severus so upset.

"But it still makes no sense," Harry said. "If my kind...wait, I can't keep saying my kind. If you're dark, then do you call my kind light wizards?"

Irritated at all the questioning of aspects of his life that he took for granted, Draco turned testy. "No, we call you blood-traitors and mudbloods."

Harry scowled. "You peevish little...fine. Light wizards it is." Gratified to see Draco scowl back, Harry continued. "If light wizards can turn into animagi, why wouldn't they also have more half-breed?"s?"

"You've seen how they treat the half-giant idiot," Draco said. "And you've seen how they treat centaurs. Being half-wyvern is no better in their eyes."

"Or yours," Harry said. "You make fun of Hagrid all the time for being half-giant."

"Yeah, well, he makes it so easy," Draco said with a smile. "And it pisses you off, so that's even
"Better."

"But why would you--?"

"What, you think I'd lay off him just 'cause I'm half-breed, too?" Draco laughed. "Half-breed solidarity? First off, my own blood is far more refined. The wyvern aspect runs over eight centuries back, while his giant blood is only one generation apart. Besides, dark magic comes first, and he badmouths us every chance he gets...never mind how often he drops into Gowdie's Gold to roll the bones."

"Gowdie's...what?"

"It's a casino in Knockturn Alley. Really, Potter, all the rule-breaking you love to do and yet you've never been through there?" He shrugged and leaned back on the couch, resting his head on the padded arm. Pomfrey's magic worked wonders but the chase, his transformation and the waning trembling still left him exhausted and he looked forward to sleeping through the afternoon. "Your loss. The Devil's Delights beats anything the Hogsmeade candy shoppes have."

Neither spoke for a moment. Draco wondered why Potter hadn't left yet, but after two dragons making swiss cheese out of the castle, keeping Potter around was a good idea. The Gryffindor could tell everyone that the dragons had been out for Draco's blood alone, and that the whole thing wasn't an elaborate Malfoy plot to destroy the world. The Prophet would probably still try to link him to the dark lord, and maybe this time Dumbledore wouldn't be able to keep the ministry out of it. Of course Harry would have a paragraph devoted to his heroic attempts to save the school, going so far as to protect the ungrateful Malfoy brat.

He glanced at Harry who sat staring at the lake looking lost in thought. "Potter?"

"What?"

"At the staircase, you were waving and screaming like a madman."

"I was not! I was trying to get the dragon's attention," Harry said.

"Why?"

Harry hesitated. His silence stretched longer as he thought, and after a minute he still showed no sign of giving an answer.

"You couldn't have stopped it on your own," Draco said.

"Everyone says I have a hero complex," Harry mumbled.

"Tch. Some hero," Draco scoffed. "It didn't even look at you."

"Look, I just didn't want it eating you," Harry said. "You're helping Snape with those potions, you nearly blew up Voldemort, you've been teaching me and Hermione, and I know how you hate teaching her but you're still doing it...I just didn't want you getting eaten by a dragon. Is that such a big deal you have to question it?"

For the Boy Who Lived to save the Boy Who Lived to Make Potter's Life Miserable, for a blood traitor to save a dark wizard, for Potter to save Lucius Malfoy's son, yes of course, it was such a big deal it was practically world-shattering, but Draco didn't say any of that. He just looked down at the floor and mumbled a quick "thank you." And before Potter could think of anything to say to that, Draco turned around to face the back of the couch and drew the cloak up around his face.
"I'm going to sleep," he said. "You don't have to stay here, you can go join your friends."

"Wait--" Harry said, but the sound of the main door opening made him look up.

Striding into the common room with his arms bloody to the elbow, Severus walked past him and used Draco's tattered robes as rags to clean off the blood. Several coins clinked onto the table and Severus glanced at them.

"You can soak those in dragon's blood tomorrow," Snape said to his apprentice, not caring that he was pretending to be asleep. "They'll fetch a higher price then."

"You killed them?" Harry asked, eyeing the stains on Snape's hands.

"The headmaster slaughtered the first one, but I did the second. The dark lord made a grave tactical error in sending us dragons. There are so many potions we can create from them." Severus glanced at Draco and then Harry. "You're no longer needed and Miss Granger suspects I've fed you to a dragon. Get going."

With a last futile look at Draco, Harry got up and left. Snape watched him leave and then set a charm on the door so that it wouldn't open to anyone else even if given the password. Another spell unlocked one of the antique cabinets across the room, revealing a small bar of alcohol that Severus now helped himself to. After fighting two dragons, he imagined he'd feel better after a stiff drink.

"Get some sleep," Snape said, draining his glass. "We'll start stripping those dragons down to parts in a few hours, once the runes have been dispelled."

"Is that how they got passed the wards?" Draco asked, not moving.

"We won't know until the headmaster and McGonagall are done examining them, but that is a fair guess."

He locked the cabinet back up and straightened his robes. They were singed, but he didn't have time to change them yet. He still had work to do sealing up a much draftier castle.

"Congratulations on surviving," he said after a moment. "I don't think I could have faced Lucius with your ashes in a jar and an apology."

Draco closed his eyes and sighed. "I'm sorry."

"For what?" Severus asked. "Nearly letting those things burn you to a crisp? Hiding from your master? Letting a Malfoy secret slip to Potter?"

"No...I'm apologizing to my children, if I live long enough to have any," Draco said. "This is going to be one hell of a nightmare for them."

Intending to leave, Severus walked by him but paused at the steps. "You know they're not nightmares," he said softly. "They're memories."

Memories passed down through blood, Draco knew. His mother had been the one to tell him that the strange people in his dreams and the terrible things that happened to him were not the products of reading scary books before bedtime.

"I know," he said. "And that makes them worse."
In which Draco gets covered in dragon's blood

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The elves served breakfast in the common rooms of each house since two dead dragons currently filled the great hall. Draco stared at the smaller of the two, his grimoire in his hands. Only a few hours ago those sharp teeth had nearly devoured him and, even though it was dead, the body still unnerved him.

"Serves you right, you ugly bastard," he muttered and turned away.

The Slytherin dining table, the only one to survive the attack since it had been pushed against the wall, provided plenty of space for the endless jars that his master had set out. Draco nearly laughed when he saw the size of them. Most were as big as first year students and a few could have held Crabbe or Goyle easily. Using such large containers for dragon parts bordered on ridiculous. Dragon anatomy often sold in small bottles for high prices. This felt a little like pouring expensive perfume into buckets.

The table also gave him a place to set his grimoire. He pushed a few jars out of the way and set his book down, then bent and gently blew on the lock holding it shut. The lock clicked softly and the thick belt pulled open on its own. He turned over the cover and flipped the yellowed pages to the table of contents, scanning the handwritten notes that divided the book into categories and chapters. In sharp cursive written by some distant ancestor, he found the section on dragons and turned to that page.

Diagrams of several dragons lay spread before him, also hand drawn and meticulously labeled. He found the Welsh Green dragon and studied both the parts and the margin notes recommending the best methods for dissection. He sighed as he read the long column.

"I don't care how much you sigh," Severus said as he came up behind him, placing a rolled bundle onto the table. "You're not getting out of this."

"It's not that," Draco said. "I just don't think I'll be of any help. I've never done this before and it looks so detailed and complicated."

"It is complicated," Snape said. He unrolled the bundle to reveal a long line of oddly curved black knives that would have sent normal wizards scurrying back in revulsion. "But you shouldn't feel as if this is a test of your skills. I've never taken a dragon apart either."

"Never?" Draco's eyes widened. "Mother's done several before. Well, the pieces anyway."

Snape shot him a look. "I admit, Narcissa's expertise in the illegal dragon trade would make her a more suitable tutor for this. Of course, she's never done a complete dragon and hates to get her hands dirty, so you'd still be doing all the cutting. Now take this--" he pushed a jar with a brass top into Draco's hands "--and start with its teeth."

Wincing, Draco turned and trudged back to the dragon, kneeling beside its jaws. Its mouth was open enough for him to remove the teeth without trouble, but he cast a quick risana spell to open the jaws wider and then cast a bracchia charm to hold them secure. With a deep breath to steady himself, he grabbed the nearest fang and dug his knife down along its root.

The head suddenly trembled violently and tilted towards him. Dropping his knife with a shriek, he
scrambled backwards and hit his head on the table's edge. Severus turned with his wand out, but he paused and watched the head thrash a few more times, finally coming to rest with a high pitched crack as its jaws broke against the bracchia charm. Snape lowered his wand.

"So they bite reflexively even when dead," he murmured. "Fascinating."

On the floor at his master's feet, Draco started to breathe again. "Fascinating...right."

"Well, go on," Severus said. "I don't think it'll give you any more trouble."

Draco looked up at him in shock. "You can't honestly expect me to go stick my hand in there!"

"I do indeed," Severus said. "Now get to it. We won't stop until we've finished this one."

Draco would have argued more but he knew his master hadn't slept the night before and an irate Snape was not to be argued with. Retrieving his knife from the floor, he screwed up what little of his courage was left and slowly approached the head. Seizing the first fang again, he thrust his knife into the root again and closed his eyes. Nothing happened, and he easily yanked the tooth out.

"I think they only bite once," he said, partly to tell his master and partly to calm his nerves. "It's just a reflex, but make sure you're careful around the claws."

"Duly noted," Severus said dryly, but Draco noticed that he jotted a note into the grimoire anyway.

One by one, Draco cut and wrenched each tooth free, dropping them into the jar at his feet. The close fitting and severe robes that Snape had bought him snagged on the teeth so halfway through he took off his outer robes and left them in a pile on the floor. Because the dragon's heart had stilled the sockets didn't bleed profusely, but even so, blood covered his hands and arms. The last fang was stuck fast, so he grabbed it with both hands and leaned all of his weight against it, tearing it free along with several pieces of pink flesh attached at the root that splattered his face and robes with blood.

"Done here," he ground out between clenched teeth, tossing the fang with the others and sealing the jar shut.

"Eyes next," Severus said, not turning from his own work. He'd used a thin knife to slice through the dragon's skin above its left foot, cutting a neat circle before working up the arm towards the stomach. Now he had almost the entire leg skinned. "And try to take them out intact."

"Fine..." Draco muttered, carrying the jar of teeth back to the table and retrieving an empty jar. He glanced over the grimoire and skimmed the notes for directions on removing eyes.

"Skinning...wings...pocket of flame in the gullet, have to watch out for that later," he murmured. "Teeth, tongue, ah...eyes. 'With bare hands, slide fingers into the sockets and pull the entire eye out, cutting the cords to free it. Best preserved in dragon's blood'."

As disgusting as that sounded, it was better than putting his hands into its mouth again. He walked back to the body and set the jar down at his feet, then realized he couldn't use both hands if one was holding a knife. Carefully holding the blade in his teeth, he rolled his sleeves up higher and pushed the dragon's eyelid up.

Edging his fingers in the space between the eye and the bone, he grimaced as warm slime and blood slicked his fingers. His hands slipped all the way in but he didn't feel the back of the eye yet, so he continued reaching up to his elbows. His fingers finally touched, and he slowly pulled towards himself. The eye easily slid out of the socket, but he had to juggle it in one arm so that he could cut
the cords connecting it to the brain. Slime, blood and a whitish fluid seeping out of the eye soon covered the front of his robes. After he removed the second eye, his clothes were soaked and dripping.

"Eyes are out," he said, putting the jar back on the table. He stretched his arms and gingerly stripped out of his shirt, leaving himself only in his trousers and shoes.

"Tear out its pedota, then," Severus said.

Draco blinked. What on earth was a pedota? He returned to his grimoire and looked over the diagram, squinting at the tiny labels with lines drawn to their corresponding parts. "Pedota," he told the book, and a single word glowed as if burning. He followed its line down to the dragon's mouth to a spot just above the throat where the dragon kept a small lump of bone hot enough to ignite the gases it used to breathe fire.

His jaw dropping in horror, Draco stared first at Snape and then at the dragon's jaws still held open by his charm. True, he'd pulled its teeth, but if it could bite reflexively, maybe it could swallow reflexively, too. There wasn't even enough room to stand or crouch inside.

"You want me to crawl down that thing's mouth?" he said, trying to keep his voice even but failing miserably. "You'll be cutting me out of its stomach if I try--"

"You'll be filling those jars yourself if you don't," Snape said, slicing through the leg bone and working off one of the feet. "My store of pure blood is dwindling, and I suspect that even yours might suffice."

Shocked into silence at the insult of his blood, Draco nearly drew his wand to hex his master. Just because he had wyvern blood was no reason to slander his family line. If he was honest with himself, he knew that Severus was simply in no mood to argue with an emotional Malfoy, and the potions master could be insultingly curt with his father as well. And throwing a tantrum simply would not work, not when Snape was used to more far more violent tantrums from Lucius. With a furious pout, Draco grabbed the longest knife on the table and stood at the dragon's mouth, staring into the dark cavern that had nearly eaten him the night before. Now that he was looking, he spotted the pedota's faint glow at the back of the mouth.

Grimacing, he tightened his grip on the knife and knelt down, tentatively touching the dragon's tongue. Nothing happened. Bit by bit, he crept into the mouth, alert for any tensing of its muscles, any tremor in its tongue. He consoled himself that at least being held open for so long had dried out its saliva, making his crawl easier and less disgusting.

Nothing bad happened when he reached the throat, and the bony protrusion was warm but not hot to the touch as he grabbed it and sliced it out. To his surprise, it continued to glow. More blood ran down his hands and arms, and a little even dripped on his back as he turned and climbed back out.

"Merlin, he's inside it's mouth!"

Ah, the trio. Wonderful. Draco sneered as he stood up, his messy prize in one hand and his knife in his other. Ron only looked surprised to see Draco coming out from inside. From the identical looks on both Hermione and Harry's face, neither had seen a dragon stripped down for parts.

Green eyes. Draco's breath hitched when Harry's eyes focused on him. Today they seemed even more intense than usual, almost feverish. Momentarily forgetting that he had blood on his hands, he pushed back a stray lock of hair from his eyes, leaving a dark red streak in his pale blond hair.
"Don't you have classes?" he asked, walking by them.

"Classes are cancelled for today," Hermione said and tossed her hair out of her face. "Dumbledore said we should be here."

"Couldn't you go back in its mouth?" Ron said as he looked around for a place to sit. All of the chairs had been reduced to splinters during the attack. "See if it'll swallow you? If it wasn't dead, it'd probably die of poison."

"Ron--" Hermione started.

"You're covered in blood," Harry suddenly said, looking up and down Draco's body.

Self-conscious at being watched as he worked, Draco reddened slightly and pushed his hair back again, smudging his cheek. He couldn't help his own glance at Harry's clothing, odd muggle wear that looked like he'd nearly grown out of it.

"It's nothing," he finally said, looking away as he put the still-glowing pedota in its jar.

"Yeah, it's all right, Harry," Ron said. "I heard dark wizards bathe in the stuff. That's his mother's milk, it is."

"Of course it is," Draco said. "I've missed it so much these past few weeks. How about it, Weasley? Your sister would do just fine, and your family's already got too many children--"

"You stay away from Ginny!" Ron yelled. Both Hermione and Harry stared at Ron in shock. He seemed to take Draco's threat dead serious. "I swear to God, if I even see you in the same room as her--"

"That's enough." From behind the dragon's head, Snape walked into view with two of the dragon's paws in his hands. "If the headmaster saw fit to send you three here," he said, glaring disdainfully at them, "then sit down and stay quiet. Draco, shear the scales off of its face next."

While Snape left the great hall, levitating several full jars of dragon parts out the door and presumably to the dungeons, Ron and Hermione both sat down on the floor. Opening her bookbag, she fished around for a textbook and Ron groaned and complained that she studied too much. Still standing, Harry stared at the blood covering Draco's hands and face, unabashedly watching his every move. Ron seemed to notice, but from his look he seemed to believe that Harry was dutifully keeping an eye on the dark wizard. Under Harry's constant gaze, Draco felt his face heat up, so he turned and busied himself with the diagrams in his book. He didn't want to say anything and attract Weasley's gibes, but Potter's look made him wish he could put something on. Cursing that his cloak was downstairs in the dungeons and his robes were in no condition to be worn, he scanned the page for instructions on shearing scales.

"That's your grimoire?" Harry asked softly.

Draco froze with a gasp. "Damn it, don't sneak up on me," he whispered, glancing sideways at him as Harry looked over his shoulder. He edged away as Harry bent over the book, but he quickly grabbed Potter's wrist as he reached for the book.

"Don't touch it," Draco said. "It's cursed...no one can touch it but blooded Malfoys."

"Not even your mother?" Harry asked.

"She can. Father just had to share his blood with her, that's all."
He realized he was still holding Harry's wrist and lingered for a moment. His own hand was pale in comparison, and even though he wasn't much smaller, his hand looked fragile next to Harry's. Remembering how evenly matched they'd been in their first year, he wondered how Potter had managed to overshoot him now in their seventh. His fingertips brushed over Harry's skin as he let him go and turned his attention back to the book.

"Who drew these?" Harry asked, staring at the diagrams. "They're beautiful."


His voice trailed as he considered how familiar that name sounded. It conjured up a feeling of intense claustrophobia, cold stone and iron bars. The more he thought about it, the more vivid his memory became until he could see her prone on the floor of a prison cell miserably coughing blood. In one of his recurrent nightmares, he felt everything she had felt as she died.

"Muggles killed her," he murmured. "They tortured her until she gave them the sordid stories about the devil that they wanted, and she died waiting for execution." He softly traced the outline of a wing on the page. "I didn't know she'd drawn these."

Harry was quiet for several seconds. "You know your family so well..."

"Only their last moments." He picked up the shortest knife and gripped it firmly. "If you don't mind, even if the little Gryffindors get to sit around and have a holiday, I have work to do."

Glaring at him, Harry sat back down with his friends, coughing a few times and waving off Hermione's concerned nattering.

Draco returned to the dragon's head and carefully began removing scales one by one. The knife's edge slid under a scale, pulled it up and cut the soft tissue holding it in place. Then he could drop the scale into its jar and move onto the next. Blood spurting down his fingers and hands didn't surprise him. He knew from experience that facial wounds bleed profusely and dragons were no different, even without a beating heart. Though by now the blood had settled and cooled, dragon's blood ran nearly boiling hot so that it ran warm down his arms and shoulders. Because he had to raise his arms to reach the higher scales, soon his chest and back were covered. A few drops made it down his stomach to his pants.

Being an apprentice meant he suffered the messy work the master didn't want to do. While trying to keep blood from running into his eyes and stinging, he consoled himself with the knowledge that soaking in dragon's blood was considered good for one's health. Of course that blood was supposed to be hot and steaming and the person soaking was supposed to be the good wizard who killed it. Of all the stories he'd ever read, dark wizards never slew dragons, they only of them stripped them down like scavengers.

Which wasn't far from the truth. "Better a scavenger," he reasoned as he cut through a scale, "than a roasted wizard."

A thunderous clap and Hermione's sudden scream nearly made him cut off his own finger. He turned and saw her suspended overhead in a swirling vortex of black wind, her arms and legs flailing as she cried out. Beneath her, Harry tried to reach out and catch her hand, but the dark forces turning her head over heels blasted his hand back through sheer power. Ron's levitation spell burst ineffectively on the surface. Draco followed the vortex down to its narrow tail whirling out from his grimoire.

"Mm..." he mused. "So that's what the curse looks like." No wonder Severus said Malfoy magic was
Malfoy!" Ron yelled over his shoulder. "Get her down now!"

"It's her own damn fault," Draco muttered.

More interested in saving the old pages from potential damage, he moved as close as he could towards the vortex without the wind slashing his skin and reached around its tail to grab both ends of his open book. The storm didn't lose any strength, so he tried to close the book by force. As he pushed, however, the wind grew stronger, spinning Hermione violently and holding the pages open. The more he closed, the more force escaped through the increasingly smaller gap. The last few inches were impossible.

Warm arms completely enveloped him and he nearly let go in surprise. Backing into a solid body, he looked over his shoulder at Harry who'd come up behind him and put his hands over his own.

"Keep closing it," Harry said, adding his strength to Draco's.

With the extra help, the book began to close. Most of the wind only attacked Hermione more ferociously, but some of it blew wildly around the two seekers. Draco backed hard against Harry's body for shelter and heard Harry's breath wheezing deep in his chest.

Finally the book snapped shut. Hermione fell into Ron's outstretched arms, but her weight made them both hit the ground. The redhead groaned and glared from the floor at Draco.

"You rotten, evil little ferret! You set her up, didn't you?"

Seeing Ron searching the floor for his dropped wand, Harry stepped between him and Draco. "It's not his fault, Ron. It was the book, it can't be touched by anyone but his family."

"And you didn't warn Hermione?" Ron snapped. "You know she can't resist an open book!"

Draco glared at her as he set his grimoire down. "The world doesn't revolve around your pathetic compulsions. You should learn to leave things that aren't yours alone. You're lucky the curse didn't suffocate you."

"As if you'd mind!" Ron yelled, giving up on his wand and standing, looking like he was ready to settle this with his hands. "You'd probably love to chop her up! Human body parts--"

"Nonsense," Draco drawled, but keeping safe behind Harry. "Her blood's hardly pure enough for our needs."

Harry glared over his shoulder at him. "Shut up, Malfoy. Blood doesn't matter and you know it."

"Blood is everything, Potter. Haven't you figured that out yet?"

"How can you be so damn blind?" Harry yelled, turning his back to Ron and startling Draco back a step. "Hermione's the smartest girl in school, the muggleborns in Hogwarts do just as well as anyone else. How can you still think that blood matters?"

"Because it does, and I won't be lectured by someone who's never studied the history of the world he's supposed to protect!" Draco snapped. "I know you don't have a grimoire, but at the very least you could've--"

"The grimoire?"
Draco paused and they all looked back at Hermione, who'd caught her breath at last. Still wheezing, she coughed a few times as she steadied herself, taking Ron's offered arm to balance herself.

"The book?" she said, slowly wobbling to her feet. "The book did that?"

"Protected against thieves and snoops," Draco said without sympathy. "At least you're not poisoned. That's a favorite curse for books."

"But that's..." She stared at him in disgust. "What is wrong with you dark wizards? Cursing things so no one can touch them, creating nothing but poison, using magic that could kill you...that's no way to use magic."

"You can't create without killing," Draco said, sounding as if he was quoting something. "You can't use magic without being prepared to sacrifice something of yourself. It's hardly my fault you can't understand."

"Don't try to hide behind philosophy!" she yelled. "You take pleasure in hurting things. You like killing. You smile whenever you think about it!"

"Hermione--" Harry said, stepping closer and raising one hand. She ignored him.

"All of your kind say that they're just reflections of normal wizards, the darkness to their light," she said. "I've read the books in the Restricted Section, I've read your kind's books. I've read how you try to explain away all the vile things you do."

Ron looked down at her. "You've been reading dark books--?"

She didn't hear him, too intent on Draco. "It's nothing but pride and arrogance. Twisting the world around at your whim, killing people who don't fit in--"

"Good Lord," Draco whispered, more impressed at her temper than what she was saying. "The irony almost makes this funny."

"--your magic even feels dirty," she continued. "No wonder they call you dark, your magic's like tar or mud. Even after that cleansing rhyme, I still feel dirty. I wish--"

"You've been learning dark magic?" Ron said, taking a step back and staring at her, his mouth a thin line.

Hermione froze. The accusation in Ron's voice cut through her anger and made her remember where she was. Eyes widening as she realized what she'd said, she put her hands to her mouth as if to take it back.

"Ron--I didn't--I mean--"

"You lied to me." He glared at her as hotly as she had at Draco. "All those times you said you were in the library, you were learning dark magic."

"Not all the time," she said. "But I couldn't just let Harry learn alone and I really wanted to know--I mean, I didn't know--"

"I told you it was evil and you didn't believe me?" Ron said, his voice growing angrier. "Just because you read so much, you think you bloody well know everything?"

Insulted, she frowned and stood straight. "How am I supposed to believe you when you don't tell me
anything? All you ever said was to not ask questions, that wanting to know was just as bad as--"

"What's going on here?" Snape's voice rang through the hall as he came back in. "Ten points each for being so loud. If you can't keep your mouths shut, then get out."

"Fine by me," Ron said, turning on his heel and walking by him, disappearing down the hall.

"Oh, for heaven's sake..." Hermione muttered, bending and scooping her up books. "Ron! Ron, wait!"

As she ran after him, Draco thought she looked more like she wanted to argue instead of apologize. "I'm afraid you've lost your friends," he said to Harry.

"It was bound to happen," Harry sighed, leaning against the table. "They've been arguing for days. In a week or two, it'll be all right again."

Snape walked up to them and set a bundle of towels on the table. "What was that about?"

"Granger tried to read the book," Draco said. "It spun her around and nearly stole her breath."

"Ah...I see," Snape said. "And Weasley didn't try to kill you?"

"He wanted to, but Potter here got in the way and stopped him." Draco half-smiled. "There's something to be said for not understanding your culture, I suppose."

"Mm." Snape glanced sideways at Harry, who glared back. "Well, at least someone's taking the headmaster's recommendation seriously." He turned to go back to his work.

"What?" Harry challenged to his back. "No points for Gryffindor for being a good bodyguard?"

Snape briefly looked back. "Don't be naive. You could save the world and you still wouldn't get any points from me."

Harry practically growled as he watched Snape disappear behind the dragon's corpse. "How on earth do you stand working with him?"

"You get used to it," Draco said, reopening his book. He noticed that Harry's angry look didn't fade and he breathed out, leaning hard against the table. "If you ignore his insults and look at what he actually does, he's really quite fair."

"Only if you're a Slytherin. He's mean, he's petty, and he's absolutely horrid to everyone around him."

"Yes, well, he just gives back what he's gotten." Draco glanced up at him. "You're not going to run after your friends?"

Harry shook his head and hopped up on the table, dangling his legs over the side. "No, I'd just make it worse. Besides, one of us should stay here with you."

"Suit yourself. Might want to clean yourself off, though. You've got blood all over you."

"What?" Harry groaned as he examined his stained clothing and hands from where he'd touched Draco.

Meanwhile Draco went back to shearing scales, but he couldn't help glancing out of the corner of his eye every few minutes at Potter. Over the next hour, without Ron or Hermione to distract him, Draco
noticed that Harry looked pale and drawn. His head tilted to one side and he leaned listlessly against the wall, hardly moving and coughing occasionally. After a little while, Potter noticed his look and stared back.

Draco flinched. Harry's look wasn't just piercing. His eyes seemed to burn. Set against his pale skin, his eyes glittered like emeralds and almost seemed to glow. Even more bizarre, Draco distinctly heard Harry's ragged and uneven breathing from half-way across the hall and wondered if Potter was merely sick or if something had happened during sixth year that had affected him this way. Perhaps a werewolf had bitten him, he thought. That would account for the heavy breathing, especially since the full moon would rise in a few nights. If that was true, no wonder Potter restlessly roamed the halls at night and prowled the grounds during blizzards. But Dumbledore wouldn't allow him to roam as a wolf at night. He dismissed the idea as he cut off the last scales.

When he'd finished, the great lizard's face looked more like an exotic dish than a dragon. Completely skinless now and with most of its distinguishing features cut away, it resembled nothing more than a great slab of meat. Useless meat, he recalled. Dragon muscle made fine steaks but useless potions ingredients. Only the bones, sinews and organs were of any use once the skin and sharp bits were off.

"Mm...wonder if we could get the elves to butcher it for us," he mused.

A soft thump made him look back at Harry, who'd jumped off the table and was swaying slightly as he walked towards the door to the hallway. Holding onto the table with one hand, he held his other hand against his forehead and kept his eyes downcast.

"Is my bodyguard leaving so soon?" Draco called to him.

"I'll be back in a few minutes," Harry said with a groan. "I just need to go to the bathroom, that's all."

Draco watched him walk out, but a sharp reminder from his master made get back to work. Each dragon scale weighed about as much as a single galleon. All together in one jar they were nearly immovable. They clinked as he levitated them to the table and set them down by the sheets of quick-dried dragon skin his master had hung up. Itching from the drying blood, he took a moment to towel himself off. The whole great hall reeked of blood, the heavy copper smell was overwhelming, and now he understood why he and Snape had gone without breakfast. Dissecting dead dragons after eating would've made him vomit.

Which was probably what Harry had gone to do, he thought. He looked down the table where Harry had been sitting and noticed a small empty vial on its side. Frowning, he picked it up. Light blue residue clung to the sides. He knew the vial didn't come from Snape's storeroom, so what was Potter doing with strange potions?

Somewhere out of sight in the hallway, glass shattered and crashed to the ground immediately followed by Harry's startled yell. Wand in hand, Draco was moving toward the sound before the echo faded.

Only a few yards from the door, Harry lay on his side, holding himself half upright on one arm while searching blindly for his glasses with his other. Shattered shards covered him and the floor where the nearest window had burst.

"Stay still!" Draco spotted the glasses several feet away and spelled them into Harry's hand, then swept the glass safely away.

Instead of standing, though, Harry groaned and rolled onto his back. Thin cuts lined his face and
hands, but it was his deathly pallor and quickening breath that told Draco that this was something more serious than an exploding window. He knelt beside Harry and looked down as his fingers touched something wet on the floor. White liquid made a thin puddle around the cracked remains of a tiny vial.

"What on earth?" Draco whispered.

"Med...medi...med..." Harry choked on his words. "Pomfrey..." His breath turned into a dry rasp and he started to tremble.

"Medicine, right."

From the look of it, Harry had gone out to take whatever Pomfrey had given him, the window had burst and he'd dropped the vial just when he needed it. Deciding to worry about the window later, he grabbed a threadbare edge of Harry's clothes and ripped a section off, then dropped it over the white medicine, soaking up as much as he could. It barely made the cloth damp. He held it up and winced as Harry's shaking became violent. There was no time to rush him to the hospital.

"Breathe in, Potter."

He stretched the cloth over Harry's open mouth but his shuddering gasps didn't take in the vapors quickly enough. He had no choice. Lying beside Harry and taking a deep breath, Draco opened his mouth and breathed out over the cloth. Coughing as he accidentally inhaled fumes, Draco nonetheless continued forcing his breath into Potter.

Falling in synch, he breathed out while Potter breathed in, and he turned his head away trying not to breathe in the medicine himself. Somewhere around the seventh breath, Harry's trembling eased and he was able to take deeper breaths. He put a hand on Draco's shoulder to steady himself, feeling as though he was falling even though he lay on the floor. Although Harry looked better, Draco continued breathing for him for several minutes, and Harry did nothing to stop him. He even pulled him a little closer, and Draco crawled over him for a better reach.

Finally Draco leaned back on one arm, wiping medicine from his mouth with the back of his hand and smearing blood over his lips. "Better?"

Breathing steadily, Harry nodded once. He still looked pale and tired, but nothing like when he'd fallen.

"Yeah." Harry put his glasses back on and took a deep breath. "What did you do? CPR?"

"What?" Draco tilted his head. "You couldn't swallow, so I breathed it for you. You should probably see Pomfrey, you couldn't have gotten the full dose."

"Oh..." Sitting up on his elbows, which was as far as he could with Draco still on top of him, Harry looked at him curiously. "Thank you."

Only inches away, their eyes met. Curiously this time Draco didn't flinch. Far from forcing him to look away, Harry's eyes seemed inviting, drawing him in.

"You just remember to make sure no one tries to blame me for this. Another accident and we're both here...the Prophet'll be saying I'm trying to kill you."

"Are you?"

Draco blinked. "No. I--"
His voice trailed off as Potter stared at him, and he was vaguely aware that he'd frozen in position. Feeling as though he was floating, muffled voices echoed in his head, Snape's, Dumbledore's, his mother...he heard his father telling him that he was a fully recognized knight, but any initiation ceremony would have to wait until the next Walpurgis night--

"Knights of Walpurgis?" Harry asked.

Suddenly Draco realized his thoughts were being shuffled through and he cried out, turning his head away and screwing his eyes shut tight while fumbling desperately for his wand.

"Oh God, Malfoy." Harry sounded truly distressed and put his hands on Draco's shoulders. "I'm sorry, I didn't--I mean I couldn't--"

Draco tried to move away but Harry held him still. He kept his eyes shut, feeling sick as he thought that Harry might be a legimimens. No wonder he couldn't look him in the eye for long, and he gave a silent apology to his master for complaining about his occlumency lessons. Flinching each time he'd looked at Potter had probably kept his thoughts safe.

"How could you, after I just--?"

"I didn't mean to," Harry said in a rush. "I'm still learning, sometimes I see without meaning to--"

Footsteps pounded down the hall, crunching broken glass underfoot. "Get away from him, Malfoy!"

Draco looked up at Ron, Hermione and several more Gryffindor students running towards them and realized he was crouched over Harry and covered in indistinguishable blood. Finally finding his wand, he threw himself to one side as a stupefy spell flew from Hermione's wand. A moment later, an incendio spell scorched the wall where his head had been. Lying on his side, he aimed his wand at the first thing he saw, Ron's red hair, and did not seem to cast a spell but rather called out "hrofana" as if calling something forth.

They had all seen birds fly out of a wand before, but they had never seen such huge ravens sweeping out of Draco's wand in such a throng that they momentarily blotted out the light. Even though he had aimed at Ron, the flock flew into the crowd, pecking and clawing anything in reach.

About to run while everyone was distracted, Draco covered his eyes as blinding light filled the hallway, destroying his ravens and blinding everyone else. As they all blinked away spots, he recognized his master's voice mingled with McGonagall's.

"What's going on here?" she demanded, lowering her wand.

"Malfoy attacked Harry," Ron said. "We saw him on top of Harry like he was sucking his breath out."

Both Snape and Draco started to speak, but Harry interrupted both of them.

"He wasn't hurting me," Harry said, sitting up with a labored breath. "He saved me. I almost--" He cut himself off short and looked down at the cracked vial, then back at his head of house. "It broke," he said simply.

McGonagall noticed the white stain and quietly nodded once. Shaken by his near brush with Harry's mind, Draco still cataloged that little exchange for later scrutiny.

"Mr. Weasley," she started, "I believe I told all of you to remain inside the tower for today."
Ron's jaw dropped. "We thought he was being attacked--"

"So you have said," she replied. "But your rash assumptions could have led to serious injuries all around, as well as endangered Mr. Malfoy's life even more than it already is."

"But he's covered in blood and Harry's bleeding everywhere," Seamus said.

Harry lowered his face but it didn't completely hide his face turning red. "It's not mine," he mumbled.

They all couldn't help looking at the Slytherin on the floor. Draco grumbled to himself and stood up, brushing off a few pieces of glass harmlessly stuck to his skin.

"I had to get close, I couldn't help it," he said to Snape.

"Understandable," Severus said. "Get back to the hall and continue working. Professor McGonagall and I need to examine the damage here."

"And you lot," McGonagall said to her students. "Go on. I'll see to you later."

Still looking back at Malfoy and obviously not believing him, the group turned and went back towards the staircase, muttering to themselves about the unfairness of it all. Ron and Hermione bent towards each other and continued arguing, their momentary truce to save Harry's life forgotten.

"Why didn't you come sooner?" Draco asked as he paused by his master's side. "I thought you'd be right behind me when I heard the glass explode."

"'Explode'?" he echoed. "I came because I heard you yell."

"It wasn't that loud," Harry said, still sitting down. "More like a pop than anything else. The glass hitting the floor made more noise. You probably heard me instead of the glass," he said, looking at Draco and then at the floor when he wouldn't meet his eyes.

"Odd," McGonagall said. She turned her attention to the window frame in question and ran her wand over the sill. "Perhaps a silencing charm was placed on it. Which of course means it was rigged to go off when someone walked by."

"Not someone," Harry said. "Me. Ron and Hermione walked by here and nothing happened. It was meant for me."

"You were with us for an hour," Draco argued. "It could've been done after they left."

"A possibility we will examine," Snape said. "Not you. And if you want to eat anything today you'll go finish that dragon."

Not that he had much of an appetite, but Draco knew that tone. When he reached the doorway to the great hall, he glanced over his shoulder at Harry. Covered in red stains and coughing as he spoke with McGonagall, the Boy Who Lived looked very much like a tired child and he wondered how they expected him to defeat the dark lord. Not for the first time Draco thanked his luck that he would not be fighting alongside him.

True to Snape's word, Draco did not eat until the first dragon lay completely bottled and cataloged in the room next to his master's office. They levitated the last jar inside by starlight. Rows of blood, scales, skin, internal organs, sinews and claws filled the shelves, and he knew he could look forward to an even longer workday on the larger dragon. Yawning, he scratched at the dried blood coating his skin but he desperately wanted to eat more than he wanted to shower.
"It's already late," Snape said. "You don't have time for anything more than supper and washing up, so don't dawdle."

"Yes, sir."

Draco all but ran from the office before Snape could remember anything else he needed to do. Once in the kitchens, he had to reassure Daffy that he wasn't hurt before she'd give him dinner. While eating it so fast that he nearly burned his mouth, he spotted her setting out two trays of pastries. Sure enough, a minute later, the painting entrance swung out and Harry walked in, hesitating for just a moment when he noticed him.

"Evening," Harry said, taking his tray and sitting down.

Draco just nodded once and began working on his own pastries. Exhausted or not, in his opinion there was always time for dessert, and he took the opportunity to examine Harry's hands, which shook very slightly.

"Feeling better?" Draco asked.

"Much." Harry looked him over in return. "You're still bloody."

"Too hungry to shower first." He opened his mouth to take another bite but a coughing fit made him turn away.

"You're still coughing?" Harry asked. "It's from what you breathed in, isn't it? Why didn't you see Pomfrey?"

"No time," Draco said, taking a breath. "It's almost gone anyway. Whatever medicine you take, it hardly affected me."

They ate in silence for a few seconds, and then Draco decided to try asking him questions again. Hopefully it would go better than their last dinner together, especially if Harry felt guilty about earlier.

"What was that stuff, anyway?"

Harry stalled for time, finishing another pastry before answering. "Just something to keep me settled. There was a bit of an accident last year."

"That adventure where you won a thousand house points?"

Now Harry half-smiled. "It wasn't a thousand...weren't you paying attention at the end of year dinner?"

"Not really. Father and I were busy. I didn't notice much outside our plans."

"Your father..." Harry said softly. "I hadn't thought about it but...is he like you? I mean, you're both blooded Malfoys."

"If you're asking if he's also a half-breed, yes." And a much larger wyvern, he thought, but he didn't say it.

"Is he as small as you?"

Draco decided that Potter had a knack for asking very irritating questions. "I'm somewhat unique in our family. Wyverns usually are a little bigger."
Harry looked like he was going to say something, but he reconsidered and closed his mouth. Finishing the last bit of dessert, he stood up and started to leave, but he stopped at the painting and looked back.

"Hey, Malfoy."

"What?"

"You were right," Harry said. "You can be courteous...for a little while, at least."

Draco stared at him as he left.

Chapter End Notes

1. pedota, from the Medieval Greak pedotes, pilot (yes, it's the dragon's pilot light)

2. hrofana, from the Old English hraefn, raven
In which Harry breaks ancient tradition

When the torches dimmed and Filch made his last round through the dungeons, Draco slipped out of the Slytherin common room. He kept close to the wall, alert to any noise as he snuck out of the castle. He couldn't risk meeting any students breaking curfew, especially not now.

Crossing the grounds quickly so no one would see him, he walked along the edge of the forbidden forest with one eye on the school and one eye on the trees. Even without moonlight and wearing his black cloak and robes, he stood out against the white frost covering the earth, but where the trees touched the open landscape, the mud and shadows safely concealed him.

His breath misted and swirled in the faint starlight, uncomfortably loud in the night air. His cloak kept him warm but it could not muffle the sounds of his boots on the ice and stones. Every brush of his foot against the dead grass, the rustle of his clothes against his skin, even his heartbeat, sounded like thunder. And yet walking alone in the cold was better than being inside Hogwarts.

Even after a week's time the Daily Prophet did not know about the latest attack on Harry, but the students knew and their rumors filled the castle until the atmosphere felt as oppressive as Azkaban's. Worse yet, after Dumbledore decided to keep the students confined to Hogwarts in light of this new attack, under the excuse that the faculty needed to keep them safe from the repairs to the main hallways, gossip incubated within the houses and Draco was their favorite topic. McGonagall assured both him and Severus that neither Ron nor Hermione had broken confidence, but after Harry's attack and Draco's hrofana spell in front of several Gryffindors, many students had reached a verdict.

There were many students from every house who did not believe he was dark, but there were many who did. The punishment for a discovered dark wizard was expulsion from the community, and if the wizard died in the effort, so much the better. Purely as a precautionary measure, Severus had removed him from classes and confined him in Slytherin, but that no one had suffered any further attacks only confirmed to his condemners that Draco was responsible. For the past week, he hadn't dared leave his common room. Time seemed to stand still inside Slytherin. Taking this late night stroll felt like a breath of fresh air.

Out from the dungeons and under the sky, he at last saw the moon, a sliver of light behind the clouds. Tomorrow night Pansy would bring the Slytherins home.

Just within sight of Hagrid's hovel, a large fallen tree provided a convenient seat, and as he sat down he wished he'd brought his broom with him. At the time, sneaking out and walking the whole way had seemed like a wonderful break from being cooped up inside the dungeons. Now he just felt sore and winded.

He didn't know how long he would wait. Perhaps until sunrise, although that would mean no sleep. Dumbledore's new list of potions he wanted by the end of the week was nearly three feet long and Severus intended to work from dawn to moonrise each day. Even without classes, he was exhausted.

A twig snapped almost right behind him and he shot to his feet, his wand in his hand as he faced the trees. No one was there. His wand trembled and his skin turned cold. He stopped breathing. Even his heart seemed to pause. For a moment he heard nothing, not even the wind. And then he heard a slight scuff in the darkness, as of someone rubbing their foot accidentally against a tree root. Draco
pointed his wand a little to the left and whispered "grywania."

Forced from its hibernation, the tree's branches sprouted tiny nubs and new branches. At the tree's base, however, a thick bunch of thorn bushes suddenly sprang up. Twisted by his dark spell, they didn't grow naturally but rather curled like fingers covered in thorns. A second later, he heard a satisfying shout of surprise and the heavy thud of something falling on the dirt.

"Dammit, Malfoy, you didn't have to do that."

Irritated by that voice, Draco still felt a wave of relief wash over him that it wasn't a Death Eater, or even another student. "You're damned lucky I didn't cast something stronger, you scar-faced idiot."

Harry came out from around the tree, quickly folding something shimmery and tucking it into a pocket in his robes. "Do you always attack people who haven't done anything?"

"When they're hiding in the bloody forest in the middle of the night, yes!" Realizing he was starting to sound hysterical, he took a deep breath and sat down with his back to Potter. So much for silently sitting in the dark. Maybe if he was lucky, the Death Eaters were taking the night off.

"...did I frighten you?" Harry asked, leaning over the tree and trying to see his face.

"Of course not!"

Draco turned aside a little and put his hands on his face to cool it. Without moonlight, Harry couldn't see the flush he knew was turning his face pink. Sometimes he wished he didn't have such fair skin. Every single emotion stood out on his face.

"I just don't like people sneaking up on me."

Harry smiled and sat down. "Sorry."

"What are you doing here, anyway? How'd you find me?"

"I'm following you. What are you doing out here? The Slytherins won't be coming until tomorrow night, or the night after."

"If they come."

"What do you mean, 'if they come'?" Harry asked, his eyebrows knitting together. "You and Snape said that's what the message meant. I swear, if you two were lying--"

"Don't you ever get tired of threatening me?" Draco sighed, looking up at the sky. For a moment Harry sputtered. "I threaten you because it's the only way to get you to stop doing horrible things!"

"Horrible things?" Draco echoed with a laugh. "Well, I suppose since I'm dark...yes, the horrible dark wizard of Hogwarts hiding in my common room, afraid of the little light wizards who would never think of tearing me into bloody pieces. Good thing you're here to threaten me, who knows what I might do otherwise?"

From the silence, he realized he wasn't far off from the truth. He sighed and bowed his head. "How many of them want me dead?"

"I...don't know," Harry said. "They're talking about that raven spell you cast. Hermione's been trying to convince them it's not dark magic and Ron--"
"If you try to convince me that Weasley is defending me, I'll be forced to take you to Pomfrey for delusions."

Harry half-smiled. "He still hates you, nothing'll ever change that. But he's reminding everyone that you're helping Snape and that Dumbledore wouldn't let you stay if you were dangerous."

"So instead he's telling everyone I'm an incompetent dark wizard, wonderful." He looked at Harry and felt a twinge of irritation that he had to look up to meet his eyes. "No one's buying it, are they?"

"No one in Gryffindor will hurt you," Harry said firmly. "We've talked to everyone and the ones who think you're dark agreed to give you a chance. But Malfoy, if it hadn't been us, scarhead and mudblood and weasel, telling everyone you weren't evil, they wouldn't of believed us. You've been horrible ever since first year and no one trusts you at all."

"That's because the Slytherins aren't here," Draco said. "But what about Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff?"

"I don't know. We don't see them except in class. Would they really try anything?"

Draco stared at Harry for a moment to make sure he wasn't joking. "God, Potter, you could at least try to understand our society a little bit." He sighed and considered. "Maybe if it was just older students here, but there's a bunch of first and second year children and all the seventh and sixth years will think they have to protect the little rats before I sacrifice them to unholy demons."

"They believe you'll sacrifice them?" Harry asked, aghast.

"Oh yes, I regularly conjure spirits to do my bidding. And that's if I don't boil them for my dinner or eviscerate them alive to read the future in their entrails."

"Draco..." Harry looked sideways at him and took a breath before asking. "Will you tell me about real dark history? I mean, about what you said about Merlin and Morgan and--"

"You mean after all this time you haven't looked anything up in the library?" Draco interrupted. "Even here they have one or two honest books. Thiselton's Camlann and Ramifications for one--"

"It's not that," Harry said. "I can't go to the library. Hermione's always in the library, and if I go, she'll just start nagging me about--well, about everything."

"Everything?" Draco raised an eyebrow. "Nagging her little boy about taking his medicine?"

"Not that. She doesn't know. I mean, she knows I see Pomfrey a lot more often this year, but she doesn't know I'm...sick."

"Potter, you're not going to tell me you have some tragic disease and you're going to waste away before you even get to graduation?"

"No," Harry said with a smile. Draco made it sound like getting sick was a personal insult to him. "Nothing like that."

"Wait, she was part of whatever you did last year but she doesn't know--"

"A lot of things happened last year," Harry said. "Hermione doesn't know everything about me, even if she thinks she does. So...will you tell me? About dark wizards, I mean."

Draco sighed as if put upon. "Not like there's anything better to do. Might make up for all the lessons
"You're not locked up," Harry said. "You're down there for your own protection."

"Locked away, hidden away, it feels the same." Draco didn't mention he'd flown around the common room on his besom a few times just to pretend he was in the air and no longer surrounded by walls. After clipping a cabinet and slamming face first into the sofa, he didn't fly anymore. "Tell me what you know. You must have gleaned something from all the talk about me in class."

"That's the weird thing, they don't talk about you. I mean, yes, they talk about the things you've done, the raven spell, saving your owl, helping Snape, but they don't talk about what any of that means. They don't say why casting a raven spell is dark, just that it is."

"Mm, figures. They probably don't know for sure, either. All they know is what their parents tell them. How'd you put it before? 'Dark wizards don't care about anything once they turn'?"

Draco leaned back and stared at the stars. Without bright muggle city lights, they glittered brilliantly against the night. "That's misleading. We don't turn, we're born. Well, some people turn, of course."

He opened his mouth to mention that Snape's mother hadn't been dark, but he stopped himself before he said anything. Severus never spoke about his parents and even if he did, he would never want Potter to know about his mother.

"The ones who turn don't call it turning, though. They always say they were called, felt drawn to it, seduced even. You use your light spells like tools, mundane little charms to make your life easier."

"Dark magic can never be mistaken for a tool. It's alive, it's dangerous, it feels like part of your soul. Whenever you cast a spell, it invades every part of your body and lights every nerve on fire. It's like putting yourself into the magic and letting it do the same to you."

Harry shifted slightly on his seat. "You make it sound almost...um..."

"Sexual?" Draco chuckled. "Father told me it was like a lover that'll do wonderful things for you, but take it for granted and it will kill you."

"Who on earth would want a lover like that?"

Draco remembered asking his father the exact same thing, but he'd asked in front of not only his father but his mother and Severus as well, one day when the potions master was at the manor. No one had answered him except with knowing smiles and a soft, slightly sinister laugh from Narcissa.

"Doesn't matter," he said. "What I'm saying is that we don't turn. Dark families have existed for generations and no one ever turns from it. We sometimes gain converts, but anyone who pretends to go to the light has always turned out to be dark in the end."

"You can't leave it?"

"It'd be like trying to leave our skin behind." Not a perfect explanation, he thought, considering his own physiology, but it worked. "It's part of who we are. We grow up with it, we live with it, and inevitably we die with it."

"What does this have to do with dark history?"

"It's..." Draco took a deep breath and considered how to explain. "It's frightening to some people. To most people, really. Look at the Ministry. It started with Merlin and his Order about not casting spells..."
on muggles, but it grew into the monster it is today. They want to control every aspect of magic, make laws and rules and limits...on magic, of all things. They try to shackle it and act surprised whenever it breaks its chains.

"But us, we're willing to give ourselves over to the magic. We stopped thinking that we can control it completely and allow the magic to lead us where it wants. We don't hold ourselves to nearly so many rules."

"And what do you hold yourselves to?" Harry asked. "What rules do you have?"

There was that piercing glare again. Draco avoided it and covered the motion by looking intently at the forest. "Not so much rules as loyalty, to family and to extended family. I know you think I'm a spoiled brat--"

Harry didn't try to deny it. He laughed.

"--but I serve my father loyally. When you were walking around uninvited in my head, you heard that conversation about the Knights of Walpurgis, right?"

"Um, yeah. I really didn't mean to--"

Loathe to discuss it, Draco shrugged once. "The Knights existed long before the dark lord turned them into the Death Eaters. They're our counterpart to the Ministry's aurors, but we don't have the endless regulations to follow. Instead we're loyal to each other and protect our families. Loyalty is everything."

Harry didn't hear that last part, too busy thinking about something else. "Wait, if the Knights are Death Eaters and you're part of the Knights, then...you're a Death Eater!"

Without waiting for an answer, Harry reached over and grabbed Draco's arm, yanking him forward as he pushed his sleeve up. Draco would've laughed at the surprised look on his face at seeing the unblemished white skin except Harry didn't seem to know his own strength.

"Ow! Let go!" He pulled free and shied away while he rubbed the red fingermarks on his arm. "Bloody maniac, I'm a Knight, not a Death Eater! Father took all the loyal Knights away. Did you see a mark when I was cutting up the dragon, you scarfaced idiot?"

"Sorry," Harry mumbled. "Forgot. Memory's been a big foggy lately."

Frowning, Draco reached out and grabbed Harry's hand, holding it for a moment. So he hadn't been imagining that cold, clammy feeling on his skin. He put his hand on Harry's forehead and winced.

"Potter, you're burning up. Why'd you come out here if you're sick?"

"I'm fine," Harry said, pulling away with a grumble. "It's just a reaction to Pomfrey's medicine."

"So you decided to follow me over the grounds?" Draco stood up and tugged his cloak closed, muttering as he started to walk off. "Stupid Gryffindor."

"Wait, where are you going?" Harry shot to his feet and caught up, swaying slightly as he matched pace.

"It's too damned cold out here to be talking," Draco said. "And my legs hurt from sitting on that tree, and I've got to get some sleep before Severus wakes me up in, oh, four hours."
He waited for a response, but Harry was conspicuously silent as they walked towards Hogwarts. Draco snuck a glance from the darkness of his hood and felt a twinge to see Harry with slumped shoulders and a lowered head. He looked disappointed that their conversation had stopped. Draco felt a little sorry to see him like that and felt irritated by his own feelings.

"Tomorrow around dinner," Draco mumbled. "I can tell you more about dark wizards then."

Harry raised his head with a guarded look. "In your common room? Will Snape let me?"

"He will if I tell him you're coming for a lesson." Severus probably wouldn't be surprised either, not with how quickly Harry learned each spell Draco showed him. Even if they were simple spells, Harry was still picking them up rapidly. "Just...don't antagonize him. He's hard enough to work with. I don't need you two snapping at each other all night."

"Right," Harry said, but he was starting to smile again. "I'll be on my best behavior."

"That's hardly reassuring."

Alert as they crossed the grounds, Draco relaxed a little when they entered the castle again, quietly walking on the stone floor to the dungeons. The dungeons were the only part of the castle that seemed the same at night as day. Only the dimming of some of the torches signified that the sun was down, but even during the day the dungeons were dark and quiet with their own cool air circling across the stone walls. Living here, he grew to understand why his ancestors felt more comfortable living beneath the ground. Even now when they lived in normal houses, their most treasured possessions were kept in cellars. His father's study hadn't even had windows.

They were halfway to the common room when Draco realized something was wrong. He froze, his cloak swirling around his feet as he stared down the hallway. Without thinking about it, he grasped his wand and held it at his side.

"Malfoy?" A few feet ahead, Harry stopped. "What is it?"

Draco didn't answer. He didn't know what had changed or how the dungeons were different from when he left. He just knew he wasn't safe. Warned by countless memories in his nightmares, Draco recognized the charged air, the instinctual sense of foreboding, the way his breathing sounded like shouts to his own ears. This sense of dread felt different from his anxiety while walking outside, as if some monster's jaws were tensed around him just waiting to snap, and he slowly started walking backwards with his wand still raised. For a moment he wanted to hide again, change into a tiny white snake that could slip into a hidden chip in the wall safely out of sight, but that wouldn't be wise.

"People aren't dragons, he told himself. They'll see me slithering away."

"Malfoy?"

He flinched at Harry's voice, then looked up like a startled rabbit as the air changed, moving through the windless dungeons as something stirred the air. For a second he couldn't move, couldn't even breathe. The scuff of someone's shoe broke his stupor and he turned to run back to the outer door.

Not two steps later, he stopped again, drawn to a halt by the sight of several students barring the way and coming towards him. Blue scarves and yellow scarves mingled among faces he didn't recognize. Perhaps if he saw them in a class, he'd remember their names, but right now he only saw them as the faceless mob that had killed his countless ancestors. He looked over his shoulder and saw more coming from around corners where they'd set up the ambush he'd narrowly avoided. The Slytherin entrance lay only a few yards behind them. It might as well have been a mile away.
"Harry," one of them said, beckoning the Boy Who Lived towards her side. "Come out of the way."

Fully expecting Harry to move, friendly overtures be damned, Draco stared in as much surprise as everyone else when Harry took a step not towards the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws but towards the Slytherin.

"I didn't really think you'd actually try this," Harry said to her, his wand easily appearing in his hand. "Don't you trust Dumbledore?"

"He's wrong this time. There are some people you don't give second chances to," she said. "And if you don't move, we'll take you down, too."

"He's not evil--!"

"He's a dark wizard," one of the boys said.

"We know what his kind do to children," another one said. "He can't stay!"

Murmurs of agreement filled the hall. All of them already held their wands in hand. They only waited for the first spell to be cast before they would start their own attack. No one wanted to cast the first curse.

Except Draco. This far into the dungeons, he had a better chance of reaching his common room than escaping outside, but there was no way to escape except through a fight. Again he wished for Crabbe and Goyle's backup, Pansy and her gang of girls, even Blaise or Nott's more cautious guile. All he had was one Gryffindor, the nightmares of his ancestors' deaths threatening to make him sick, and Snape's subtle spells of his own invention drilled into his head.

While Harry argued with the mob, Draco sang softly under his breath, his wand still pointed at the ground as if he was afraid to raise it. Which he was, but he wasn't afraid to cast a sneaky and potentially lethal spell.

"Hatiaen en rabere ic giefan t' eow," he whispered, the same phrase over and over again. One of the easiest dark spells to cast, it didn't change anyone's inherent nature, only drew out their natural hatred and rage. It'd be suicide to cast if it only worked on their anger's current target, namely himself, but the spell did not discriminate. He could almost hear Snape's voice explaining that emotions were more than enough to completely destroy his enemies. They were already afraid. If he whipped their hatred and anger into an uncontrollable frenzy--

"Don't you see," Harry kept trying, "this is exactly what the Death Eaters want us to do."

"Oh shut up!" a Ravenclaw boy snapped. "You act like you know everything--"

"--you don't even know what a dark wizard is," the first girl yelled.

"The Boy Who Lived doesn't know anything about our world--"

"--got poor Cedric killed--"

"Enough about Cedric!" someone in a blue scarf said. "Honestly, you'd think no one else suffered losses the way you Hufflepuffs go on about Diggory--"

"How dare you!"

"I knew him--"
"He slept in my dorm--"

"We've kept a bed empty for his memory--"

"Merlin, you're making him into a bloody saint--"

"Better than forgetting him!"

The squabbling grew into a roar around his ears. Draco almost smiled. Whoever had thrown out that first crack at Cedric had done him a favor. The ones blocking the way to the common room were entirely distracted. The group at the door, a little farther away and more alert, perhaps because of the chilly breeze coming in from outside, snipped at each other but kept Draco in sight out of the corner of their eyes.

"What on earth?" Harry whispered, staring in wonder as the mob crumbled into insults and clenched fists.

Draco glanced at him with a touch of irritation. He was glad Potter hadn't succumbed to irrational anger, but considering the boy's temper, Draco had to assume that Harry was just shrugging off another magical attack as usual and he found it annoying.

"That's it!" A fist flew along with a curse as two Hufflepuffs took aim at a Ravenclaw.

And that was Draco's cue. He stopped his chant, raised his wand and called out "bubonia."

Greenish-black spray from his wand struck everyone in the mob closer to the outer door. Harry watched wide eyed as huge swollen lumps emerged on their faces and they were seized with racking coughs, patches of their skin turning black as they sank to the floor in unison. Draco whirled on his heel and aimed at the second group who, startled from their arguing, began to raise their wands.

"Hrofana!" Even as he summoned enough ravens to pack the hall, Draco was right behind their beating wings, following in their wake as they tore through the crowd. Several stayed behind to peck and scratch at exposed faces and hands, buying him precious seconds as he darted over fallen students. He needed those seconds. He'd been up all day brewing potions with his master and casting dark spells on his own work. Two strong dark spells on so many people left his right arm trembling as he tightened his grip on his wand so it wouldn't slip out of his hand.

Once he cleared them, he turned as he ran, about to cast even more ravens to screen his escape. Instead of fallen students, however, he was startled by Harry suddenly bursting out of the cloud of ravens and barreling into him. The impact sent them both stumbling backwards and Draco's spell turned garbled as the wind was knocked out of him. Millions of slivers of ice accidentally shot from his wand, cutting through the huge incendio spell on Harry's heels, but flames still caught Potter across the arm and shoulder.

Draco landed on his side and his wand skidded out of reach. About to lunge after it, he stopped when a bright yellow curse exploded on the floor just a few feet ahead of him. He jerked his hand back and looked over his shoulder. His breath hitched.

Between him and the mob stood Harry, his robes burned around his right arm as he held his wand aloft. He looked absolutely furious.

"If this is what I'm missing out on of your wizarding world," he ground out between clenched teeth, "then you can keep it!"

"Harry, move--" one of them tried.
"Shut up!" he yelled. "I'm not letting you hurt him! Anyone tries, you damn well come through me first!"

Draco stared up in mute wonder. Never in any of his memories had anything like this happened. He watched Harry as if in a trance, unable to look at the students demanding that Potter step aside.

That's why he can defeat the dark lord, he thought. He doesn't know the rules. He doesn't know what's he's not supposed to do.

"Defending a dark wizard's as bad as a dark wizard itself," someone said, gathering their courage. Then a wand appeared out of the crowd, indistinct and safely anonymous, and the reducto spell flashed in the dim light.

Harry countered it easily. And the next spell. And the next. But then they were firing so quickly that he was hard-pressed to keep up, and Draco couldn't find the courage to dash from behind him to grab his wand, not when curses and hexes and violent spells smashed into the floor and whizzed through the air all around him. A moment later, two stupefy spells struck Harry in the chest, throwing him backwards across Draco's lap. A diffindo spell and several more stupefy spells flashed over both of them before the spells stopped flying as they all stared at the fallen Gryffindor. No one spoke as they all caught their breath.

"Is...is he okay?" a younger voice asked.

Hunching over slightly, Draco looked down at Harry's face, then gingerly touched the burned skin around his shoulder. Harry's arm trembled and his wand, still firmly in his hand, scraped on the floor.

"We'll deal with Potter later." As one, they all turned their gaze from Harry to Draco. "Him, first."

Again, hesitation. No one wanted to cast the first spell, not when they knew that this time it'd be more than just stupefy and reducto charms. They spared a moment to look at each other, steel each other's nerves.

Draco's hand seemed to move without him thinking about it. Knowing he'd never be able to pry the fingers back in time, he grabbed Harry's hand and raised it and the wand into the air as high as the burned skin would allow. Everyone noticed and in fear they all began shouting their own spells.

"Leothia stricaena!" he yelled even as he leaned over Harry's body. He knew he wouldn't be able to shield him entirely. He didn't even think about how much it would hurt himself until the first bolt of lightning crackled through the air and exploded on his back.

More electricity spiraled down his arm and out, burning his robes and skin. From the mob's screams he knew his spell was working. As he poured more strength into it, he hoped dearly that they were thrashing in agony, that their pretty faces were scorching, that their mouths would burn as they howled and that every inch of their skin would be scarred forever, if they survived at all.

Casting the spell offered scant protection. Lightning coursed down his arm and back like white hot whips. He tried to scream but his voice died in his throat. It wasn't supposed to be this powerful. The spell should've ended by now. His arm stopped hurting but his back felt like burning tar had been poured on him. After several more seconds and long after the screams had stopped, he blacked out.

Beating black wings and a hard peck to his face woke him. Coughing from the smoke in the air, he waved his good arm by his head and scared off one of the ravens he conjured. He watched it jump backwards and fly back to the mass of bodies on the floor where the rest of the ravens were busy gorging themselves on students and the birds who'd had the bad luck of being killed by lightning.
He didn't know how long he'd been out. Probably only a few seconds. His body screamed in protest as he sat up, fighting down the waves of nausea as he saw the damage to his hand. Black, charred skin flaked off all the way down his elbow. His whole body started to shake and turn cold in shock.

Footsteps.

He didn't bother to look up. Sounds echoed in the dungeons so there was no way to tell how close they were or even who they were. Maybe it was Severus and Dumbledore, maybe it was their saboteur. Maybe it was another mob of students.

Sliding out from under Harry, who'd received little more than few red burns on his hand and legs, Draco turned over onto his hands and knees and crawled the few feet towards his wand. He had to take it in his left hand. His right refused to move.

"Ilmauzer," he rasped. The door opened and he was about to drag himself in when he looked back at Harry. Wasting precious seconds as the footsteps came closer and cursing his own stupidity, he aimed his wand at Harry and levitated his prone body through the doors into the common room. Only then did he crawl in, careful not to put any weight on his right arm.

He changed the password to the first word he thought of, his mother's name, and then set one locking charm after another on the door, each unlockable by another password, until he heard someone outside scream. Forcing himself to his feet, he found that he couldn't stand straight but had to walk almost doubled over, stumbling towards the far door and bringing Harry with him. He didn't think about hiding inside any of the bedrooms. He simply walked, head down, deeper and deeper into the halls nearly everyone had forgotten about.

This far in, the halls were mere caves hewn out of the rock. No torches lit his way. One of the few benefits of his half-blood nature let him see vague outlines in the darkness. Dusty chambers echoed his own gasps back to him like whispers, turning into moans when he reached an old shower room, and he locked the door behind himself, laying even more charms upon it until he couldn't stand anymore. He set Harry down on the tiles near the back wall and sank down beside him, leaning forward because he couldn't bear to put his back on the stony wall.

Long minutes passed. It felt like hours to him. The air here felt damp even though no one had used the showers in years. He briefly thought about rousing Harry but decided not to. Harry would be in pain, he'd be angry, he'd want to talk. Draco just wanted to sit in the darkness forever.

All too soon, he heard a soft whoosh of air rush through the caves and blow gently under the door. He swallowed reflexively and closed his eyes. Someone had figured out his passwords and opened the main door. He couldn't hear them at first, but within a few seconds he heard them walking through the caves, ignoring every door and coming straight towards the old bathroom. As he heard each locking charm breaking like wood being snapped, he raised his wand and breathed in.

Whoever stood on the other side of the door threw it open and stepped in, the quiet "expelliarmus" snatching Draco's wand away before he could speak. The sudden light from the torches outside blinded him for a moment, and he turned his head away with a wince, expecting to be cut to pieces or to hear an Unforgivable Curse.

"Stupid, stupid child..."

After lighting one of the torches on the wall, Severus crossed the room and knelt beside him, setting down two jars, one of which he opened and pushed to Draco's mouth.

"Drink it," he ordered. "Two swallows at least, five if you can manage it."
With a shuddering breath, Draco put his good hand on the side of the jar even though Snape was the one tilting it and his head back. He managed three good mouthfuls before he started coughing again. After the fourth one he started to think he might be sick. He pushed the jar away and put his hand over his mouth as if he could settle his stomach that way.

"...how did you get through?" he whispered through his fingers. "All the spells--"

"The baron watched you seal the doors," Snape said as he unscrewed the other jar and pulled out a handful of ground dittany leaves. "You didn't even notice him. He told me every password, and you should be glad he did. If I'd been forced to undo those one by one, by the time I reached you, the damage would've set in and you'd be crippled."

Holding Draco's burnt arm out, he sprinkled the dittany across the skin and then waved his wand over it, whispering very quickly. With each wave, the tiny bits of leaves melted into a kind of cream. Draco watched in fascination as the skin turned dark red and started to bleed. It also started to hurt. By the time Snape had healed the skin back two more shades, Draco lay on one side whimpering in pain. He expected Severus to scold him for acting like a child. His master didn't say anything at all, even when he stopped working on his arm and turned his attention to his back. This time the healing dulled the pain since his back hadn't been burned to a crisp.

"A protego charm before a leohtia curse would block the worst of this," Snape said as he flicked away the raven's slice on his cheek. He gave his apprentice a once-over and almost snarled. "I expect they didn't give you time to protect yourself, though."

"I'm sorry," Draco whispered. "I should've stayed inside. If he hadn't been with me...he stood over me, between me and them..."

"Leaving the common room was stupid," Snape agreed. "Going out alone at night, especially when you knew half the school wants you dead...Malfoy arrogance truly knows no bounds."

He gave a tired sigh and stood up. "But, while you were indeed monumentally stupid, they were the ones who tried to kill you. You did nothing wrong, though I'm not sure that Madam Pomfrey will see it quite differently when she has to treat all of them."

"They're still alive?" Draco wasn't sure if he should feel relieved or disappointed.

"Yes, I'm afraid your only kills were some of your own ravens. Can you stand?"

Feeling worse than before but also stronger, Draco hissed as he turned onto his stomach and pushed himself up. He had to lean against the wall to rise, but finally he stood on shaky legs. "I don't think I can reach the hospital, though."

"You think I'd take you there? And have you surrounded with those would-be assassins?" Snape scoffed. "You'll be safer down here in your own bed. Since he's already down here, we might as well put Potter up as well. If he were to show his face among his friends, they'd probably hex it off."

If they didn't kill him outright, Draco knew. Light wizards defending dark wizards was simply unheard of, but then again that was something Harry didn't know about. Perhaps if he had grown up with his parents, he would have stood with the rest of the mob tonight. The thought made Draco's stomach clench and nearly made him throw up, so he stopped thinking about how close he'd come to death and just tried to keep Snape's medicine down.

The walk back through the caves felt longer than going down them had. While Snape floated Harry out ahead of them, he kept one hand on Draco's arm to steady him. By the time they reached his
room, Draco collapsed on top of his bed without bothering to get under the covers. Severus didn't argue or complain, he just summoned a blanket off of another bed and lay it over his legs while he continued working on his back. Draco wanted to stay awake long enough to see if Severus would treat Harry's wounds, but he found that he couldn't keep his eyes open and he fell asleep, wondering if he imagined Snape's hand gently touching his hair or if he just dreamed it.

Chapter End Notes

1. grywania, from the Old English growan, to grow
2. Hatiaen en rabere ic giefan t’ eow -- hate and rage I give to you
3. bubonia, from bubonic plague
4. hrofana, from the Old English hrœfn, raven
5. leohtia stricaena, from Old English leoht and strican, light and strike
In which Draco makes a love potion

Something cold and soft woke him up. With his eyes only half-open, the room looked blurry and dark, lit by a single candle on the nightstand beside his bed. The flame reflected off something shiny nearby, dazzling his eyes as he blinked. Something cool pressed against his forehead and he tried to reach up to take it off.

"Don't move."

A moment passed before Draco recognized Harry's voice. Another few moments went by before he realized that he was holding a cold compress to his face. "What are you...?"

"Snape said to try to cool you down," Harry mumbled, looking up at the door once as if Severus might be listening outside. "Your fever wasn't going down fast enough."

The bed shifted as Harry sat on the edge, careful not to sit on Draco's injured hand which lay on top of the blankets cradled by a soft cushion. Draco frowned and tried to make a fist. His fingers curled slightly and lay still, without the slightest twitch. He couldn't even feel it. Trying not to cry, he shut his eyes and turned his face back down against the pillow.

"How long have we been here?" he mumbled.

"A few hours. I don't know what time we were attacked, but I do know it's breakfast now."

Draco's brow furrowed. "How do you know that? There's no clocks in here."

"Um," Harry stammered. "I heard the bell. First bell. The one before classes, I mean."

Gryffindors make lousy liars, Draco thought, but he let it go. He didn't care about that at the moment. His hand was probably mutilated beyond repair and his whole body hurt and his back... he frowned and gave a tentative shrug. Nothing. He rolled his shoulders and still didn't feel any pain. His master worked fast if it had really only been a few hours. "Did Severus leave anything for us?"

"Oh yeah, a couple bottles of some really vile potion. He said for you to take one when you woke up." Harry grabbed one of them off the nightstand, but he hesitated before uncorking it. "You don't have to drink it. I won't tell if you don't."

"Why wouldn't I?" Draco winced as he slowly pushed himself up on his side. Even without burned skin, his body ached all over. He also realized he wasn't wearing his burned robes, just a pair of soft pants, probably pajama bottoms.

"Give it here." He held out his left hand.

"I mean it, it's really vile," Harry said, but he unstopped the top and handed the bottle over.

Essence of lavellan, Draco recognized the scent and downed it all in one go. Although it was a liquid, it felt dry on his throat and he reached out for the glass of water by the candle. As he sipped, the aches faded but they didn't go away entirely, leaving a dull throb in his muscles and joints.

"How do you do that?" Harry asked, taking the bottle back.

"Do what?"

"Drink those things without gagging." Harry held the bottle up to the candle and looked at the grainy...
bits clinging to the side of the glass. "I usually can't even drink some of Pomfrey's stuff without spitting out the first taste, and Snape's potions make her medicine taste like candy."

"I've grown up taking them," Draco said, yawning. "Hell, I've grown up making them. When you have to brew them nearly every day of your life, you stop tasting them as a whole and taste all the different ingredients. They're not so bad then."

"All the ingredients? What was in the bottle, then?" Harry asked like it was a challenge.

"Lavellan and cobwebs," Draco said with a disdainful roll of his eyes. "Simple healing draught, I learned it as a child. But it doesn't react with other potions or spells, so Severus probably has a couple charms on me."

A sudden thought occurred to him. If Snape could only give him such a mild potion, that meant he probably did have a few charms on him, and complex, powerful charms at that. Maybe his hand was healing very slowly and Severus had just blocked out the pain. He knew he shouldn't get his hopes up but he couldn't help it.

"What happened during the fight, after I got knocked out?" Harry asked. "Snape had to do something for the burns on my legs. He said if you hadn't protected me, it would've been a lot worse."

"He said that?" Draco smiled. It was nice to hear something other than the usual 'stupid child'.

"He also said I was lucky because everyone else there got really badly burned, including you." Harry stared at him hard. "What did you do?"

Draco took a deep breath and sighed. "I'm not sure. I cast a lightning spell, but inside the castle, it should've only stunned them. It shouldn't have been as strong as it was. But I'm not sorry it happened," he said, almost daring Harry to argue. "I hope they carry those scars forever."

"Scars?" Harry glanced at Draco's upper body, but he didn't see any damage aside from his maimed right hand. "How strong was that spell? Wait, you didn't have your wand--"

"I used yours," Draco said, speaking quickly when Harry's look darkened. "I didn't have a choice. They stunned you and they were going to kill me."

"How did you cast the spell?" Harry asked slowly.

"What do you mean, how'd I--?"

"How did you do it?" Harry demanded, leaning forward so that Draco leaned back, eyes wide. "Hermione put so many anti-theft jinxes on my wand, it should've been impossible for you to use it."

"I...I didn't..." Draco blinked in surprise. "I just grabbed your hand and held your wand up. If anything, the spell was stronger."

"You grabbed my hand?" Harry asked, sitting back. "You were holding my hand to use my wand?"

"It's not like I had time to ask permission. Besides, you wouldn't let go. The whole time I brought you back through Slytherin, you never let go of your wand."

"You're the one who brought me here?" Harry asked softly. "You...protected me from your spell and then brought me here while I was unconscious?" He seemed to say that more to explain it to himself than ask for confirmation, staring at the edge of the blanket as he thought.
Still wary that Harry might throw a punch, Draco waited until he looked deep in thought before easing back into the middle of the bed and propping up a pillow to lean back on. He glanced at the door and wondered when Snape would come back. That neither he nor Harry had a wand meant that the door was probably locked so that no one could get in or out. He hoped there were more candles somewhere, otherwise when this one burned out, they would be left in the dark.

After a few moments, Harry sighed and looked around the room. In the dim candlelight, he could only see the silhouettes of four other beds. "How on earth do you stand sleeping in here?" he asked. "It's like a prison cell."

"They're called dungeons for a reason," Draco said, relaxing as Harry seemed more at ease. "Besides, they're quiet. And you can let the curtains down--" he motioned at the curtains tied back at the bed's corner posts "--and read alone."

"You read in bed?" Harry asked. "You're as bad as Hermione."

Draco would've snapped at him but a soft pop near the foot of the bed made them look down at the two elves that had appeared. In her hands, Daffy held a tray obviously meant for Draco piled high with pastries and a bowl of hot soup stuck on the edge like an afterthought. With a more sensible meal and studiously looking only at Harry, Dobby did his best to ignore his former master.

"We's sent to bring you breakfast," Dobby said, setting Harry's tray on the table. "The headmaster says tell you he'll meets you soon and he's terrible sorry for everything."

With a disdainful sniff at the other elf, Daffy offered her tray and waited for Draco to nod in acceptance before she set it on his lap. He looked over it, impressed by the amount of different tarts and treats she'd prepared.

"Excellent service," he said softly, less interested in how she brightened at the compliment than at how Dobby gaped in surprise and wounded pride. In all the years he'd served the Malfoys, he'd never been complimented. "Daffy, can you tell me if the all the other students know about the attack last night?"

"Oh yes," she said, excitedly nodding her head. "They's all talking abouts it, how a bunch of students tries to kill Master Draco and Harry Potter, and how they was all in the hospital crying."

"Burned horribly," Dobby said, throwing an accusing glare at Draco. "And Professor Snape's refused to help so Madame Pomfrey can't treats them all fast enough. Sent them off to St. Mungo's, she did."

"And they's all knows how Harry Potter saved Master Draco," Daffy said over Dobby. "And hows you sick and hurt, too. Everyone's talking."

"Did Harry Potter really stand in front of Draco Malfoy?" Dobby asked Harry, glaring sideways at Draco. "That's a life debt for sure."

"I hardly think so, you spiteful little worm," Draco hissed at him. "Not when I had to drag him to safety."

Before Dobby or Harry could respond, Daffy grabbed Dobby's wrist.

"Unnatural elf," she scolded. "Wanting to be free, takings wages, now spiting the masters...if there's time to complains, there's time to works."

With an unceremonious pop, they both disappeared.
"If there's time to complain...?" Harry echoed.

"It's an elf saying," Draco said, taking a bite from one of the pastries. "Dobby's going to be hell to work with now. He used to hear that all the time from the other Malfoy elves."

"Your family had more than one?"

"Oh yes, we have four. Well, three without Dobby." He made a little noise as he finished off one treat and started on the next, the peach filling still hot inside the sugary crust. "Mm. Daffy really outdid herself this time." He spotted a small bowl of honey behind the pastries and dipped the corners in.

Harry sighed and started eating his own breakfast, picking out the sausages one at a time. "I suppose I'm the only one you're willing to speak courteously to."

"He started it."

"How very mature of you."

"If he's going to be spiteful, why should I be nice back?" He sulked when Harry just shook his head quietly.

They ate in silence, and one by one Draco finished all of the sweets on his plate. He stared at the soup bowl on the side, probably chicken soup to help him recover. Should've expected it, he thought. His mother had told him once that even muggles knew about chicken soup's magical restorative properties. He grabbed the spoon in his left hand and awkwardly held it in his fingers for a moment, but he decided that trying to eat with his off hand was too tricky, especially with someone watching. He picked up the bowl in one hand and drank it slowly, grimacing as he tasted celery. It was one of the foods he considered inedible, something Severus found amusing whenever he noticed his apprentice setting celery aside after drinking a potion that would make other people vomit.

"So now what?"

Draco glanced up. "What?"

"So now what?" Harry repeated. "I mean, everyone's going to know you're dark now. Classes will be almost impossible. I guess maybe if Dumbledore--"

"No." Draco took a little satisfaction in how Harry's jaw snapped shut in surprise. He set his breakfast tray aside and regarded him. "I don't plan on staying here long enough to give them a second chance at me. I'll rest up and fly out before Pansy arrives. With any luck, I'll meet her on the road, and then we'll find another place to hide."

"What? That's insane, after they've come so far--" Harry stumbled over his words and stopped when he saw the serious look on Draco's face. "There's a whole house full of children with her! And the Death Eaters are probably watching Hogwarts, it'd be even more dangerous to meet her nearby."

"Potter, the only reason she's been so cautious is because only a handful of them have brooms. If they could fly, there'd hardly be a problem. Before I leave, I can steal the Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw brooms and take them with me. If there's still not enough, we can double up with the youngest children. Probably have to do that anyway..." he mused, starting to think of the mechanics of such a large scale flight.

"And where would you go?" Harry demanded. "Winter's almost here...again. You'll be freezing and starving--"
"I suppose we could always find a big muggle house and obliviate its owners. There's a few muggle borns in Slytherin. They'd know which ones to pick."

Harry fell silent for a moment and lowered his head. "Then...you'll be leaving? Today?"

Draco watched him pluck at the edge of his sleeve and nervously chewed his lip for a second. "You could come with us," he said suddenly.

"What?" Harry breathed.

If the subject hadn't been so serious, Draco would've smiled at how Harry's eyes widened like an awed child.

"Come with us. It won't be any safer for you here. You defended me. They won't forgive that. But if you come with us, you'll be safer."

"With a bunch of Slytherins who hate me? Trying to get children past Death Eaters?"

"So what if they're young? You fought a troll when you were eleven. And Pansy, Blaise, Daphne, we're all dark children. You'd be surprised what we can do. Come with us, Harry. We could do this!"

"I dare say you could," Dumbledore said from the doorway.

Startled, both boys turned toward the door, and Draco nearly fell into Harry's lap as he turned too fast. Neither of them had heard the door's lock click open, but Dumbledore stood there with a contemplative look on his face.

"The idea of dozens of children flying across the countryside in the middle of a war is frightening at best, insane at worst. But then so is a single child standing against the dark lord long enough to set off a glorified bomb before flying across Britain." Dumbledore walked closer as he spoke, finally conjuring a chair and sitting a few feet from both of them. "With Harry at your side, I have no doubt that you could pull it off. But at what cost, Mister Malfoy? The dark lord's followers are everywhere. Even if they didn't attack, the cold would do their work for them. How many children would you lose in the flight?"

"Less than if we stayed here," Draco shot back. "I'd rather take my chances out there than watch your students pick us off one by one."

Dumbledore sighed and nodded. "The attempt on your life is a stain on Hogwarts' honor. I promised you sanctuary and you still came to harm. For that, I can only apologize. However, I do not believe that taking the Slytherins back through the countryside would be the wisest route, especially when remaining at Hogwarts may yet be your safest option."

"When the entire castle wants to kill us?" Draco scoffed.

"Fortunately, the entire castle does not want to kill you. Thanks in part to a handful of students doing their best to explain your situation, all of Gryffindor is willing to give you a chance, based on your previous good behavior and your efforts toward destroying the dark lord."

"So I'm attacked and nearly killed, but they're willing to forgive me? How generous."

"They're willing to trust a dark wizard," Dumbledore said. "A Malfoy, even. You know what that means."
Rather than look at the old wizard, Draco looked down at the bedsheets. How many people had his ancestors hexed and jinxed over the years? Tricked lost travelers into dark forests? Stole into homes and barns, leaving cursed amulets to wrack the family long after... His ancestors hadn't caused every mishap in England over the centuries, but they were certainly responsible for a fair bit. Sometimes he wished he could enjoy dreams like those, but he seemed cursed with their deaths instead.

"What about Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff?" Draco demanded. "I hadn't done anything and half of them wanted me dead. Now that they know--"

"They will do nothing." Dumbledore's eyes hardened. "This evening at dinner I intend to address the students to ensure your safety."

"What can you tell them that they haven't heard already?" Draco asked.

"I will simply explain to them that the reason their fallen comrades are in St. Mungo's and not in our own hospital is because they broke the laws of sanctuary, and the backlash took the form of your spell."

"The threat won't stop everyone," Draco said.

"It won't need to. I also plan on telling them everything you've done for us."

"A handful of potions will hardly--"

"Your potions are responsible for the deaths of over a dozen Death Eaters and have saved the lives of our aurors countless times."

Draco's jaw snapped shut.

"I understand that your master has not informed you of what your potions have been used for. You may rest assured that I am not exaggerating when I say that your efforts have been instrumental in our war. Without you, we would be at a stalemate. Instead, we are slowly overtaking them."

For a few moments Draco considered that information, mulling over the various poisons and vapors he'd created and how the Death Eaters must have died. He considered how Voldemort knew exactly how fast Snape could brew his potions and must therefore know how the youngest Malfoy, as Snape's apprentice, had facilitated his master's work. And if Voldemort found out that the Hogwarts students had tried to kill him and then assumed that Draco would naturally run from danger--

"Dammit," he snapped, leaning back on his pillow in defeat.

In his chair, Dumbledore gave a soft sigh of relief and also leaned back. Harry looked back and forth between them in confusion.

"What's going on?" he asked Dumbledore while keeping an eye on Draco. "Is he staying?"

"It's not even a bloody choice," Draco growled, glaring at both of them for good measure. "The dark lord will know I'm the one responsible for killing his minions--"

"But it's the aurors who--" Harry started.

"That's not how the dark lord thinks," Dumbledore murmured. "Our Order members just deliver the poison. In his mind, the ones responsible are the ones who betrayed him and created the poisons for us."
"He'll be looking for me," Draco said, mostly in explanation to Harry but also to settle it in his own mind. "He'll have all his servants looking for any dark wizard who's left his service and--dammit!" He almost slammed his right hand down on the mattress but remembered just in time.

If it was just him, he was willing to risk it. After all, he'd crossed most of the country while the dark lord was insanely furious at him. Running and hiding came naturally to him, after all. But with all the children Pansy was bringing, many of them first and second years, he simply couldn't chance it. They'd be too slow to move, too awkward to maneuver and impossible to lead out of a fight. One wizard could slip through the dark lord's net. A whole house full of students, impossible.

"Severus explained that putting anyone out near the gate to guard the children would only frighten them off," Dumbledore said, smiling again now that he'd won the argument. "So we'll simply have to wait for them to arrive. You believe that Miss Parkinson can bring them through any ambushes the Death Eaters may have waiting?"

"She'll bring them here safely, I have no doubt." Now Draco's look turned doubly sharp. "And you will guarantee their safety once they arrive. Because if you can't, we'll simply take over the dungeons and I won't do a damn thing more to help you."

To Harry's surprise, Dumbledore's smile grew and he stood up. "Completely understandable. Now, I believe I've bothered you long enough and you do need rest. Thank you for taking the time to speak with me, Mister Malfoy. I trust I will see you at dinner?"

"...what?" Draco blinked. "Dinner?"

"Unless you intend for the Slytherins to dine in your common room, which I think would be uncomfortably crowded, it'd be best for them to eat their meals in the great hall. I realize you'd been avoiding it and dining in the kitchen, but I think you should make an appearance tonight."

"That's hardly--"

"A show of pride and strength," Dumbledore continued. "And of your willingness to forgive Hogwarts and give it a second chance. Since any students who might attack you are all in St. Mungo's, you can be sure of the rest of the school's peaceful intentions toward you."

"What about when they come back?" Draco asked. "I'm not foolish enough to hope that you'd send them to Azkaban but can I hope that you might consider expelling them?"

Dumbledore held silent a moment. "Normally I would. But we are at war, and if we cannot end it quickly then we will need every able wizard and witch we can get. All I can promise is that they will not harm you again. I will see to that myself."

Draco didn't know what he meant by that and decided not to ask, although he hoped Severus could give him an explanation later. For now he let it go. "Fine. I'll be at dinner."

"Thank you." Dumbledore glanced at Harry and for a moment Draco thought he might ask him to leave the dungeon since he looked well. But then the headmaster conjured away his chair and left quietly, locking the door behind him.

A long stretch of silence followed. Draco breathed out and stared at the covers over his legs. Amazing how all his plans could change so quickly. He hoped his Slytherins would forgive him for bargaining with their lives, treating them like pieces on a chessboard. His mouth twisted. Dumbledore was playing them all, and he didn't like it. More and more this felt like a game played between Voldemort and Dumbledore, with pieces saved or sacrificed according to their usefulness.
But no one played a Malfoy for long. What would the two players do when their perfectly ordered pieces suddenly turned on them and refused to play the game?

I won't be his pawn any longer, he thought. I will do whatever benefits me, and if that means I occasionally do what Dumbledore wants, so be it. But if it means I do what he doesn't want, then that's fine, too. Father has his Knights. I have my Slytherins.

This is no longer a chess game, he decided. This is politics with armies on the side, and he could play politics with the best of them.

"So you're going to stay?" Harry asked softly.

"Yes, Potter. I'm staying."

"Malfoy..." Harry said, pausing to look at the door to make sure they were alone. "About that offer..."

Draco glanced up curiously.

"I would have gone with you."

A small smile appeared on Draco's face. "I'd hoped you would. I...I wanted to thank you. For what you did."

"It was nothing--" Harry said.

"No, it was. No one's ever done that for a dark wizard before. No one."

"You can't know that for sure."

"I can." Draco took a deep breath and pressed on. "You don't know this, almost no one knows about it, but...something about the way we cast magic, the way we let it control us, it lets us see things from the past. Memories of our ancestors."

Harry thought about that for a minute. "That's how you knew about the girl in your grimoire, the one who drew the dragons, isn't it?"

"You remembered?" Draco whispered.

"I've been thinking about it for awhile. It was like you didn't know her until you tried to remember her." He looked away. "I wish I could remember my family."

"I don't remember everything about her. Just how she died. That's the irony, all we dream is how they die. That's how I know for sure no one's ever tried to defend a Malfoy. Or any dark wizards. We would know."

"Every night you watch them die?"

Draco shook his head. "I don't watch them. I am them. I feel everything they felt when they died, or when they were running for their lives. But it's not every night. It's usually only a few nights out of the month. Although lately it's been much more often..."

"That's awful."

"It's just the way it is."
Harry fell silent and didn't answer. After a few seconds, Draco yawned and began to ease back under the blankets. "Well, as much as I hate to admit it, I do need to rest." As he lay his head on the pillow, he noticed Harry still staring at nothing. "You should get some sleep, too."

"Right." Harry set the two breakfast trays on top of each other and left them for an elf to collect later, then walked over to the nearest bed. "It's weird, I only got stunned but I feel like I went through a battle."

"You did," Draco said. He watched Harry pull the blankets back and slide into bed, noticing for the first time that he was still wearing the clothes from the night before. Which made sense, he thought. Snape's good will only extended to letting the Gryffindor stay over. Bringing him clean clothes or anything else was out of the question.

"Hey, Malfoy," Harry called. "Whose bed am I sleeping in?"

"That one? Nott's, I think. Why?"

"Just want to make sure I'm not in Crabbe or Goyle's bed."

"No, they're nearest to the door."

"Like guards?"

"I guess." He pulled the blankets up to his shoulder and turned over to sleep on his stomach, careful to leave his right hand out like Severus had left it.

"Will your friends still hate me when they come back?"

Draco chuckled. "I'll let them know we don't hate you anymore. In fact, I promise that if we have to stay down here, you'll be welcome, too."

"Even if Snape still hates me?"

"There's no if about that, Potter. Nothing will ever make him like you. But he'll put up with you if I ask."

"Oh."

A long pause. Draco yawned again and closed his eyes.

"Malfoy?"

"Go to sleep, Potter..."

"Are you going to leave the candle burning?"

Draco blinked and opened his eyes, staring at the soft orange glow. "I'd rather, if it doesn't bother you."

"No bother. Good night."

"Night." He lay watching the candle burn steadily for several minutes, unmoving as he listened to Harry's breaths deepen. Sleeping with someone nearby made him feel much more comfortable, and he briefly remembered his first night back, sleeping all alone in the cold hospital wing with the snow hitting the windows and pale moonlight making sharp shadows on the wall. Here the flame reflected on the glass on the nightstand, turned the walls a dark orange, and glistened on something very near
Draco straightened. There on the mattress just in front of his face was a small dark hair. Glancing once at Harry to make sure he was asleep, Draco picked up the hair and held it to the light. It was one of Harry's, he was certain. Seconds passed as he gently twirled it between his fingers. He knew Harry had a chance of defeating the dark lord simply because he didn't know the rules of society, but at the same time, Harry had just left a single hair for a dark wizard to find. Draco smiled. If Weasley could see him now, the red head would probably beat him into the floor.

He glanced back at Potter, then down at the hair. And made his decision in an instant. Tugging at the hair above his eyes, he found one approximately the same size as Harry's and pulled it out with a wince. Working one-handed was difficult, but he managed to twirl the two hairs together. That done, he leaned over the nightstand and pulled open the drawer, rummaging through the odds and ends he'd stuffed inside over the years. He didn't have ready access to Snape's supplies, but he didn't need to for what he had in mind.

"C'mon...where are you?" he whispered, pushing aside scraps of paper, broken quills, a deck of cursed playing cards, a few pages he'd torn out of other people's books, loose tie pins, a small blue butterfly in a glass case he'd bought years ago and forgotten about, and finally several tiny vials that had fallen into a corner. He found one with a cork top and pulled it out, blowing off the dust that had gathered on it. He also tore off a corner from one of his old notes and grabbed a quill that still had some ink.

Writing left-handed made his letters hard to read, but he managed to write Draco and Harry on either side of the paper. Then he wrapped the paper around the two hairs and tucked them into the vial. With one more glance to Harry to make sure he hadn't heard him so far, he reached for the bowl of honey on his breakfast tray.

Very little honey was left, but he didn't need much. He tipped the edge over the vial and slowly filled it up, corkscrewing it when he was done. For a moment he smiled at the little charm he'd made. It was a weak amulet, something children toyed with while their parents roamed the countryside at night, but since it was so weak, maybe no one would find it. Only his closest friends might notice Harry becoming closer to Draco, arguing less with him, spending more time with him, and generally more willing to defend him against anyone. He'd trusted Dumbledore for too long. He wanted a bit more protection than what the headmaster could offer, and using Harry to provide it seemed fair to him. He slipped the amulet under his pillow and lay back down. Later on he'd find a string for it and wear it around his neck for safekeeping.

"Thank you, Potter," he whispered to himself as he closed his eyes. "Looks like something good's come out of that attack after all."
In which Draco is revealed to the students

Dreams came to him as he slept through the day, not the nightmares of his ancestors' deaths but of flying through the twilight sky on a broom made of ancient magics, dipping through the clouds as the stars glimmered and the moon lit his way over the tree tops. The wind lifted him up higher and higher until he watched the land fly by like a patchwork quilt dotted with houses and barns. There was no need to hide from muggles or light wizards, and he was vaguely aware of several more wizards and witches flying behind him as they crossed the countryside. He lowered his broom in an easy swoop and came back up again for the sheer pleasure of the night air swirling around him.

"You were right," someone said close by. "It's even more beautiful when the sun sets."

"You can only see the stars at night," Draco said.

He tried to turn to see who'd spoken, but he could only turn his head a little bit, just enough to see the tip of his companion's Firebolt broom. The more he tried to look, the farther away his companion flew until he seemed like a little gold bird in the distance. Then Draco put his hand out and gently cupped the bird in his hand and pulled it close to his chest.

"I've finally caught you," he whispered, and then he woke up.

Sitting at his bedside, Severus met his eyes as he blinked the sleep away. "No nightmares today?"

Had he slept through the whole day? It seemed like he'd just closed his eyes. "No nightmares. I just remember flying and...someone was with me, I think." He groaned as he shook the sleep out of his head.

"Mm. Can you move your hand?"

Looking over at his right hand and wincing at the candle light, Draco tried to make a fist. His fingers curled loosely and with no strength behind them. A dull ache started in his bones, growing stronger as he flexed.

"It hurts," he said.

"Good," Snape said. "That means it's healing. Sit up and drink this."

Another potion was thrust into his hands and he drank it down, noting the heather, vervain and several different types of toadstools that he didn't try to sort. Another healing draught.

"And how does your back feel?"

He rolled his shoulders and stretched a little. "Fine. Did it scar?"

"You're just like your father," Snape sighed, gathering his things together. "Survives a fight by the skin of his teeth and all he cares about is that he's not going to scar."

"What fight?" Draco asked.

"Back when we were still students," Snape said, not offering any more information. "Now, I understand you told the headmaster that you intend to stay here?"

"Yes," Draco said slowly. There was no way to tell what his master thought. "Was that the best choice?"
"I can hardly foretell the future. Time alone will tell us if your decision was prudent or if it will cost the lives of the children." Snape glanced at him and saw the worried look on his apprentice's face. "But it may be the most practical choice at the moment. After all, you can easily leave the castle at a later time if need be."

That didn't sound very reassuring to Draco, but he didn't say anything except to ask what time it was.

"An hour before dinner," Snape said. "Which gives you enough time to shower and get ready."

"This feels a little insane," Draco said.

"Of course it's insane," Snape said as he stood up. "No dark wizard has ever come into the open like this before. But then...so much is changing, even though no one seems to notice. If you can pull this off..." He let the thought hang as he moved towards the door, but he turned just before he left. "Well, hurry up. Get ready. And you'd better wake up Potter. If he's not with you tonight, they'll think we sacrificed him."

"Right." Draco watched him go and looked back at the nightstand, spotting his and Harry's wands next to the candle. Relieved to see them, he eased out of bed, rubbing his sore hand as he knelt and rummaged through the trunk at the foot of his bed. Once he had a handful of clothes, he grabbed both wands, then walked over and put a hand on Harry's shoulder to shake him. "Get up, Potter."

"...wha?" Harry mumbled something unintelligible and turned over.

"I said wake up," Draco said and shook him hard. "It's almost time."

Still grumbling, Harry sat up and glared, but without his glasses and with worse hair than usual, he didn't frighten Draco at all. "It can't be time. I just laid down."

"You've been asleep for hours," Draco said. "Come on."

He waited until the other boy got up and then realized that Harry didn't have an extra change of clothes. Draco figured he could give them a quick cleaning while he was in the shower.

"Did anyone come by while I was asleep?" Harry asked, following him out of the bedroom and down the hall to the bathroom.

"This isn't the hospital," Draco said. "Even if your friends tried to visit, I doubt Severus would let them in."

Taking the nearest shower stall, he hung his clothes on the towel rack and stepped inside, closing the curtain before he stripped off his pajama pants. After whispering his cleansing chant a few times under the hot water, he felt something cold splash against his foot and he looked down. To his surprise, Harry had chosen the shower right next to him again, and apparently he preferred his water at a cooler temperature than nearly scalding.

Draco paused, staring at the thin metal wall between him and Harry. He put his hand against it to feel the water from the other side strike it and closed his eyes, listening as the water changed pitch against the tile as Harry moved. He leaned forward until his forehead touched the wall, just standing and listening. Knowing Harry was so close felt reassuring.

With a start he blinked and stepped back, one hand over his mouth. He hadn't expected his little amulet to take effect so quickly or to spill over into his own emotions. After the initial shock, he figured that at least he knew it was working. Finishing his shower quickly, he dressed and stepped out, relieved that Harry was still washing. He aimed his wand at the pile of clothes on the floor and
scourgified them, then added a pressing charm to give them an ironed look before he lay Harry's wand on top.

"I'll wait for you in the common room," he said as he left.

"Be out soon," Harry answered.

A large bowl of apples stood on one of the end tables, so Draco grabbed one and sat down to eat. A few seconds later he stood up and started pacing as he ate. When he finished, he tossed the core into the fireplace and sat down again. He drummed his fingers on the seat for a little while, then stood up and paced the room again.

His mind refused to stop whirling. His Slytherins were coming home tonight, but first he had to face the rest of the school. Maybe they would hex him before Dumbledore started talking. Maybe someone would try to get revenge for what he did to their friends. Maybe Death Eaters would try to storm the castle tonight. He heaved a sigh and stared at the glass window to the lake.

"And maybe the apples are poisoned," he chided himself. Worrying wouldn't help anything and there were no memories from his ancestors to help him, so he leaned against the glass with his eyes shut and tried not to think about it.

When he looked up again, the giant squid's massive eye was staring right at him. He cried out and jumped back, knocking his hip against the table's corner. As he hissed in pain, he tilted his head and watched the squid hover in front of him, its tentacles stretching out in all directions. This close, it looked like a horrible monster pulsing in the water. Draco wondered if something was wrong with it. The squid had never looked into the room like this. It always swam by without noticing anyone inside.

"Its even bigger than I thought," Harry whispered from the doorway.

Draco glanced over his shoulder at him but didn't answer. The squid's tentacles brushed against the glass and followed the edges where it met the stone, as if searching for a gap. As it moved, its body turned up slightly, giving both of them a clear view of its sharp beak opening and closing slowly. Scowling, Draco raised his wand and cast a lumos so bright that the squid shot away into the murky water, its tentacles leaving streaks on the glass for a few seconds before the currents washed them away.

"Why'd you do that?" Harry demanded, stepping closer. "It wasn't doing anything."

"It..." Draco stared after it and hoped it wouldn't come back. "It's not supposed to..."

Harry leaned forward, trying to get a look at Draco's face. "Malfoy, did it scare you?"

Feeling his face heat up, he turned away and went to stand by the fireplace, hoping that the flames would explain his flushed skin. To his dismay, Harry followed after him, but he was saved by the door opening and Severus coming through.

"Good, you're ready," Snape said when he saw them. "Let's go."

The walk to the great hall never felt so long. The whole school was uncommonly quiet. Usually at dinner, stragglers would still dot the corridors and students skipping a meal would be on their way to the library. Now their footsteps sounded too loud and Draco felt like the school was empty.

"Don't let your guard down," Severus said as they walked. "That goes for you, too." He glared at Harry as if speaking to him was an insult. "They may be focused on us, but they're hardly enamored
of you, either."

Harry ignored Snape's attitude and instead looked at Draco, who walked with his head slightly lowered. "Gryffindor won't attack you. You could sit with us if--"

"No," Draco said, cutting him off quickly, before he gave into temptation to sit beside the boy who'd protected him. "No. I'll be all right." He smiled. "You'll be right across the room in any case."

Brightening when he saw Draco's smile, Harry nodded once.

Severus took them around to the front doors and paused a moment, giving them all a chance to steel their nerves. Draco went to put the hood of his cloak up and almost panicked until he remembered that he wasn't wearing it. He took a deep breath and raised his head as Snape pushed the doors open and led them in.

The entire student body turned to watch them enter. Conversations died and whispers started as Harry left their side and walked to his table, smiling nervously as he sat down at the space Ron and Hermione made for him. On the other side of the room, Draco followed just behind his master and crossed around to sit at the head of the Slytherin table, facing the students. Severus continued up and sat at his usual seat, ignoring the teachers watching him out of the corner of their eye.

Draco sat ramrod straight, one hand on the table and the other beneath it, gently easing his wand out of its pocket and resting it on his lap. Now he waited, breathing shallow and staring at a spot on the floor near the front table. In his peripheral vision he could keep everyone in sight. No matter what happened, the first one to attack him or Harry would be cut down before they could form the spell.

At the front of the room, Dumbledore stood up and faced the hall, waiting for the whispers to fade away before he spoke. "I know that you have all heard rumors regarding last night and the continued absence of several of your housemates today, rumors that a group of students gathered in the dungeons to make an attempt on another student's life. I am sad to say that the rumor is true."

Startled whispers started flying, but Dumbledore did not wait for them to stop, instead talking over them until they quieted.

"Last night several Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw students attempted and came quite close to murdering both Draco Malfoy and Harry Potter. It is a testament to the skill and ingenuity of these two boys that they are still alive, and it is to the shame of Hogwarts that they had to defend themselves at all." He paused to take a breath. "The absence of their attackers is not due to any punishment, but is rather the retribution of a broken sanctuary vow. It shall be many days before they can be released from St. Mungo's, and you can be sure that any further attacks will result in similar injuries, if not outright death."

Startled whispers started flying, but Dumbledore did not wait for them to stop, instead talking over them until they quieted.

"By now, I have no doubt that you have come to a conclusion regarding Mister Malfoy's affiliations. However, what you do not know is that his actions have already won several battles against the dark lord, depriving him of nearly half of his Death Eaters in one fell swoop and causing the deaths of several more. All of you have heard about the destruction of his home, but few know that Mister Malfoy had to risk capture to destroy the manor himself before flying across the country in the middle of a blizzard to reach Hogwarts. And his efforts while under our protection have been crucial to fighting the dark lord."

Draco almost laughed. Dumbledore made it sound like such a heroic adventure. Some day when this was all written down in the history books, he hoped no one would remember that he'd been too petrified to think when he'd faced Voldemort, or that he'd nearly crippled himself while he panicked and hid in his dormitory. He couldn't help a small smile from escaping. A heroic Malfoy in the
history books, wouldn't that be amazing?

Amongst all the whispers in the great hall, one stood out among the rest. A first year's voice, probably, too young to keep her voice down as she clearly asked, "but he's a dark wizard, isn't he?"

Everyone stilled as the question hung in the air. Draco swallowed and tightened his grip on his wand. Dumbledore wouldn't be able to dodge this question with euphemisms, and he braced himself in anticipation. At the front table, although he didn't look, he knew Snape was doing the same. His breathing started to come in quick shallow bursts and he struggled to keep himself still. No matter how much he wanted to bolt, he knew running would only make things infinitely worse.

"Mister Malfoy," Dumbledore started slowly, "is indeed a dark wizard."

Immediately everyone turned and faced him, as if that pronouncement meant that Draco would suddenly change shape before them, his true form revealed. Seeing the same thin blonde who wouldn't return their look was a bit of a letdown.

"I sincerely doubt any of you have ever seen a dark wizard or witch and realized it," Dumbledore said. "They are not the monsters you've read about in your storybooks. They keep very well hidden, and for good reason I might add, if last night's attempt on Mister Malfoy's life is any indication. And yet he sits before you, willing to trust you despite the actions of your classmates. Despite any actions you yourselves might have taken before today, if you'd been as certain as your friends."

"Then...he's really on our side?" the same child asked from the Hufflepuff table, her voice carrying through the silent hall.

"He has lost his home and quite possibly his family to aid us in this fight," Dumbledore said gravely. "And he has proven his intentions to my satisfaction. In fact, he has proven his intentions so well that Mister Potter stood between him and the mob."

That certainly sent fresh whispers across the hall, but whispers of a distinctly approving tone, and Draco started to let himself believe that this might actually work.

"For the first time in our collective history," Dumbledore said, "we have the chance to end the long conflict between dark and light. Draco Malfoy took the first step in trusting us. Harry Potter took the second to prove that trust was not in vain. Can we have faith that the rest of Hogwarts will honor that trust?"

Long seconds passed as the question lingered. Draco wondered why on earth Dumbledore had asked that and fought the urge to look at the rest of the hall as the students looked around at each other, wondering what to do.

"Gryffindor will honor that trust."

Draco blinked as Ron's voice echoed around him and faded. His gaze swept the Gryffindor table, looking for any sign of deceit or reluctance. There was none.

"Hufflepuff will honor that trust," came almost immediately after.

At their table, it seemed like every Hufflepuff wanted to redeem their house's besmirched honor. Like everyone else, he waited for the last table to echo the sentiment. This time he could see the reluctance on their faces. He had no doubt that Ravenclaw students had delved into the library and the forbidden section to glean more information on dark wizards, finding more false stories than true, although he was sure the true stories meticulously described dark wizards' less savory pastimes.
"Ravenclaw will honor that trust." Spoken like a Ravenclaw promise, too, with cautious reservation and unspoken conditions. But it was still a promise.

Draco let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding, and from a quick glance at Severus, he saw his master do the same.

Dumbledore smiled as if he'd expected this outcome the entire time. "I find that as I get older, my highest hopes are realized not by adults but by the boundless idealism of youth. Perhaps when this conflict is defeated, we will discover that we have won not one but two wars, one against the dark lord and one against ourselves. Now, I think we've dwelt on the unpleasant business of war long enough."

As dinner popped up on the tables, a tangible sigh of relief went through the whole hall, Draco included, and he slipped his wand back into his robe. The atmosphere was still tense, but at least the school wasn't contemplating killing him, at least not tonight. He looked down at his plate and hoped that Dobby hadn't poisoned it.

Dinner passed interminably slowly, and within a few minutes he started to wish his dinner was poisoned after all. No one could resist the occasional glance at the dark wizard, like children looking at a dangerous snake in a zoo, tapping the glass and hoping to make it move. Draco refused to look up or move except to eat, doing his best not to react to the poorly hid whispering as they gossiped about his missing parents or the Ministry officials still trying to talk to him. But he did keep his ears open and caught every scrap of information about Hogsmeade, how the ice cream parlor had closed and its owner gone missing, and then the rumors about how Amelia Bones' continued absence might not be illness like the Ministry said. They even listed the people they'd heard had died with a morsmordre over their homes. As he put what he'd heard together in his mind, he smiled. The dark lord was looking for the missing children, but he had assumed they would hide somewhere and had gone on a wild search through the homes of his traitorous Death Eaters only to find empty houses. He'd never imagined that they'd scurry into the forests like little night creatures.

But it didn't make sense. Why hadn't the dark lord known they'd disappear into the woods? It was what any good dark child was taught to do almost from birth. Maybe Voldemort was even more insane than anyone realized.

After awhile, the students realized that he wasn't going to put on a show and began to leave bit by bit. Silence was far more tolerable to their gossip and he relaxed in earnest as the room emptied out. After awhile only a handful of students remained, including Harry and his friends. Draco watched as he spoke with them, nodding when they seemed to ask him something. Hermione looked at Draco with a disapproving glare and then back at Harry, but they finally all stood and walked out, leaving him at the table. Harry pushed his dinner plate away and looked up at Draco, smiling. The last of the students left soon after, as had most of the teachers. Only Snape and Dumbledore remained at the front table, both of them having finished eating long ago. Severus was writing out something on a roll of parchment while he waited, and beside him Dumbledore slowly built a house of cards, carefully stacking it higher and wondering when it would explode.

Draco sighed and stood up, stretching slightly as he walked around to the center of the room, sitting on the corner of the Ravenclaw table. As he expected, Harry joined him.

"When do you think they'll show?" Harry asked as he sat.

It was the question he'd been dying to ask Severus, but Draco knew if he asked, his master would mock him for being even more stupid than usual. Indeed, he heard the quiet scoff from the front table.
"Who knows? They'll be fairly well hidden so we won't even know when they come through the wards around the castle. We'll just have to wait for them to come in. Might not even be tonight."

"So...we're just going to wait here all night?" Harry asked.

"No one is forcing you to stay," Severus said.

"Still," Dumbledore said, adding another layer to his house of cards, "it would be a nice gesture for Gryffindor to have a representative to welcome the Slytherins back."

Severus glared at the headmaster and then at Potter and then went back to writing.

"Wish I'd known it could be awhile," Harry said. "I'd have borrowed Ron's chess set."

Draco gave him a sidelong look. "Got your wand?"

"Yeah, right here."

Turning on the table so that he was facing the empty hall, Draco pulled out his own wand. "Fyria raebaena."

A thin red stream of fire slipped out of his wand and into the air towards the ceiling, twisting like a snake as bits of orange and yellow flames sparkled along its length until he finally snapped his wand and cut the stream off. It glowed brightly for a moment, then exploded in a small shower of sparks. Harry held his hand out to catch them and smiled when they felt like feathers.

"What was that?" he asked. "Was that dark magic, too?"

"It's a ribbon of fire," Draco said. "It doesn't really do anything. It's just one of the spells I learned as a child waiting for...um..." His voice trailed off.

"Waiting for what?" Harry asked.

"For my parents to come home," Draco said, not mentioning that he'd waited for them to come home after flying around the countryside terrorizing the neighbors. "Our parents, actually. Pansy, Greg, Thomas, Vincent, all of us who live close to each other, we'd get together while our parents went off to, mm, social functions."

"Like sleep-overs?" Harry asked.

"Kind of." He sent another stream of fire, blue with green and white glimmers this time, spiraling towards the ceiling until he dispersed it into a cloud of smoke. Beside him, Harry raised his wand to try the spell himself. "Not too strong," he reminded him.

Harry took a deep breath and concentrated. "Fyria raebaena!"

A gigantic bolt of yellow fire streaked out of his wand, crackling in the air with violent energy. Harry gasped and jumped back, which broke the connection between his wand and the ribbon. It pulsed dangerously close for a moment, sending out black bursts of power in all directions.

"Tempestas!" Draco called as fast as he could. A white beam engulfed Harry's spell and exploded in a harmless shower of white fluff that faded after a moment. He stared at Harry with wide eyes. "How the hell did you do that?"

"What? I just...I didn't expect it to...I just did what you did!" Harry said. "You said it couldn't do anything."
"It's never done that before!"

"Perhaps," Dumbledore called from his seat, his beard singed after the pulse of energy had detonated his cards, "fireworks are not the best means to pass the time indoors?"

"Sorry, sir," both of them muttered. Draco shot a suspicious glance at Harry but didn't yell anymore.

"Surely you can pass the time," Snape said, "with something a little less explosive?"

Draco frowned and thought, but nothing immediately came to mind. All of the little spells he knew were spectacular light shows. Maybe Malfoy magic really was flashy after all.

"Actually," Dumbledore said as he cleared the smoking remains from his table, "There is something within the realm of dark magic that I've heard of but never seen. Ever since I first found out about it, I've always been curious to see it."

Interested though a little wary, Snape glanced at the headmaster. "And what would that be?"

"I've heard of magic that instills life within inanimate objects, usually dolls. Not the cursed dolls you'd find for sale in Knockturn Alley, I mean--"

"Poppets," Snape interrupted, his voice very soft. "We call them poppets, not dolls."

"But since it's forbidden magic," Dumbledore said, "I've never had a chance to see it."

Severus and Draco exchanged a look. After revealing the Malfoy line to the school, shying away from a small demonstration seemed ridiculous, but to create a poppet and set it dancing on the headmaster's whim went against every instinct of self-preservation they had.

"If it's too much to ask, I completely understand--" Dumbledore started.

"No," Draco said. "It's all right. I...I can do it."

Snape's expression let everyone know what he thought about such a display of magic, but he didn't argue. Malfoys were inherently flashy creatures, after all. "You'll need cloth," he said, and conjured a large rag for him, sending it across the air with a swish of his wand.

Draco caught it and turned it over in his hands. Green and tattered, he recognized it as a cleaning rag from the potions storeroom. Normally he would prefer using a clean section of cloth for any kind of spell, but a potions rag by its very nature had to be kept clean of ingredients, lest they accidentally combine and cause some kind of reaction.

He hadn't made a poppet in years, but they weren't difficult to make. He tore a few strips off of the sides and lay them in his lap as he folded the rag over and bunched the cloth out in places to make arms and legs. The torn strips were then used to tie off the limbs and make a bunch at the top for the head. When he was done, it looked like a little ragdoll, just big enough to hold in his hand.

Before Draco could ask, Severus tossed over the small knife he used to sharpen his quill. Draco grimaced but made the cut in his hand, his left hand this time because he was tired of mutilating his right hand all the time, and let a few drops of his blood soak the doll's torso, staining the green cloth black.

He glanced at Harry's hands. "Let me see your fingers."

"What?" Harry reflexively drew them away.
"Just let me see. I'm not going to hurt you."

Once offered, Draco grabbed Harry's hand and held it out. As he suspect, Harry's fingernails were long and messy as if he chewed them regularly. Considering he had a dark lord out to kill him, that was understandable.

"Hold still," he said, using the quill knife to cut off a few bits of his fingernails and push the pieces into the doll's folds.

"That's not going to do anything to me, is it?" Harry asked.

"Not at all." Draco jumped off the table and walked over to Dumbledore, climbing up on the raised floor so he could stand in front of him. He held the doll up to his face and breathed over it once, then set it before the headmaster and tapped it on the head three times.

At first nothing happened. And then slowly, like a leaf blown by a breeze, the poppet's arms started to move. It turned over on its side and came up to its feet, swaying unsteadily. Moving like a marionette with broken strings, it bent its arms and legs in haphazard angles trying to walk towards Dumbledore, who leaned closer for a better view.

"Don't let it touch you," Snape warned him. "Fingernails were used, so it's fairly dangerous to touch it now that it's moving."

"Fascinating," Dumbledore whispered. "I'd read about it, but I've never seen necromancy step by step. It's only blood and breath and nails, though."

"Grass is better if you want a harmless poppet," Snape said. "That thing would drain the lifeforce right out of you if it got close enough."

"That's what you said before," Harry said, looking at Draco. "I remember, when you were talking about Knockturn Alley and the woman there selling fingernails."

"Selling them?" Dumbledore asked. "Yes, I recall seeing such vendors on my occasional visits. But why sell them when they grow so readily?"

"Can't use my own," Draco explained. "Not if I use my own blood. They've got to be someone else's. I'm surprised you don't know about this, sir."

"Don't underestimate the lengths your culture has gone to hide itself," Dumbledore said, entranced by the poppet. "Despite my long searches, I've yet to find a book on dark magic comparable to our textbooks, or even your grimoire. Living under constant threat has made dark wizards more likely to pass information down orally than through the written word." He picked up a scrap of an exploded card and poked the poppet with it, keeping it at bay. "How do you get rid of them?"

"There's only a few drops of blood," Draco said. "It should just collapse in a few moments."

"Can you make them last longer?" Harry asked.

Draco hesitated before answering. "We can. It takes more blood, though."

"How much?" Harry asked, starting to frown. "Is this what Ron was talking about? Human sacrifices?"

"All blood is a sacrifice," Draco muttered. "But I haven't heard of a poppet being created that would need an entire life, not recently anyway. They're too dangerous. We don't make these little ones very
often, either."

"Why would you need something like that?" Harry glanced at the poppet as it stopped moving and flopped over, its little time clearly run out. "Why make even a little one?"

"If you could sneak a few of these into a Death Eater's home," Draco said, "wouldn't you?"

Harry watched Dumbledore pick up the lifeless doll and turn it over, clearly contemplating how something like that would be used as a weapon.

"It's not right," he whispered. "It's like a little assassin."

"Exactly," Dumbledore said. "A little monster that could kill a Death Eater without risking an auror...well, until he has to destroy the thing."

"Potter," Draco said, "do you think the dark lord would hesitate to use them against us if he knew about them?"

Harry frowned and didn't answer, but he still didn't agree.

Draco's earlier thought about the dark lord not understanding that dark children would hide like animals popped back into mind. Coupled with this new thought that Voldemort didn't know about some of the tools in any dark wizard's arsenal, he decided to risk his master's insults again.

"Severus, I've been thinking about something. The dark lord hasn't figured out how to find Pansy yet, and he hasn't used a lot of the magic we know. He only casts Unforgivables. Do you know why?"

Both Severus and Dumbledore shared a look that Draco thought held more than just a meaningful glance. That was the bad thing about legilimens, you could never know when they were talking about you in front of your face. Even more disturbing, though, was that Harry also looked wary.

Draco frowned. Did everyone know something that he didn't?

"There is a reason, yes," Dumbledore said slowly, measuring out each word. "Not many people know the dark lord's true origins. Suffice to say, he lost his family early on and so he didn't have any chance to learn his heritage."

"Lost his family?" Draco echoed. "But then...if he wasn't adopted by another family, his dreams should have taught him how the world works. Even if he didn't know what he was, the nightmares would've taught him everything."

"There are many oddities surrounding the dark lord's life," Dumbledore said. "It may be that his environment simply wasn't conducive to magic. His mother died in childbirth and he was brought up in a muggle orphanage."

"Raised by muggles?" Draco said, his voice dripping with disgust. "You mean like--" He almost said "Potter," but one look at Harry's face and he stopped short. Harry's face was drawn up as if in physical pain. And then another thought struck him, even worse than before.

"Wait..." he said. "If he's a dark wizard with no family knowledge, then he's been using dark magic for years without ever cleansing himself?"

Snape nodded once.

"No wonder he's insane," Draco whispered. "How's he even alive?"
"Sheer power, probably," Dumbledore said. "In fact, I have no idea what will happen when he dies. His accumulated magic may fade away, or, with his strength diminished, it may swallow him completely."

It would be nice if it would swallow him now and save them the effort, Draco thought. He went back to the Ravenclaw table and sat down on it again, lost in thought.

They weren't telling him something, he could figure out that much. All three of them knew something important, probably something that they hadn't told anyone else. Certainly not the Ministry. No doubt it had to do with the dark lord's true name. After all, Voldemort couldn't have been born looking like a corpse. He must have been created, or had created himself in that monstrous image.

Severus cleared his throat, catching Draco's attention. "I'll explain it to you later," he promised. "Not soon, but...in time. You won't take it very well, I'm afraid, and I don't need more tantrums than you usually throw."

Draco narrowed his eyes but he didn't snap back. Not with other people present. A master could insult his apprentice freely while the apprentice had to show proper respect at all times when others were around. That was simply one of the privileges of being a master. Still...he sighed and sulked. It wasn't fair.

"You'll have to tell him soon," Dumbledore said to Severus, "now that he's figuring some of it out. After all he's done, we shouldn't--" He broke off suddenly with a startled look on his face. "Oh my...amazing. I thought I'd sense it, but I didn't."

At first no one knew what he meant as he stared at the far door with a surprised look, but then Draco heard it. The sound of dozens of people coming up the stairs that led to the great hall, and the sound of excited young voices mingled with weary older ones. They started soft at first but gradually grew louder until he could no longer contain himself. Heedless of what the others would think, Draco jumped to his feet and ran down the length of the great hall, but he was still several feet away when the doors were pushed wide open, Pansy at the forefront with Crabbe and Goyle flanking.

The edges of their robes were tattered and threadbare, the result of walking long distances through briars and underbrush. Even though their robes were clean, they had the air of scourgify spells rather than soap and water. Almost all of them were pale and most of them had lost weight, which had done Vincent good but everyone else ill.

He scanned their faces quickly just to make sure they were all there, Blaise, Thomas, Gregory, Daphne, Pansy...he crossed the remaining space between them and put his arms around her, tightening his grip when she hugged him back. Her small hands and the sound of her voice made their return feel more real, less like a dream. They'd tease him for this in the coming weeks, he was sure of it, but for now he couldn't hide a grin as his friends piled in close to see him and put a hand on his shoulder in return.

"Draco! Finally--"

"--you'll never guess what happened--"

"--we were chased like rabbits--"

"--had to kill three Death Eaters--"

"--good thing too, their blood hid us for months--"
"--one of 'em was Mrs. Pellinore, remember her? One of Greg's cousins, the one with the hair--"

"--a few of the little ones got hit by a wisprian curse, though--"

Draco could hardly follow all of them, and he didn't try. All that mattered was that they were back, the sound of their voices drowning out all of his worries for the moment. Tomorrow he'd explain what had happened and how things stood with them at Hogwarts, but for now his Slytherins were back where they belonged, at his side.
In which Draco and Hermione discuss Camelot

Sitting on the stairs at the front of the room, Draco watched them sleep. Old habits die hard but habits created out of necessity die harder, and he figured that it would be a few days at least before the Slytherins could sleep in individual beds again. They'd slept close together for months now, both to keep warm during heavy snowfall and to stay safe in one tight group, and they weren't about to split up into rooms again. Rather than try to move beds around, they'd simply shoved all of the furniture to the side and levitated mattresses, blankets and pillows into the middle of the common room, sleeping mingled together with the youngest children against or on top of the oldest.

Pansy had also lined up the couches as a kind of front line between the pile of students and the main door. He'd listened to her while she rearranged the common room and told Theo, who seemed to have become second in command, that she wanted the couches there as barricade in case someone ever guessed the password and tried to attack. Draco thought she was being paranoid, especially since he hadn't told any of them about the previous night's attack, a conversation he was not looking forward to. But paranoia aside, the couches also gave Pansy a more comfortable bed than just a mattress on the floor, even if they had charmed all of them to float a few inches off the floor purely for comfort.

Probably won't wake up 'till tomorrow morning, he thought. Whereas he had a dull headache from lack of sleep and didn't think he'd be drifting off anytime soon, even though the morning bell for breakfast had already rung. If he fell asleep, he might wake up and discover that this was just a dream. He leaned back on the cold, hard edge of the stairstep behind him, glancing at each of them. Somehow Pansy had brought not only every single Slytherin but also many children that weren't Hogwarts students. Nestled in Daphne and Tracey's arms lay children from the dark families that had never come out of hiding even to send their young ones to school. He recognized a few of them, children from the Avens, Scoto and Praevatt families. He even saw two from the Danaeu family, and they'd disappeared so thoroughly that even the Ministry thought they had died generations ago.

Simply amazing that Pansy could bring all of them. He tilted his head and watched them sleep curled together. In time he'd have to tell them about the threats lurking within Hogwarts and how the school knew that he was dark, but that conversation could wait.

He stood up and crept around the pile of children, disappearing into the corridor that led to his room. When he stepped inside, he closed the door and fished out the honey amulet from his nightstand, then went to Crabbe's nightstand. Vincent was a terrible packrat, refusing to throw nearly anything away. Stones, torn scraps of cloth, buttons, broken shoe buckles and other useless things filled his drawers. Draco fished through them until he found what he wanted, a long thin strip of leather once used as a tie for a formal shirt.

Knotting it once around his amulet, he placed a sealing charm on it so it wouldn't come undone and then tied it around his neck. Easily concealed under his robes, the glass vial lay comfortably against his skin and warmed up after a few seconds. He put his hand over it and smiled.

The door opened, startling him.

"Here you are," Snape said, looking in. "I would've thought you'd be asleep with the others."

With a small shake of his head, Draco closed the nightstand drawer and turned. "Can't sleep. Besides, you saw the way they clustered together without me. I can't join in. They went through so much without me."
"They hardly drew away from you," Snape said. "Last night they looked like lost nestlings that had found their mother."

"It was Pansy who--" Draco started.

"Pansy led them here, yes, protected them, guided them and apparently killed for them, exactly like a mother should. But even after all that, when they arrived, she waited for you to tell her what to do next."

"She's the one who told everyone what to do," Draco said, "not me."

"Only after you made sure that everyone ate before coming to bed. Only after you took the injured children to the hospital. Only after you told her to get them all into the common room." Snape gave him an exasperated look. "You did notice, didn't you?"

"But I didn't tell them to do anything! It was nothing like getting the Ministry to do what I wanted," Draco said. "It wasn't even like before when we were friends terrorizing the other houses."

Snape gave him the look that meant his apprentice had missed something important, but he didn't argue. "You'll figure it out. Maybe. Now if you're not going to sleep, you can help me with the children in the hospital."

"They're still all right, aren't they?" Draco asked, following him as he turned and walked away. "They haven't gotten worse?"

"Pomfrey's been taking care of them," and Snape's tone told Draco exactly what the potions master thought of Pomfrey's treatments. "But I would prefer our own remedies. Her medicine is limited to what the Ministry can measure."

As they left the common room, Snape retrieved a bag of potions ingredients from a cabinet and handed it to Draco to carry, who didn't complain but did give his master a dirty look behind his back.

Classes were full and the halls empty as they came up out of the dungeons. When they reached the hospital, they both gave a little sigh of relief that Madame Pomfrey was not in sight. Curtains separated the beds in the back where four Slytherin students lay suffering from wisprian curses. Their breath came in short thin wheezes and the slightest bit of dust in the air sent them into violent coughing fits. Pomfrey's Respiratory Remedy bottle stood prominently in the nearest cabinet, but it didn't seem to be working all that well.

At the bedside of the first child, Draco unloaded the bag of ingredients and was a little surprised to pull out two potted clover plants. Although fresh ingredients were sometimes called for, having them still in their pots meant that someone was going to lose some blood.

"We're creating a Clover's Breath potion?" Draco asked.

"Yes, but instead of the leaves, we'll use the essence. I'll do that part. You start drawing their blood. We shouldn't need much from each of them."

Draco nodded and took up the empty glass vials, leaving one at each bedside. Using blood far more intimately associated a potion with its patient, but rendered it nearly useless for anyone else, sometimes coming out too strong, sometimes so weak as to be hardly noticeable. Only close relatives could hope to share blood potions without ill effect.

He bent over the first child, drawing her arm out from under her blanket. Her veins were bold against her pale skin as he pressed the tip of his wand against her wrist. "Stoabim," he whispered. A spark of
light made a small cut and he guided the flow of blood with his wand into the vial until he had enough. "Haean," he said, and blood welled over the cut and scabbed over. A second later the dried blood disintegrated without leaving a scar.

Twice more he repeated the process. By the time Snape finished mixing the potion for the first child, Draco stood beside the last child, a young boy he didn't recognize. He frowned and searched the boy's arm, but no matter how he squinted, he couldn't find a vein. Sighing, he gave up and leaned over the boy's throat, fingers gently searching for the pulse.

The boy's eyes snapped open so quickly that Draco squeaked and stood straight. Brown eyes swept over the ceiling and walls before focusing back on him. From the look he gave him, Draco knew he was remembering a nightmare, trying to figure out how to escape from here.

"It's all right," Draco murmured, putting a hand on the boy's shoulder. "You made it to Hogwarts, but you were hit with a curse. I need your blood to break it."

The eyes narrowed. "Sis...sister--" As he spoke, he started heaving as a coughing attack struck.

"Don't talk," Draco said, waiting for the attack to stop before he spoke again. "Everyone who was with Pansy made it, so the faster you let me take your blood, the sooner you see your sister again."

Both of them knew he didn't have a choice, but Draco's willingness to ask made him feel a little more secure. He didn't nod but instead turned his head to the side, watching Snape administer the first potion. It was a little like watching him pour smoke into her mouth. The little girl didn't wake up but her breathing immediately deepened and lost some of its rasp.

Drawing blood from the throat was tricky at best. Draco leaned so close that his hair brushed the other boy's face, just inches from the tip of his wand as he made the cut and caught the blood. He felt a touch of pride that not a single drop spilled onto the sheets. When he looked up, he breathed out in relief that his patient had fallen asleep again. Cursed or no curse, all of Pansy's charges were exhausted.

And then a sudden harsh whisper made his heart skip a beat.

"Get away from them!" Her wand held straight out, Madam Pomfrey faced both of them with her lips set in a thin line.

Inwardly cursing, Draco tightened his grip on the vial so much that it almost cracked. He'd been so focused on his task that he hadn't heard Pomfrey's footsteps on the hospital floor. Of course she'd think they were harvesting human blood for dark potions and performing necromancy on helpless children. He couldn't help a chuckle as he realized she was right.

"Think it's funny attacking children?" she all but growled. "Not enough to burn and electrocute them--Merlin, to cast a plague curse on them-- now you come after your own--"

"Expelliarmus," Snape cast, whipping her wand out of her hand and into his. As her eyes widened, he set the wand aside. "You are an excellent healer, but I'm afraid you know nothing of how we work."

Hardly deterred, she reached out for a huge jar labeled Rowan. Draco cringed when he saw the bright red berries. He had no doubt she knew the charms to cast to turn them into little weapons.

"If you throw those," Snape said softly, "then you will hurt the children as well. They're dark, too. I assure you, we are not hurting them."
Pausing with one hand in the jar, Pomfrey glanced at the children and then back at Snape, weighing her options. Her eyes narrowed as she considered.

"What are you doing?"

"Your potions are too slow," Snape said. "We can give them something faster and far more effective."

"You're not hurting them?" she asked. "Then why didn't you tell me you were coming here? Why are you bleeding them? And what's that smoke you gave her?"

"I didn't tell you because I'd hoped to avoid a confrontation," Snape ground, loathe to admit that he'd erred. "As for what we're doing, now that you're here, you're quite welcome to watch. I doubt the Ministry ever let you learn how to perform necromancy."

"Necromancy?" she gasped. "Oh Merlin, they're not dead!"

"Not on them," Snape said. "On the plants."

Despite herself, Pomfrey slowly set the jar down, resealing the top and looking over her shoulder at them. Not entirely convinced of their good intentions, nonetheless she crossed to Draco's side and stood over him as he sealed the tiny cut and corked the vial of blood. To their mutual relief, no one had woken up.

"They're all dark wizards?" she whispered, staring at the boy. "He's too young..."

"Old enough to survive on his own," Draco muttered, then motioned at the girl Snape had already treated. "She's not dark, but she's been surrounded by so much dark magic that rowan would probably hurt her, too."

Pomfrey glanced around at their patients, then looked at him as if he were a loathsome bug to be stomped underfoot. For a moment Draco thought she would say something, scold him for what he'd done to his attackers, but she just sighed and turned towards Severus. He'd finished administering the second potion and now picked up another clover plant, setting it on the table between him and the healer.

"It's fairly common knowledge that our kind deal in necromancy," Snape started as if lecturing a class. "What is not common knowledge is that necromancy extends beyond human death and into nature. The lifeforce of an ancient oak tree is far more potent than that of most people, but even the smallest blade of grass has a wisp of life, no matter how infinitesimal. It is that wisp that infuses our potions with more power than any of your kind could hope to achieve."

As he spoke, he lowered the tip of his wand to the clover and made seven seemingly useless circles over the leaves, spiraling his wand higher with each circle. He repeated the process three more times, whispering what sounded like a song as he started the last motion, as with the final circle a wisp of light green smoke followed his wand through the air into the waiting potion. While he corked and shook the vial, Pomfrey bent closer and examined the clover. She expected to see withered stems and leaves, but instead found warped and twisted stems, malformed leaves and roots poking into the air as if the plant had forgotten how to grow.

"He didn't take all of its life," Draco explained. "Just a little. Clover's durable, more so than other plants. Losing a little bit only makes it act strange."

"But it's still alive," she mused. "How can you call it necromancy if it's not dead?"
"Necromancy doesn't deal just with death," Severus said. He slipped a hand under the next child's neck and tilted his head back, pouring the potion into his mouth. "It's the magic of spirits, and spirits exist before and after death. The Ministry will condemn anyone who practices it either way."

"Because if you could do this with plants," she reasoned, "you could do the same thing to people."

"Exactly." Severus set the empty vial aside and began work on the next potion. "Draco, I no longer need you here. Take the excess materials back to my storeroom."

"Yes, sir." As Draco gathered up the loose bottles and ingredients, he glanced over his shoulder at his master. "Do I have to go to classes?"

"No, you'll probably be asleep by lunch. Just keep out of trouble. You're supposedly safe but I wouldn't stake my life on it."

Draco nodded and walked around Pomfrey, careful not to brush against her. She gave him a dark look but she didn't say anything as he walked towards the door. He knew she had to be angry over what he'd done to the other students and hoped that he wouldn't have to come back to the hospital alone. He didn't think she'd hurt him, but he was tired of defending and explaining himself.

After he left the bag in the storeroom and put the ingredients back on the shelves, he decided to go upstairs to the library. No one would be inside during classes so he could read without being disturbed, stared at or asked annoying questions.

Madame Pince gave him an evil look when he walked in but she didn't say anything, just followed him with her eyes as he walked into the Forbidden Section. He headed to the section on dark magic, thinking he'd brush up on his history, and was surprised to discover that nearly half the section was gone. Books lay on their sides, fallen haphazardly into the gaps, and a few scraps of parchment lay scattered about. He picked one up and noticed that someone had made a booklist of every book that had the word 'dark' in the title.

But who was reading them, he wondered, Hufflepuffs trying to understand him or Ravenclaws building a case against him?

He plucked a book that had slipped everyone else's notice, *Morgan's Poisoned Apples*, and sat down with his back against the wall and a clear view out the window. A yawn crept up on him and he shook his head to clear it before he started reading.

Someone walked into the library, but he paid them no attention until they came towards his table. He didn't move but raised his eyes as Hermione stopped in front of him, several books in her arms and her bag slung over her shoulder. She stared at the title of the book in his hand for a moment.

"I thought the apples were poisoned by a knight," she mumbled. "Meant to poison Gawain in revenge."

"Morgan's servants could be discreet," he said slowly, wondering why she'd come. "Arthur was so eager to prove Guinevere's innocence that he accepted any excuse."

"But she was innocent," Hermione said.

"Only of poisoning," Draco said. "She was still an adulterous harlot. Why so curious?"

Hermione shifted from one foot to another, glancing over her shoulder once. "I've been reading up on early wizarding history, but a lot of it's sketchy and some things don't seem to fit."
"That's what happens when only one side writes the books."

She frowned and hefted her books before they could slide out of her hands. "I want to know more. But I can't get it from the Hogwarts' library."

He tilted his head slightly. "You read everything?"

"Almost." Taking that as an invitation, she set her books on the table and sat down, dropping her bag on the floor with a heavy thump. "I couldn't get Camlann and Ramifications and someone already checked out The Queen of Gorre. And the entire section on Camelot is gone. Ravenclaws are bloody locusts in a library."

His mouth twisted as he remembered saying something similar to Blaise during a research project. "At least you tried to get something more substantial than this lot." He picked up the book on top of the pile and flipped the cover over. Broken Oaths and Imprecations. He snorted. Didn't hear that accusation too often anymore. "So what do you want, Granger? I doubt you came here for my company."

"I asked Dumbledore," she said, "and he told me dark wizards pass things down orally, and that if I wanted to know more about them, I should ask one. So I'm asking."

Torn between his memory of her screaming at him and Harry saying she'd helped convince the Gryffindors not to hurt him, he set the book down and leaned back in his seat, assuming what he hoped was a disdainful look.

"I'm afraid I'm tired of being yelled at, so if you think I'm going to lay bare our history so you can tell me how evil we are--"

"I promise I won't yell," Hermione said, sounding annoyed that she had to remember flying head over heels over his grimoire. "Or say you're evil."

Draco stared at her.

"Please, Malfoy," she ground out between clenched teeth. "Or would you rather I believe everything in these books."

He sighed and glared at the ceiling for a second, stifling a yawn. He didn't care what she thought, but she had Harry's ear and Potter seemed to listen to her. Giving her his side of the story would probably benefit him later on. "Oh, fine."

Paper and quills rustled wildly as she whipped out her notes. "Thank you. Now there were a lot of things I didn't get, but I especially don't see the connections between Morgan and Arthur."

"What's not to see? She was his half-sister."

"But why'd she hate Arthur? I read about the things she did, but nothing told me why she did them."

Draco took a deep breath and sighed. "Because Arthur had the support of Merlin, a very powerful old wizard who absolutely hated dark wizards. He killed any of us he came across to cement his power in Britain and he poisoned Camelot against us. Most of us fled to Gorre for Morgan's protection since she was strong enough to hold him at bay."

Hermione's eyes opened wide. "But I've never heard anything about that in wizard or muggle literature."
"Of course not. It's hard to write about what we were doing when we went to such lengths to keep it a secret. If Merlin had known we were all running for the hills, he might have spent less time helping Uther's brat and more time chasing us down."

"Why did he hate you?" Hermione asked. "I mean, why did he hate dark wizards?"

Draco gave a little wave of his hand. "Tch. By then, the lines between dark and light were so entrenched that I'd be surprised if there were any of your kind that didn't hate us. We use magic that muggles and light wizards alike considered evil and disgusting, and we refuse to change to their whims. There's always been more of you and muggles, though, so the war quickly turned against us."

"And Merlin loved muggles enough to create his Order," Hermione said softly, reasoning to herself. "But why did he start helping Uther?"

"To get rid of us once and for all." Draco picked up one of the books and flipped through it, glancing at the medieval woodcuts of dark witches cavorting with sleeping men while their wives slept in the same bed. "You have to understand that at that time, most muggles still believed in fairies and the creatures that come out at night. They still believed all of us wizards were in league with powerful old gods and forces of nature."

"So they were afraid of you," Hermione said.

"They were in awe of us," Draco clarified. "We protected the boundary between their world and the magical world. We kept the two worlds from mingling and if that included transforming or killing muggles, then so be it."

"But Merlin worked against that," he continued. "He hated how we kept apart from muggles. He, and other wizards like him, thought that lording over muggles was wrong, that they weren't animals to be herded. Not only that, your kind shunned any contact with magical creatures and magical beings, and we, who sought out that contact, were equally shunned. They didn't think we should fraternize with the old inhabitants of the land. He thought the age of the old gods was coming to an end and that humans were the rightful inheritors of the land."

Hermione winced slightly as his voice turned harsh. "But couldn't the dark wizards have called on the old gods to help them against Merlin and the other light wizards?"

"No. Because the old bastard was right." Draco snapped his book shut and tossed it on the table. "The faeries and old spirits, they slowly vanished from the world, never to come back. Oh sure, a handful still linger here and there, but nothing like they used to be. We tried to perform our duties, cleaned up the messes they'd left behind, the little traps and places of power that echoed with their charms. It was when we started wondering what to do with ourselves now that there was no boundary to protect that Merlin struck, sending Arthur's knights into the world to destroy us."

"I thought they were sent out to prove their valor," Hermione said. "Although I did wonder why there were so few stories of great deeds when there were so many knights."

"Even poets have a hard time romanticizing the slaughter of families. When we found out what was happening, we ran for Gorre, hoping the queen would protect us."

"Queen Morgan le Fay, right? Did she?"

Draco smiled softly as if remembering. "She did better than protect us. Before we came to her, we were just scattered families living by ourselves practicing our own brand of magic, bound only by
our common duty. Under her care, we learned powerful spells, potions of her own invention. Dark wizards by our very nature do not like being around people, but she taught us to work together. She forged the families into a strong community that, in time, grew powerful enough to support Mordred."

"You make it sound like you were there."

"I was, in a way." He didn't know if Harry had told her about dark wizards dreaming about their ancestors' deaths, but he probably had. Harry had probably urged her to talk to him in the first place. "Potter told you about my dreams?"

She nodded. "The ones of your ancestors?"

"Sometimes when they died, they remembered Morgan. Not for very long, and they always remembered her the way they wanted to, never the way she really looked. At least, I don't think they did."

"Why not?"

"I'm not sure that anyone can be that beautiful and still be real."

Hermione opened her mouth to speak but the bell cut her off. Both of them looked towards the door as students' voices filled the halls, but after a few seconds no one came into the library and eventually they both relaxed.

"The books barely talk about what she looked like or what she did when she wasn't attacking Arthur. Did she marry or take lovers? Did she ever have children?"

"...we don't know." Draco hesitated. "You wouldn't know this, but we've had centuries to think about her and what she did. Some of us think she couldn't have any children, that she was the daughter of a mortal woman and a spirit. It would certainly explain why she could match Merlin. In any case, she never explained herself to anyone. Taking in dark wizards, opposing Arthur, supporting Mordred, she did those for her own reasons, whatever they were. In some ways, we were incidental."

"Why would the other wizards support Mordred?" Hermione asked. "He was a muggle."

"Not one bit," Draco said with a shake of his head. "He was a true dark lord and he was of Morgan's blood, and through the oaths we swore to her, he was our family by proxy."

"Hermione, Malfoy!"

They both looked towards the door and spotted Harry coming towards them, folding up a parchment and sticking it in his bookbag as he came closer. Madame Pince shushed him but he ignored her, grabbing a chair from another table and joining them.

"Didn't expect to find you two together," Harry said. "Especially during classes."

"I've done my work ahead in arithmancy," Hermione defended herself. "Besides, I'm learning more here. Malfoy's telling me about Mordred."

"Who's Mordred?" Harry asked.

Hermione and Draco both gave him disbelieving looks.
"What?" Harry asked testily. "Sorry I haven't read the same books you have."

"Oh Harry, honestly."

"I asked both of you before," Harry snapped, "and neither one of you gave me an answer."

"All right," Draco said, "the quick version just to bring you up to speed. You know about King Arthur, Merlin, the knights of the round table and Camelot?"

"Yeah, everyone knows about that."

While Hermione rolled her eyes, Draco continued. "Merlin helped Arthur's father, Uther, and then raised Arthur until it was time for him to become king. Later Arthur has a bastard son with his half-sister. The boy, Mordred, grows up to become a knight in Camelot. Mordred spreads rumors about Queen Guinevere's affair with Lancelot, and eventually proves that the rumors are true. While Arthur and his loyal knights go off to attack Lancelot, Mordred takes over the kingdom. Arthur comes back, they fight, everyone dies."

"Except Sir Bedevere," Hermione said. Then, for Harry's benefit, "Arthur's most loyal knight."

"No, we got him few days later," Draco said. "Didn't matter, though. The damage was done. Even though Camelot was destroyed and Merlin was gone, the light wizards had always outnumbered us and now it was worse. A lot of dark wizards had died and those who were still alive had to scatter. Some of us went back to Morgan, but many of us disappeared into the forests."

"Wait," Hermione said. "How could you go back to Morgan? Three women accompanied Arthur to the Isle of Avalon, Guinevere, the lady of the lake and Morgan le Fay."

"Depends on who's telling the story," Draco said. "Guinevere was in a convent. It was Arthur's third sister Elaine who stood beside the lady of the lake."

"That still leaves Morgan."

"Tell me this, Granger, Morgan le Fay constantly plotted against Arthur and his knights. Why would she escort him to Avalon?"

Hermione frowned and considered. "I admit, that always bugged me. It doesn't make sense."

"Because it didn't happen," Draco said. "Morgan didn't escort him, Nimue did."

"Nimue?" Hermione shook her head. "I've never heard of her."

"Bet you've heard of Vivien, though," he said, and her look of sudden recognition confirmed it. "One woman, two names, one that we knew her by, one that Merlin gave her. She got confused with the lady of the lake, though, and then later on it became politically convenient for Morgan to take her place."

Harry looked back and forth at them in bewilderment. "What on earth are you two talking about?"

"Vivien was Merlin's lover," Hermione explained in a rush, as if talking was distracting her from understanding something. "She's the one who seduced him and trapped him in amber. But why put Morgan in Vivien's place?"

"Because Nimue was also Merlin's mother," Draco said. "And when Merlin became the wizarding world's role model, it was more convenient to forget her and pretend their incestuous affair never
happened. Putting Morgan in Nimue's place with Arthur was an attempt to convert dark wizards, as if Morgan had turned her back on her old ways and accepted Arthur in the end."

"Wait," Harry said. "Why are you using two different names for the same woman?"

While Hermione went into a long explanation about Roman invaders, indigenous languages and English stories being told in French, Draco leaned back in his chair and shook his head.

"No, Granger," he softly interrupted her. "It's hardly that complicated."

He looked at Harry with both anger and sadness. "The reason she uses the more popular name is because the winners write the history books. More was lost at the battle of Camlann than just Mordred's hopes for the throne. We had always been a divided society but when Mordred lost, the dark wizards withdrew from society and went into hiding. Over the centuries we were hunted down and now very few of us remain."

"How many?" Hermione asked.

"In Britain, a little over fifty families, if that," Draco said. He looked back at Harry. "You told me once that my family changed sides only because we were in danger. That we were dark wizards and nothing could change that."

Harry nodded once.

"You were right. If the dark lord wasn't insane and fixated on his own mortality, if there was any chance that we could overthrow the Ministry, I would serve him more faithfully than my father ever did."

"Why?" Harry asked. "He doesn't care about you, he doesn't care about anything but himself."

"You don't understand what's at stake," Draco said. "The battle between Morgan and Merlin never really ended. This new war was our chance, maybe our last chance, to turn it around. The Ministry's grown fat and lazy under its own weight, there's a real chance we could kill it. Yes, it would send our society back several hundred years, but--"

"But what?" Harry interrupted. "So you can even the score? Over a battle hundreds of years old? What's the point? It's petty and spiteful."

"Because if we win," Draco insisted, "the raids stop. Aurors will no longer barge into houses to steal away family heirlooms deemed dark or evil. Whole families won't be dragged out in the night to be tried in secret and thrown in Azkaban forever. So that we can practice magic our way, without being afraid of mobs or..." He cut himself off and took a deep breath. "The battle is hundreds of years old, yes," he began again, "but it never ended. It won't end until every follower of Morgan's school is dead. And that means me, and my family, and all the rest of us dark wizards."

"But..." Hermione said, "I thought aurors only went after dangerous wizards, or wizards who try to hurt people."

"Really?" Draco looked over at Harry. "Were you trying to hurt someone when you were tried at the Wizengamot?"

"How did you know about that?" Harry asked. "Only a handful of people know--"

"Malfoys are good at politics," Draco said. "You might be surprised what you can worm out of people when they're afraid of what you know."
“Wait, what about Knockturn Alley?” Harry asked. “Why don’t the aurors raid all the stores there?”

“Because they don’t put their contraband on the shelves. You have to know what to ask for. More importantly, you have to know how to ask. Aurors could spend all day looking, and believe me they do, but they won’t find anything. Besides, they’ve already destroyed a lot of our works. Most of our books were burned and any real information in your own works was obliterated.”

While Draco spoke with Harry, Hermione pulled another book out of the pile and flipped through it quickly, coming to rest at a half-torn page. She held the book open and turned it to show it to Draco. “That reminded me of this. Do you know what's missing from here?”

He leaned forward and glanced at the last few sentences before the rip. "Many secrets and mysteries abound in the Queen's lands," he murmured to himself as he read. "The kingdom of Gorre sinks into strange perversities. The dark queen's borders abound with plants that grow all out of nature, roots in the air and leaves in the ground. Animals show an almost human intelligence. True horror comes at nightfall, however, when the followers of Morgan le Fay fly through the air and hold worship to the moon. Few have seen their revels and survived to tell tales of monstrous howls and creeping things, when on the night of—" he broke off when he reached the end.

“Is any of that real?” Hermione asked.

"Even the worst lies have a bit of truth to them," Draco said. "Yes, most of that is true. Dark magic confuses plants, makes them grow weird."

"What about the animals?" Hermione asked.

"Dark wizards are fond of crossbreeding," he said. "Magic can be quite unpredictable, so you're never sure what you're going to get. Your kind never took to mixing and matching animals."

"Crookshanks is a crossbreed," Hermione said.

"Yes, and how long had he been in the store before you finally bought him?" Draco didn't expect an answer and motioned at the book again. "You wanted to know what's missing? Whoever tore out this part didn't like any mention of Walpurgis night. Probably tore it out a few hundred years ago when there was a big push to get rid of any information that impressionable little wizards and witches might find and try out during their rebellious years."

"Why is Walpurgis night so special?" Harry asked. "You said the Death Eaters came from the Knights of Walpurgis, right?"

"Walpurgis is just another name for Beltane, isn't it?" Hermione asked. "They're both around the same time, the midpoint between the equinoxes."

"I don't know what muggles call it," Draco said. "And your kind don't really celebrate it. As for us, it used to be one of the nights we'd have to stand guard over the places where the old gods used to cross into this world. When they left, we kept gathering together out of habit. That's how the Knights of Walpurgis came about."

While Hermione looked back through her book, Draco turned his head aside and tried to smother another yawn. It escaped, though, and when he looked up, he found Potter staring at him.

"You're exhausted," Harry said, finally noticing the dark circles under Draco's eyes. "Did you go to sleep at all?"

"I didn't have time," Draco said. "I was busy looking over the cursed students and introducing the
children who aren't students to Dumbledore, and getting them all into the dungeons and into bed was a chore without them rearranging the common room."

"You really should get to bed," Hermione said. "You look awful."

Draco thought about muttering that he was exhausted so what was her excuse, but Harry was right next to her and Draco felt like showing him that he could be courteous if he felt like it. After another yawn, he nodded once and stood up.

"I probably better go back before I fall over." He pushed his unread book across the table. "Put that back for me."

"You're welcome," she muttered but took it anyway.

"I'll walk you down to Slytherin," Harry offered, standing up.

"I'm not so tired that I'll lose my way," Draco said mildly, but he didn't argue as Harry followed him out of the library.

"I just meant you shouldn't be alone," Harry said. "We still haven't caught the person who's sabotaging things and laying traps, after all."

"You haven't?" Draco frowned. He'd thought they'd caught the person long ago and simply left him out of the loop. "But nothing's happened for so long."

"You nearly got killed by a bunch of students," Harry said. "Until we can talk to them, Dumbledore says we shouldn't rule out our saboteur's influence."

That made sense, he thought. Maybe he shouldn't have cursed his attackers so soundly. He smirked. No, he was glad they were all mutilated and plague-ridden. He just wished he'd left them enough strength to talk.

"I can tell what you're thinking," Harry said disapprovingly. "You only get that look when you've really hurt someone."

"They deserved it," Draco said.

He didn't get angry, but if it was because he was tired or because he knew Harry wasn't really criticizing him, he wasn't sure. He put his hand to his chest and felt the honey amulet under his shirt.

"Thank you for walking me down here," he said softly. "I'd be nervous if I was alone."

Harry smiled. "My pleasure."

As they walked, Draco edged a little closer to him, almost shoulder to shoulder, and felt gratified when Harry didn't shy away. Just being in his presence felt comforting. He knew Potter would stand between him and anyone who tried to hurt him. And hadn't Dumbledore said that he and Harry could pull off impossible feats if they were together?

All right, he thought, that wasn't exactly what the headmaster said, but it was still true.

When they reached the dungeons, he paused at the door and turned towards Harry, unsure of what to say. He blamed it on his sleep deprived mind and felt better when Harry spoke first.

"Do you think you could teach me more magic again? I mean, after you've slept, of course." Harry flashed him a proud grin. "I've mastered everything you've taught me so far."
"Sure," Draco said. "I'll teach you to call down lightning next time. We can use the quidditch pitch for that."

"Oh right, I wanted to ask you," Harry said, looking excited. "Now that the Slytherins are back, you'll be getting a team together, right?"

"What?" Draco blinked. Quidditch? Now? "But it's so late in the season."

"That doesn't matter. I know you haven't been following the games," Harry said. "I wouldn't if I knew I couldn't play, it'd be too painful watching everyone else. But we didn't force any forfeitures. Games against Slytherin were just postponed."

"You mean we're still scheduled?" Draco's eyes widened.

"Yes. Your first game is in a few weeks. It'll be tight, but you can still play."

Before he could respond, the Slytherin door opened and Pansy glared out at them. "There you are, Draco. You should've told me you were going out with--Potter?" She froze and stared at Harry. "What are you doing here?"

"It's all right," Harry said. "You don't hate me anymore."

"What?" she blinked. "Of course we--"

"Of course we don't," Draco said over her. "I'll explain later, Pansy, but he's right. We don't hate him. Potter's our friend now."

Her jaw dropped a little and she looked at him like he was crazy. And then her eyes narrowed and she looked back and forth between them. "What on earth happened while we were gone?"

"A lot of impossible things," Draco said, still looking at Harry. "I'll see you tomorrow, right?"

"Of course. See if you can stay out of trouble until then."

"I could tell you the same."

As he watched him walk away, Draco leaned against the wall, barely hearing Pansy snapping at him. Despite the war and the little day to day battles, thoughts of playing Quidditch again filled his head. He'd have to form a team, select players, hold brutal practice sessions to bring them up to speed. He half smiled as he walked into his common room, thinking about playing against Harry again, battling him for the snitch and flying side by side.

"Wonderful," he mumbled to himself, "as if I'm going to fall asleep now."
In which Draco suffers the price of crossbreeding

Dreams of quidditch drowned out any dreams of his ancestors so that when Draco woke up in the wee hours of the next morning, for once he did not need to drag himself out of bed. Eager to fly again, he quickly showered, dressed and grabbed his broom, carefully creeping past the sleeping Slytherins and out of the common room. He felt a little nervous walking through the dungeons alone, but nothing happened on his way out.

So bright that the stars seemed dim, the moon showed him the way to the quidditch pitch, the night air crisp and cold. He noticed the dew frozen on the ground and wondered when the snow would fall again. Lasting effects remained from Voldemort's unnatural blizzard, from the early blight of herb gardens to several magical creatures being tricked into early hibernation, but the sky itself seemed loathe to bring back a normal snowfall. A memory of lying in warm snow struck him and he shivered and hoped it never snowed again.

Months had passed since he flew to Hogwarts and he looked down at the besom in his hands. No longer the dry, dead branch it had once seemed, the wood was darker with small leaves along the length and the twigs at the end showed several new buds.

"You better not sprout flowers," he mumbled, then kicked up into the air.

Endless snow. Ice in his hair. One hand clutching the broom, the other hand clenched in agony--

He gasped and closed his eyes, pushing the flashback out of his head, but the rough bark and the wind blowing over him lingered like a tangible memory. He brought his right hand up to his face just to make sure it was in one piece.

"Don't think about it," he whispered to himself. "It's not real."

But his pounding heart and sudden cold chill told him that even if he knew this was just a flashback, his body thought it was real. He sighed and leaned back on his broom. He'd never had a flashback about flying through the snow, but something brought those memories back in a rush, probably the wide space of the quidditch pitch and the lack of other people. At least he hoped the lack of people was part of it. If he couldn't fly when it came time to play, he'd be useless as a seeker.

"Malfoy!"

Draco blinked and looked down. Harry stood beneath him, straddling his own broom for a moment before coming up to fly at his side.

"Are you all right?" Harry asked. "You've been sitting still for awhile."

"I'm fine," Draco said slowly. "Just...a little tired."

"Oh." Harry leaned closer, trying to see his face under his hood. "You won't fall off, will you?"

"No, I'm fine." Draco sighed and looked up at him, feeling as if he'd just relived flying alone through the night. "How do you keep finding me? Did you follow me again?"

"Not really," Harry said. "Just used a family heirloom of my own. Almost no one knows about it."

Which meant he wasn't going to tell him. Draco turned his head. He knew that he shouldn't feel snubbed, that he kept his own secrets, but he still wanted a little more trust from him. A golden
sparkle near Harry's hand caught his eye and he looked down at the snitch flapping its wings furiously between his fingers.

"You stole the snitch?" he asked with wide eyes.

Harry couldn't help laughing. "No, Hooch would kill me if I did that. I bought one when I was in Diagon Alley but I haven't had a chance to use it yet. Fancy a game?"

"First to catch the snitch wins?" Draco tried to smother his smirk but he couldn't. "How about we make things interesting with a wager?"

"I don't know that I want to lose a bet to you," Harry said, eyeing that smirk. "You only get that look when you're about to do something bad. No cheating, you hear me?"

"Of course," Draco said with his most innocent smile. "Winner does whatever the loser wants?"

"You've got to be kidding--"

"Is perfect Potter afraid I'll win?" Draco laughed and flew a slow circle around Harry. "I promise it won't be too humiliating."

"You remember that when I win," Harry said. "Ready?"

Still smiling broadly, Draco nodded. As he watched Harry raise his hand, he discovered that sometime between Harry's arrival and his laughter, he'd stopped feeling scared. The cramp in his hand disappeared along with the cold fist in his stomach. Even simply breathing came easier. Then the snitch flew out of Harry's hand and streaked across the pitch with two seekers right behind it.

At the first tight turn over the stands, only his panicked grip kept Draco from flying off his broom. Unprepared in his previous flight for fast turns, he'd never thought of what it meant to fly without charms to keep him safely seated. The danger didn't slow him down, though. He raced to catch up with Harry as the snitch flew straight and in the precious seconds before it turned again, he settled his entire body along the length of his broom, wrapping his left arm around the shaft while crossing his legs beneath it. He had to pull the broom a little higher so that the twigs settled on his calves, and he figured he looked ridiculous, but he felt the difference immediately with the next sharp turn into the air. Not only did he not fall off, but the besom responded to his slightest movements, managing turns so tight that he didn't think he could have done them on a newer model.

So this is how it's meant to be ridden, he thought. His legs clenched firmly around the branch and his hand easily steered, leaving one hand free for the snitch. He trailed at Harry's side, pulling even with him as the snitch turned and zoomed back down to the ground. Like eagles, the two wizards fell so close that they seemed to be touching. They spared a glance at each other, eyes wild with excitement and promising the other that they would win.

The snitch took them across the field, over the stands, under the stands and between the goal posts, but at last it dove to the left, flying closer to Harry who grasped it in his fingertips, just inches from Draco's outstretched hand.

"Not fair!" Draco complained. "Damn thing wanted you to win--"

"Draco!"

He stopped talking as he suddenly noticed that he couldn't stop the broom. Harry came to rest near the middle of the pitch but Draco was going so fast that his besom, which did not have modern braking charms, kept going towards the stands. With a shriek, he pulled the broom up and
instinctively tried to fly the other direction, any direction, as long as it kept him from crashing. The broom gave a jolt and stopped so fast he nearly slid off.

Righting the broom and hovering just a few feet from the stands, he took a moment to breathe and let his heart slow down. Harry flew over to his side, leaning close and trying to see his face.

"Are you okay?" he asked. "I thought you were going to crash through to the other side."

"So did I," Draco said shakily. "Damn thing handles different than I'm used to."

"Blaming the broom for losing?" Harry asked, a smile creeping onto his face as he held up the snitch.

"Yes, and your biased snitch and your Firebolt and all your practice time this year." Draco frowned as Harry's smile broadened. "Nothing humiliating," he snapped.

"Of course not," Harry said, his smile a match for Draco's earlier grin.

"And nothing public," Draco said.

"Absolutely," Harry said.

Draco's irritation turned to worry as he started to think that Harry might have already thought of his penalty. "And nothing dangerous."

"I wouldn't make you do anything dangerous," Harry said, a little hurt Draco had thought of that.

"And nothing physically demanding," Draco said. "It might give me calluses."

"It won't," Harry promised. "Relax, I'm not you. What were you thinking of making me do?"

"I'm not going to tell you 'till afterwards," Draco said. "Don't think I'm going to give you any ideas."

"Malf... Malfoy, you are such a--a--" Harry stammered as he put the snitch back into his robes and felt around in his pockets. He even turned them inside out, swearing softly when they were empty.

Draco turned his besom to face Harry. "Did you lose something?"

"One of my--" He broke off and stared at Draco for a second, clearly considering something. "One of my antidotes," he said at last. "I must have dropped it."

"Well, that's why you're not supposed to carry anything during quidditch," Draco said.

"Oh, you're as bad as Hermione sometimes." Harry ignored Draco's snort and looked over his shoulder at the pitch. "We were all over the place, it could be anywhere."

"When do you have to take it again?" Draco asked.

"I don't know. I just take it when I feel an attack coming on. Could be tomorrow, could be right now."

"Then we'd better look for it." Draco wheeled his broom around and flew low to the ground, holding his wand up like a searchlight.

Harry drew beside him and took out his own wand. In slow loops they circled over the grass, covering the entire pitch. When they reached the distant goal posts and Draco started to fear they'd have to search under the stands, Harry gave a soft "oh" of recognition and stopped. Draco came near
and spotted the glass vial in splinters. Not a drop was left.

"Oh no..." Harry mumbled. "Here, help me pick these up."

"Why?" Draco asked. "Just ask whoever's giving them to you for another one."

"It's not that simple," Harry said. He sighed and sat up, his shoulders hunched over. "They won't let me have another one if I can't show them that it broke."

The wind whistled through the stands and blew Harry's hair around his eyes. For a moment, he wouldn't look at Draco, just shuffle the glass in his hands as if he could put the vial back together and refill it.

"It's not medicine," Draco whispered. "You're addicted to something."

Harry nodded once. "Felix felicis. I didn't mean for it to happen but I had to drink the whole bottle or else Greyback would've gotten his hands on it."

"A whole bottle of--wait, Greyback? As in Fenrir Greyback?" Draco's eyes narrowed. "Are you sure it was him? Werewolves look alike when they're transformed and I know he was there when the manor burned--"

"I'm dead sure," Harry said with a bitter laugh. "You weren't here when it happened. No one knows about it except the ones in the Order. I mean...um..." He bit his lip trying to think up a way to explain that slip.

"Order?" Draco asked.

"It...I'm sorry, I can't tell you about it," Harry stammered, speaking faster as Draco frowned. "I know you've given up almost everything to join us, but only Order members know about it. Not even the rest of society knows about us."

Draco turned to hide his pout. After being saved by Potter and even revealing his family's greatest secret, being refused Harry's confidence now stung worse than when Harry had refused to trust him in the kitchens months ago. He shrugged once.

"What were you saying about Fenrir Greyback?"

Wincing himself at how unfair it seemed, Harry continued anyway. "We'd found out that one of Voldemort's hor--that something of his that we needed was at a shop in Diagon Alley, but when we went to get it, Greyback was there first and several other Death Eaters were with him. During the fight, he found out I had a bottle of felix felicis. There was no way to keep him from getting it except by drinking it all."

"A whole bottle?" Draco winced.

"Well, at least I defeated everyone."

"With that much potion in you, they didn't stand a chance," Draco said dryly. "When did you start feeling the side effects?"

"It took a week for the potion's luck to wear off," Harry said. "And I couldn't play our quidditch match that week. And then I started getting sick and craving it. Slughorn makes the antidote and Pomfrey gives it to me, but since it's got some of the felix felicis ingredients in it, it's more like it's weaning me off it."
"How often do you have to take it?"

"At first it was every day. I'd feel weak and shaky, and if I didn't take the antidote quickly, I'd collapse. Well, you saw it that day after the dragon attack."

Draco nodded once.

"But it's gotten better. I don't have to take it very often now, and I've been taking less and less." He sighed and looked down at the broken glass in his hands. "But Slughorn won't believe that it just broke. I was really bad about trying to get it before, and..." His voice trailed off. The shards in his hand glimmered in the moonlight.

"What about Severus?" Before he finished asking, Draco realized that his master wouldn't help Harry if he didn't have to. Even if Dumbledore somehow convinced him, Harry would probably never trust anything made by Snape. Without a word, Draco reached into the glass and pulled out the largest shard, a narrow sliver as long as his finger. A white film colored one side, and he brought it up to his mouth.

"Wait!" Harry cried, putting one hand out to stop him. "You don't know what's in it!"

"Exactly," Draco said and flew a little out of Harry's reach as he licked the faint residue, careful not to cut himself. For a moment he silently floated in the air, touching his tongue to his palate, considering the taste. To his surprise, the moment it hit his stomach, it made him want to throw up. Worse than just breathing it, swallowing it made him immediately recognize one of the ingredients. Despite the powerful bitterness, dry texture and stinging aftertaste that made him cough, he forced a smile.

"I know this. Common thyme with a touch of rowan. Probably cobwebs, too, though I can't be sure." He coughed again and took a deep breath, tossing the glass over his shoulder. "It's the rowan you were craving. It's one of the main ingredients in felix felicis."

"You could tell that in one taste?" Harry asked disbelievingly.

"Of course. I'm Snape's apprentice. If I couldn't tell the basic ingredients, he'd drill them into me again." Draco didn't mention that Snape would have scolded him brutally for tasting an unknown potion. What the master didn't know wouldn't hurt the apprentice, Draco figured, and the tiny amount of rowan wouldn't hurt him either. "We can probably make this in Severus' office. Let's go."

"Hold on," Harry said with a shake of his head. "I'll believe that you could figure out the ingredients, but I can't believe you'd know how to mix everything."

"If Slughorn can do it, then I can, too. Besides, I'm sure the recipe is in my grimoire." Draco's smile faded when he saw how reluctant Harry was to trust him. "Look...even if I get it wrong, and I won't, I promise it won't hurt you. None of the ingredients are poisonous."

"Then why do you look sick?" Harry asked, tilting his head. "You barely tasted it and you look like you're going to fall off your broom."

Draco didn't say anything at first, annoyed at Harry's lack of confidence and constant questions. He angled his broom down and landed, certain that Harry would follow him towards the castle. Sure enough, Harry quickly caught up and walked alongside him.

"Malfoy?"

"Rowan makes my kind sick," Draco said softly. "For some reason it reacts to dark magic."
"That's why you were coughing when you breathed it last time?"

Draco nodded. "Just touching it stings. Swallowing it is like...well, like swallowing one of Snape's potions is to you."

They fell silent as they entered the castle, and an apprehensive sense of déjà vu washed over him as they made their way into the corridors that led into the dungeons. The distant echoes of his footsteps and the tangible silence used to comfort him. Now he couldn't help but look over his shoulder as they walked.

"Don't worry," Harry said. "No one's going to attack you."

"That's what I thought last time."

Despite his worry, they only spotted Filch making his rounds with his cat at his heels. When Mrs. Norris meowed in their direction, the caretaker raised his lantern and looked down the corridor, narrowing his eyes at the boys. Once he recognized them, though, he just scowled and turned the corner out of sight. Draco frowned in return, feeling snubbed by someone he thought should be grateful just to be noticed.

"Rotten squib," Draco muttered.

At hearing Draco's soft words, Harry sighed. "Why do you always do that?"

"Do what?"

"Call people names just because of the way they were born," Harry said. "It's really mean."

"Why shouldn't I?" Draco said. "They never minded calling me names."

"Just because they're cruel doesn't mean you have to be." Harry gave him a look. "You're not stupid. You must know how ridiculous it is to call people those horrible slurs when you've seen them cast the same spells you do."

"I've already told you about the effect of mixing with muggles--"

"Yes, that more squibs are being born, you've had to crossbreed yourselves," Harry said with a touch of exasperation. "But the children had nothing to do with that. A muggleborn is no different than a pureblood. Why do you keep acting like you're so much better than everyone else?"

"Because we just are!" Draco snapped, turning to face him. After all this time, did he really have to spell it out for him? He cursed inwardly. Harry could be so clueless sometimes. "We're the only ones who remember our history. They're all too busy thinking about making the next Ministry law and how to hide from the muggle vermin."

"Malfoy..." Harry said warningly.

"We're sick of muggle sympathizers trying to keep the worthless mongrels safe from their own stupidity--"

"--Malfoy--"

"--and the blood traitors, they're destroying us even more with their worthless mudblood nits."

A second later, Draco gasped as Harry shoved him back against a wall and held him there, hands painfully tight on his shoulders. He tried to wriggle out of his hold but Harry held him as tight as a
snitch, pressing him hard against the stone wall.

"I warned you," Harry said, "what I'd do if I ever heard you say that word again."

Eyes wide, Draco swallowed reflexively, unable to look away. He wondered if his amulet had stopped working and then thought maybe he'd angered Harry past the amulet's weak limits. As Harry loosened his grip as if to pull back a fist, Draco closed his eyes and turned his head.

The blow never came. After a few seconds, he opened his eyes again and saw Harry leaning close with his fist on the wall beside his head, his own head bowed, taking deep breaths. Once he started breathing normally again, he looked up, and Draco could see the dark lines around his eyes clearly, see the weariness in his eyes.

"Why are you like this?" Harry whispered, his face only inches away. "It's ugly. This stupid hate you have...you shouldn't be ugly, Malfoy. You shouldn't hate the whole world."

Still afraid to move, Draco couldn't help a bitter laugh. "Then change the world."

To his surprise, Harry almost smiled.

"I think I will." Releasing Draco suddenly, Harry turned and walked away, leaving him without another word, although he did turn around and glance at him once before walking out of the dungeons.

Draco watched him disappear from sight, then breathed out and relaxed. "Stupid Potter," he mumbled. After a quick look around to make sure no one else was in the halls, he put his hand over his chest to make sure Harry's manhandling hadn't twisted the cord holding his amulet in place, and on a whim he drew the amulet out of his shirt and looked at it. The firelight reflected on the glass and colored the honey inside amber. Now he was sure it was working properly. After all, Harry hadn't hit him, and he had one of the most explosive tempers Draco had ever experienced.

"Worth your weight in gold," he whispered and tucked the amulet safely away again. He looked back down the hall and smiled. Harry's temper frightened him, but perhaps with a little more effort he could wrap his lion around his little finger. Severus kept thyme, cobwebs and rowan in his storeroom, and Draco felt he had enough time before his master came with Dumbledore's list of poisons to brew. Humming like his mother did when one of her schemes went perfectly, he hurried through the dungeons, first to gather his grimoire and then to edge his way back into Harry's good graces.

A little while later as the sun peeked into the office, with his eyes watering from the powerful fumes, Draco wished Harry had hit him. At least then maybe he'd be in bed with another healing draught instead of coughing up red smoke. As he finished bottling the potion and slipped it into a pocket, the door slammed open and he heard his master's angry voice. He winced and thought he should have realized the smoke would pour out from under the door.

"What are you doing in here?" Snape demanded, dispersing the red haze with his wand. "Was that rowan?"

"Yes..." Draco mumbled, looking at the floor as he smothered his coughing. There was no use lying to a potions master.

"I'm surprised you're still breathing," Snape said, crossing to his cabinet and pulling out a jar of mistletoe. He dropped several white berries in a cauldron and ignited a strong flame underneath, and as the berries began smoking, he grabbed the back of Draco's neck and forced him to bend over the
cauldron, inhaling the smoke.

"Stupid child," Severus scolded him. "Pomfrey's threat wasn't enough, you had to go digging around for poison? What the hell were you making anyway?" Not giving Draco time to answer, he grabbed the grimoire and dragged it close, scanning the different recipes on the open pages. Slowly his hand became gentler and his anger faded.

"Rowan's Heaven?" he murmured, immediately recognizing it. He glanced over the ingredients spread on the table just to be sure. The only thing missing was the cobwebs, but then he imagined those were in the corners of the office where his apprentice, who often had to clean, knew where to find them. "And why would you need to make this particular potion?"

"Harry's bottle of it broke," Draco said, not mentioning that it happened while they snuck out from the castle again. "He said no one would believe him."

"And you blithely offered to make it?" Snape asked. "Knowing that no one trusted that little addict for good reason--"

"He doesn't know I made it!" Draco snapped, then coughed again as the mistletoe, a poison in its own right, scrubbed out the last of the rowan smoke and started to overwhelm him. He shook his head and broke free of Severus' grip, standing away from the potion and breathing deep. "I mean...yes, I offered, but I saw him find it in pieces. And then he...we had an argument and he walked off. He doesn't know I'm doing it."

Snape stared at him for several seconds, his eyes boring into Draco's. Finally Draco lowered his head.

"I'll get rid of it if you want," he said softly, loyalty to his master winning out.

"No." Severus closed the book and dispelled the mistletoe, putting away the cauldron as he spoke. "Give it to him. And let him know that you will be making his antidote from now on."

Draco looked up, his eyes wide. "Me? I thought Slughorn--"

"Slughorn is indeed making them, but I doubt Potter enjoys being dependent on him. And I would much rather have him indebted to your goodwill than Slughorn's manipulation." He sighed as he drew a long list of new potions for Dumbledore and set it on the table. "There was a meeting this morning. The professors have agreed to shuffle the students around so that the Slytherins are either in their own classes or paired with Gryffindor."

"What about--?" Draco started.

"Because the children were traveling eldest with youngest," Snape said over him, "we'll also be keeping the older students with the youngest in class, so you'll be forced to have study groups after hours."

Draco nodded once in relief. He didn't think Pansy would be willing to let the youngest wander alone, especially after he told her about the attempts on his life. "When do we start classes again?"

"Tomorrow, but classes have been cancelled for today while the students are shuffled. I suggest you explain everything to the children before breakfast, or else they'll only hear rumors from the other students."

"Wonderful," Draco muttered, then motioned at Dumbledore's list. "Are we going to start on that today?"
"Tomorrow. I have to prepare the dragon parts before we can use them. You might as well go wake the children up now. I'm sure explaining why you decided to keep them here will take up the time from now until breakfast."

"And that's if Pansy doesn't interrupt me every five seconds to call me an idiot." He left the office and dragged his feet to the common room, ignoring Mrs. Norris' meow and Filch's accusing yell before Filch realized it was just Draco again. Mumbling "snake's den" to the door, Draco went inside and sat down on the steps with a sigh.

"Good morning," Blaise said, looking up from the couch with an open book in his lap. "You're up early."

"Mm. Morning. Pansy make you stand watch?"

"Nope, volunteered myself. Well, Vincent and Gregory suggested it strongly, but it's not like I was intimidated or anything." He smiled and snapped his book shut. "Three months of being her strong-arms and they've let it go to their heads."

"I'll have a word with them," Draco said. "Actually, I need to have a word with everyone."

"Right now?" Blaise asked.

"Before breakfast. I need to brief everyone and give out marching orders."

Blaise regarded him quietly for a moment. "Something happened while we were gone, didn't it?"

Draco met his gaze. "How'd you guess?"

"You didn't argue when Pansy made these couches into a little wall, even though you'd obviously set one up as your bed," Blaise said. "You're not surprised that I'm standing watch. And since when do you think about things like marching orders and briefs? Oh, well, briefs maybe..." he said with a smirk.

"Tch." Draco smiled but he didn't grace that comment with a response. "I think about it ever since I had a crash course in politics last year. Go wake up Pansy and Theo. I'll get Vincent and Goyle."

"You telling everyone or just us?"

"All of you, but I want you lot to hear first. I don't want any of the children panicking and bolting for the door."

Blaise narrowed his eyes. "Are things that bad?"

Hesitating, Draco considered. "A few nights ago, they were. But now...maybe not."

Obviously suspicious but willing to play along for the moment, Blaise got up and leaned over the next couch, waking Pansy. As Draco got up and waked past them, he noticed Theo sleeping next to her on the cramped couch. Draco felt a little sting in his heart as he headed towards Crabbe and Goyle, picking his way over sleeping children. He knew some things would change, but seeing his best friend lying practically on top of Theo clinched it.

Once he had his small group awake, he sat down on the steps again and let them gather around him. No one complained about sitting below him since they couldn't sit anywhere else and none of them wanted to leave the common room.
"All right, Draco," Theo said. "What have we missed since we've been gone?"

"Couldn't of been more interesting than Death Eaters searching for you every night," Vincent said.

"Well, I don't think you missed the blizzard," he said, and they all chuckled. "But you missed sabotage, two dragons galloping through the school, and a blood thirsty mob that nearly killed me and Potter."

The children's soft snores and the rippling undercurrents against the lake window seemed surprisingly loud to Draco as everyone around him froze. At first Vincent and Greg tilted their heads, wondering if this was one of his dry jokes, but as Draco remained silent and let it sink in, Blaise whistled lowly and Theo swore under his breath.

"What?" Pansy gasped. As the initial shock wore off, her eyes narrowed and she practically growled. "You let us stay here when we're in danger--?"

"You think we'd be here if I thought we'd be safer somewhere else?" he said. "The way things have gone, we stand a far better chance of survival here than out there, or do you think you can keep all these children out of the dark lord's hands until the war ends?"

Keeping her mouth shut but still giving him a murderous glare, she crossed her arms and waited for an explanation. Trying not to stumble over his words, he started with his service with Severus in providing poison to Dumbledore's forces, explained Voldemort's attempts to kill him with both a blizzard and a pair of dragons, mentioned the saboteur's efforts against him and Harry, described the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuff's attempt on his life and ended with what Severus had told him earlier about their classes.

"And you expect us to go classes with them?" Theo asked. "What for? To give them a chance at us?"

"They don't know that you're dark," Draco said. "Besides, you're all protected under the laws of sanctuary. After what I did to the others, I doubt anyone will try anything."

While none of them looked happy with that explanation, none of them argued it. Blaise furrowed his brow and looked up at him. "You're really telling us Potter fought beside you?"

"Knowing Draco," Theo muttered, "more like he used stupid Potter as a shield."

"He stood beside me like no one else ever has," Draco snapped. "Like none of them ever stood beside one of us. And you'll probably be seeing more of him around, so keep any bloody comments to yourself."

Almost all of them straightened in surprise at the sudden edge to his voice, but Pansy continued to thoughtfully consider everything Draco had told them.

"They don't know that we're dark?" she repeated. "Draco, what aren't you telling us?"

Trying not to show his own anxiety, he took a deep breath and stared at her. "They know about me, Pansy. The night you arrived, I let Dumbledore tell the entire school that I'm dark."

Even Crabbe and Goyle knew that was bad, exchanging a horrified look. Pansy's eyes widened and her hand flew to her mouth. "Good God..."

"Are you insane?" Theo demanded in a harsh whisper, then looked over his shoulder to make sure he hadn't woken anyone up. "It's suicide! That's like walking into a dragon's den and saying 'here I
"You weren't there," Draco said. "I honestly believe I'm safer here than taking my chances out there."

"You've already been attacked once!" Pansy hissed. "Do you honestly believe I'd let the children stay here?"

"He might have a point," Blaise said softly, interrupting before the argument could turn violent. "After all, moving through the countryside was getting harder and harder. You know we would've been caught eventually, Pansy."

She frowned at him but didn't argue.

"And they only know about Draco," Blaise continued. "We don't have to let them know who's dark and who isn't. Draco will be taking the brunt of their hostility anyway. Besides, he's already got Gryffindor on our side."

"I also made a deal with Dumbledore," Draco said. "If anything happens, we'll hole up down here for the entirety of the war. If you have a better idea, I'm willing to hear it."

She frowned at him but didn't argue.

And they only know about Draco," Blaise continued. "We don't have to let them know who's dark and who isn't. Draco will be taking the brunt of their hostility anyway. Besides, he's already got Gryffindor on our side."

"I also made a deal with Dumbledore," Draco said. "If anything happens, we'll hole up down here for the entirety of the war. If you have a better idea, I'm willing to hear it." He looked around at them, almost daring them to say something. "Otherwise, it's time for breakfast. We're expected in the great hall."

Pansy leaned forward and put her hand on his arm. "Wait," she started. "Right now?"

"Of course right now," Draco sighed and looked at her. He understood her panic. If their position had been reversed, he would have refused to go upstairs. He smiled. "Pansy, you know there's no such thing as a brave Malfoy. If I feel safe here, it must be a suitable warren for the children."

A little laugh escaped from her before she could stop it. With a faint smile, she still gave him a look. "You're an absolute disgrace to dark wizards," she said softly, reaching up and pushing his hair out of his eyes. "But you're our disgrace. Can't imagine what your father's going to say about all this, though. With you revealing your family, the Malfoys won't be a political power anymore."

Mention of his father's name made Draco's face cloud over, and he glanced away. "That's if he's still alive."

"You haven't heard from him yet?" she asked. "What about--"

"You and the Slytherins are the first dark wizards I've heard from since this all started. I haven't had an owl from anyone but you." At her stricken look, he forced all the doubt from his face. He couldn't afford to let anyone think he was as worried as they were. "We all know we could lose our families at any time. It's just the way things are for us. But we're strong enough to handle it if it happens."

With a small nod, Pansy turned away from him and headed for the group of sleeping Slytherins. When she didn't see Blaise or Theo or anyone else with her, she turned and gave them all a harsh look.

"Well, what are you waiting for? I can't get this lot up and out on my own."

Draco almost laughed watching four dark wizards, all much bigger than she was, scrambling to do what she said. As he watched them kneel or bend over the older students, slowly working their way through the crowd of faces that he hardly recognized but they knew intimately, his humor faded. Had three months bound them into such a tight group? Did he have any place with them anymore? In a room full of Slytherins, he felt completely alone.
By the time Pansy had everyone awake, showered and grouped together, the breakfast bell had rung. Draco leaned patiently against the door, feeling everyone's eyes on him. He had no doubt they had all found and read discarded issues of the Daily Prophet. Although only his trusted handful knew the details of his dealings with Dumbledore, the rest of the Slytherins undoubtedly knew about the destruction of his home and that the dark lord himself personally wanted Draco dead. Even if they didn't, he was still a Malfoy, possibly the last Malfoy, and his family was always a force to be reckoned with. When they were all before him, looking up expectantly, he stood straight and faced them.

"Things have changed since you were here last," he said curtly. "There's no time to explain it all right now. Just keep your mouths shut and don't start anything. Stay together. Never go out alone. And if anyone asks if you're a dark wizard, don't panic, but don't say one way or the other, either."

He opened the door and ushered them out in small clumps of young children clustering around older students, Pansy and Blaise at the front and Theo bringing up the rear with Vincent and Gregory flanking. They'd probably marched through the forest like that, he realized, and he glanced back at the empty common room, now a mess of mattresses, knapsacks and a handful of dolls the youngest had carried with them. Such cramped quarters, miserable to him, probably felt like luxury after months on the forest floor.

The walk upstairs turned tense when they joined the other students in the halls on their way to breakfast. Conversations faded and whispers sprung up as the Slytherins passed silently by Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs, who couldn't help but notice that they all had one hand in their robes, ready to pull out their wands at a moment's notice. Edging towards the walls to keep out of their way, the other students relaxed a little when they saw Draco walking behind the rest of the Slytherins, keeping a close eye on everyone.

To Draco's surprise, he spotted Harry and several Gryffindors slowing to a stop halfway to the great hall. He noticed the looks on Ron and Granger's faces, not hostile but not friendly either, and he paused and put a hand on Theo's shoulder.

"When everyone's done eating," he said softly, "make sure they come back to the common room. I should be waiting."

"Where are you going?" Theo asked, and followed his look back to the Gryffindors. "Oh. Careful they don't bite your head off."

"Don't worry, I'm about to have Potter eating out of my hand." Separating from his Slytherins, Draco walked over to Harry, glancing briefly at the small group around him. "I need to speak to you," he said.

"About what?"

Draco spared another glance at the circle of red and gold scarves clustered around the Boy Who Lived. "Alone."

Harry sighed and let his shoulder slump a little. "Malfoy, if you just want to argue again--"

"Potter, you should be nicer to me, especially when I've gone out of my way to help you." He couldn't help his smile and from the way the Gryffindors leaned a little closer to Harry, he wondered how conniving and sneaky he appeared. "You'd be surprised what a dark wizard can do for you, especially when that dark wizard is also a potions master."

"You're not a potions master," Hermione said, more in surprise than in denial.
Draco almost challenged her, but then Harry's eyes lit up in understanding and he glanced over his shoulder at his friends.

"I really better speak with him," he said. "I'll be back soon, promise."

Leading him around the corner and into an empty hall, Draco scanned the corridor quickly before reaching into his robes and pulling out the vial. Harry's brow furrowed as he took the potion.

"You made it?" he said softly, turning it over in his hands. "After what I said to you..."

"Yeah, well..." Draco felt a smile pushing out onto his face no matter how hard he tried to force it down. "Severus says I'm to make this for you from now on."

"This was Snape's idea?" Harry asked, looking like he wanted to drop the vial.

His look made Draco laugh. "Hardly. I had to convince him that you didn't know I was making this. He decided that since I was already doing it, I might as well keep you supplied. Better than owing Slughorn any favors."

Harry grinned. "I can't wait to see his face when I tell him."

"Please let me be there when you do," Draco smiled.

They fell silent as a group of students walked close by, and as they passed, Harry raised the glass to the light. "It's red, though. Slughorn's was always white."

"Mm-hmm. I don't think I used as many ingredients as he does."

"More dark magic?"

"Not quite..."

With a tilt of his head, Harry stared hard at him. "Malfoy..."

"It's the same thing," he hurried to reassure him. "I just didn't add white lufurnia petals. And it's not like the potion needs them. It'll just be a little bitter going down, that's all."

Having experienced Snape's idea of what "a little bitter" tasted like, Harry did not feel reassured. "But why leave them out? You're a potions master, aren't you?"

"I'm still an apprentice--"

"For less than a year now, right? And dark wizards start out young, you told me that yourself."

For a moment Draco considered telling him that lufurnia was a prime ingredient of love potions, that Rowan's Heaven altered even slightly could become a love potion, and that he would rather avoid risking a horrible mess just because he couldn't brew the damn things.

"I just can't. It won't work for me if I do."

Harry blinked. "Even with a recipe?"

"No." Draco looked up at him and sighed again, feeling the urge to confide in someone beside his master. Probably the little honey amulet working its subtle magic, he figured. "It's love potions. I can't make them, or even potions close to them. I didn't want to risk making something poisonous just to improve the taste."
To his surprise, Harry didn't tease him or gape. Instead, a broad grin spread over his face. "You can't make love potions?" he gasped. "That's wonderful!"

"No it's not," Draco snapped, annoyed that Harry was happy about it. "It's awful! Snape always calls me stupid and my mother looks at me like it's my fault and the portraits snigger behind my back...well, they did before I burned the house down..."

"It's good you can't do it," Harry said firmly, putting a hand on Draco's shoulder. "You can't make people live a lie. If you had any idea what love potions do...what they're responsible for..."

Draco felt a perverse urge to convince Harry he could indeed make people live a lie, but he quashed it. Harry gave him such an earnest look that he didn't feel afraid to meet his gaze, and now he wished that he didn't have to follow the Slytherins into the great hall. He'd already been up for hours and he didn't want to spend more time with every Hogwarts student staring at him. Pansy had brought them through blizzard and death eater attacks, surely she could handle breakfast. All he wanted now was a quiet meal.

"I'm headed to the kitchens," Harry said abruptly. "Want to come?"

"The kitchens?" Draco asked. "But it's not night, you don't have to sneak--"

"It's not that," Harry said. "There's no one watching me all the time there. And you look like you don't want to go eat breakfast with everyone else, too."

More of the amulet's influence? Draco didn't care, he just nodded. Neither of them were surprised by the looks following them as the Boy Who Lived walked alongside a confirmed dark wizard, but Draco did feel a little surprised when he realized he was smiling. Fear of ambushes and lurking saboteurs faded away. Beside Harry, he felt safe.

When they arrived at the kitchen, the elves added a second chair to the one already prepared for Harry in the corner. Draco held his tongue as they sat down. Too busy with making poison in the morning, he always skipped breakfast and only came up for dinner, but it seemed that Harry was a regular, dining where no one could stare at him. As curious as he was, he didn't pry into Harry's sudden need for privacy. He'd been invited into the private sphere Potter had created for himself, and Draco didn't intend to botch it by asking the wrong questions.

"Pansy's going to kill me for this," he said as an elf served him.

"They'll survive being stared at for awhile," Harry said.

"Oh, you've never seen Pansy when she gets going. Rules her girls with an iron fist. I'm sure she's only gotten worse."

"No one can stay mad forever. And if she's that bad, we can hide you in the Room of Requirement until she calms down."

Draco shook his head. "Not there. That room always makes me nervous. What happens if you're inside and someone outside changes it? Besides, the room's eerie enough on its own. I once went in and it was nothing but a mess of thousands of pieces of junk."

"Junk? What were you inside for?"

"Had to hide something." He didn't elaborate. "Could've been a dead body in there for all I know. If I ever go in again, I'll be sure to have Vincent or Greg stand guard."
"Them?" Harry incredulously. "You'd trust them to guard something?"

"They're not idiots," Draco said. "They're not brilliant, but they do take commands well and they're loyal. They don't have to be smart."

"So they're just tools to you?" Harry asked. "Servants?"

"Of course they're tools," Draco said. "They've kept me alive for years and I've gotten them this far, when they probably couldn't have gotten past first year on their own."

"I don't believe it," Harry said. "Those two, keeping you alive?"

Draco half-smiled and pulled a plate of apples close, taking one and tossing it in his hand. "Malfoys aren't well-liked in this world, Potter. I could've been a saint and people would still hate me."

"We'll never know for sure," Harry said. "Saint Malfoy, now there's blasphemy for you."

"Ha..." Draco muttered, taking a bite. And he froze in shock.

The mixed taste of rowan and hemlock burned his mouth even after he spit out the apple piece and stared at the iridescent white of the apple. The two plants mingled with a charm to create a lustrous sheen that belied the poison within. Without thinking, he smacked aside the apple in Harry's hand.

His reaction drew the attention of several elves and he grabbed the first one in reach, too distracted to notice that he'd grabbed Dobby.

"Who did this?" he snarled, shaking the elf. "Who!"

"Did what?" Dobby cried, prying at Draco's fingers until he got loose and fell to the floor. "What's wrong with--"

"You think I don't recognize poison?" Draco threw the apple at Dobby and as it hit his head, he finally recognized his father's old house elf. "You useless, stupid--you worked for us for years! You damn well ought to recognize poison when you see it. Or did you do this, you worthless little--"

"Dobby wouldn't poison anyone," Harry said and stood up. As they spoke, cries of "poison" rushed through the kitchen and the elves clustered around them, examining the fruit for themselves. Nearly every apple had been tampered with.

"It couldn't have been Dobby," the elf said, one hand on his head. "Dobby's been cooking eggs, he has. It was Daffy that washed the apples."

Draco turned and immediately spotted her, any previous trace of friendship gone from his eyes. "You?"

"N-no, Master Draco," Daffy stammered, shaking her head quickly. "I's only washed 'em and puts them in bowls, to go up--"

"Dear God," Draco breathed. "They've been served?" At her small nod, he looked around at the small crowd in a panic. "Don't just stand there! Get up there and stop them, hurry!"

As several elves disappeared, Harry drew close to him, holding the bitten apple. "But if you could tell it was poisoned, can't they?"

"Only because of the rowan," Draco said. "Only because I've worked with poison my whole life. Even if no one gets sick, everyone will know which one of us is dark."
A memory of his father's diary played in his mind, of young Lucius being poisoned to find out if the family would betray themselves. All these years later, the same sick drama unfolded around him, and he cursed himself for his stupidity. He should have seen it coming. He looked back at Daffy, who quailed under his gaze.

"Where did you get them? Where did they come from?"

"Master Filch brings them fresh from Hogsmeade likes always," Daffy said, breaking down into tears and wringing her hands. "Daffy didn't mean no harm. Daffy just does what she always does."

"Filch..." Draco ignored her whimpering as his mind raced.

For most of the term, he hadn't seen Filch, but recently he'd seen him several times near the dungeons. He hadn't thought anything of it at the time, but certainly no Slytherins would have left the common room, especially not after what happened to him and Harry. Filch had no business in the dungeons.

"How long ago--?"

Before he finished asking the question, he knew there was no use trying to find him. If Filch hadn't done anything wrong, he wouldn't know who did, and if Filch indeed poisoned the apples, then no doubt he was long gone by now. With a frustrated shout, Draco slammed his hand on the table, too angry to feel old injuries flare up.

Just as he thought he'd better rush upstairs and make sure his Slytherins were all right, Harry mumbled something unintelligible and unfolded a yellowed map of what he quickly recognized as the school. To Draco's surprise, footprints ran in and out of sight with names attached.

"What on earth?"

"It's a map of Hogwarts," Harry said, "and don't you tell anyone about this. We're looking for Filch, right?"

Draco nodded once and came around the table, looking over Harry's shoulder. He couldn't see the map clearly, though, so he wormed his way under Harry's arm and leaned against him, scanning the halls for the caretaker's name. Nothing could be made out in the mess of the great hall and the first floor as several teachers started to move out, presumably to come down to the kitchens or search for intruders, but Draco looked past most of the castle and stared first at the exits and then at the dungeons.

Mrs. Norris' paw prints stood out first, tiny but distinct, and nearby he found Filch heading towards the door to his common room. Draco's triumphant smile quickly turned feral and he turned, slipping out of Harry's reach as he ran to the corner and opened the trap door, climbing down the ladder that led to the little closet in the dungeons. Wand drawn, he pushed the door open and quietly headed down the hall.

In moments, he spotted Filch at the common room entrance tracing symbols on the door, looking back and forth at the blank wall and a sheet of paper in his hand. Draco vaguely recognized them as runes, but right now he didn't care what Filch was drawing. He raised his wand but jumped as Mrs. Norris meowed, letting Filch know he wasn't alone anymore. The caretaker glanced up and froze for an instant, then turned and dashed around the corner.

Surprised at how fast Filch could run, Draco shifted his grip on his wand and chased after him, wishing he could have opened the common room and summoned his broom. If he could fly, he'd
catch Filch in a second, but the man moved so fast that he briefly wondered if this was how the
dragon had felt following him. He did not worry that he would lose him, though. Draco knew the
dungeons intimately while Filch needed his cat to show him the way. By the time they reached the
long corridor to the first floor, Draco had plenty of time to draw his wand, pausing so that his hand
was steady.

"Tyrnan," Draco called out, aiming his wand not at Filch but at the stone beneath the man's feet.

Twisting up like water, the floor spiraled up and around the caretaker like a cage conforming to his
body, turning him within the stone's curves so that his body contorted to its very limits. Filch
screamed. A few more inches and bones would start to snap, joints would pop, and his head might
very well twist off. As Draco approached, his prisoner spotted him out of the corner of his eye and
glared, baring his teeth.

"I won't tell you nothing!" Filch spat, hardly able to move his jaw. "You bastard purebloods are
finally getting what you deserve!"

"Who said I wanted information?" Draco asked.

As if turning a sensitive dial, he rolled his wand between his fingers, making the stone twist a little
tighter, constricting around Filch like a python. With each twist, he heard bones grind together,
actually heard muscle rip. Stone muffled Filch's screams as it pushed his jaw shut and broke it. The
tighter it grew, the more intense the drag on his victim's skin until it finally tore in places. Blood
trickled down the winding stone, slowly at first, but Draco intended to continue until his sculpture
turned into a fountain.

"Malfoy, stop!" Harry barreled into him, pulling him away from the statue and against the wall,
knocking the breath out of him. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing he doesn't deserve," Draco hissed, pushing him back and raising his wand again, giving
the stone another twist. "Get out of my way!"

"You can't kill him," Harry said. "Draco--"

"He tried to kill my Slytherins! He's been after me since I came here--"

"You don't know that for sure," Harry said, looking between him and Filch. "Even if you're right, he
can't have been acting alone."

"Then we can ask his ghost."

Above Filch's groans and the rumbling of stone pressing in on him, they both heard voices on the
upper floor coming towards them. Harry reached towards him and Draco shied out of his reach.

"Everyone's coming, Malfoy, and if they see you doing this, it'll make them think you're just like
every dark wizard they've heard about in their storybooks." When Draco made no move to stop,
Harry growled and took a step forward. "If you don't stop now, right now--"

"What?" Draco sneered. "You'll stop me?"

"If I have to," Harry said.

Draco looked between his prisoner and Harry. If he let him go right now, he still couldn't hide the
damage he'd done, even if he wanted to.
"He hurt us," Draco tried. "He hurt you."

"If you don't stop," Harry said, "it'll just hurt you even more."

With a flick of Draco's wand, the stone retreated so violently that it spun Filch around twice before he landed, most of his body bent at wrong angles on the smooth floor. Sliding his wand back into his pocket, Draco turned away from Harry's outstretched hand and stood beside the wall, crossing his arms as he glared at him. In a few seconds, Dumbledore and McGonagall appeared at the mouth of the hallway, followed by Hagrid.

"Merlin, e's killed 'im!" the giant shouted, his eyes widening. "Malfoy's killed Filch!"

"I left him alive," Draco snapped.

"Barely," McGonagall scowled, kneeling down beside the caretaker. "You don't even know if he's the one who--"

"I caught that squib drawing runes on Slytherin's door," Draco cut her off. "You know they can't get in without passwords, and he was trying to--"

"You can't just go aroun' cursin' people," Hagrid said. "You really are a dark wizard through an' through, hurtin' folk just 'cause you like to--"

"That's enough," Dumbledore said. "I will ascertain his guilt or innocence myself, after Madame Pomfrey sets him right again."

"Might have to send him to St. Mungo's," McGonagall murmured, casting a spell to raise Filch without moving him. "I'll take him straight to the hospital. With any luck, Severus has everyone confined to the great hall."

"All students are accounted for," Severus said, startling her as he appeared down the hall, coming towards him and ignoring the body on the floor. "Except these two. I had to take five more children to the hospital. Pomfrey's there, if you'd like to take him now," he said to McGonagall. She frowned at him but took Filch away.

"The children were poisoned?" Dumbledore asked.

"Not severely," Snape said. "Mr. Malfoy's warning saved them from a second bite."

With Hagrid nearby, Snape would not speak openly, but Draco understood his meaning. None of the dark children had been poisoned. Even if a few Slytherins were among the sick, at least their real secret was still safe.

Hagrid grunted. "Well, Mr. Malfoy here nearly killed a man for no reason."

"He tried to kill us!" Draco hissed.

"You don' know that--"

"That's enough," Dumbledore said stronger than before, "both of you. Although I must say, Mr. Malfoy, that it is a good thing you listened to Mr. Potter. I'm sure it was his influence that persuaded you to stop. Had you killed him, I would have been forced to rescind your guest status."

"I was acting in self-defense," Draco said, his voice starting to turn harsh in sheer rage. "Which I've had to do twice now."
"A wizard against one without magic is hardly a fair fight," Dumbledore said.

If Draco had been a snake, he would have coiled tight, fangs bared. His whole body tingled. His children had been threatened by a lowly pissant unworthy of even looking him in the eye, and he was the one being scolded?

"Father was right," he said. "This school's slipped since you--"

"Draco!" Severus snapped.

"But Severus, it isn't right," Draco cried, knowing he sounded like a child but beyond caring. "I don't care what anyone else says, if I have to kill--"

"But you didn't have to," Harry said softly.

Feeling as betrayed as the night Harry refused to confide in him in the kitchen, Draco stared at him. "How...how can you, you of all people...say that?"

Both Harry and Dumbledore blinked in surprise, but Draco pressed his hands against his mouth and looked up at Severus, whose eyes widened in alarm. He stepped closer and bent over Draco, examining his skin and wincing as he found the faint lines and loss of color that heralded his apprentice's change.

"A year early," Snape murmured. "It must be the stress you're under, the high emotions...and you've been casting strong spells..."

"No," Draco whispered, his voice muffled. "It's too soon..."

"Run," Severus said, stepping forward and shoving him once. "Run! Or do you want it to happen out here?"

Without another word, Draco turned and ran back into the dungeons, hearing his master say something else but unable to make it out. When he was at the common room, he didn't look at the runes still on the door but cried out the password as best he could, "snake's den." The wall didn't open, and he frantically pounded on the stone, repeating the password but only hissing even worse.

"Snake's den," a voice said clearly behind him.

The door opened. One hand still over his mouth, Draco looked up at Harry.

"Snape said to come with you," he said simply.

Loathe to say anything, Draco just nodded once and went inside, heading down the same route he'd taken when he'd brought an unconscious Harry into the deepest tunnels. Familiar twinges of pain coursed through his body. He undid his cloak clasp and let the garment fall behind him, then unbuttoned his robe, dropping it without a thought. When they finally reached the dark shower room, he could no longer walk straight but had to stoop over, one arm wrapped around himself, and he felt his ribs and internal organs shift beneath his skin.

"Malfoy, what's going on?" Harry lit the torches on either wall and looked around. "A bathroom?"

Unable to answer, Draco went into each stall, turning the hot water on full and fighting his own mouth to gasp out the spell "seoleh." Water stopped running down the drains and began to fill the room, and Harry winced and adjusted the water so that it wouldn't scald either of them. Even so, the room filled with steam.
"If you're trying to make a swimming pool, it won't work," he said. "It's running out the door."

Was it? He'd never done this for himself before, always relying on Crabbe or Pansy to do it for him. Draco shook his head to clear it and felt the bone around his eyes ripple. He had very little time left. He cast another sealing spell on the door and hobbled inside the farthest shower stall, drawing the curtain closed and dropping his wand into the water.

His fingers no longer had nails but instead ended in claws, and he used those to tear his robes free, sitting down as he completely undressed. He barely slid his pants off in time as his legs fused together in a short tail. The change finally came upon him in full, his skin turning to scales and his eyeteeth turning sharp. The webbing between his fingers grew thicker and his lower body elongated so that his tail could give him some balance, even if it couldn't support him properly. Despite the hot water and steam, he put his arms around himself and shivered.

"Malfoy?" Harry asked. "Are you all right?" His hand gripped the edge of the curtain and without thinking, Draco put his hand over it to stop him.

Harry drew back as if burned, but it was Draco's cold and slick skin that startled him. Kneeling down in the steadily rising water, he put his fingers around the curtain again.

"Malfoy?"

The torches along the wall cast little light into the stall, and Draco dragged himself into the darkest corner, his tail slapping the water in agitation. The little honey amulet still hung around his neck and he clutched it in his hands, curling around it and closing his eyes as he heard the curtain pull back, heard Harry gasp.

"Draco?"

Harry's voice didn't sound horrified. From the sound of the water around them, Harry was coming closer, putting a hand on his shoulder. When Draco didn't move, he leaned close and pushed the hair from his face, a little surprised that Draco still had hair when the rest of his body was covered in white scales.

"What is this?" Harry asked. "Can you still talk?"

Wishing he was small enough to fit into a chink in the wall, Draco held the amulet a little tighter and pressed harder against the wall.

"C-crossssbreeding hass a price," he whispered. Not only did his voice sound like one long hiss, but even his consonants sounded harsh as he had to speak from farther back in his throat. "God, don't look at me."

"But..." Harry whispered, unable to help himself. "You're not ugly."

Draco didn't know why that made him angry, but he suddenly hissed and slapped his tail hard on the water, splashing them both, and he turned and bared his fangs at him.

"Sshut up! Go away, justs go away!"

He raked his claws down the wall, making a terrible screech, and then when Harry wouldn't leave, he lunged forward. Unused to his changed body, he slipped sideways and landed with one arm trapped between him and Harry. With his free arm, he tried to slash at the other boy, but Harry grabbed his wrist and held him tight, seemingly more concerned with not breaking Draco than with his claws.
That terrible feeling of being pitied instead of feared broke something in him. His hand went limp and he gave a few token struggles as Harry tightened his grip, forcing him still. When the tears came, Harry's hand on his hair seemed to make it worse.

"Go away," he whispered. "Pleassse."

"No," Harry whispered back. "I won't leave you alone now."

Draco tried to think, tried to come up with something venomous and cruel to drive Harry away, but the silence stretched longer and longer, and Harry's hand stroking his hair felt warm. His whole body felt warm. The only sound came from the showers but already that was muted by the hot water that now covered the floor. He'd spent time in this shape before, usually secluded in the bath next to his room, and once here during Christmas break with Crabbe and Goyle guarding the door while he languished alone in the shadows. He closed his eyes. He didn't want Harry to leave.

"I'm sssorry," he said softly. "Don't go."

Harry didn't answer, but he started to edge away from him. Draco winced and grabbed at him again, sinking his claws through his robes, but he found that he needn't have worried. As Harry managed to turn and settle with his back against the wall, he pulled Draco more securely into his arms and sat still. Fidgeting for a moment, Draco worked himself into a comfortable position and lay his head on Harry's shoulder, unable to stop a soft hiss of satisfaction. To his relief, it didn't bother him.

In an hour or maybe just a few minutes, Draco knew that the Slytherins would come back down, and Pansy would probably march straight back here and start snapping at him for thinking they were safe and leaving her to do all the work, and Severus would come down with her and call him stupid for shouting at Dumbledore and nearly killing Filch, and perhaps Dumbledore would even come with them and tell him he was being handed over to the Ministry. He didn't care. He slipped his hand around his amulet and drowsed, smiling a little as Harry sat with him in the dark.
In which Draco and Harry lounge in the bath

They sat together up to their waist in water and undisturbed for much longer than Draco expected. As it became clear that no one was going to bother them for awhile, he wrapped the end of his tail around Harry's right leg and lay flat against him, curling one arm against his chest and trailing his other hand in the water, claws safely away from Harry. In return, he felt Harry's hand stroking his hair and the side of his face, seemingly fascinated by how his face felt like snakeskin. After awhile he took Draco's hand and brought it up to his face, examining as best he could in the dim light the way his fingernails had turned into white claws. Draco cracked an eye and watched him. His small claws were hardly dramatic, but the Gryffindor studied them closer than any class lesson.

"I'm not a lab specimen," he said softly. Now that his body had settled into its shape, he no longer had to fight his mouth to speak, and although his S's were sharper and his voice rasped, it sounded a little closer to normal.

"Sorry," Harry said, but he didn't let go of his hand. "You're just so interesting. Can you understand parseltongue?"

Draco gave a tiny shake of his head. "I'm not a real snake. I'm just a wyvern."

"I thought wyverns were snakes. Are you a dragon, then?"

"No." He opened his eyes and saw the blank look on Harry's face. "A wyvern's not a dragon or a snake. It's both, and neither."

"Another dark crossbreed?"

"Yes. A false dragon with all the weaknesses and none of the strengths."

"Then that's why the dragons wanted to kill you," Harry mused. "That's why they hate wyverns."

Not exactly, Draco thought, but it was close enough and he didn't want to try to explain how easily dragons were offended. Diluting their blood with a lowly snake's was an affront to them.

"But why crossbreed them at all?" Harry asked. "What's the use of a snake with wings?"

Sheer joy of being able to mix the pair, Draco thought, but Harry probably wouldn't like an answer like that and there was another reason for it, a more important reason. "No witch in her right mind would lay with a dragon. But a wyvern, possibly."

Harry frowned and thought about that for several seconds, but after a moment, he blinked and looked back at Draco. "Your voice sounds a little clearer. It's still weird, but I can understand it better."

Self-conscious of being studied, Draco put a hand over his mouth. "My body isn't changing anymore," he said.

"So...your whole body changes, not just your legs or your skin." Putting his hand under Draco's chin, Harry tilted his face gently up, then touched the slight ridges over his eyes. "Does it hurt when you change?"

No one had ever stroked his eye ridges before, and the sensation sent shivers through his body. His scales rippled and several seconds passed before he realized he'd been asked a question. When Harry repeated himself, it sound so much like an accusation that when Draco answered, he felt like he was
making an admission.

"A little. Like growing pains."

"I don't understand you," Harry said with a sigh. "All dark magic does is bring you pain. Why do you stay with it?"

As much as he wanted to snap and insult him, the note of concern in the Gryffindor's voice prompted him to give a real answer.

"It's not always pain," Draco said softly. "There are good things...spells and charms your kind would never imagine. And there are darker pleasures." He looked up at Harry, glad that he couldn't blush under his snakeskin. "Taboos that only we delight in."

"What," Harry swallowed reflexively, "what kind of taboos?"

"All sorts," Draco whispered, as if someone might be listening. "Maybe someday you might join me on a night ride. The witches aren't the only ones who enjoy themselves."

He thought Harry might ask more questions, but for the moment the other boy held silent. As he listened to the torches crackle and the water softly sloshing against the walls, Draco noticed that the water was much cooler than he was used to. He shivered and snuggled closer, enveloped in Harry's warm embrace. Before he thought about it, he flicked out his tongue once with a tiny hiss, tasting the other boy's scent.

Nestled in his companion's robes, he didn't hear the footsteps outside until they were right at the door. Although they didn't expect trouble down in the deepest part of Slytherin, Harry dropped his hand to his wand just in case.

The bathroom door opened, sending ripples through the room even though the water didn't flood out, and Draco pushed his face into Harry's robes. Only faint torchlight came in from outside, but it still stung his eyes. He smiled as Harry put his hand over his head, shading him.

"Draco?" Pansy whispered. "You in here?"

A stupid question, Draco thought, and he wasn't going to answer. When Harry nudged him, he grumbled and burrowed his head further.

"Draco, I know you're in here. Don't play games, I'm not in the mood." Water splashed as she stepped inside. "Why's the water so cold? You trying to kill yourself?"

Hissing in irritation, Draco sat straight, gripping onto Harry's robes to keep his balance. "Pansy, I'm tired, I'm sore, I'm transformed a year early and I'm not in the mood to be scolded. Go away."

"I'd leave you alone if I thought you could take care of yourself, you spoiled brat," she said, turning on a few showers and adding more hot water. "Abandoning us in the great hall, running off with Potter, getting in trouble with Dumbledore--"

"Saved you from poison, you little idiot," he hissed.

"Which you should've expected," she said. "Honestly, poisoned apples? Literally the oldest trick in the book. And that doesn't get you off the hook for running out on us with Potter."

"Pansy--"
"I don't know what you're scheming with that Gryffindor, but don't think I haven't noticed."

"Pansy, shut up--"

"At least I hope you're scheming, but knowing you--" she came to the last shower stall and pulled back the curtain, freezing as she stared at Draco cuddled up in Harry's arms. "Oh."

Heaving a long sigh, Draco glared up at her, wincing in the light. "Pansy, darling, I love you like a sister, but if you don't leave right now, I'll bite you."

Despite his harsh voice and bared fangs, Pansy just raised an eyebrow and snorted at his threat. Instead she turned her attention to Harry, who met her gaze evenly. "And what are you doing here? Afraid he'll try to kill another spy?"

"Snape told me to watch over him," Harry said. "Like I've been doing for the past three months while you were gone."

"Well, he's got us now," she said, visibly upset by his comment. "You can push off back to your tower."

"No, I'm rather comfortable at the moment," Harry said. "We don't have a swimming pool in our house."

"Look, you--"

"He's fine where he is," Draco snapped, whipping his tail hard enough to splash the wall. "Unless there's something important, go away. Please." He added that at the end only because he knew she'd be the one bringing him any food.

She stayed staring at them for so long that Draco started to wonder if she would argue with him again, but she finally shook her head and sighed.

"Fine. I'll get your lunch. And as for you..." she scowled at Harry, looking at him as if he were a tiny bug she wanted to squish. "If you hurt him, you'll never make it out of these dungeons alive. Got it?"

Not waiting for his answer, she turned and left, pulling the door shut behind her.

"I see what you mean," Harry said. "She's not nice when she's angry."

"That wasn't angry," Draco said softly. "And she did warm up the water for me."

"Why do you need it so hot?" Harry asked. "Any hotter and I think my skin'll burn. In fact, we'd better turn off the shower she left on."

Some day he would find out how Harry always managed to ask the uncomfortable questions and make them sound so ridiculous while he asked, but for now Draco gently extricated himself from Harry's arms and lowered himself into the water. Finally it felt comfortable on his scales, and he turned on his stomach. By now the water easily covered his back as he lay down. He remained submerged for several seconds, laying his cheek on the warm tile floor. The water took the weight of his body off his back since he couldn't support himself on his tail, relying solely on his arms if he wanted to do anything besides curl up.

After a minute under water, he pushed himself up to breathe and turned on his side, remaining mostly under the surface as he looked at Harry. "Please leave it on. This body is cold blooded."
"Wait..." Harry said, sitting straight. "You mean she wasn't kidding? It could kill you if the water isn't hot enough?"

Draco shrugged.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Harry asked. "I thought you were just forgetting how hot it was, like when you had to get the dark magic off you."

A little embarrassed, Draco kept the tip of his tail submerged so Harry wouldn't notice it twitching. "You were warm enough."

Before Harry could answer, the door opened again and waves ran through the room as Pansy levitated something in.

"Food's served," she called out. "Just leave everything here and I'll have the elves get rid of it later. Oh, and Potter, McGonagall said that Draco doesn't need your protection down here. She wants you back upstairs."

Even in the dim light, Draco saw Harry's face fall.

"But," Pansy continued, "Snape said that McGonagall treats threats in Hogwarts far too lightly and that if you stay down here, he'll see that your classwork is taken care of. So, you staying?"

"Yes," Harry said before thinking about it. "I'll stay down here. Much safer after all."

"As if it was your safety Snape cared about," Pansy muttered, and she slammed the door as hard as she could, which wasn't hard because the water got in the way.

Once she was gone, Harry poked his head out from behind the curtain and spotted their dinner, two steaming plates of something he couldn't quite make out perched on a very low table obviously built with Draco's tail in mind.

"Great," he said, standing up. "Here's hoping it's not poisoned."

As Harry pulled the curtain back and stepped out, however, Draco winced and shrank back from the light. It was easier to sit together when Harry couldn't see him clearly. If he slithered out of the dark stall, there'd be no hiding his looks.

"Malfoy?" Harry noticed he wasn't following and knelt down. "You coming?"

"I..." Draco stared at the water. "No one's ever seen me like this."

"No one?" Harry asked. "Not even your parents?"

"No, I always hide in my bathroom. The first time it happened, father helped me get upstairs and inside, and he locked the door after me."

"He just left you there?" Harry asked, horrified. "How old were you?"

"Seven," Draco said. He saw Harry's growing disgust and shook his head. "It's not like that, I didn't want him to see me!"

Harry tilted his head. "Then why did you let me stay?"

Silence. Was wanting to have someone with him a good enough reason to reveal everything he had shown him so far? And to Potter of all people? Draco had far more enemies than friends in the
world, and Harry certainly had enough reason to want to hurt him. He tightened his grip on his amulet, but he didn't think a little honey charm could explain why he was acting so stupid.

"Come on, Mal--Draco," Harry said, smiling and holding out his hand. "It'll be all right."

In the darkness, Harry's hand reflected the light. For a few seconds, Draco looked at it like it was a snake poised to bite, but he took a deep breath and grasped his hand. As Harry gently drew him out of the shadows, he didn't resist. For the first time in his serpentine form, he came into the light.

Blinking rapidly, he had to let go of Harry's hand and settle back in the water to move. Harry couldn't help watching him. The firelight reflected of Draco's skin, turning what had looked like a pale white in the shadows into a gleaming mother of pearl. Half serpent's tail and half human, he wasn't much taller, or perhaps longer was a better word, than he was normally, which crippled him in this shape. Snakes used so much of their bodies to rear up, but Draco's tail was too slender to support him. Instead of truly slithering, he crawled on his stomach, digging his claws into the ground and pulling himself along. Only when he reached the table and sat down did he seem somewhat comfortable, sitting with his tail curled around his side, but he had to hold onto the table's edge with one hand to balance himself.

As Harry sat across from him, Draco glanced at the food Pansy had brought. Harry's meal looked like normal steak and potatoes, but he caught the Gryffindor staring at his little pile of roasted birds.

"Are those chickens?" Harry asked.

"No, baby pheasant," Draco said. "They're easier for me to eat."

Uncomfortable with being watched but unable to bring himself to ask Harry to look away, he gingerly snagged a bird in the claws of his thumb and forefinger and brought it up to his lips. He couldn't dislocate his jaw to open his mouth wider but he didn't have to. His longer tongue curled around the pheasant and drew it in, and he tipped his head back slightly as he swallowed.

"Is eating hard when you're like this?"

Draco didn't think he glared at Harry, but from the way the other boy winced, he must've.

"I'm sorry," Harry said, suddenly finding dinner fascinating. "I don't mean to pester you with questions--"

"It's not that," Draco said quickly, then frowned. "Okay, it is that, but I don't mind. It's just that I have a hard time talking right now."

"I understand," Harry said. "I mean, I don't know exactly what it feels like, but, well...maybe I could let you ask questions this time."

Hearing that made Draco feel worse. He didn't want to upset Harry, but... "What I want to ask, you can't tell me."

"What do you mean?"

"The Order you mentioned before," Draco said softly. "Why you wander at night. Why you try to hide from--" He broke off as Harry's face darkened. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't ask."

For a moment, Harry didn't say anything. The silence stretched longer and longer, and Draco wondered if he'd just undone all the good will he'd built between them. He took a deep drink from his glass of water, wishing it was wine. When Harry spoke, the sound startled him so much that he
nearly dropped the glass.

"It's all right," Harry said at last. "It's not fair for me to keep that secret, not after what you've done for me. What you've let me see. But you promise you won't tell anyone, not even Pansy?"

"I promise," Draco said. He thought Harry was too trusting to take a Slytherin's word, let alone a Malfoy's word, but he honestly intended to keep it.

"The Order of the Phoenix is Dumbledore's secret group dedicated to fighting Voldemort," Harry started. "It's made up of wizards who didn't want to wait for the Ministry to decide to act. I'm not really supposed to be part of it since I'm not of age, but I've got a habit of getting into trouble so they made me a full member last year."

"To keep an eye on you?" Draco asked with a smile.

"Something like that. I also own the house they use for a headquarters. Long story. And there's the prophecy--" Harry bit himself off.

"Prophecy?" Draco asked.

"I really can't talk about that," Harry said in a rush. "I'm sorry, but not even all the Order knows--"

"So dark wizards aren't the only ones who keep secrets," Draco said.

"Tch," Harry snorted bitterly. "Dumbledore's got your kind beat when it comes to secrets."

"At least he's not a total idiot," Draco said, nabbing another pheasant between his claws. "All right, I won't ask about the prophecy. But you haven't told me why you wander outside at night."

Harry stalled by taking a long drink of pumpkin juice. "I don't suppose Pansy poisoned any of my food?"

Swallowing his pheasant, Draco just shook his head and waited. Harry sighed and continued.

"Being alone," Harry said, "being outside in the cold air...it helped a little. With the addiction, I mean. And there was no one looking at me, or asking why I was so restless. Why I couldn't sit still or pay attention or why I was always tossing and turning in bed. Especially since everyone knew Pomfrey can take care of insomnia. Sometimes I didn't eat, sometimes I ate three times as usual."

"You never told any of your friends?" Draco asked.

Harry shook his head.

"Why not?"

Shrug. "I didn't want them to know."

Draco's eyes widened slightly. "You're ashamed? But it's not even your fault."

"I could've spilled the potion on the ground," Harry said, refusing to meet his look. "I could've smashed the bottle against a wall, I could've apparated, I could've...I could've done something else."

"Fenrir would've lapped it off the ground." Draco tilted his head. "Your choice was stupidly Gryffindor, but probably the only way to keep it from his hands."

"You mean a Slytherin choice would've been wrong?" Harry chuckled humorlessly. "That's not
"You listened to Severus?" Draco started to laugh. When Harry glared at him, he put a hand over his mouth, but he couldn't muffle himself entirely. "You know he hates you. He'd do anything to make you feel bad. Oh, you Gryffindors are too trusting." His laughter quieted as Harry looked down crestfallen, and he put a hand on his, careful not to scratch him.

"Any Slytherin would've smashed the potion just to save himself and left Fenrir to take the spillage," Draco said. "I suppose in some ways, you Gryffindors are handy to have around. And...perhaps your addiction was a good thing. You wouldn't have been waiting for me in the snow otherwise."

Harry smiled at that, but his smile faded quickly as Draco shivered and sat a little lower in the water. Without hesitation, Harry stood up and took off his robe, soaking it in hot water before he draped it around Draco's shoulders. "Is the water getting cold?"

"No, I've just been sitting up too long."

Draco finished the last bird on his plate and pushed himself away from the table, easing down into the water. Keeping Harry's robe wrapped around his shoulders, he looked across the water and grimaced at the thought of crawling all the way back. He didn't have to sleep in the very last stall but he preferred staying as far from the door as possible.

He was rising into the air before he realized Harry had picked him up, one hand under his tail and the other behind his back, holding him close to his chest. Hissing in surprise, Draco snagged his claws into Harry's shirt and clung to him, afraid of being dropped.

"Relax," Harry said. "This way you don't have to drag yourself there. Unless you mind, of course." His voice trailed off uncertainly.

"No, it's all right." Draco gave a little shake of his head and looked down, unable to meet Harry's eyes.

When Harry sat down in the water, Draco expected to be let go, but instead Harry held him in his lap and closed the curtain, plunging them back into comfortable darkness. Draco thought he'd get cold again, but the water covered his tail and Harry slipped the robe off of him and soaked it again. When he put it back on, tugging it around the Slytherin, Harry left his arm around his shoulders.

"What are you doing?" Draco whispered.

At first Harry didn't answer except to tighten his hold a little bit, and Draco put a hand on his chest as if to hold him back.

"Remember our bet?" Harry asked softly. "When we played for the snitch. Loser has to do whatever the winner says."

Unable to speak, Draco only nodded once and flinched when Harry reached up to touch his white skin and brush his hair from his face. Trapped as he was, he felt keenly aware of the strength in Harry's arms, the sheer vulnerability of his position. Of course he had claws and fangs, but he was also crippled and held securely in the Gryffindor's grip. Even if he screamed, no one would reach him in time.

"I think I'll claim that forfeit now," Harry whispered. Tilting his head, he leaned close while pulling Draco towards him.

Harry's mouth felt warm against his own cool snakeskin. Draco wondered if the water had gone cold.
because his body suddenly turned hot. His fingers curled, digging deep into the other boy's shirt, and his tail curled around Harry's leg for leverage as he kissed back. He didn't dare open his mouth for fear of his forked tongue flicking out. He dreaded hearing a hiss.

Harry didn't protest when Draco withdrew, sitting back in his arms, and a few seconds passed before Draco realized that kiss was all that would be demanded.

"You could've made me do anything," he said softly. "And you only wanted a kiss?"

"Um, yeah," Harry said, and not knowing what else to say, he remained silent.

First Draco thought Harry might be taunting him, but the other boy seemed so sincere. Then he thought it was the amulet's effect, but such a weak charm shouldn't be able to work so powerfully. And he had not resisted the kiss, either. As the pause grew awkward, Draco pulled his wet robe tight around himself like a shield.

"You aren't disgusted?" he whispered. "I'm a halfbreed."

"You're not disgusting," Harry said. He put his hand under Draco's chin and gently tilted his face up, but Draco refused to meet his eyes. "You're beautiful."

Harry wouldn't think so for long, Draco thought, but he didn't say anything. If he could have this moment, then he would savor it. Consequences could wait until tomorrow. He smiled despite himself, comforted by the continuous stroking of his hair. After a moment he noticed that Harry was also stroking his tail, gently running his fingers over the slick scales. He frowned. Too gently.

"I'm not going to break," Draco said.

"Sorry," Harry said with a nervous laugh. "It's just...do you get smaller when you change and--"

"I'm not small," Draco hissed. "Wait, what did you mean 'get smaller'?"

"Well..."

"Potter--"

"You're not that big," Harry said. He almost laughed when Draco flashed his fangs, sharp but also rather small. "Well, you aren't! You always had Crabbe and Goyle with you, so you must've realized it, too."

"Small or not, I'm not made of glass," Draco said. His tail flipped in annoyance. This must be the work of his amulet. He'd never tolerate teasing otherwise.

"If you insist," Harry said with a broad smile. He put his arm around Draco's waist and pulled him flat against his body, their eyes only inches apart. Draco's breathing quickened but when his tongue flicked out for just a second, Harry put his free hand under the other boy's jaw, holding him still as he leaned forward and kissed him.

Eyes widening, Draco fought to keep his mouth firmly shut, but Harry crept his thumb up to the corner of his mouth, pressing it between his lips and braving his fangs. Draco whimpered, but Harry tasted too good, felt entirely too warm, to break away. His forked tongue slipped out and flicked into Harry's mouth, lightly touching his teeth.

Unable to stop his wince, Draco broke away and put a hand over his mouth. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to--"
"It's all right," Harry insisted, grasping his hand and pulling it down. "I-I kind of like it."

"But it's, it's not--," He floundered for the right words. He wasn't ashamed of his body, but no one had ever seen him like this before, let alone touched him this way. And if Harry knew what this form truly entailed--

"You really do think about it, don't you?" Harry asked. "What people say about halfbreeds. About what you've said--"

"I'm not ashamed," Draco snapped, but he didn't meet his gaze. "But it's not to be seen. We mustn't let anyone touch us like this. It's dangerous. We have to stay in the dark--"

"Then why did you let me see you?" Harry asked, trying to see Draco's eyes. "Why did you let me stay here with you?"

"Because...because I wanted..." Draco pushed against Harry's chest but he couldn't slip free, and without legs he had no leverage. "I wanted you to stay."

"Why?" Harry would not let up. "Draco, why did you want me here?"

How to answer? Draco's heart pounded in his chest. He knew his need for dark magic, his own addiction to dark magic's lure which held his heart in constant separation from the rest of society. He didn't regret being born into darkness, but the endless solitude, alone in a school full of light wizards and now held apart even from his own Slytherins, turned that darkness into a crushing weight. He didn't want to live in the light, but...

"I wanted someone with me in the darkness," he finally whispered. "I wanted you."

"And I'm here," Harry said, kissing his forehead when he refused to look up. "Don't be so quick to get rid of me now that you've got me."

He didn't know why that brought tears to his eyes but they came, sliding down his cheeks and into the water. It only got worse when Harry cupped his hand around Draco's face and ran his thumb over the dark circles under his eyes, wiping the tears away.

"Come here," Harry murmured, pulling him close and sinking down a few inches, washing the hot water over Draco.

Pressed against the Gryffindor's warm body and half-submerged, with a soaked robe covering the rest of him, Draco lay his head on Harry's shoulder and closed his eyes. His head hurt from crying and his body ached from sitting up on his tail for so long. The slow steady strokes on his back and tail made him groan and he shook his head once, trying to stay awake.

"You should get some sleep," Harry said, tugging the robe up over Draco's head and pushing the edge back away from his face. "I'll make sure the water doesn't get cold."

Draco briefly considered telling him that the water was charmed not to cool, but he knew Harry was offering to keep him safe and sound. As stupid and trusting and naive as Gryffindors could be, he had to admit if only to himself that they were comforting to have around. At least this Gryffindor was. Tilting his head just enough to press his lips to Harry's throat, he closed his eyes and yawned, falling asleep in the same breath.

Caverns and shallow pools filled his sleep, dark bodies of water that he swam effortlessly through. When he opened his eyes again, he found that he'd shifted positions, laying on his back between Harry's legs with his head comfortably pillowed on his stomach. Water lapped at his chest but he was
in no danger of sliding too far down with his arms draped over Harry's thighs. As he sat up, pulling the robe over himself like a blanket, he blinked a few times before realizing that his blurred vision would not improve. A milky-white film covered his eyes that turned the light a hazy gray and smoothed over the shadows.

"Oh, you're awake," Harry said, absently touching Draco's hair. "You missed Pansy bringing breakfast. She wouldn't give me any. Said I had to wait for you."

Instead of answering, Draco eased himself out from between Harry's legs and lowered himself completely into the water, remaining submerged for several seconds. He could stay under longer since the only benefit of his wyvern blood was holding his breath as long as a natural wyvern, but after spending so much time in Harry's arms, the water no longer felt comfortable enough.

Shaking the water from his hair as he rose up on his elbows, he froze as his Gryffindor stretched out beside him. He didn't see him move so much as he felt the water ripple around him, and the hand on his cheek felt like a brush out of the darkness.

"Draco, what happened to your eyes?" Harry suddenly asked, turning his face towards him. "They're white."

"There's a reason I have to change shape," Draco said softly. "I didn't want to tell you at first. It's...it's not pleasant."

"What do you mean?" Harry snorted. "I've seen a lot of things. I don't think you can do anything to startle me."

Perversely taking that as a challenge, Draco put his hand against his face and rubbed hard, smiling humorlessly when Harry gasped. At first it looked like he was pulling his face off, but it soon became apparent that he was actually rubbing off excess skin. When he lowered his hand, a strip of old scales lay in his palm.

"You have to shed your skin?" Harry shivered and instinctively drew back from his hand, but he soon spotted the newly revealed skin of Draco's cheek. If he'd thought his scales were beautiful before, they were absolutely lustrous underneath. He reached out to touch them, but Draco jerked out of his reach, pressing himself back against the wall.

"Draco?"

"Don't touch," he said quickly. "It's very sensitive."

"It hurts?" Harry asked, crawling closer. "But you were rubbing it pretty hard just a minute ago."

"I have to," he said. "Just to get it off." His eyes widened as Harry refused to stop and kept crawling towards him. It happened so fast that he didn't have time to react. One moment he was out of arm's reach, the next moment Harry was right in front of him, hands on either side of his face. He froze and shut his eyes but instead of pain, calloused fingertips ran lightly over the vulnerable skin, touching the ragged edge.

"You have to shed all of it?" Harry whispered. "How long does it take?"

Harry was too close, Draco couldn't think. He felt as if he would smother. Blindly reaching out, he found Harry's shoulders and pushed him back, holding him at arm's length. There was no way he could hold him there if Harry pushed back but he didn't.

"What's wrong? Why are you--?"
"Please," Draco interrupted, "just...be quiet a moment."

In the silence, he took several deep breaths. He'd never been with anyone during his change and he'd never expected his instincts to flare up so strongly. Shedding was such a vulnerable time for wyverns, their new skin so easily damaged, their eyes cloudy. Having someone nearby tested the limits of his courage, even after he noticed that he wasn't pushing Harry away as much as he was leaning on him.

"Wyverns usually don't have company when we shed," he said softly. "I can barely see you. And you're too close..."

"Do you want me to leave?" Harry asked.

Draco shook his head.

"Then...I could sit against the other wall?"

With a nod, Draco let go of him and waited until he heard the water splashing against the stone as Harry settled himself. Only then did he relax, steadying his breath and chiding himself for panicking. He put his hand along the wall, feeling his way to the far corner and easing down into the water.

"Why are you putting up with me?" he asked. "Why did you even follow me in here? And don't say because Dumbledore told you to."

"I came because I wanted to," Harry said. "I wanted to help you."

"Why?" Draco demanded. "You're no saint. You've never liked me. Even the am--" he broke off just in time, putting a hand over his mouth and accidentally cutting his new skin with a stray claw. There was no way he could let Potter know about the amulet. "Even me making your potions doesn't explain it."

"You're right," Harry said. "I didn't like you at first. You were mean to me and my friends for years, and you haven't changed. I think the only reason you haven't called anyone a mudblood is because you're afraid I'll hit you."

Draco inclined his head. True enough.

As he spoke, Harry's voice slowed down, grew thoughtful. "I'm not sure when it started. I didn't pity you when you were all alone. And every time you were nice to me, you always made it clear you wanted something in return. But...but then you stopped being mean to me." He laughed once. "You were courteous. You started showing me things, and you didn't lie to me. I was lying awake in bed one night when I suddenly realized that you were one of the only persons who's never lied to me."

Unable to stop himself, Draco put his hand over the amulet as if to cover it. In the darkness, it only looked like he was cold.

"I think it was that night when we fought off the mob," Harry said almost to himself. "Everyone wanted to kill you and I just...I just saw how scared you were. I wanted to protect you." He sighed and looked down. "And you ended up protecting me."

Draco didn't answer.

"You know, when I was in bed in your room waiting for you to wake up, I wasn't thinking about the fight or what we were going to do. While I watched you sleep, all I could think of was how you looked when you were cutting apart the dragons."
"I was a filthy mess," Draco protested.

"You were covered in blood and so shy about it, you didn't even notice when you touched your face or hair and made it worse. And then of course you saved me--"

"You weren't dying," Draco said.

"No, but it hurt, going into withdrawal like that," Harry said. "When you bent over me, I felt safe. I don't know why. It didn't make sense since you're...um, I mean--"

"Since I'm a flaming coward?" Draco snorted. "You can say it. It's not like it's a secret."

"But you're not," Harry insisted. "I admit, I thought so too, but then you let Dumbledore tell everyone what you are and--"

"That wasn't brave. I was terrified the whole time." He'd come close to bolting from the great hall, consequences be damned.

"Bravery isn't about not feeling scared," Harry said, sounding as if he was quoting someone. "It's about doing what needs to be done even though you're scared."

With that, Draco completely agreed, but his idea of what needed to be done usually involved running and hiding and letting someone else fight the battle for him. He didn't think that would be changing anytime soon. He laughed bitterly.

"So you love me for being a helpless coward," he muttered.

And then froze, realizing what he'd just said. The silence stretched out for several seconds and Draco held absolutely still, too afraid to move. He wasn't sure what he was afraid of, he just was.

"Yes," Harry whispered, as if finally figuring it out for himself. "I think I do."

Draco couldn't see him clearly, but he thought he saw Harry raise his head and look straight at him.

"Draco, I wouldn't sit in scalding water and act like some kind of fancy living pillow for anyone else. But for you, I think I'd do it forever." He held his hands out in invitation. "You know I would never hurt you."

Nonsense, all of that was nonsense and he knew nothing of the sort. After all, Harry had said he'd hit him for calling anyone mudblood, and the Boy Who Lived saved anyone who needed it, didn't he? Even dark wizards, apparently. Nevermind that no one had done that for a dark wizard, let alone a Malfoy, in hundreds of years. He bit his lip and tugged the robe closer around himself like a shield, then noticed with a start that he was still wearing Harry's robe.

"My skin's loosening," he whispered. "It's disgusting. You wouldn't like feeling it."

"Do you really want to sit blind in a corner?"

Of course not. And what was the point of having Harry here if not to take advantage of him? Hesitantly, almost skittish, Draco eased back down into the water and crept towards Harry, sliding into his lap. Warm arms embraced him and he winced as he felt his skin ripple like paper. Even worse, his wince sounded like a hiss. Harry either ignored them or didn't care. He just held him and gave him something to lean against to take the weight off his back while still leaving him upright enough so that he wasn't on his stomach like an animal. Draco took several minutes to relax but finally did so, with no small help from Harry's hand on his hair, the only part of him that wouldn't be
"What's that around your neck?" Harry asked suddenly. "A potion?"

"Just a good luck charm," Draco lied, acutely aware of its light weight on his chest. He'd been so eager to create it. Now he was afraid to destroy it.
For the next several days, Draco and Harry cloistered themselves in the flooded shower room, hiding from the world and the war. Draco shed a few inches of his skin every day, dragging himself from stall to stall as he grew embarrassed by the skin floating on the water. Harry dutifully followed him, unable to carry him while his newly revealed scales ached at the slightest touch. Draco consoled himself that at least the Gryffindor was something soft for him to lean on. After one rather painful move where Draco tried to keep the newly shed front of his tail off the stone, he flopped gratefully onto Harry's legs and refused to move again.

"How often do you have to change?" Harry asked.

Half-drowsing in the hot water, Draco cracked one eye for a moment before sinking back into Harry's lap. He didn't mind the questions so much anymore. It gave them something to talk about since neither wanted to bring up the war.

"Once every five or six years," he answered. "For a week."

"And your father has to change too, right?"

"He goes through this every year," Draco said. "It only takes him about two or three days, though."

"Why's it different?"

"It's different for all of us. Some of my ancestors had to change every month. I'm pretty lucky, actually. Poor Melusine had it worst."

"Who?"

"Oh, well, if you never heard of Mordred then you certainly never heard of her. She's only in a few books now. I don't think the muggles even remember her, though she was rather famous in her time." He shifted positions, pillowing his head on Harry's stomach. "Melusine du'Malfoi. She was a queen for awhile. She had to change every Sunday, though, and her muggle husband broke his promise and spied on her."

"Wait, a Malfoy married a muggle?"

"We all make mistakes," Draco said testily. "Besides, she ran away when he accused her of being a witch. Of course he was right, she was a witch, but it really hurt her that he'd broken his promise. Anyway, he killed their children, she flew away, and no Malfoy's married a muggle ever since."

"He killed their children?" Harry whispered.

"Makes sense," Draco said. "They were all going to turn into wyverns some day. Well, actually, we don't know for sure that he killed them. They might have turned unexpectedly and frozen to death without their mother to take care of them. Anyway, they were just mu—half-bloods."

He tensed, wondering if Harry would hit him for that near slip. After a few seconds, though, he thought he was away with it and relaxed. "Doesn't matter. In the end, Melusine came back and killed him, too."

Harry opened his mouth to ask something, then stopped and closed it again. For awhile he stroked Draco's hair, considering his question before he asked. "What started the war?"
Several seconds went by as Draco first wondered why Harry even cared, but then he frowned. He'd always known, either from reading in his father's library or remembering his dying ancestors, that the war had already raged to a boiling point when Mordred and Morgan had their battle against Camelot. His entire community focused so much on a new dark lord, heir to Mordred's greatness and Morgan’s wisdom, that they rarely spoke about the years before the war. In the slow decline of the age of the old gods, was there a spark that suddenly ignited the hatred between the light and dark?

"Draco--?"

"Hush, I'm thinking." Dreams of dreams of dreams, that was all he could remember. Like copies of copies, some dreams faded from his bloodline until they were only remembered in brief flashes as another more recent ancestor died. There was a time the Malfoys knew their gods' faces, saw them every year and drew power from them. As time passed and the old powers left the world, they slowly forgot their faces and only remembered their shapes, the antler horns, the green skin, gold eyes. Old promises and rituals faded into whispers and nothingness. After centuries of service, the dark wizards were ignored and betrayed by their masters. And where were the light wizards, if not laughing on the edges of the darkness? Hadn't they always been there, laughing in the sunlight?

Oath breakers, the light wizards called them. They had certainly broken thousands of promises in the past. By now, they took a perverse pleasure in flaunting that title, mocking it amongst themselves and on the rare occasions they openly crossed paths with light wizards. Strange that he hadn't thought of it until now, but as he thought about it, a vague sense of understanding followed. He did know what had originally started the war. Locked in his ancestral memories, he'd always known. He, and through him his family, had simply not brought it to mind in centuries.

He closed his eyes and forced himself to remember back through the ages, not allowing the accompanying screams to distract him. As Mariana Malfoy died bound to a burning stake five hundred years ago, she gave him a brief glimpse of her ancestors bleeding in their fields. Eason Malfoy fell from a muggle's knife to his back, and he couldn't help remembering the flint knives they'd used to give offerings to the earth. And as young Fabienne du'Malfoi crept through a field of wheat while his older brother, the last of his family, bought him time to escape the human mob with his life, he remembered what lights wizards did in those very fields.

"That's right..." Draco whispered as the thought came to him. "I remember now. It's been so long since I thought of it."

"You remember what started the war?" Harry asked.

"Yes," Draco said. "We broke an oath."

"All this fighting over a broken promise?" Harry snorted. "That's insane."

"Depends on the promise, doesn't it? Do you know what light wizards used to do when there wasn't any rain?"

"What do you mean? Like a drought?"

"Exactly. Few of us raised our own crops or animals. We had to rely on the muggles to raise it for us."

"I though dark wizards didn't deal with muggles."

"We didn't. Light wizards certainly did, trading charms for food. We, however, had to steal ours."

"Just because you didn't want to deal with them?"
"We didn't have much of a choice," Draco said. "Remember, this was a very long time ago, well before written history. Imagine two different kinds of wizards, ones who lived beside you, protected you from invaders, helped your women in childbirth. And ones who lived deep in the forest with the wolves and crows, who frightened you away from certain parts of the land or even killed you if you came too close, and who occasionally turned into animals. Who would you rather sell to?"

"The dark wizards were chasing them away from the older gods, right?"

Draco nodded once. "Yes. The places where they crossed into our world, their enchanted castles and cursed pools. We probably saved as many of them as the light wizards did, even if we didn't like them. Muggles are so stupid when it comes to staying away from hag's dens or a black annis' cave. Anyway, that's how our night rides started. Stealing food."

"Is that the broken oath? No stealing?"

"No," Draco said. "This oath was far more important. Remember, this was before the Ministry, before Merlin. Your kind wasn't so hell-bent on protecting muggles. They still held themselves above them. We were all still mostly pureblood. It was all right if we killed a muggle here or there, as long as we didn't kill another wizard."

"I don't remember everything. There was a terrible drought, no rain for years. At first your kind tried to bring water from nearby rivers, and when the rivers started drying, they tried to dowse for new sources underground. Finally all they could do was...Potter, do you know how your kind used to coax the crops into growing? I think muggles still do it today, a little."

"No, what?"

"They copulate like rabbits on the ground. You don't see it often anymore, but it was quite popular even just a couple hundred years ago. During the drought, it was their last resort. Can you imagine it, wizards and witches desperately rutting like animals in a dusty field? So dignified."

"But the dark wizards didn't do it?" Harry asked, not rising to Draco's taunt.

"Of course not. We knew spilling our seed on the earth wouldn't do anything. Our strongest spells always relied on one source, blood."

The silence hung as he paused. Even now, what they had done felt monumental, as if the powerful dark magic they cast still lingered in his soul, impossible to cleanse from himself.

"Draco?"

"I think," Draco said softly, "it was when the forests started dying that we stopped waiting for your kind to bring the rain. We knew what to do, but there was an agreement between us and you. Muggle blood is good for some spells, but for something powerful, you need pure blood. One night we rode out on our brooms, brought a witch to the fields, and we..."

"You killed her," Harry said. It wasn't a question.

"We didn't just kill her," Draco said. His voice sounded far away, as if remembering something he had done and not just recalling a distant familial memory. "We went into a frenzy. It was like we knew what we were doing would change everything. It wouldn't just call the rain, it would irrevocably separate us from you. And so it had to be worthy of such a separation. We didn't use wands, we used knives, little knives we use for cutting potion ingredients. We cut her throat first, then her wrists. We tore her apart and scattered her across the field. We offered her blood to the earth. The whole time, we never made a sound."
"That was the broken oath," Harry said. "You killed a witch."

"We killed her as a spell. We used her sacrifice to fuel our magic. The clouds gathered over us with the first drop of blood, and before we had finished, the first thunderstorm in years raged over our heads. With the drought ended, it was convenient for muggles and light wizards alike to condemn us forever."

"Can you blame them?" Harry's tone clearly said that he thought 'rutting like animals' was a better solution. "You killed one of them--"

"Harry," Draco said, tilting his head back to see him. "When did I say our sacrifice was one of yours?"

Harry's breath hitched for a moment. "She was a dark witch?"

"Of course. Blood willingly given is more potent. And the sacrifice had to be one of our own. It made our separation from your kind clean."

Finally Harry didn't ask another question, but Draco took no satisfaction in the silence. The bloody rite at the center of the entire war between light and dark lay bare for Harry's judgment and they both knew that even though Draco had never been there, he approved of it just as if he had taken part. Magic as a well-regulated tool or as a dangerous sacrifice, that was the difference between the light and the dark. That the dark wizards ended the drought and saved everyone at the cost of one life made no difference. They broke the rule that kept them living in relative peace and in all that time, their philosophy had not changed.

Oath Breakers. Murderers.

"Do you still love me now?" Draco asked, wrapping his hands around his amulet. "Now that you know?"

Harry didn't answer except to wrap his arms around Draco and hold him close, resting his head on his blond hair.

How Harry could stand to touch him, he didn't know. At last all of his old skin had been shed, leaving his body stark white with only a few tatters remaining on his tail and back. Draco hated his wyvern skin. As pale as his human skin was, at least it held some color. This snake skin looked diseased to him, like the pallor of death, and the remaining tatters only made it worse.

Harry didn't seem to think like most other people did. Where others saw an irredeemable dark wizard, Harry saw something to be protected. The wizarding world thought he was a spoiled Malfoy, the school thought he was a quidditch cheat, not entirely untrue he admitted to himself, and the entire Weasely clan probably thought he sacrificed red-headed purebloods every full moon. In nearly everyone's eyes, he was an anathema. He didn't know why Harry of all people should come to think differently and worse, he didn't know if he wasn't to blame. A vague desire to smash his amulet flitted through his mind, but fear of what might happen convinced him not to think about it.

He felt the first muscle spasm in his lower back and thought it was just another twinge until he felt a stronger spasm in his tail. In a panic, he squirmed in Harry's arms trying to get away but already he could tell it was too late. As fast as he'd transformed into a half-wyvern, his body began to transfigure itself back to normal. What was left of his old skin sloughed off as he turned a healthy color, his eyes lost their milky cover, and his claws receded. It felt like snakes slithering inside his skin and he couldn't get away from them. Whimpering, he squirmed in Harry's lap, holding him tight as his bones writhed.
Wish I hadn't left his robe in the other stall, he thought as his legs separated. A few more seconds as his body reconstructed itself and at last he looked human again. He panted for breath while his body calmed down and simply lay like a rag doll, legs slightly askew on the floor.

"Are you all right now?" Harry asked, leaning over him. "Your tail was going nuts."

Draco would have answered except he felt too flustered, sprawled naked in Harry's lap. Thank goodness the torches burned on their dim night time setting. The darkness made him feel a little less vulnerable.

Once he felt a little less wobbly, he sat up and met Harry's look. "Yes, yes I'm all right. Changing back and forth isn't very pleasant, that's all."

"You went all tense. I was afraid you were going to hurt yourself."

"I'm okay," Draco said. He stared at Harry for a few seconds, finally able to see him without worrying about his own anxieties. The scant firelight reflected in his eyes and played over the highlights of the Gryffindor's face, painting him in soft orange and stark black. Draco watched the light until he decided he didn't just want to watch.

"I had a snake's tongue before," he said softly. "Let's do this right this time."

Leaning close, he put both hands on Harry's face and covered his mouth with his own, jumping slightly when Harry grabbed his waist and pulled him closer. Pressed against his clothed body, Draco felt at a disadvantage but he couldn't bring himself to care. He liked it even better when the other boy ran his fingers through his hair, tilting his head for a better fit. However, he didn't expect Harry's other hand to slide from his waist to his ass, grabbing and jerking him forward. Breaking their kiss with a yelp, Draco relaxed when he saw the surprised look on Harry's face.

"Don't know your own strength?" he laughed.

"I didn't mean to--" Harry stammered, "I mean, I didn't plan on grabbing you like that."

"Pushy lion." He glanced over his shoulder and then back at Harry. "I notice you haven't taken your hand off."

"Your legs seem a little wobbly," Harry said, the beginnings of a smile reappearing on his face. "I wouldn't want you to fall."

"Such a thoughtful Gryffindor," Draco said. He leaned close for another kiss, but from this angle the amulet swung on its short strap around his neck and smacked Harry's throat. Draco didn't notice until Harry pulled back slightly and caught it in his hand, curiously staring into the glass.

"Is that a piece of paper inside?" he asked. "This stuff isn't made of blood, is it?"

"No, not blood," Draco said, his body turning cold despite the hot water. He wanted to make a grab for it but held himself back when he thought that might make Harry suspicious. "It's just a good luck charm, that's all. I told you already, remember?"

"Mm." Harry held it up, fascinated by the crystallized honey shining in the light. "I don't remember you having it before."

"I made after the attack in the dungeons," Draco said, looking away. He didn't trust himself under Harry's unpredictable legilimancy. "I just wanted something else for protection."
Harry let the vial fall back against Draco's chest. "Well, you have me now."

"I do, don't I?" Draco couldn't look at him again. "I-I think we'd better go, let everyone know that I'm--I mean, that we're back. And we should take a shower. I smell like a snake."

"I think you smell fine," Harry said, but he let go and stood up. "To the showers then?"

"We're already in the showers," Draco said. "You just need to get rid of the charms on the drains keeping the water from going out."

"Why me?"

"Because my wand is somewhere underwater," Draco said. "And you've still got yours, right?"

With a rueful smile, Harry pulled out his wand and left the stall, not noticing when Draco scooted into the shadows when he pushed the curtain back. One by one, Draco listened to him unsealing each drain and soon the water level noticeably dipped. He leaned against the wall and sighed, waiting for him to finish. Simply standing made him feel human again.

"All done." Harry set a soggy mess of something that looked like school robes on the floor outside his stall. "Here's your wand. I found your clothes, but I don't think you're going to want them anymore."

"That's fine," Draco said, taking his wand back. "Pansy probably left a clean set right outside."

"Oh, okay." Harry looked down towards the other stalls. "Um, I suppose we'd better clean up, then."

Draco frowned in confusion until he realized that Harry meant to shower in another stall. Relief and regret simultaneously washed over him. On one hand he wanted to continue that kiss, but on the other hand he didn't want Harry getting even more curious about the amulet.

"Right," he nodded. "Don't take off without me, okay?"

Rather than use the old soap left on the rusted holders, he cast a scourgify spell on himself and rinsed off with cool water. There were no towels so he had to dry himself with a charm, and then he peeked out of the curtain to make sure Harry was still in the shower before heading quickly for the door.

He'd certainly been in communal showers before, but something about being naked in front of Harry's eyes made him feel infinitely more self-conscious.

The cool cavern air made him shiver, but as expected he found a clean set of robes next to the door, along with Vincent and Gregory playing cards on the floor. Neither of them looked up but he wasn't surprised. The last time he'd been transformed was also at Hogwarts over what should have been his Christmas vacation, and the tantrum he'd thrown when they accidentally saw him in his transformed state probably still gave them nightmares. Now they wouldn't even risk seeing him out of the corner of their eyes.

"You can take off now," he said, scooping his clothes up with one hand. "I'm back to normal."

Gregory immediately got his feet, but Vincent gathered the cards and looked over his shoulder at him.

"Potter still with you?" he asked.

"Of course." Leaving the door cracked, he stood out of sight as he dressed. "Has anything happened while I've been gone?"
"Nothing bad. Pansy's got everyone studying after classes. Theo's been having tryouts for the quidditch team, but he hasn't announced any decisions yet. Oh, and you're in the Prophet again."

A sick feeling of dread welled up in him as Vincent offered him a crumpled newspaper. "You read the other articles?"

"Sometimes we'd find old newspapers that people'd thrown away." He stretched and yawned. "That's today's issue. Pansy's furious about it."

"Wonderful," Draco muttered, holding the paper in his teeth while he finished putting on his robes. As he stepped into his shoes, he unfurled the paper and nearly dropped it after seeing the headline.

MALFOY CONFESSED DARK WIZARD

"The ancient scourge of the wizarding world now claims sanctuary at Hogwarts School. Several students and faculty who wish to remain anonymous for fear of reprisal informed the Daily Prophet that Headmaster Dumbledore himself addressed the student body and confirmed that Draco Malfoy, son of the death eater Lucius Malfoy, is indeed a dark wizard."

"Dumbledore said he's earned his trust," said one student. "But I don't see what he's done to earn any trust. All he's done is stay away from almost everyone. He doesn't even eat with us. When he wears that cloak with the hood, he really looks like a dark wizard from the storybooks."

For our muggle-born readers who may not understand the full implications of this, dark magic is founded upon bloody rituals and crimes carried out under the cover of night. Necromancy, one of the most forbidden perversions of magic, is a regular practice. History abounds with their misdeeds and although their numbers have dwindled in recent years, obviously some still lurk among us.

Now a dark wizard lurks among our children with Headmaster Dumbledore's blessing. No doubt the previous mishaps that we've reported, including a recent poisoning of five students and an unprecedented hallucinarium explosion that nearly drove several children mad including Harry Potter himself, are connected to Draco Malfoy's presence. We even have reason to believe that Malfoy savagely attacked the school custodian in a fit of rage. While the reason for this attack is in question, some readers will no doubt wonder if this was an attempted sacrifice halted solely by Harry Potter's intervention.

"It was horrible," said one of the school faculty. "I saw Malfoy standing next to Filch's body, all twisted up, and Harry was--Harry Potter I mean, was between them like he'd stopped him from killing."

Indeed, not only is a dark wizard hiding amongst children, but in an even more disturbing twist, Draco Malfoy has been seen increasingly in the presence of the Boy Who Lived. Who knows what influence a dark wizard might have on the impressionable muggle-born who has already gone through so much in his young life? The pair have recently disappeared, though the Headmaster issued only a short statement that both were recuperating from injuries sustained during a fight with several students from Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff. We must question his assertion that they were fighting in self-defense, as not only has no honest wizard ever defended a dark wizard, but the other Hogwarts students have also disappeared. Some sources say they are at Hogwarts' hospital, while other sources say they are recovering at St. Mungo's.
Parents have a right to know how long dark wizards have wielded influenced upon the school. Lucius Malfoy was one of the most prominent school governors and an instrumental figure in authorizing faculty changes. Now his son, who has developed a reputation at the Ministry for ruthless behavior, holds his own power over Hogwarts, especially over the Hogwarts' house of Slytherin. Missing for several months, sources confirm that the children in this house arrived during the night with Draco Malfoy waiting for them, along with Headmaster Dumbledore and Harry Potter."

No wonder Pansy was furious. Implicating himself was one thing, but casting suspicion on the children was unforgivable. He was lucky she hadn't stormed into the shower room demanding he do something about it. He didn't even want to think about the swarm of parents that would inevitably arrive to save their children from him.

"You all right?" Harry asked as he came out of the shower, tucking his wand away. "You look sick."

"I feel sick," Draco said, handing him the paper.

While he waited for Harry to read it, he ran a hand through his hair wondering how he could shore up their plan to stay at Hogwarts before the Prophet and Voldemort collapsed it beneath him.

"It was bound to get out sooner or later," Harry said.

"Yes, but I was hoping for later." He hissed in frustration and slammed his fist against the wall, wincing as it sent a jolt of pain through his right hand. Still not fully healed from its injuries, he figured that it probably never would be.

"I thought for sure everyone was behind us, though." Harry rolled the paper up and slipped it into a pocket.

"Centuries of fighting doesn't just go away overnight." Draco started pacing while he thought. So much time and effort put into betraying the dark lord, sneaking away the loyal Knights of Walpurgis, hiding their children until they could reach Hogwarts, all in danger from a single Prophet article.

Prepared to tiptoe out of the common room and avoid Pansy's wrath, he was a little relieved to see that the room was empty save for Vincent and Gregory waiting for them at the door. Draco took a moment to look around. The mess of blankets and pillows in the center of the floor had been tidied up a bit with books and scrolls and quills scattered amongst them. A few bowls of fruit and pastries stood on each table, most likely treats from the house elves suffering a guilty conscience.

"I need to go straight to Dumbledore," Draco said for Harry's benefit. He knew his two bodyguards would follow him without any explanation. "Will you come with me?"

"Of course," Harry nodded.

With Harry at his side and Vincent and Gregory behind him, Draco felt more prepared, although he let Harry walk outside first just in case. No one would attack the Boy Who Lived, and even if they did, Harry was a good enough fighter that Draco felt quite safe standing well behind him.

"Vincent," he called over his shoulder. "Have quidditch try-outs been started?"

"Theo said there wasn't enough time to have full try-outs," he answered. "Anyone who was on the team before's still on. He's just looking to fill in for Elaron and Matthew and Risael and--"

"Right," Draco interrupted. He didn't linger on the names. A few of them had joined up with his
father's knights but a few had simply disappeared. Whether that was because Voldemort had killed them or because they had gone into hiding, he didn't know. He wondered if they had joined up with Voldemort.

Perhaps they had been one of those killed when he burned down his home. Or during his flight to Hogwarts, he hadn't clearly seen the death eater he killed with a crepara curse, his victim's face obscured by the spell as it hit him and turned his body to dry ash. Could that have been one of his former teammates? He felt no regret, but still...

The rest of the walk to Dumbledore's office was quiet.

Glad that the old password still worked on the gargoyle, Draco took a step forward, stopped, and stared up the steps. For a moment he didn't move. Snape had always been beside him when he went up to that office, and in the rare instance where he faced Dumbledore alone, it was on his turf or with Harry beside him. Now he stood at the door and felt like a young, inexperienced Malfoy about to step into the Ministry alone for the first time.

"Draco?" Harry asked. "Are you all right?"

"Just a little nervous," Draco answered. Swallowing once, he glanced over his shoulder again at Crabbe and Goyle. "You two stay here. We'll be back soon."

With a deep breath, he led Harry inside. His eyes widened when he found Severus already seated in front of Dumbledore's desk. Neither of them looked surprised to see him.

"Mister Malfoy, Harry," Dumbledore said with his usual smile. "Please sit down. We've been expecting you."

"Glad I don't disappoint," he said. "How did you know I would come here?"

"Your master has great faith in you," Dumbledore said, ignoring Snape's glare. "He knew your transformation would end this morning and felt certain you would want to address the Daily Prophet's latest article against you. The only question is how."

"I..." Draco steeled himself for his master's disapproval. In his mind he knew that no matter what plan he decided on, Severus would still call it useless and him stupid, but that was simply the way Severus was. "I want to arrange an interview with Rita Skeeter."

At their startled looks, he consoled himself that they would not call him stupid. Crazy was a step up, wasn't it?

"I admit," Dumbledore said after a moment, "that I had expected something a little more subtle."

"Subtlety completely eludes his family," Severus bit.

"We've managed to keep some things secret," Draco said, glancing sideways at his master. "Insinuation never worked on Severus, though, and the potions master didn't even raise an eyebrow. "But hiding isn't going to work anymore. I need to do something drastic before the ministry and who knows how many parents come after me."

"Owls have indeed begun to flock to my window," Dumbledore admitted. "Mostly howlers. The more rational letters have informed me that they intend to collect their children as soon as tomorrow."

Dozens of parents ostensibly there for their children but really scouring the school for the lone Malfoy. "Then I need to do the interview as quickly as possible. Today, even."
"So soon?" Dumbledore asked.

"Without any preparation?" Snape demanded. "Are you mad or simply stupid?"

"I routed the ministry and got father out of Azkaban," Draco snapped. "And I didn't have any preparation then."

Glaring eyes, fingers curling around the chair arms, Draco recognized the signs of his master truly about to lose his temper and continued in a milder voice. "I don't have to make them like me. All I have to do is put some doubt into their heads. I can do that. You know I can."

"Your father will flay us both for this," Severus murmured.

"I won't mind," Draco said, "because then I'll know he's alive."

Dumbledore picked up a quill and unrolled a fresh parchment, beginning to write. "Very well. I'll inform Ms. Skeeter that you are interested in an interview, provided she does not use her quick quotes quill. If you want it in the Prophet tomorrow, I think you'd best see her today, before noon perhaps?"

"What time is it now?"

"Classes have just started. You'll have a couple hours to get ready."

He tried not to sound too nervous. "Where should I meet her?"

"Somewhere safe," Dumbledore said, punctuating his sentence with a firm jab on the parchment. "I suggest inside the great hall during Hagrid's class. I believe that one is currently comprised of Gryffindors and Slytherins."

"And it will force us to keep it short," Draco said, "before lunch starts."

"Quite." Dumbledore rolled the letter up and sealed it with a flourish of his wand. "I'll send this out immediately. However, I also wanted to speak with you about Mr. Filch."

"...yes?" Draco wondered if Dumbledore was waiting for him to apologize for nearly killing the squib. If so, he would be waiting a long time. Fortunately Dumbledore did not press the matter.

"He has been questioned under veritaserum and confessed to several acts of sabotage, including some that we either put down as accidents or had not taken effect yet. However, we don't know what he was planning with the runes he wrote on the Slytherin entrance. The writing was incomplete."

"He had a sheet of paper he was writing from," Draco said, recalling the brief glimpse he'd had before chasing Filch through the dungeons.

"True, but it was like a mathematical equation marking your door as something to be acted upon by another spell. He didn't know what that spell was."

"Damn convenient," Draco muttered.

"The dark lord did not trust him enough to tell him," Severus said. "He probably knew we'd find him out eventually."

"Why was Filch working for Voldemort?" Harry asked, looking up at Dumbledore and missing the shiver that went through Draco and, to a lesser extent, Severus, at hearing that name. "He's a squib."
"True," Dumbledore said. "But the dark lord has no compunction about who he uses. In the past, he
has shown himself quite willing to use half-bloods. All that matters is that they serve him, and in that
regard Filch suited him perfectly."

"But why?" Harry asked.

"A lifetime of pent up jealousy and bitterness. Many wizards look down on him in pity, and there are
those who treat him with open ridicule. His inability to use magic made him an easy target for other
wizards' cruelty and Voldemort's lies."

Draco quietly rolled his eyes. Maybe Dumbledore didn't want to admit that Filch was a sadistic
bastard who loved tormenting children, but he and everyone else in Hogwarts knew it and treated
him with the utmost contempt. Filch was the best example of the evils of mixing wizard and muggle
blood, powerless, envious and easily controlled.

"So that's it?" Draco asked. "Filch put us all in danger and all we can do is wait and see what this
unknown spell is?"

"Not quite," Dumbledore said. "The runes have been erased from your door, as well as from a few
spots on the outside of the castle. Meanwhile I have asked the centaurs to be extra vigilant. They may
have let the Slytherins come through, but they will likely kill the next wizards they come across.
There will be no attacks in Hogwarts while I am here."

"Unless it's a disgruntled parent coming after me," Draco said.

"That won't happen."

Dumbledore's words did not fill him with confidence, and a few minutes later he left his office,
walking at Severus' heels. Having to leave Harry at his arithmancy class was even worse, and they
stood whispering to each other for a moment outside the door until Severus snapped at him to hurry
up.

Chancing a quick kiss, Draco smiled at Harry's startled expression. "I'll see you after classes, then?"

"Not during third hour?" Harry asked. "I've got defense, but I could skip so you're not alone during
the interview. No one should be alone with her."

"Having the Boy Who Lived with Draco Malfoy, dark wizard at large, would just make her worse,"
Draco said. "Don't worry, I've dealt with her before. I'll be fine."

Walking backward for a few steps while Harry reluctantly went to class, he turned when he heard
Snape's annoyed grumble. He caught up with him at the stairs and waited at his side as the staircase
slowly turned toward them.

"This is a fool's errand," Severus said. "You are recklessly courting danger whose only end is a
shred of hope that you might successfully play on the emotions of the wizarding world at large."

"If you didn't want me to do it, you should have said something before."

"You'd obviously made up your mind. I've already learned that once a Malfoy sets his mind to
something, they cannot be swayed, no matter how stupid their decision." He glared down at Draco
as if daring him to argue. "You'd better tread carefully. You've some talent for manipulation, but this
woman has been manipulating others for longer than you've been alive."

"My father would've--"
"No, Draco." Stepping onto the staircase, Severus turned and looked at him for a moment. "Lucius doesn't matter right now. You cannot rely on anything anyone else has done. For the next few hours, all that matters is what Draco Malfoy will do."

As the staircase turned and took his master to another door, Draco felt utterly alone and colder than Voldemort's blizzard.
In which Rita Skeeter interviews Draco

In the crowded castle, Draco slipped by like a shadow, at last coming into the great hall and sitting at the table nearest the main doors. Hagrid's first period class was already there tending to the eggs of the only surviving hydra, and they looked up curiously at him. They were all Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws but no one said anything and although they kept an eye on him, the class passed without incident.

When the bell rang, Hagrid saw his class off and then cautiously approached him.

"Hiding for a week don' make anyone forget what you did," he started. "An' you can tell Snape there ain' no more hydas for 'im, so you can stop waitin' aroun'."

"In another hour," Draco said, not looking up, "I will have the pleasure of giving Ms. Rita Skeeter an interview for the Daily Prophet. That interview will be held here during class."

"What?" Hagrid asked, eyes widening. "She's coming here? Today?"

"Yes." Now Draco languidly tilted his head back to see him, acting every inch the aristocrat. "And if you keep your mouth shut during that time, I won't bring your name up as one of the dark wizards in Hogwarts."

"I'm no dark wizard!" Hagrid growled, drawing himself up to his full height and towering over Draco. "That's a bald-faced lie!"

"When has that ever stopped her?" He smiled and ran his hand through his hair, pushing it out of his eyes. "You may have leaked information to her anonymously, but did you really think that would protect you from me?"

He didn't expect Hagrid to answer and indeed he didn't, instead retreating to where the next batch of students already gathered around the hydra and his eggs. Draco's smile immediately fell. As if he wouldn't be able to tell who told Skeeter about him nearly killing Filch. Of the few people who knew about it, only Hagrid would have talked to the press.

For the next hour, he alternately drummed his fingers on the table, held his head in his hands, and even paced a few feet from the door, trying to think of what he would say. There was a reason dark wizards never tried to argue against their accusers. Dark wizards didn't really ride at night to steal goods, curse honest wizards and trick unwary travelers? They did. Dark wizards didn't practice necromancy? They did. Dark wizards were not in the employ of the dark lord? Many of them were.

He sank back into his chair. Hands clasped, eyes shut tight, he took a deep breath to steady himself. "Please," he whispered to the air. "Please, let me do this right."

Think. What did he need this interview for? What was his hoped result? To reassure the parents that they needn't fear him among their children. To reassure them that he was not the monster in their storybooks. That dark magic was not inherently evil. That he was on their side in the war against the dark lord.

Voldemort. He would center everything around Voldemort. The light wizards liked to say that the enemy of my enemy is my friend. Dark wizards considered their enemy's enemy a tool to be used, but the sentiment was roughly the same. He breathed out. He could do this. He was sure he could.

By the time the main doors opened and Rita walked in, her eyes zeroing in on him like a predator, he...
felt confident enough to keep himself from throwing up from anxiety.

"Mister Malfoy," she said, a coldly triumphant smile on her face. "I cannot tell you how delighted your invitation made me. You've certainly set the wizarding world on its head."

"I rather think it was your articles that saw to that," he said, slightly inclining his head towards her in greeting.

At the far end of the classroom, the students noticed her and her photographer coming in and began to whisper amongst each other, craning their heads to get a better look. Hagrid quickly moved to block their view and set them back to work, glancing once over his shoulder to see if Draco was looking at him.

"It's been a few years since we last did business together," she said as she sat down opposite him and opened her bag. "You've changed since then."

"The years have not been kind," he replied. "And I admit, I missed the pleasure of your articles during your sabbatical."

Her smile turned a little wary. "Well, we all need a break now and then." She pulled out a quill and parchment, looking a little awkward as she held the feather between her long nails. "Dumbledore's letter insisted that I not use my usual quill, so you'll forgive me if I'm often looking at my notes. Now then, shall we start? Can you confirm for me that the rumors are true that you are a dark wizard?"

"I am."

If anything, her eyes gleamed even more. "And how long have you been a dark wizard?"

He opened his mouth, hesitated, then shook his head. "It's not as if I turned into one overnight. It's like asking how long you've been a light wizard. I grew up dark."

"'Light wizard'?" she asked. "Is that what dark wizards call the rest of society?"

Tempted to give her the same answer he'd given Harry about blood traitors and mudbloods, he ruefully shook his head. "No, I'm afraid that was someone else's term I've picked up."

"Then it's true that others in the school knew what you were before the headmaster's speech?"

That was a loaded question. If he said no, she might trap him later in the lie. If he said yes, that made it sound like there was a conspiracy running the school. So he gave a reply that didn't quite answer her question.

"Rumors were certainly flying around the school before he spoke. Enough students were so sure that they attacked me in the dungeons."

"Is this the attack that put several Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff in Hogwarts' hospital? I've heard you cast a plague curse as well as summoned hundreds of ravens before nearly killing everyone with lightning."

"You make it sound like I'm some great duelist," he sighed. He almost laughed, but he knew that could be twisted around to make him look like their suffering amused him. Which it did, the bastards deserved all he'd inflicted upon them and more, but she didn't need to know that. "But I would have died if Harry Potter hadn't saved me."

"That seems rather farfetched. No wizard has ever protected a dark wizard."
"Until now, Harry's suffered his own share of attacks from you honest wizards and the press. I suppose that made him more sympathetic."

"But you were never Harry Potter's friend before this year," she argued, leaning back in her seat. Her eyes glittered like two more jewels in her glasses. "You--"

"I know what I've done to him," he said over her, hoping he looked suitably penitent. "It's a testament to his character that he's been able to forgive me. In fact, we've become friends. Until the Slytherins finally came home, this year would have been extremely lonely if he hadn't been there with me."

Rita looked torn in two and he guessed that she wanted to pursue both topics, both his suspicious sudden relationship with Harry and the return of an entire house full of students. But only for a moment. She knew what her readers would really want.

"Let's talk about the Slytherins," she said. "Dozens of children disappeared so thoroughly that the Ministry couldn't find them for months only to turn up at Hogwarts one night, and no one has come forward with a reason as to why."

"Because they were doing what I did at the start of the school year," he said, feeling a little triumphant as he shifted the conversation to his own ends. "Running and hiding from You-Know-Who."

Using the wizarding world's moniker for the dark lord felt silly, but he didn't dare call Voldemort the dark lord in front of her, not now when his loyalties were in question. Plus he didn't seem to need a more impressive name. Beneath Rita's professional demeanor lurked a tiny bit of apprehension.

"I was under the impression," she said, "that You-Know-Who didn't want children around until they came of age. That was the excuse given by many families to keep their children from being tried at the Wizengamot when he disappeared the last time."

"That doesn't stop him from using children as hostages against their parents," he said. "Last time many people were forced to serve him as if he'd used an imperio curse simply out of fear of what he'd do their children. This time we would not let that happen. The same night that many Death Eaters escaped the dar—You-Know-Who, several of the older students gathered every child from every fleeing family and took them into the forest."

"Alone?" she asked.

His respect for her rose slightly. She seemed genuinely concerned.

"They weren't in comfortable beds," he admitted, "and they didn't eat three meals a day, but they were much safer in the forest than anywhere else."

"Surely someone could have taken them in?"

"We had no way to tell who was safe and who wasn't. We couldn't trust anyone except Dumbledore. It wasn't supposed to take them so long to reach Hogwarts, but everything happened so fast that they didn't have time to get to a floo."

"What do you mean, 'everything happened so fast'? Were you supposed to leave with them?"

Taking a deep breath, he now launched into the full account of that night, how the sudden meeting of Death Eaters had forced their hand early, how he stayed behind at the manor to destroy it, and his flight through Voldemort's blizzard before being found by Harry. Throughout his explanation, Rita
furiously scribbled notes across her parchment, flipping it over when she ran out of room and hastily waving at her photographer to fish out another scroll from her bag. When he finished at how Dumbledore provided him sanctuary, she didn't give him a chance to rest.

"So a multitude of dark wizards were forced into Voldemort's service? Then their children are dark also? Does that mean that the children in Slytherin are dark?"

"Some of them must be," he said, praying that Pansy would not hate for this. "Our kind would have an easier time surviving alone in the wilderness and would have helped the ones who couldn't. But many of them are not dark. Many of them are normal wizards and witches whose parents caught You-Know-Who's notice because their children were friends with dark wizards. Some of the parents couldn't help but know each other. That's why they all left together." He wasn't about to tell her that there were no dark wizards in the other houses, that they all congregated in Slytherin for safety and that even then they couldn't fill an entire house. "Other than that, I can't say."

"You mean you won't say? Or do you really not know whether any of the Slytherin students come from dark families?"

"I mean that your kind has hunted us nearly to extinction. It's a little hard to keep a Christmas card list." He didn't try to keep the bitterness from his voice. "Your books paint us like absolute monsters, worse than the devil. We're blamed for everything. Every time someone loses their way at night, they say it was a dark wizard leading them astray. Every time something disappears or someone gets sick, people blame it on dark wizards. If an 'honest' wizard gets caught having an affair, they say a dark witch addled his mind. If we were to blame for every accusation, there'd have to be thousands of us."

"And how many of you are there?"

He hesitated. Tell them the truth and let them know how few they had left to kill, or lie and make them seem threatening?

"I can't be sure. I know of a handful, but there are families who have gone deep into hiding, too afraid to come out."

Once again Rita seemed torn in two, but not because she was drooling over two angles. He knew why. No one had ever told her or anyone else in the rest of their world that their books were wrong.

"Dark wizards are afraid of us?" she asked.

"Terrified. We remember what it was like just a couple generations ago, witches like Wendolyn the Weird traveling from town to town to get themselves arrested."

"That was just because she was weird and liked the feel of flames on her skin," Rita argued. "Everyone knows that."

"But what did every muggle court demand from an accused witch but names of more people to arrest? Wendolyn and others like her named hundreds of dark families, witches and wizards who were surprised in their homes or in their fields far from their wands, to be tortured and hanged if they were lucky. Burned if they weren't, and with our natural protection, death by burning takes so long." Howling screams and the memory of charred flesh hovered at the edge of his memory and he wrapped his arms around himself as he gave a shaky sigh. "It wasn't uncommon for parents to sacrifice themselves so their children could get away, but sometimes children were still caught. Muggle mobs and 'honest' wizards saw to that."

"You must feel a great amount of bitterness for that," she said. "And you must be terribly afraid to
come out like this. What do you think your parents feel about this? No dark family has ever come forward."

His relief that she had taken a sympathetic tone floundered when she brought up his family. "I imagine they're upset, but I don't know if they're even alive."

"You haven't heard from them at all? Not in all this time?"

He shook his head. "You-Know-Who came so close to killing me. I wouldn't be too surprised if he found my parents. I don't want to think about what he would do if he did."

From there they continued in much the same vein, Rita questioning him about his family, his thoughts about history, his brush with Voldemort, and Draco fed her more and more answers that he had already rehearsed in the months before with Harry. He twisted a few half-truths and dressed up pretty lies about how dark wizards just wanted to be left alone, that night rides were an overblown exaggeration for storybooks. He left out pureblood supremacy and the contaminating influence of mudbloods and insisted that dark wizards practiced a different kind of magic, that's all.

They spoke until the lunch bell rang, startling them both. Rita had a stack of notes under her pen with wet ink staining both sides of every page. She smiled and put her quill and notes back in her bag, closing it with a loud click. Draco couldn't help staring at it. An immense store of power lay within, and he was trusting it to a viper of a woman.

"A shame we have to stop so soon," she said, standing. "Next time I really must insist on my quick quotes quill, it leaves me much more time to focus on the story itself. Now, if you'll just sit still for a photo--"

The camera flash went off before he could move. He hoped he looked good and wished he'd done more than run his hands through his hair that morning.

"Thank you so much for your time, Mister Malfoy," she said. "It might take me a little longer to put this article together, but I'm sure it'll be in the paper by tomorrow morning if it isn't a special edition in itself."

Once she'd left, he sighed and slumped in his seat. His back felt stiff, his shoulders ached, his mouth felt like cotton. Groaning, he lay his head on his arms and closed his eyes. At least that was finished, but he couldn't help but go over the entire interview in his memory, agonizing over what he'd said and what he hadn't said.

"Hey, Draco. You all right?"

He smiled despite himself. Harry's voice made some of the anxiety go away. "Yeah, I'm fine. Just finished the interview, that's all."

"How'd it go?"

"Better than I'd expected," he said. "Still wanted to throw up through most of it, but I don't think I've made anything worse."

"Still wish I could've been here with you," Harry said as he sat down beside him. "You look awful."

"Don't say that," Draco moaned, burying his face in his arms. "They took my photo. Great, I'll probably look like a beggar tomorrow."

"You've never looked like a beggar a day in your life," Harry said. "But you're tired, it's obvious."
"I've had a whole week of doing nothing but sitting with you," Draco argued.

"That was hardly a vacation--"

"Hey!" Ron cried. "What's a Slytherin doing at our table?"

Sitting straight, Draco looked up in nigh horror as he discovered that he had indeed sat down at the Gryffindor table, now half full with more students trickling in. The younger children looked at him with wide eyes while the older students laughed at the shock on his face.

Hoping he wasn't as red as his face felt, Draco stood up and swayed slightly, grabbing the table's edge before he fell. Standing quickly, Harry caught and steadied him.

"Are you sure you're all right?" Harry asked, leaning forward trying to see his face. "If you need to see Pomfrey--"

"Just tired," Draco said with a shake of his head. "I'll grab a draught from Severus' office after lunch." When Harry didn't let him go, he smiled again and whispered, "if you hold me much longer, everyone's going to suspect something."

"Would you mind if they did?"

The question surprised him but on reflection he realized it shouldn't have. What could they say about Harry that they hadn't already said? A couple extra hateful epithets? Another nasty Prophet article? After what he'd lived through, what they'd both lived through, how could any of that matter? He didn't have to think about it long.

"Only if you mind."

Harry smiled softly. "You can sit here if you want. Ron can learn to live with it."

A squawk from behind him belied his words, but Draco laughed and shook his head.

"Thank you but my Slytherins would drag me back anyway, for my own good of course." He gently pulled free and stepped away. "And your own friends probably want to make sure I didn't abuse you while you were with me."

"Oh, they already did that," Harry said. "Ron even wanted to make sure you hadn't taken my hair or nails."

"You see?" Draco nodded, reflexively touching the charm under his robes. "You go ahead and prove you're all right and I'll see you later."

"Tonight?"

"I wish. Severus will probably have me working on potions the rest of today and Theo might have quidditch practice for us tonight. Tomorrow, though. I promise."

Finally turning and heading for his table, knowing that everyone had to be watching him, he sank down in the spot Pansy and Vincent made for him. Lunch popped up in front of him, but he sighed and pushed his plate aside to Vincent, who took it eagerly.

"You've got to eat something," Pansy said, forcing her small bowl of soup before him. "You're doing your best Moaning Myrtle impression already."

"It's been a rough semester so far," he muttered. "Give me good news instead. I need that more than"
food."

"Theo's got our quidditch team together," she said.

"Except for a keeper," Theo said from beside her. "But I'll choose that tonight at practice. I've already asked Snape, and he said you'll be there."

Anything for a chance at shoving a win down McGonagall's throat, Draco thought, even if that meant working his apprentice to an ill-tempered frazzle. "Of course I'll be there. I need to practice on that broom of mine, anyway. Anything else good?"

"The kids who got poisoned are out of the hospital," Pansy said, nodding towards a handful of children at the far end of the table. "And classes are going well. No one's bothered us, although a few of the younger Ravenclaws keep asking our little ones if they're dark, or if they could show them a dark spell. I don't know if they're trying to find out who's dark or if they're just being Ravenclaws."

"Probably just rudely curious as usual," Draco said. "I don't think the ones I put in the hospital are back yet. Anything else?"

"We're warm, dry, well-fed and in comfortable beds every night," Blaise said. When everyone stared at him, he shrugged. "After so damn long in that bloody forest, it's worth mentioning."

Draco smirked and looked sideways at Pansy. "Better than running and hiding again?"

"We'll see," she said coolly.

After lunch, Draco had to leave them again to join Severus in their workshop. Buried under a deep backlog, they worked almost silently in the afternoon light, brewing poisons and antidotes like a miniature factory. As the hours passed, the tension inside slowly mounted as Draco felt his master's unspoken desire to know how the interview went. He felt continually worse wondering if his master thought his situation was so hopeless that he wouldn't even bring it up, but after finishing another batch and placing the glass vials in their rack, he had the sudden thought that perhaps Severus didn't bring it up because he thought it would upset him.

Which was a completely new experience for him. Severus never held back his sometimes cruel but always honest opinions of what he did. To be shown such consideration over something so important didn't make him feel better. It made him feel even more self-conscious.

"I think the interview went well," he blurted out before he could stop himself.

Severus stopped in the middle of a potion and turned slightly, but didn't actually face him. "Oh?"

"Yes. She wasn't nice or anything, but she wasn't mean either. She started to sound a little sympathetic at the end, but she was probably just trying to get more information out of me."

"What kind of information?"

"I didn't name anybody else," Draco hurried to assure him. "Just talked about history and Hogwarts and how we're all on the same side fighting the dark lord."

"Did you call him the dark lord?"

"No, it was always You-Know-Who."

"Anything else?"
"That was it."

"Ah." Severus turned and resumed his brewing. "Well, at least they didn't take a photograph."

Draco froze. Did he really look so awful? He didn't ask out loud, though he did resolve to take a good long look in the mirror before bed.

At least the potions distracted him. Dumbledore's list spilled over the side of the table and he checked off one more potion, a minuscule improvement at best.

"Master, do you think I could come in and work on these later tonight after quidditch practice? And maybe I can slip in some time for my own projects? The coins, I haven't had time to--"

"I noticed that you stalled at the last step," Severus said, motioning at a table in the corner. "As bad as your father when it comes to finishing things. I've already tossed them in a spare jar of dragon's blood. They'll be done within the week."

After everything else he'd been busy with all this time, Snape had remembered something so insignificant. Draco smiled very slightly and tilted his head. "Thank you, master."

Severus rolled his eyes quickly with a disdainful 'tch'.

He left soon after, stopping only to grab his besom from the common room before heading to the quidditch pitch. Light frost covered the ground but the snow had been swept from the stands and the pitch itself. Several Slytherins flew through the air at Nott's command and he recognized most of them, while the new keeper seemed to be a child from a hidden family. Nott immediately noticed him and called out for the team to stop practicing, then swooped down and hovered in front of him.

"We've been drilling but now that you're here, I'll go ahead and let the snitch go. Give 'em a taste of playing around a seeker."

"You mean trying not to hit their own seeker with a bludger," Draco said with a wry smile.

"Not just that," Nott said and reached into his pocket. The snitch he pulled out pulsed maniacally in his hand, nearly jerking out of his fingertips. "Kytel Grinset—he's our new keeper—he showed me how to spell the snitch to fly like mad. You said you needed more practice on that broom of yours, and this'll give it to you, all right."

"Don't have to sound so happy about it," Draco grumbled, eyeing the snitch distrustfully. Its erratic movements made it look less like mad and more like enraged.

"Ready?" Nott asked.

Straddling his besom and hoping he wouldn't suffer another panic attack, Draco nodded once and kicked up into the air, hovering over Nott until he saw the gold snitch flash out of his hand and streak into the clouds. He found he didn't have to turn his besom completely around as it flew slightly sideways until it pointed at the snitch.

Like he did during his match with Harry, he lay flat along his besom, curling his fingers into the thin supple vines that now covered most of the wood. As he flew, he found those vines tightening slightly around his hand and compensating for the lack of modern charms meant to keep someone on their broom at high speeds. Keeping the snitch in sight wasn't easy as it twisted and curved through the sky, and he forced the broom faster and faster until the world became a blur and nothing existed except the snitch and the air around him.
Draco suspected that whatever charm they'd used only jinxed away the safety limits on the snitch. He followed it down in a suicide dive and pulled up hard as it zoomed almost flush with the ground. The frozen dirt cracked under the pressure of his flight. With a violent wrench of its wings, it angled up to the goals and flew through the nearest hoop, and Draco barely had time to notice that his besom had shifted slightly so he wouldn't break his neck trying to follow through. The snitch took him under the stands so fast he had to cling to his broom and hope he didn't clip the supports. At this speed, that would mean a broken arm or shoulder if it didn't send him out of control altogether.

As they flew out and into the pitch again, Draco had to put his free hand in front of his face to block the wind, and as he followed the snitch he realized that he didn't have to see clearly to avoid bludgers or the players. The besom did that for him, easily taking him just inches from a collision while he concentrated on following that flash of gold. It was nerve-wracking but it also let him fly tighter turns around his teammates without worrying about hitting them. Which was a good thing, since the snitch suddenly took a liking to flying loop de loops around the Slytherins, even orbiting a bludger which did its best to break Draco's outstretched hand.

Curling his fingers around the snitch had never felt so satisfying. Pulling his besom to a halt, he took a deep breath and sat straight. The snitch trembled violently and the little wings hummed so hard that they raised welts on the side of his hand.

"Great job," Theo said as he flew up next to him. "What kind of broom is that?"

"It's not," Draco said. "It's a besom. Found it in my family's cellar."

"It looks alive," Theo said. "It even flies like it's alive. Think it'll be allowed on the field?"

"A regulation snitch won't put me through that kind of flight," Draco said, "so I don't think anyone'll notice how it helps me fly. Let them think my ancient broom's a handicap."

"Right," Theo nodded. "Okay, let it go again."

Draco winced. "Again? After all that?"

"Of course after all that. You need more practice after lazing around for months."

"I was not lazing around--"

"We're practicing for an hour at least," Theo said over him. "And Severus said I've got you as long as I need to make sure you're ready."

"He would," Draco grumbled. "Why couldn't he make me team captain?"

"Because you're too busy helping the war effort. And hanging out with Harry Potter."

Draco narrowed his eyes. "What do you mean by that? Tread carefully, Theo," he warned him. "Potter's been an invaluable tool to me. I won't have that jeopardized."

"Oh yes, a brilliant tool," Theo agreed. "Who broke centuries of tradition and saved your hide. Who you've helped and protected and stayed with for months now. You know, for a dark wizard, you're not very discreet."

"Malfys aren't discreet," Draco said before realizing he was echoing his master. "I knew people would notice. Unless they've gone beyond the usual gossip--"

"'Usual gossip?'" Theo winced. "You need to go to classes more often. The Boy Who Lived
befriends the first openly dark wizard in ages and you think the gossip would be normal? I've heard rumors that you've bewitched him, that you're converting him to the dark, and that he's converting you to the light. I've even heard that you're planning to turn him over to the dark lord."

He ran a hand though his hair. "I thought people would just think we were shagging."

"Are you?"

The blunt question didn't surprise him. Theo proved that Slytherins sometimes showed Gryffindor-like lack of propriety. "No, we're not."

"Yet?"

"Theo, I'd love to stay and gossip like old women, but I've got practice." He let the snitch go and took off after it, leaving Theo far behind.

Still, Theo had a point. He'd hidden in the dungeons long enough. No matter the danger of invading parents or ministry officials, the next stage of proving he wasn't a threat to light wizards was coming amongst them, openly dark and unafraid.

With Harry between him and them, of course.
In which things go right for once

When Draco arrived at breakfast early the next morning, he was pleased to see only a handful of students and a couple of teachers awake as well, which meant fewer people staring at him. He also found a tall gray owl waiting for him on the Slytherin table, a rolled newspaper in its talons and a card with his name in swirling script. After giving the owl a small tidbit off his plate, he opened the card, pretending not to notice the look Severus shot him from the teacher's table. In elegant gold script, he read the note.

Dear Draco Malfoy,

Our interview turned out so splendidly that my editors elected to create a special edition with my article as the centerpiece. We are also very much interested in a follow-up interview to fill in the details we did not have time to discuss. Please owl me the dates you are available as soon as possible.

Sincerely,

Rita Skeeter

P.S. Since your family's account at Gringott's is not accepting deposits, I have included our standard interview fee within. Please note that any further fees are entirely negotiable.

Fee? He tipped the envelope and breathed in sharply when a hundred galleon promissory note fell into his lap. As good as coin, it wouldn't have made him look twice if he hadn't been living on Severus' good will for the last few months. He stuffed the note into his robe and looked back at the newspaper.

With a deep breath, he unfurled the paper so fast that he ripped the edge, then paused.

For several seconds he stared at the thin, fragile-looking boy in the photograph as he blinked too quickly and leaned on the table as if he would fall over without it. Only looking up occasionally at the viewer as if afraid he might be hit, Draco in the picture rubbed the scars on his right hand as if in constant pain. No wonder Severus had hoped they hadn't taken his picture. Draco wondered if he really looked so lost and noticed with a start that he was rubbing his hand right now. With a grumble, he put his hands on his lap.

Still, Rita's picture made him look less like a dark wizard and more like a frightened child. It stung his pride that this picture would probably be the one that went down in history, but for now it served his purpose well. He hardly looked like a threat.

Of course none of that would matter if she'd made him out as a devious monster in her article. He'd lain awake much of the night worrying about all the ways she could twist what he'd said, all the little slips and incongruities she could pounce on.

Daily Prophet Special Edition

In a dramatic first, the Daily Prophet's very own Rita Skeeter sat down with Draco Malfoy at Hogwarts yesterday for an historic interview. For the first time ever, the silence about dark wizardry has been broken. This Daily Prophet Special Edition features her interview, along with informative articles about dark magic and the history
of how the two societies evolved side by side.

Rita Skeeter's Interview With Draco Malfoy, Dark Wizard

I found the young Malfoy fighting obvious fatigue after long months of facing hostility at every turn. Trembling from exhaustion and fear, he met me in the Great Hall at Hogwarts School of Wizardry nursing an injury to his right hand, a souvenir from recent attempts on his life. After confirming the rumor that he is indeed a dark wizard, we began the interview, which ranged from his troubles at Hogwarts, his daring escape from You-Know-Who, and even touched upon history from a dark point of view.

As he read the article, a light-headed feeling of disbelief began to wash over him and he scanned the paragraphs faster and faster, certain that the tone would eventually turn against him. That Rita would say that none of what he said could exonerate dark wizards. That perhaps he was a misfit who'd slowly been converted away from the dark by his time with normal wizards. Or that the entire article was a plot to gain the wizarding world's trust.

"...severely injured after facing You-Know-Who, Malfoy flew through the blizzard to Hogwarts, where he aids Dumbledore's cause by brewing potions for the war effort. The war, as readers know, is not yet recognized by the Ministry...

"...while hiding from both You-Know-Who and those in society who would harm him, he has developed an unlikely friendship with another young wizard who suffered hostility and malicious gossip, none other than Harry Potter...

"...ambushed by several students in Hogwart's dungeons, Potter and Malfoy defended each other as spells flew around them. While rumors have circulated that Malfoy cast dark curses upon unsuspecting children, the truth remains that his spells were cast in self-defense..."

"...in an ironic twist, however, Malfoy told me that while we 'light' wizards are afraid of dark wizards, dark wizards are terrified of us..."

"...of course everyone knows about Wendolyn the Weird, but the dark wizarding world's history portrays her in a much more malicious light, accusing her of seeking out multiple arrests not because she enjoyed the sensation of the flames but in an effort to point muggle authorities to hiding dark wizards in the hopes that they would be arrested and burned or hanged without their wands..."

After several pages, the article ended. The rest of the special edition included a Test Your Knowledge of History quiz and filler material about Camelot and Morgan, but he felt a little rush when he saw the note about how so much had now been thrown into question and needed re-evaluation and study. The complete interview without embellishment lay in the back "for archival purposes" as explained by an editor's note, and as he read over it, he breathed a sigh of relief that none of the slips he'd made had found their way into the full text.

Rita Skeeter depended too much on her special quill, he thought. It made her vulnerable to slip-ups when she didn't use one. Lucky for him, and he almost laughed to have some good luck for a change.

He looked up at the teacher's table to gauge his master's reaction and nearly dropped the paper. Severus sat still with a copy in hand, staring at it with an expression that Draco had never seen before. Anyone else would have thought nothing was different about their potions master reading the
paper, but the subtle widening of his eyes and tight grip creasing the page told him that Snape was truly surprised. More than surprised. Awed. But then McGonagall leaned over to ask him something and his customary disdain reasserted itself.

Draco pushed his barely touched breakfast away, too excited to eat. He rolled the paper up as he headed out, avoiding the students coming into the great hall. Enough of them had subscriptions to the Daily Prophet that he knew the interview would quickly become the topic of gossip. He didn't return to the dungeons, though. Stopping just out of sight around a corner, he leaned against the wall and opened the newspaper, reading Rita's article again as laughter started to bubble out of him.

Success. After the ambush in the dungeons, the dragon attack, the blizzard, losing his family and transforming into his half-blood shape, he'd felt like he was running as hard as he could just to stay in one place. Now he felt as if he'd finally gained a step. Of course it remained to be seen if parents would take their students out in droves, but if they did, that was no longer for his lack of trying.

"Ah, Mister Malfoy, there you are!"

Draco turned and spotted Dumbledore coming towards him, a newspaper under one arm.

"I gather you've already read today's Prophet?" Dumbledore smiled as he stopped. "Well done, I have to say."

"Thank you, sir." Draco knew the headmaster never came to see him unless he wanted something, so he tried to keep his voice cool. He found that he couldn't entirely squash his exhilaration, though, and struggled to bring his laughter under control. A sudden thought of how his father might react to his son outing the family to the wizarding world did the trick and his smile faded. "I just hope it worked."

"Indeed. I have already received several owls from parents willing to give you a chance, provided I keep a constant eye on you, of course. I'm afraid I must warn you not to return to the great hall for a few hours, as you left just before several owls could deliver their howlers to you. Still, it is progress."

"True, they're not beating down the doors," Draco said dryly. "Yet."

"Hopefully never," Dumbledore said. "I am also impressed that you managed to convince Rita to go against the Ministry and call this a war. Of course I doubt that will win you any more friends in the Ministry."

"If it makes Fudge and Scrimgeour squirm, so much the better." Draco tilted his head as he noticed something else Dumbledore was carrying. It looked like a list of classes. "Um, did you need to see me for something?"

His voice trailed off as he heard footsteps coming up behind him, but he sighed in relief when he saw Severus coming to stand next to him. No doubt if Draco felt nervous being alone with the headmaster, then Snape felt even more anxious. Draco had just broken centuries of silence. With Dumbledore egging him on, who knew what a reckless Malfoy might do next?

"Ah yes, almost forgot," Dumbledore said with a smile. "Snape mentioned that you were returning to class, and a few of the teachers have asked if you would be willing to demonstrate for the students certain dark spells they might encounter in a fight."

Draco's eyes widened. Telling everyone he was dark was one thing, but casting dark spells? In front of children? Severus beat him to the question.

"Headmaster," Snape started, "he just told the entire world that he's no threat. Don't you think
"Not if it is at the teacher's behest," Dumbledore said. "And we are in need of real demonstrations. As you continue to tell me, we cannot rely on our enemies relying solely on unforgivable curses. In fact, if you were to do this, it would further prove that you are not dangerous to the school but rather a vital ally in our war."

A vital tool more like, Draco thought. "I suppose... But I reserve the right to stop for any reason. These aren't parlor tricks."

"Don't demonstrate any necromancy, either," Snape told him, then paused. "Unless Potter volunteers, of course."

Draco glared sideways at him but didn't reply. "I do have one condition, though. I don't want any of the other Slytherins asked to demonstrate dark magic."

"Completely understandable," Dumbledore said. "We don't want to cast any more suspicion than has already fallen upon them. And while we're on the topic, since the Slytherins will be attending their own lessons, I meant to ask if you would feel more comfortable with a companion while you go from class to class. I'm sure Harry would be willing to accompany you, unless you'd prefer someone of your own house."

"I think another Slytherin might be best," Snape said.

"Potter will be fine," Draco said and refused to meet Severus' look. "Are you expecting trouble?"

"No, but then I didn't expect a pair of dragons to run through my school, either. When you first arrived, I rearranged a few students I knew I could trust to each of your classes. Since you'll be visiting several different classes, however, that won't work, but the two of you have proven yourselves to be quite formidable together."

Dumbledore handed over the list of classes. "The teachers will all be expecting you. If you have any problems, don't hesitate to come talk to me."

With that, Dumbledore turned and left, leaving Draco concentrating hard on the list so he wouldn't have to look up at his master. Half of occlumency was simply avoiding eye contact with the other wizard. And the list itself was interesting. A few teachers wanted to see how a glamour worked, a couple wanted to know about the language of dark magic. Most wanted to a demonstration of dark curses.

"I'll have to gather a few more acorns," he mused.

"Draco, look at me."

Wincing but unable to disobey, Draco raised his head and met his master's eyes. When he felt the familiar prickling of Snape's legilimency, however, he instinctively resisted, using the same techniques his master had taught him.

"When I taught you occlumency," Severus said softly, "I didn't intend for you to use it against me."

"I'm sorry," Draco said, looking down again. "But there's something I don't want to talk about."

"Oh? And those things involve Potter?" Snape cut him off before he say anything. "Don't bother trying to deny it. You Malfoys never learned discretion. Your infatuation is plain to anyone who knows you."

"I'm not infatuated--"
"I don't care what lies you tell yourself," Snape said, "but don't you dare lie to me. And don't think that just because you've survived revealing yourself so far that you're out of danger. They might tolerate you while you pretend to be safe, but if you try anything more serious than friendship with their savior, you'll discover where that tolerance runs out."

When Draco refused to answer, Snape drew closer, looming over him. "And you remember this: you are dark. He is not. Even if such an alliance were allowed, do you think Potter would stand being so close to the dark? He's just like his father and all the rest of them, and there's a reason you didn't tell Skeeter about our necromancy, our blood sacrifices. They hate us and that will never change."

Turning to leave, Snape paused and glanced over his shoulder. "You're focused entirely on winning this war, but you'd better start thinking about what will happen afterwards. They need us now. What do you think they will do when the dark lord is dead?"

As Snape's footsteps disappeared back into the school, Draco leaned back against the wall. What indeed? If Voldemort won this war, then they were all dead. But if Voldemort died and all his Death Eaters were rounded up into Azkaban and all their hopes came true, then what? What use would the world have for a dark wizard? A novelty? An accepted member of society? A dangerous mongrel that needed to be put down now that the enemy was dead?

Of course Harry would stand between him and the world, just as surely as he stood between him and the students now. Draco frowned. Maybe. What about when everyone turned against Potter, even his friends? And would the dark wizards accept Potter as his friend? What about himself? His blood ran cold at the thought of being outcast from his own kind, but after everything he'd done, he knew that was a real possibility.

Drawing his hood low, he walked back into the main hall and dropped the newspaper inside the nearest trash bin as he headed for the door. Harry had exhausted all of his acorns before on his lessons and no doubt the mudblood hadn't stopped practicing, no matter what her blood traitor boyfriend said. If they didn't want him to hex the students, then he needed targets.

A light snowfall greeted him as he walked outside and headed to the forest's edge. Very few students lingered on the grounds. The air was cold as real winter pushed in and he shivered, pulling his cloak tight as he scanned the ground. As he knelt to pick up his first acorn, however, he closed his eyes and cursed himself. He'd forgotten to bring a jar.

Footsteps crunched in the thin layer of snow behind him, and he turned, not surprised to see Harry walking towards him. Harry stopped at his side with a smile.

"Saw you heading out here," he said. "Gathering acorns?"

"Mm-hmm. Dumbledore wants me to show off a bit for his classes."

"Yeah, he told me this morning. He said he wants me to escort you from class to class, just in case anyone tries anything."

"My hero," Draco said dryly. "I guess you can start by escorting me back inside. I forgot to bring a jar to carry them all in and there's no way I'm carrying them all in my cloak."

"Well, I've got a small bag you can use," Harry said, reaching into the pocket of his muggle jeans. "I had my snap cards in here but they all exploded."

Draco took it and opened it up. "I think I can make do."

After a quick engorgio charm, he knelt again and began gathering up acorns. Harry knelt next to him
and helped, and between them they filled the bag quickly. Draco tied it off and stuck it in a pocket, but made no move back to the castle.

"You all right?" Harry asked.

"Just a little nervous." Draco brushed a stray wisp of hair from his face, then startled slightly when Harry reached out and pushed his hood back.

"You've let your hair get long," Harry said softly. "Makes you look a little like your father."

"I haven't had a chance to get it cut," Draco said, lowering his eyes. "Rather annoying, really."

"I think I like it." Leaning closer, Harry cupped Draco's face and held him still for a kiss. When he met no resistance, he put his arm around him and tugged him against his body.

To hell with Severus and his paranoid caution, Draco thought. He'd worry about the consequences later. For now, he had the Boy Who Lived.

He found himself pushed against a tree with Harry's hands on his shoulders, holding him still before pushing his cloak off his shoulders. A little clumsy, Harry fumbled at the two clasps holding Draco's collar shut, finally unsnapping them and pulling his robe open a few inches.

"Why'd you get such tight robes?" Harry whispered as he kissed along Draco's exposed throat. "You never wore them before."

"Had to let Severus buy them for me," Draco said. He leaned his head back against the tree and stared at the sky, letting Harry do whatever he liked. The snow through the bare branches looked like falling stars.

"They look good on you," Harry murmured as he undid two more clasps at the side, finally opening the front of Draco's robe. "Form-fitting."

"If I tell Severus that, he'll get me nothing but loose robes." And possibly obliviate my memory, Draco thought.

"Tell him, then," Harry said. "Loose robes come off easier."

Draco shivered as the breeze touched his bare skin. Harry's hands and lips felt like fire.

"You're almost as white as the snow," Harry said. "Is that from being half-wyvern?"

Draco almost laughed. Even now Harry couldn't stop asking questions. "I don't know. Never asked." He yelped as Harry's fingers hooked into his boxers and instinctively grabbed his hand, holding him still.

Before Harry could say anything, the bell rang, summoning students to class. Not sure if he was relieved or disappointed, Draco quickly did up his robe clasps and arranged his cloak over his shoulders again. Patting his pocket to make sure the acorns were still there, he took a deep breath to steady himself before standing straight.

"Come on," he said with a slight tremor in his voice. "We'd better get going."

"Draco, are you okay?" Harry put a hand on his shoulder before he could walk away.

"I-I'm fine."
"No, you're not. Draco, I didn't mean to--I mean, if you didn't want to--"

"It's not that," Draco said. He breathed out again and turned to face Harry. "Believe me, it's not that. Although I think next time I'd rather do this somewhere warmer."

Harry didn't seem too relieved and Draco sighed. "I'll explain on the way."

While they crossed the grounds, Draco considered how to best explain to Harry. Drawing on Theo's example, he decided to just blunder into the subject.

"Have you ever slept with anyone?"

A little to his relief, Harry turned faintly red. His lion was simply eager, not a sex starved maniac.

"A couple times. You?"

"Never."

Harry's eyes widened. "Never? But..."

"But what?"

"I've heard you're rampant. That you've had girls from every house."

"Well, then that's definitely not true," Draco said with a smile. "I've never fancied girls."

"But then why would they say that?"

"Wishful thinking, maybe," Draco said. "Perhaps hoping a reputation for sleeping around will convince me to do it for real. Or there could be someone who's gotten some of my hair and is seducing girls while under the effects of a polyjuice potion. Since there haven't been any pregnant girls demanding a marriage or stipend for my bastard child, however, I doubt it."

"So you've never slept with anyone?"

"Harry, did the mu—did Granger ever talk about dark families while she was researching us?"

"Nice save," Harry said slowly. Draco winced and looked away, but Harry didn't pursue his slip. "To answer your question, no. She complained that she couldn't find a lot of information, though."

"Ravenclaws can be damned annoying when it comes to libraries," Draco said. "Harry, dark families are...well, you've heard me talk about it. Loyalty to family, our loyalties to Morgan and Mordred because they were considered family."

"You said loyalty is everything," Harry nodded.

"And it can't be taken lightly. Our friendships are usually impossible to sever, and..." He stopped and looked up at Harry. "Our relationships are forever. To sleep with someone before marriage is...well. Frowned upon, to say the least."

"So dark wizards never have sex until they get married?" Harry asked.

"At least not with other wizards. Now you see why those night rides are so important to us," Draco said, unable to stop a small smile. "It wasn't so strict before. Dropping into the local village at night and sporting with muggles was fine while we were in power, but when they started turning against us, when your kind turned against us, we couldn't do that nearly so much."
"So," Harry breathed, rubbing the back of his neck. "M-marriage."

Draco laughed out loud. "Relax, Potter, I'm not putting a chain around your neck yet. I just wanted you to know why I tensed up a little. I'm not supposed to do things like that 'till marriage."

"Oh, right." Harry glanced sideways at him. "If loyalty's so important, how do dark wizards get divorced?"

"We don't divorce, Harry. We widow."

When Harry's eyes got wide, Draco realized how that sounded. "No no, not like that. I didn't mean it to sound like that. Well, not usually anyway. I just meant we don't live very long. I don't think I've ever heard of someone having a second spouse."

By now, they were inside and the halls had emptied of most of their students. Draco took out the list of classes Dumbledore had given him and read the first one. "McGonagall, charms for seventh years."

"Really?" Harry said, looking over his shoulder. "That's my class right now. What does she want you to do?"

"Show you what a glamour looks like, I think."

As they walked through the school and took the stairs up, Draco found himself walking closer to Harry. Each time they passed a classroom, everyone inside turned to watch them go by. After passing a few rooms, he drew his hood low so he wouldn't have to see them. He kept alert for any signs of danger but when raised voices suddenly erupted from a corner near them, he bumped hard into Harry as he shied away.

They were close to the tower, Draco realized, because two parents were standing over a first year student with luggage while berating Dumbledore for knowingly harboring a dangerous dark wizard amongst children. The headmaster took their complaints in stride, but the hatred and anger in their eyes made Draco's heart race. They sounded so familiar, as if his dreams echoed around him, and he stopped in middle of the hall, unable to make himself move forward. But he didn't have to. Harry's arm came around him and held him close as he guided Draco past the parents and down the hall.

"Who was that?" Draco heard the father say. "You allow children to walk around out of class while there's a dark wizard in your dungeons?"

"Ah, no," Dumbledore said, his voice fading as they hurried away. "That child is the dangerous dark wizard..."

Draco didn't hear the rest, though he found himself curious as to what Dumbledore would say.

"You all right?" Harry asked.

Nodding, Draco straightened. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to--"

"Don't feel sorry," Harry said, and Draco spotted him putting his wand away. "That's what I'm here for."

Arriving just before the bell, they reached McGonagall's class without further incident. As they stood at the door, everyone, even the teacher, gave Harry a quick look over as if they might find a mark or tattoo or some kind of evidence that he was under Draco's control. Forcing a smile onto her face, she motioned them inside and faced the class.
"We've been talking about glamours and how to dispel them," she told the class of Gryffindors and Ravenclaws. "But we've only had the theory, never any practical examples. As you know from your defense classes, especially in your fifth year, theoretical knowledge is no substitute for practical experience. As such, Mister Malfoy has been kind enough to agree to cast a glamour for us. Mister Malfoy, if you need anything for your spell...?"

Draco shook his head. "Glamours are fairly simple, but unless you have a mirror, I think I'd better have a volunteer."

She stiffened but didn't argue. "If someone would be good enough to come up front?" she asked the class.

For a moment, no one moved, too stunned to be asked to participate in the dark arts. Draco almost laughed at the wide eyes as they glanced at each other and then at McGonagall, terrified she might call on them. And then one hand shot up into the air.

"Hermione!" Ron hissed.

"Shut up, Ron," she hissed back. From the sound of it, they'd been arguing even since Ron found out about her lessons. "I want to see this up close."

"But it's dark magic," he said despairingly as she stood and walked forward. "Hermione, don't! It's Malfoy, for Merlin's sake!"

Malfoy rolled his eyes. "Weasley, even if I was evil, you think I'd try something in front of all of you? I'm dark, not suicidal."

"Or brave enough," someone muttered in the back.

Not in the mood to argue the similarities between bravery and stupidity, Draco pulled out two chairs and spun them to face each other to give the class a side view.

"Have a seat," he said. "This is best done sitting."

"Does it take a long time?" she asked, sitting in front of him.

"No, but a steady hand makes the illusion more real." He stared at her face wondering how he would change her looks. Make her hideous, perhaps? No, Harry was standing behind him watching. He sighed and raised his wand.

"Will I look very different?" she asked.

"The best lies are just subtle twists of the truth," he said. "Now hold still."

Whispering the word "gramaire," he traced his wand over his face, leaving a soft glow on her face that faded into his skin. Then with soft flicks of the wand, he raised her cheekbones, made her eyes a little larger and changed their color to blue, then lengthened and straightened her hair before making her a blonde. A tremor in his right hand accidentally made her nose crooked, but another sweep of his wand fixed it. After one final touch to lighten her skin another shade, he sighed and leaned back.

"There. Finished."

Amidst the murmurs of her classmates, Hermione stood up and took the compact mirror Lavender offered her from the front row. She breathed in slightly and touched her face.
"Does it hurt?" Parvati asked.

"I don't even feel it," Hermione said. She turned back to Draco. "Could a glamour make me look like someone else?"

"If you mean like polyjuice, no," he said. "Dark wizards can brew potions just as well as you. Glamours aren't suited for pretending to be someone specific. All they do is make you look just different enough so that no one will know it's you."

"So it's like a mask," Hermione said.

He nodded. "Glamours can cover your entire body, make you look taller or shorter. It depends on how much magic you're willing to use. Some witches use them so often they forget what they really look like."

From the opposite side of the classroom, McGonagall looked ill at ease watching dark spells cast on one of her students.

"I've heard that glamours can be addictive if used too often," McGonagall said, "and that some witches lose everything they own trying to keep the spell up."

"Only because they let vanity get the better of them." Draco nodded once at Hermione. "A glamour like that can cost a hundred galleons and it'll wear off in a week."

Hermione's eyes widened in fright. "I don't have to wait a week, do I?"

Draco shook his head. "No. It's just an illusion. It comes right off."

"Why does it cost a hundred galleons?" Seamus asked. "It only took you a couple minutes."

"Dark magic takes a lot of power," Draco said. "But usually the buyer has very specific demands. It can take awhile to get the face just right."

Hesitating for a moment, Hermione glanced at the class before carefully considering her words. "Dark magic takes more power because it changes something's basic nature, right?"

Draco looked at her sharply. He'd told her that himself weeks ago. She wouldn't forget one of his lessons so easily. "Yes, like humans turning into werewolves. Why?"

"If a glamour is just an illusion, why does it take so much power?"

A good question, he grudgingly admitted, but he didn't say so. "Because I did change something about your nature. I didn't alter your face, I altered how your face looks. I changed how the air and light twist around you."

"Oh," she said in sudden understanding. "Like water bending light."

"Exactly. Ready to take it off?"

Without waiting, he cast a deletrius spell. The glamour rose off of Hermione's face like smoke, curling away into the air.

"You see? No special counter-spell. You can get rid of it easily."

For a moment no one said anything and Draco was about to leave the class to rest. He hadn't slept well and he had a lot more spells to cast today.
"I don't get it," Seamus suddenly said. "Why bother with a glamour if it's so easy to get rid of?"

Draco blinked. Wasn't it obvious? "You must have studied some instances of when glamours were used?" He looked at McGonagall for confirmation and she nodded.

"We discussed the most recent instance," she said. "When two known Death Eaters slipped into the Ministry and assassinated several officials."

"But they got caught," Seamus said. "So why use a glamour when they could've used polyjuice potion?"

"What were their names?" Draco asked softly.

No one replied.

"That was weeks ago," McGonagall said. "I'm afraid I don't remember."

"Wait a minute." Hermione went to her seat and pulled a muggle notebook out of her bag, flipping through several pages before stopping somewhere in the middle. "I've been keeping notes. It was Helia Sarracenia and Betula Carriway."

He recognized their names from his mother's dealings with Voldemort. She kept her batches of poisons carefully labeled so that she never mixed them up, terrified of what the dark lord would do if she gave someone a wrong potion. Draco leaned back against McGonagall's desk and stared at the floor.

"Polyjuice is good for impersonating someone," he said. "But glamours aren't meant to impersonate someone. They're meant to hide your real features like a mask, to mingle unnoticed in a crowd. They're useless in a duel, but if you use them right, you won't need to duel."

"Because you'll be so close to your target," Harry reasoned, finally speaking for the first time, "that he won't have time to draw his wand."

Draco nodded once. "Those witches were new converts to the dark, completely inexperienced. And yet well cast glamours got them into the Ministry and let them kill a few officials. I guarantee a practiced dark wizard could use a glamour even more effectively."

After a few moments when it became clear that if the class had any questions, they'd rather hear them from McGonagall, Draco left with Harry at his side. The rest of the classes he visited were even more awkward since he had to cast several curses at targets he created in the front of each room. Even Harry, who'd seen and practiced them before, shuddered each time he saw a man-shaped target burst into flames after the section representing its heart exploded.

The last class involved a demonstration of risana spells on several of Professor Sprout's rowan bushes and mandrakes, making them sprout from seeds into mature plants in a few seconds. By the time the final bell rang, Draco was breathing hard and wondering if she'd requested a demonstration just to hurry her plants along. While the students scurried out of class, uncomfortable staying inside with a dark wizard, Draco leaned on a flowerpot as tall as he was to catch his breath.

"Are you all right?" Harry asked.

"I've never cast so many spells in one day," Draco said. He didn't move as Harry put a hand on his forehead.

"You're really warm," Harry said. "Do you want to see Pomfrey?"
Put himself at her mercy? Draco snorted. "No, I'll be fine. Just help me get down to Slytherin. I need to take a shower."

Since the greenhouses lay some distance from the castle, they walked into the constant snowfall and followed the path the other students had already trudged. The brisk winter air played havoc with Draco's hair so he pulled his hood up, wrapping his cloak around himself a little tighter.

"If it's too much," Harry said apologetically, as if he felt somewhat to blame, "you could ask to do only a couple of classes a day."

"No," Draco shook his head. "I'll get Theo to let me skip practice tonight so I can sleep. Tomorrow I should be fine."

Harry didn't look convinced. "You've looked exhausted for months. I don't think one night is going to make it all better."

A brief memory of his photograph in the Prophet flashed into his mind. "Do I really look that bad?" Draco asked.

"You look like you're going to fall over," Harry said.

Draco sighed. He felt like it, too.

"I thought it would be easier when my Slytherins got here," he whispered. "Instead it's gotten harder. God, if I'd known all this would happen when I burned the manor down, I would've flown to France."

"It may be hard," Harry said. "But you've done a lot of good. You're helping destroy Voldemort. You're bridging the gap between the light and dark. And, well, I'm glad you didn't fly to France. Very glad, really."

The sincerity in Harry's voice made Draco want to scream. Why had he ever thought that making that amulet was a good idea? Harry wasn't a poppet to be controlled. Every day the urge to smash the glass became stronger, but fear of what might happen if he did stayed his hand.

"Why?" Draco stopped and turned to face him. "Why me? I'm dark."

"I know," Harry laughed. "Everyone keeps telling me that as if I've forgotten."

"Harry, I'm serious," Draco whined. He nearly even stomped his foot but stopped himself. "You may be different from the others, but just a few months ago you were calling me an evil dark wizard that didn't care about anything. You can't just stand there and pretend this was easy for you."

"Malföy..." Harry sighed. "I admit, I sat up some nights wondering why on earth I love you, but that had nothing to do with you being dark and everything to do with you being a spiteful, bigoted little monster sometimes."

Draco scowled. "If I'm so bloody awful, why'd you fall in love with me, then?"

"I don't really know why. I can't point at some reason or moment. When I was with you in the showers...I just knew." He touched Draco's hair again, swirling it around his fingers. "I spent time with you. And you're not the cocky bastard you try to make everyone believe you are. You're self-conscious, you're hopeful, you're even brave when you let yourself be."

"There's no such thing as a brave Malföy."
Harry bent and pressed a kiss to his forehead. "I think there is."

Draco didn't know whether to smile or cry.
Standing outside his team's dressing room, Draco listened to the dull roar of the audience in the stands and clutched his besom close to his chest. News confirming his usual place as the Slytherin seeker had slipped into the Prophet and now their first match against Gryffindor would be in front of a sold out audience. Although Dumbledore assured him that strong wards had been set around the field to protect them from hurled jinxes and hexes, the fact remained that in a few minutes he would walk out onto the field before hundreds of wizards and witches, none of whom would think twice about killing a dark wizard. Or what worried him even more, they might hex their own hero for fraternizing with darkness.

"Draco," Theo said from the doorway. "Stop pacing. You're acting like a love-struck fool."

Draco glowered at him. "I am not! He said he'd be here. Should've known he'd be late."

"Potter?" Theo asked.

"Of course, Potter," Draco grumbled as he went back to pacing, kicking stones out of his way as he muttered curses. "Stupid, late, sex-crazed Gryffindor. Probably forgot all about--"

"Draco!"

His head snapped up and he grinned as Harry ran towards him, broom in hand. He thought his Gryffindor looked wonderful in his quidditch red and gold, even if the colors did clash, like a lion with a flowing mane.

"What was it you wanted to see me about?" Harry whispered as he bent and kissed Draco, not caring about the audience at the door.

"I told you last night I had something to give you," Draco said while pulling a small handkerchief from his pocket and unfolding it, revealing a gold coin on a leather cord. "It's an amulet. It'll keep you safe."

"This is one of those coins you were working on, isn't it?" Harry said. He took the cord and held the coin up to the light, watching it sparkle and spin. "Is it dark magic?"

Draco nodded once. "Pretty powerful, too. You don't have to wear it. You can just keep it in your clothes."

Balancing his broomstick against his arm, Harry reached up and tied the cord around his neck, letting the coin fall under his throat. "Safe, huh?"

"It can't stop a jinx," Draco explained, "but it will make them fly around you and miss. Most of them, anyway."

"And it's not a spell to make me lose control of the broom just before I grab the snitch?" Harry quirked an eyebrow, but his tone made it clear he was joking.

"If I thought I could get away with it, I would," Draco said. "But not on you. I wouldn't jinx you for anything."

"Not even the world?" Harry smiled.
Hesitating, Draco's voice dropped to a whisper. "One little jinx for the whole world? I'm not sure, that's rather tempting."

Harry just shook his head. "Malfoys...don't you ever get tired of scheming?"

"Never."

Putting his hand around the back of Draco's throat, Harry held him close as he kissed him and ignored the disgusted noises coming from the Slytherin changing room. None of the team tried to stop them although they groaned about Gryffindors being properly beneath a Slytherin's notice.

"Your friends don't seem to like me much," Harry murmured.

"We're just a few minutes from our first game," Draco replied. "Be glad they haven't cast an impedimentia and stuffed you in a locker."

"Sounds like a good idea," Theo called from the doorway. "Move out of the way, Draco. I want a clear shot."

Throwing Theo a look over his shoulder, Draco sighed and looked back at Harry. "I think you'd better go," he said. "I'll see you after the game, right?"

"You sure your housemates won't curse me after we win?"

With an insulted huff, Draco gave Harry a not-so-gentle shove back towards the field. "They'll be very happy rubbing it in your nose when we win."

But as he watched Harry walk off, patting the charm in his pocket, Draco knew the Gryffindors were more than likely to win. For all the practice Theo had put everyone through, his Slytherins didn't have nearly enough preparation. Gryffindor had practiced for months. Slytherin would be lucky if they weren't slaughtered. Considering the crowd, literally. He crossed his arms and walked back to his team's dressing room.

"You think we're going to lose, don't you?"

Draco looked up at the small group of faces staring back at him. Several of them had played before, but too many were rookies, probably never even seen a quaffle up close before. They held their brooms awkwardly and stood close to the seasoned players who knew they didn't have enough practice to play as a solid team. Still, maybe it wasn't hopeless. They shivered in a freezing forest for three months and managed to kill a few Death Eaters to boot. So what if Harry's team had few more hours of practice? His Slytherins were battle hardened.

"If I didn't think we were going to win," he said, recognizing the new keeper Kytel Grinset as the one who'd asked, "then I wouldn't bother going out. Especially not in this weather. It'll probably start snowing again any minute."

"You're going soft," Theo said. "Compared to what we went through, it feels like bloody summer."

"Yes, I've had such an easy time of it," Draco sneered and pushed by him to retrieve his besom.

To his dismay, a few of the buds on the tail twigs had bloomed into delicate white flowers. He would have brushed them off but he wasn't sure if that would affect the besom's magic. If only he'd had time to search his grimoire for information about his besom, but for now he had to settle for carrying his besom so that the twigs trailed in the snow and masked the flowers.
Walking in front of the team, he was almost at the field when Theo held something out to him. He didn't recognize what it was until he took it and held it up to his face.

"A hair tie?" he grimaced. "That's for girls."

"You've been pushing your hair out of your eyes every couple minutes," Theo said. "It's your own fault for not getting it cut."

"I've been busy," Draco snapped, but he handed his besom over for a moment so he could use both hands to pull his hair back. And he reminded himself that his father used a ribbon so he couldn't whine about a simple tie.

Snow started falling as they walked onto the field, the large flakes audibly hitting the ground as the crowd fell into a hush. The Slytherins couldn't help but edge closer to each other and tighten their grips on their brooms. If an attack came, they wouldn't bother defending themselves but would simply take to the sky.

Draco refused to break the silence, afraid that their customary taunting might set off someone in the crowd. Across from him, the Gryffindors likewise held silent. Only Harry's reassuring smile made him feel better, even if he didn't know why. If someone cast a spell at them, Harry wouldn't be able to help him, and yet seeing him smile made some of Draco's fear drift away.

He would think about it later. At the whistle they all kicked up into the air. Some polite clapping followed them up but nothing like the applause in a normal game. Pansy refused to let any Slytherins out of the dungeons to cheer for their team, and the Gryffindors in the stands were uncharacteristically quiet. Were they trying to avoid sounding hostile? Or did they simply feel awkward with everyone watching their slightest reactions to their rival house?

Just as Draco thought the grave-like silence would drive him mad, a female voice rang clearly from the announcer's box.

"Up they all go into the sky. Everyone's been talking about this match for days. The clouds even look a little like a dragon and a lion. See, that big long one over the stands is the dragon with its snout curving over Slytherin goals. The lion's under the dragon with its mouth wide open. Now I wish I'd worn my roaring lion hat."

Whipping around on his besom, Draco nearly fell out of the sky to look at the announcer's box. Sure enough, Loony Lovegood sat idly looping corks into necklaces, chattering dreamily while McGonagall whispered at her to pay attention. Luna nodded and paid attention to what she thought was important.

"The snowflakes are so big I wonder if Harry might mistake one for a snitch. I hope he doesn't. Large snowflakes are notorious for camouflaging biting mikonks."

While McGonagall corrected her constant mistakes about player names and mispronounced maneuvers, snickers and hissed laughter slipped out of the audience as Luna announced strange ideas with only a vague link to the game. From his vantage point over the rest of the players, Draco flew in a wide circle, keeping an eye out for the snitch as well as watching the crowd, but with the tension broken by Luna's rambling, suddenly looming death didn't seem so looming anymore.

When the crowd started cheering, Draco didn't even mind that they only cheered for Gryffindor. At least that made the game feel a little more normal. He worried when they cheered too often, but to his relief Kytel was not letting the quaffle slip through their goals. Gryffindor was merely pulling off some rather flashy moves for the benefit of the crowd. Draco frowned. He hadn't expected
Gryffindor to go easy on them, but a little consideration would have nice.

Half an hour into the game, spotting the snitch right in front of the announcer's box came as a relief. Even better, he spotted it before Harry did. Slowly maneuvering toward that side of the field, Draco leaned forward on his besom and tightened his hands in anticipation. Without any charms to keep him from falling off, he didn't want to find out if the snow would cushion him.

"Oh my," Luna said as he came closer. "Malfoy's riding a very strange broom. It looks more like a tree branch."

Wonderful, Draco thought. Just make everyone in the stadium even more suspicious.

He imagined their furtive whispers, the dark wizard rides a strange broom, wonder if it flies with a curse instead of a charm? Think he could use it to jinx all the good little wizards without us knowing it? Perhaps we should hex him just to be safe?

"Oh," she cried as he came closer, "but it does have sweet little flowers all over the twigs. I thought it was snow at first. How cute!"

Draco winced and hunched over, hiding in his hood. "I take it back," he muttered. "Someone hex me into the ground right now."

"But they really are cute," Harry whispered.

Startled by his sudden presence, Draco shied away a few feet. "They are not. And you shouldn't be so close. People might think I'm doing something to you."

"No, they'll think the Gryffindor seeker's keeping an eye on the Slytherin seeker," Harry said. "And I am. Have to keep you from cheating, after all."

"I haven't cheated yet!"

"Exactly." Harry flew in a little circle around him and watched the field, completely missing the snitch still hovering near the announcer's box. "I may love you, but you're still a Malfoy."

"And you're still an annoying Gryffindor," Draco snapped. "But one thing's for sure. After today, you won't still be the champion seek--"

"Oh my, I've never seen the snitch so close before," Luna gasped like a child seeing a new toy.

Damn it! Forced to cut himself off, Draco sped forward over Harry's shoulder straight for the snitch, which suddenly veered left through the Gryffindor team. He didn't actually knock Ginny off her broom, but he flew so close that she spooked and pulled her broom up too high, sending her backwards toward the ground. A flash of red out of the corner of his eye told him Potter was right on his heels, but the next tight turn that nearly sent him smashing into Ron gained him a few more inches ahead. The snitch began descending until it skimmed the ground, and Draco's besom sent snow flying up in his wake. When he heard Harry cursing about the snow in his face, he laughed loudly and pressed his cheek against the besom, no longer caring if he looked stupid as long as he flew faster.

At breakneck speed the snitch veered into the sky with the two seekers right behind it. Afraid that he might lose it in the clouds, Draco put his hand out but it flew just beyond the tip of his fingers. Once inside the thick clouds, he felt the smooth surface on his skin, felt its wings hum briefly against his nails.
Though he couldn’t see it, he felt it brush against his arm as it changed direction again. The besom reacted in an instant, pivoting in the air and following it back down. The risky maneuver cost him precious seconds and he knew Harry felt him turn. Side by side, they burst from of the cloud, hands out, their robes mingling as they plummeted like eagles.

Pushing his besom so hard that he felt the wood tremble against his body, Draco slid forward just enough to put his hand over the snitch. His elation died in the same instant as Harry's hand pushed against the side of his palm, forcing his hand completely open again. In a panic, Draco forced his fingers to curl and found himself tangled in Harry's hand, both of them covering the snitch.

He met Harry's eyes, his intention clear. Their dive became a game of chicken, and the first person to pull away would lose the snitch. Both of them struggled for a better grip and in the process their brooms came close together. Since Draco was already laying flat on his besom, Harry seemed to envelop him, their faces only inches apart.

"I've got the better grip," Harry ground out between clenched teeth. "Give up!"

"It's bloody mine," Draco snarled.

Faintly aware of screams below, Draco wondered if anyone would bother to heal the dark wizard once they'd crashed headfirst, and if he'd be alive long enough for even that. There was no way he'd break his grip. Neither of them held the snitch so much as their twined fingers became a loose cage for it. If Harry slipped, Draco wasn't sure he could grab it fast enough.

Halfway into the stadium, the snitch made a herculean effort to fly forward, and it nearly popped out of their hands before they changed course to match it. The sudden turn made Harry clip Draco's besom, which tried to right itself but only managed to get Harry's robes wrapped around its twigs. An ill-timed bludger struck Draco in the back and pushed him into Harry, and together they did a quick spiral into the snow, tumbling off their brooms and over each other until they came to a stop.

Both of them smacked their free hands close over the snitch, tangling themselves even further. As they jockeyed for a better hold, Harry rolled on top of Draco, knees on either side of him. With his robes covering both of them from the referee's sight, Draco saw his chance and blindly brought his knee up towards Harry's groin. He missed but still hit his thigh hard enough to make Harry grunt and roll to the side.

"Bloody cheater," Harry winced. "I knew you'd try something dirty."

"No such thing as dirty in quidditch," Draco hissed and rolled on top of him. He didn't try to hold Harry still since he knew he'd be overpowered soon anyway. Instead he leaned down, let his hood fall low so that no one could see his face and pressed his mouth against Harry's. All struggling stopped and Harry's eyes closed for a second.

Kissing, Draco decided, felt quite different when he was on top of a writhing Gryffindor instead of curled up helplessly in his lap.

A moment later he yelped as he was dumped in the snow with Harry again on top. This time Harry sat down hard on his legs to make sure he couldn't kick.

"You really are a horrid cheat," Harry whispered.

"Didn't hear you complaining," Draco said, breathing hard.

Only a whoosh of air warned them as Hooch flew close on her broom. "That's enough of that," she said, stepping off and standing beside them. "Let me see who has the snitch."
They held their firmly clutched hands out to her and she paused. "Take your hands away."

Both of them could only remove one hand, letting her see exactly how tangled their fingers were. They'd come at the snitch from opposite angles so that they didn't hold the snitch so much as they caged it.

McGonagall and Snape finally caught up and halted in mutual surprise. They glared at each other as if daring the other to make a claim before staring at Madame Hooch.

"Is there a rule for this?" Snape demanded.

"I don't think it's ever happened before," Hooch said. She summoned her rule book from somewhere off the field and flipped through it, scanning for the right rule.

Still on the ground, Draco occasionally yanked at Harry's hand and winced when Harry dug his knees into his side. Draco looked up in the hope that someone would tell Harry to get off of him, but McGonagall seemed more interested in looking over Hooch's shoulder and Severus apparently thought that moving either of them would dislodge the snitch and jeopardize Slytherin's chances.

"Here we go..." Hooch said, tapping her finger on the rule. "In the unlikely event of a tie game, whichever team's Seeker caught the snitch will be determined the--oh wait, that's not it. It doesn't seem like there is a rule for this."

"Then we'll have to think of something," McGonagall said. "Shall we toss a coin?"

"Certainly not!" Severus snapped. "The team who was ahead should receive the points."

Both Harry and Draco looked up at the scoreboard which showed Gryffindor with 40 points and Slytherin with 60. Draco barked a laugh.

"Ha! I knew it! My Slytherins went through a bloody blizzard, nothing can beat them!"

"I hardly think that Snape's suggestion would be fair," McGonagall argued to Hooch. "Perhaps a hundred and fifty points to both teams would be the best solution?"

"Absolutely not," Hooch said, slamming her book shut. "You cannot create an extra hundred and fifty points. We'll simply have to divide the score between the teams. Seventy five points each, Slytherin wins. Congratulations to both seekers."

As Hooch reseated herself on her broom and flew towards the announcer's box, Snape shot a smug look at McGonagall and turned with a flourish of his robes. "Hurry up," he called over his shoulder at Draco. "We have work to do. Be in the office in an hour."

"Yes, master," Draco said dutifully, then shot his own look at Harry. "Told you we'd win. Now I wish I'd made a wager. I could've had you helping me clean the office for a month."

Harry sighed and stood up, bringing Draco up with him. "I thought you were a bad loser. Turns out you're an even worse winner."

Draco sniffed and turned his head away. "You're just jealous."

As they heard Luna calling out the score and the decision, polite applause again came from the crowd. Draco wanted to yell taunts at the other team and laugh at the crowd who obviously hadn't wanted the dark wizard's team to win, but he held his tongue. Not only was taunting an enemy that outnumbered him a bad idea, but the Gryffindor team was flying overhead.
"Harry!" Ron called from above them. "Leave Malfoy alone and come on!"

"Be right there!" Harry looked back at Draco. "You going to let go?"

"Hm?" Draco realized their hands were still joined over the snitch. "You first."

"Oh, you're such a..." Harry let the thought hang and pulled his hand free, letting Draco finally curl his fingers completely around the snitch. "I'll see you in a few minutes, all right?"

"Right." Draco nodded and watched him take off with his team. He glanced at his own team as Theo rounded everyone up and had them moving off the field.

About to follow them, he paused as he felt the snitch jerk hard against his hand. The snitch his teammates had jinxed before had been erratic, wasting all of its energy trying to fly everywhere at once. But this snitch had not be jinxed and before he could stop it, it wrenched free and zipped across the field. When he looked down at his empty hand, he realized why Harry had been able to worm into his grip before he grabbed the snitch. The white scar in the middle of his palm didn't stand out anymore, but it clearly crossed his skin.

He tried to make a fist. His hand only twisted into a claw without much strength, as if he'd just woken up and couldn't close his hand. Had he not noticed the injury before? He shook his head slightly. No, he'd known it was weak. He just hadn't known it was that bad.

Beside him, he heard a hiss and a sorrowful murmur. "Draco..."

He saw Theo standing in front of him staring at his scar before meeting his eyes, immediately understanding what had happened. There could be no doubt. In the winter light, his hand looked fragile and thin as twigs.

"No big loss," Draco shrugged. "Not like I could've been a professional seeker anyway."

Knowing Theo would try to say something to make him feel better, Draco turned and walked by him before he could, picking up his besom on the way. Inside the changing rooms, he went straight to the showers and cleaned off as fast as he could. It was naive to hope that Theo would keep his injury a secret and by the time he came out and dressed, everyone knew.

No one spoke. The game wasn't a loss but it didn't feel like a win, either. Draco threw his cloak over his shoulders and pulled the hood low. Bad enough everyone else in school stared at him, but now his own Slytherins stared at him, and worse, with pity. What good was a seeker that couldn't catch a snitch? He silently walked past them and into the snow.

The snitch should have been his. Would have been if not for his right hand which no longer closed properly. He tried again but only winced as his hand trembled with the effort. No wonder the snitch had almost slipped out of his grasp. Tenuous at best, his grip would easily give way if someone else pushed his hand.

"Draco, wait up!"

He sighed to hear Harry's voice but didn't move, letting Harry catch up to him. The Gryffindor panted for breath and Draco wondered if he'd rushed to change, too.

"Guess that's something else for the history books," Harry started, but he stopped when he saw Draco's face. "You all right?"

Admit he was permanently maimed? He'd rather slash his hand open again. "It's nothing," he said
and turned away. To his relief, Harry didn't ask questions as he walked with him.

He spotted several students up ahead walking to Hogwarts, so he detoured to the left through the green houses. Professor Sprout kept bushes of rowan berries growing close to every green house but he didn't think that was to keep him out. As they walked closer to the castle, he realized he was right when he spotted Neville kneeling next to several bushes with a bowl full of rowan berries.

"Hey Neville," Harry called out. "Sprout got you working today, too?"

"Oh hey, sorry I missed the game." Neville stood, carefully keeping the rowan from spilling. "Yeah, she wants all this harvested by Sunday for Slughorn. Said Dumbledore wants some kind of potion made from them but that Snape refused."

"And I'm sure Slughorn was all too eager to pitch in," Draco muttered. He brought his arm up to his face, covering his mouth and nose with his sleeve. Even unprocessed, raw rowan made him feel sick. "You can tell that idiot he better use the leaves instead. Otherwise any dark wizard'll feel you coming long before they see you."

"Really?" Neville smiled. "That'd be a lot easier on my hands. I'll go ask Sprout."

Draco glared at his back as Neville left. "Oh yes, ask Sprout. Nevermind you've got a bloody dark wizard in front of you...not like I would know anything..."

"Draco?" When Draco didn't answer, Harry stepped in front of him and pushed his hood back. Draco still wouldn't meet his eyes, so he followed the Slytherin's look down to his pale hand and the splotchy scar on the back. "What's wrong?"

"I can't close it," Draco said softly. "I couldn't even hold the snitch."

"But you did hold onto it," Harry said. "You almost got it away from me."

"Right. Almost." He sighed and shook his head. "I shouldn't whine. Sev did everything he could. It's not his fault I'm stupid and reckless."

"He can't fix it?"

"It's been months already," Draco mumbled. "If it was going to get better, it would of by now."

"Well..." Harry tilted his head, not used to comforting people. "I couldn't even tell anything was wrong. Is it really so bad?"

"I can't close it all the way and sometimes it shakes so bad. And now this..." He sniffled and pressed his sleeves against his face, wiping furiously at his eyes. "Theo's probably picking out my replacing right now. It's not bloody fair!"

"You don't know that," Harry said.

"No one'd keep a useless seeker on their team--"

"Has he told you he's kicking you off? Have you asked him?" When Harry didn't get an answer, he grabbed Draco's hands and pulled them down so he could see his face. "Malfoy, look at yourself. Would it really be so bad if you quit the team?"

"How can you even ask me that? I fought hard to get on that team and now after everything I've done--"
"Everything you're doing," Harry corrected.

Sick of listening, Draco wrenched his hands free and turned his back only to be caught as Harry wrapped his arms around him from behind.

"Let go of me!" He struggled, turning frantic when he couldn't get loose.

"Look at yourself," Harry said. "You can't even fight me. Dark lessons, potions, quidditch, if you keep up like this much longer, Voldemort won't have to kill you. You'll do it yourself."

Draco laughed at him. "Stupid Potter. There's a war--"

"Even soldiers get time off."

When Draco stopped struggling, Harry relaxed his grip but didn't let him go, simply holding him. For a few moments that's all Draco wanted and he leaned against Harry as if he was a wall.

"What if I can never play again?" he whispered.

"Ask your captain before you think about that," Harry insisted.

What was worse, asking Theo and knowing for sure or not asking and having that glimmer of hope? Draco thought both were awful, but he had a Gryffindor maneuvering him toward Hogwarts and he couldn't pull free.

"Fine, I'll ask," he grumbled. "Just quit manhandling me."

"Mm, but I like holding you," Harry whispered. "Even if you are too bony. Doesn't Pansy make you eat anything?"

"I'm not hungry," Draco said, finally shrugging out of Harry's arms. He straightened his robes as best he could, no easy feat when the severe cut made them form-fitting, and started towards the door that led to the dungeons. "Come on, let's go before too many people come back."

Fortunately they passed no one in the dark corridors under the school and reached the dungeons without incident. Unsure about entering the Slytherin common room, Harry hesitated at the door until Draco grabbed his sleeve and tugged him inside.

As strewn with blankets and mattresses as usual, the room looked messy but inviting. He spotted two of his teammates already sitting with the older students telling them how the match played out, wildly gesticulating as they demonstrated how they hit a bludger or yanked a Gryffindor's broom backwards without drawing Hooch's attention. The younger students all sat in a group as Pansy and her girls sat in the middle and showed them how to create small charms and amulets.

"Looks like they beat us here," Draco said. "I'm going to find Theo, be right back."

"Wait," Harry said, grabbing his hand. "You're just going to leave me here?"

"They won't hurt you," Draco said dryly. "What happened to all that 'honoring the trust' nonsense I heard when I betrayed my nature to the school?"

"Interhouse unity is one thing," Harry hissed, "but they're still Slytherins."

"Yes, we are," Pansy called out in a sing-song voice without looking at him. "But if we wanted you flayed and roasting on the fire, you'd be spitted already."
Harry glared at her. "That doesn't make me feel better."

"Just sit and watch them," Draco said, giving him a nudge toward the children. "You might learn something."

Daphne scoffed at hearing that. "Doubt it. Though maybe if I try something I learned before I was old enough to come here, he might pick up a tiny bit."

Harry threw Draco a pleading glance, but Draco ignored him and left the common room, heading towards his old bedroom. Even though they all slept in a group, Theo still occasionally used their shared dorm for private conversations. There was a chance he was already speaking to the older players about today's game. If he was right and he snuck up quietly, Draco thought he might be able to eavesdrop.

Cave walls did little to muffle his footsteps but he'd been trying to be silent in Hogwarts for months now, and all that practice paid off as he edged closer to the door. Muffled voices echoed inside the room so he had to step right next to the door to make out what was said.

"--course I'm sure. I saw it myself. He couldn't hold onto the snitch."

"I still don't see why it's a problem," Blaise said. "He grabbed it today, didn't he?"

"You're not on the team, you don't understand," Theo said. "He should've been able to keep it from Potter. Instead we ended up splitting the points."

"Still," Thomas said. "He's the only seeker we've got. And crippled or not, he's still damn good."

"Did you see him scare Weasley off her broom?" Vincent snickered. "Never seen anyone fly that close."

"Anyway," Blaise added, "you always said Potter's the one to beat. What're the odds Ravenclaw or Hufflepuff can do what he did?"

"I know," Theo groaned, sounding like he'd argued this in his own head already. "And it's not just his hand. He's exhausted. If I push him too hard during practice, it might be more than he can handle."

"So, what?" Blaise asked. "You thinking of replacing him?"

"With who?" Vincent asked. "There's no time to train no one else."

"Of course I'm not replacing him," Theo snapped. "But I don't want him keeling over in the middle of a game, either."

"Well, what are we supposed to do?" Thomas asked. "It's not like we could sit on him. 'Cept maybe Vince'."

"No way," Vincent said. "I've see him angry."

"No one tells Draco what to do," Blaise said. "'Specially not now. What, you expect us to just go and ask him to stop--oh. Oh. Theo, you bastard."

"'Oh' what?" Vincent asked. "Theo, what're you looking so smug for?"

"He knows I get it now," Blaise said, a note of disgust creeping into his voice. "Why he invited me here even though I'm not on the team."
"Huh?"

Draco would have rolled his eyes at Gregory's usual cluelessness except he didn't understand either. Inching as close as he dared, he held his breath.

"It's simple," Theo said. "You just have to get him some time off so he can practice."

"You're the captain of the team," Blaise said. "You talk to him."

"He likes you better than me," Theo said. "You know I hardly pay attention in potions. If Pansy wasn't helping me--"

"That has nothing to do with it," Blaise argued. "Snape won't listen to me, either. Besides, he'd listen to you. You're the team captain."

"And if I talk to him, he'll think I'm just whining and trying to pin our problems on Draco. But everyone in Slytherin respects you, and if you go to Snape, it'll be like the whole house is behind you."

"Yeah, way behind me. Where no one can see them."

"Well, I'm not having Draco drop dead during a game, so you're going to talk to Snape--"

Draco smiled and eased away from the door, quietly heading back down the hall. Sure, he would have to convince them that he was all right, maybe talk to Snape himself, perhaps even ask for a day off. But for right now, all that mattered was that he was still on the team. And Harry was right, even soldiers got time off. Shouldering Dumbledore's added demands had pushed him too hard. Hm. Blaise was more eloquent. Draco decided to wait and see if Blaise could get him a week or two off before trying his own luck.

A week off with Harry. The thought made him smile, and he closed his eyes as he imagined snowball fights, eating together in the kitchens, catching up on Harry's dark arts lessons. He knew some pretty though useless charms to make little paper horses that capered on a tabletop or make a wisp of light that spun faster and faster until it spun itself out of existence. He didn't think anyone had ever shown Harry those kinds of spells. He wondered if the Gryffindor would like them as much as the ribbon of light they'd created while waiting for the Slytherins.

With these thoughts in his head, he stepped into the common room and looked around for Harry. He found him sitting with a handful of children in front of Daphne as she showed them how to make a charm. As he walked closer, stepping around groups of students and piles of blankets and pillows, he noticed that Daphne had her students filling tiny glass bottles with honey.

Draco froze. The children who'd already finished were corking the bottles tight and wrapping string around their newly fashioned amulets. Daphne smiled and knotted the string for the smallest child, draping it around his neck.

Too late, he thought. Too late. He raised one hand as if to stop time, grab Harry away, anything.

The children, the room, even the war and the last three months all disappeared, swallowed up in darkness until his entire world shrank to Harry holding a tiny bottle in his hand, staring at him in a blazing rage.
In which Draco suffers forced legilimency

Chapter Notes

Note: a scene contained herein may be triggery. Check the tags. You are warned.

At first Draco couldn't move or think. He couldn't even breathe as he met Harry's eyes, feeling as if he'd wither underneath their heat. Was anyone watching them? He couldn't tell. Everything around Harry blurred and turned dark. And then the Gryffindor got to his feet.

Acting purely on Malfoy instincts, Draco turned and headed for the door. He felt as if he was walking through water, fighting the current as he climbed the stairs, his feet dragging in the heavy air. Usually fear made him faster. This time he had to fight his fear to move, walking out of the room and into the hall. Only when he heard Harry's footsteps plodding heavily behind him and coming closer did he finally break into a run.

Too late. Harry's hand fell hard on his shoulder and spun him around, slamming him back against the wall. When he cried out, Harry put his arm up against Draco's throat and leaned hard, choking him.

"You lying bastard," he snarled, his face only inches away. His breath blew hot between his bared teeth. "I trusted you. I trusted you! All that shite about love potions--you lied! I can't believe I told you--"

He cut himself off with a bitter laugh. "'You're the only person who never lied to me'," he remembered, mocking his own words. "Should've known never trust a damn Malfoy--"

"Please, no--" Draco rasped.

"Don't you dare lie again!" Harry drew back and punched him.

The world spun and turned black for a moment. Draco landed on the stone floor, one hand over his eye. He groaned and shook his head. "I didn't--oh God, Harry--I didn't mean--"

"Silencio!"

Only his own harsh breathing and the roar of his heart sounded in the hall, drowning out Harry's steps as he stood over him. Harry was going to kill him, he was sure of it. Draco closed his eyes and curled up, unable to get up. It wasn't fear. He felt too sick to move.

"Expelliarmus!"

Harry landed on the floor in front of him, his wand skittering across the hall. Draco watched him snarl at whoever had cast the spell, then turn and focus on him. Flushed and on all fours, Harry dragged himself closer, his fingers spread like claws that dug into Draco's throat.

He couldn't cry in pain. Draco put his hand out trying to push him away and Harry's fingers fought with the high collar of his severe robes, twisting into the leather cord. A second spell blasted Harry away and back against the wall, snapping the leather from Draco's neck. The cord twisted in Harry's fist and all Draco could see was Harry painfully pushing himself back up, staring at him with hurt and hate.
Draco would have screamed if he had his voice. Gasping with one hand pressed against his throat, he got to his feet and ran down the hall. Someone behind him called his name but the voice sounded like it was underwater. Only his own footsteps echoed in the corridor as he turned left, then right, losing himself in the dungeons. When he came to a stop, leaning against the cold wall to catch his breath, he looked around realized he didn't know where he was.

Harry would come for him. He had no hope of fighting him. Harry always seemed to win every fight. Draco spotted a door nearby and pushed it open, not caring if he ran into something dangerous and forgotten. Instead he stepped into a bathroom where rust and black grime covered the sinks on the wall. The only light, a small flame in a stone holder carved into the wall, sputtered and coughed to life.

His harsh breath roared in the silence and he put his hands over his mouth to muffle it. The room echoed every sound back to him. Acutely aware of the tiniest noise, he crossed the room and stood in front of one the sinks, holding the edges as he started to sob.

But why? So Harry hated him again. It was just like the last five years. What did it matter if Harry hated him a little more? Everyone had warned him about befriending a dark wizard. What else did he expect?

The thought brought no comfort. His gaze wandered up from the black sink to the cloudy mirror showing a murky blur of himself. He raised his arm and wiped a circle clear with his sleeve, slowly revealing his reflection. Once he could see his face, he let his arm drop.

Rita Skeeter's photograph of him had only shown the image he'd wanted to project, a lost child afraid of the world. But he couldn't fool a mirror. Gaunt with slightly sunken eyes and cheeks, he'd gone from the whipcord strength of his flight across the country to a pale, exhausted shadow. He didn't look like a storybook dark wizard. He looked like Draco Malfoy, weakest Malfoy in a dozen generations and failure of the dark community.

The blood traitors and muggle lovers would never truly accept him. When his attempt to manipulate Harry came to light, they would try to send him to Azkaban. Even if he escaped punishment, he would be ostracized by the entire world. His friends would shun him if their parents demanded it. His family would disown him, if they were even alive. And if Harry saw him again, grabbed him again and looked at him with nothing but hate in his eyes--

He bent over and retched. Only stomach acid came up, but the effort made him shake. With a trembling hand, he blindly grabbed the old faucet and turned it, breaking off rust and bringing out a trickle of brownish water. He couldn't stop throwing up what little remained in his stomach and he bent lower, resting his forearms along the sink. Struggling to breathe, he tried to control himself only to be rocked by each cramp of his stomach.

After several minutes it finally stopped. By now the water ran clear and he put his hand under it, gathering some in his palm to rinse his mouth. As he caught his breath, he leaned his forehead against the cool mirror and moved to push his hair from his face. It was a familiar gesture borne out of habit, but he stopped as his fingers touched someone else's. Someone was holding his hair back.

Shrieking silently, he jerked away and backed into the wall before he saw Harry standing in front of him. For a brief instant he gasped for breath, pressing himself against the wall as if he might become part of the stone. Then Harry took a step towards him and Draco winced, turning away and putting up one arm to ward Harry off. As seconds passed he started crying again, unable to stop. His upraised arm came down on his face to cover his eyes and he slid to the floor, curling his legs under himself. The longer he cried, the harder he fought to breathe until he started to choke.
"Stop it," Harry demanded. He knelt and grabbed Draco's arm, forcing it down.

Draco couldn't imagine how hideous he looked. He kept his eyes squeezed shut and would've howled if he had a voice.

"I said stop it."

Harry's rough tone made Draco think he'd be hit again, cursed, condemned. The soft touch of Harry's sleeve on his cheek surprised him and continued to surprise him as his tears were wiped away.

"You'll just make yourself sick again."

For a long time Harry didn't say anything. Draco wondered why he stayed quiet. He knew better than to hope Harry wasn't angry anymore, but the gentle treatment and lack of accusations confused him. The minutes dragged and after a little while, Draco slowly looked up at Harry.

"You're lucky," Harry murmured. "I really wanted to strangle you. I wanted to beat you into a bloody pulp. Snape stopped me."

"Snape wanted to kill me," Harry continued. "Then he saw what I was holding and..." His voice trailed off and he scowled. "He laughed. I don't think he wanted to, but he couldn't help it. When I yelled at him, he just laughed harder and said I was stupid to think this was a love charm."

Harry held up the honey charm on its broken string. Draco flinched, thinking he'd be hit again. The charm glittered in the firelight like gold, spinning slowly.

"And then he said Malfoys were all stupid children."

The familiar jibe no longer sounded like an insult. Draco thought it sounded accurate.

"I still love you," Harry whispered. "That's why I hate you so much right now. Tell me, will I stop loving you if I smash the charm--"

Draco clamped his hands over the little bottle to shield it from attack. Shaking his head, he mouthed the word "don't" and refused to let go.

"Why shouldn't I?" Harry demanded. "If it's not real? If it's just a toy dark children play with, why shouldn't I smash it against the wall right now?"

Draco finally met his eyes. Even if he could have spoken, he didn't think he knew what words to use.

"I can't trust Snape," Harry whispered. "And I can't trust you."

He put his hand on Draco's cheek with calloused fingers that glided down his face and under his lips before spreading out and holding his jaw securely. The grip didn't hurt but Harry didn't let him move.
Draco had no idea what to expect until he felt the invasion into his thoughts.

Unpracticed, Harry stumbled through Draco's mind as if drunk, raking through his memories and grabbing those that caught his attention. He saw Draco practicing with his quidditch team only a few days ago, then looked over his shoulder as he read the Daily Prophet on his first day back in classes. He felt his panic running from the dragons and his rage as he tortured Filch. He found Draco's flight through the blizzard and the fight against two death eaters, and he followed the strand of memory back until he saw Malfoy Manor in flames.

Aware of both his ransacked memories and the cold stone floor beneath them, Draco put his hands on Harry's shoulders and tried to push him away. Harry didn't budge and his grip on Draco's mind became tighter, as if his fingers were digging into the Slytherin's brain. Every occlumency lesson failed when put against Harry's raw power.

He watched helplessly as Harry skimmed over their time in the bathroom together, then seesawed back as he dissected the dragons. The feeling of going back and forth made him nauseous as Harry narrowed in on the time before he had the amulet and the time after, until finally he came to the night when Draco lay in bed writing their names on the tiny slip of paper.

Feeling like he would throw up again, Draco heard his own heartbeat growing louder, felt cold chills cover him in waves. Harry didn't ease off, and Draco shuddered as the memory was peeled back like a layer of skin, letting Harry creep into a part of his mind that Severus had never taught him to defend. The feeling of claws raking something soft didn't feel like legilimency, but it did feel familiar. This was what the dark lord had done to him, snagging vulnerable emotions and relishing them.

As Harry burrowed deeper, Draco screamed in silence, held in place as if Harry had sunk hooks into him. Even worse than the violation or the sense of being drilled into was the feeling that Harry wasn't just digging aimlessly. He'd found something buried deep in Draco's emotions and he was determined to unearth it. Draco began gasping for air. He sensed Harry's elation as he discovered whatever he was looking for, revealing a white hot light that stabbed through Draco--

They both collapsed on the floor. Shaking too hard to push himself up, Draco dragged himself the scant few inches into the corner, huddling in a tight ball as he watched Harry through his tears. He didn't know how he'd pushed Harry off. He just hoped the other boy stayed where he was, panting with wide eyes.

Of course Harry wouldn't do what he wanted. As the Gryffindor got on his hands and knees, Draco wished he could moan, cry for help, pray. He put his hands over his face and waited. Harry didn't take long. A moment later Draco found himself pushed back up against the wall and his hands yanked away. He tried keeping his eyes shut tight and felt Harry trying to open them with his fingers, almost caressing them firmly, coaxing them to open.

"Please," Harry begged, "please let me see. Please, I need it, please, please Draco, let me see it--"

Any attempt to push Harry off again met with less than a shrug and the constant pleading. The light that Harry had touched was something Draco didn't want to touch again, didn't want to admit to, but in his exhaustion, he couldn't stop Harry from opening his eyes. Without bothering to look at anything else, Harry raced right back down the same path he'd forced and into the blazing heat. Draco wanted to run away before it burned him but he was lost inside, turning and turning trying to find the way out until he gave up. All he could find was Harry enveloped in the same light.

"Say it," Harry whispered. "Please say it."

Draco opened his mouth, trying to form the words. Long seconds passed as Harry didn't stop
begging and the heat grew so hot that he couldn't breathe and his tears evaporated. Harry at last fell silent and Draco finally found the words, mouthing them in disbelief.

I love you.

When Severus found them some time later, Draco barely raised his eyes. His arms were wrapped around Harry who lay against his chest, one hand still clinging to the amulet.

"Did you kill him?" Snape whispered, staring at Harry's prone body.

Draco would have laughed but he couldn't summon the strength. He had to wait for Severus to look at him again before he could communicate his need for a finite incantatem spell, thanking heaven that his master was a legilimens.

"He's alive," Draco whispered. "And I don't think he hates me anymore."

Severus knelt before him and put his hand under Draco's jaw, lifting his head so he could see his eyes and thoughts better. "Good Lord, your mind is bleeding. I think it's even burned. What did he do to you?"

"He wanted to know why I made the amulet." Draco's mouth quirked into a sort of smile. "He wasn't very gentle about it."

"You need to get to the hospital--no," Snape reconsidered. "No. To my workshop. A quick dose of heather will at least start mending your mind."

"Sev'," Draco murmured. "Is it really just a toy?"

Without answering, Severus reached down and pulled both boys to their feet, but while Harry stumbled to consciousness and fell back on the floor with a muttered curse, Snape bent and gathered Draco in his arms like a child.

"Keep up, Potter," he snarled over his shoulder. "Dark children are roaming the halls looking for you. If they find you alone, you'll never see daylight again."

However, the only dark children they met were Pansy and Theo who let Harry pass by because of the murderous look on Snape's face when he ordered them to fetch Pomfrey. When they reached the workshop, Severus set Draco down in the only chair.

"It hurts," Draco whimpered, curling up in his seat.

"Shut up," Severus grumbled as he took down a jar of heather. "You're supposed to be a coward, but then you go teasing lions and cry when you get bit."

Draco didn't answer. He should have known better than to seek sympathy from his master. He moved to put his hand around his amulet, then sighed when he realized Harry still had it. Risking a glance, he saw Harry sitting on the floor and holding the amulet close. The Gryffindor showed no sign of moving.

"Is it a toy?" Draco asked again. He looked out of the corner his eye at his master, loathe to move since his head hurt. "Severus, does it really do nothing?"

Snape finished brewing the heather and handed Draco a glass filled with purple liquid. He folded his arms and watched him drink in small sips. Draco brought the glass down against his chest as he drank, savoring the heat if not the taste.
"My apprentice," Snape said ruefully. "You're an adept at potions but now I see how badly I've neglected your charm work. Of course it's a toy. The only thing it's good for is giving shy boys the courage to talk to the objects of their affection, but you couldn't even do that right."

Snape turned to brew something else, but in a fit of pique he glared at both of them.

"And while we're on the subject--Potter? All the students in the school and you chose Potter? Tell me, is it because you love making your life difficult or because you didn't think you'd annoyed me nearly enough for one lifetime?"

"I didn't have a choice," Draco mumbled around the glass. "I didn't even know it was happening."

With a disdainful snort, Snape went back to gathering ingredients in front of him. After a moment he reached for a thick notebook on the table, but after flipping through it, he realized that it didn't have the recipe he needed. He threw a glare at Draco as if it was his fault.

"Where's your grimoire?" he snapped.

"In the cabinet in the common room," Draco said quickly.

"Well, God knows I can't leave you two alone," Snape said and stood at the door, raising his wand. After glancing once at Harry to make sure he was still on the floor, he closed his eyes and concentrated. "Accio book."

Finished with his heather, Draco eased his glass back on the table and lay his head on his hands. His head throbbed in time to his heartbeat and he still felt nauseous, but the familiar calm of the workshop eased the pain. In the soft silence, the rustling of Snape's robes as he caught the grimoire in one hand startled Draco.

"What are you making?"

"Salve for the mind," Snape said. "It requires an incantation your father wrote."

Draco closed his eyes and tilted his head. Lucius had composed dozens if not hundreds of different dark spells, splicing them together from fragments of forgotten old charms and prayers to their long since vanished gods. Simply listening to Severus whispering his father's words eased the pain in his head. Like whispering his cleansing spell over and over again, he murmured the repeated words with him and the seared memories began to soothe.

Snape's hand came down gently on his head, and Draco blinked a few times before he recognized the bowl in his master's other hand. He took it in both hands and sipped the bitter liquid, gulping down pulpy bits with a grimace.

"I'll take you back to sleep this off soon," Severus said. "But this needs time to start working--"

"Draco?"

He flinched. When he didn't hear Snape yell or hear footsteps coming towards him, his gaze carefully swept down the chair along the floor to Harry's shoes. He couldn't bring himself to look any higher.

"Draco, could I--" Harry swallowed once. "Would you let me see again?"

Snape slammed the grimoire shut and glared at the Gryffindor. "Didn't you do enough damage the first time? You've torn delicate layers of consciousness--"
"Severus--"

"--proven exactly how violent you are--"

"Severus." Draco put his hand on his master's arm and met his disbelieving glare without looking away. "I have to talk to him. Alone."

"After what he did to you?" Snape's voice was an incredulous whisper. "Are you so delusional--?"

"I have no more delusions," Draco cut him off.

Severus paused at the flatness of Draco's voice. His look flickered over to Harry for a second before settling back on his apprentice.

"He will hurt you again," he said softly.

"No doubt," Draco said. "But not today."

Although he didn't have Draco's confidence in the matter, Snape simply nodded once. "I will go and see what's keeping Pomfrey. If he tries anything, throw him outside for the Slytherins to take care of."

Draco doubted he could push Harry off, let alone throw him out, but he didn't think he'd need to. Once Snape was gone, Draco sighed and closed his eyes again, resting his head on his arms.

"You hurt me," he said.

"You tried to use me," Harry countered. "Even if you didn't know it was fake, you tried."

Draco didn't deny it. "I thought it was working both ways."

"What?"

"I thought--" He paused. In retrospect, it seemed so stupid. "I thought it made me like you, too."

"Was loving me so bad that you had to pretend it was fake?"

"It scared me." He burrowed his head a little deeper in his arms. "And it burns."

The rustling of cloth along the floor told him that Harry was crawling towards him. He flinched even though he didn't think Harry would hit him, and he sighed in relief when he felt a warm hand cover his own. He raised his head slightly and found Harry on his knees beside the chair, leaning on him for support.

"Let me see it again. Please."

For a moment, Draco didn't answer. He raised his free hand and hesitated, holding it in the air before setting it down on Harry's. Either Harry was hot or he was cold because he started to shiver.

"It hurts too much," Draco said. At Harry's crestfallen look, he continued. "You'll just have to live knowing it's there. And so will I."

"But why's it so bad? You know I love you." Harry tightened his grip until Draco winced, letting go when he realized he was hurting him. "I know I shouldn't have hit you, but you tried to use me."

"This year's been nothing but pain. Why should love be any different?"
Harry didn't say anything. After a minute, he leaned completely against Draco, resting his head on his side. Draco turned to rest against Harry and listened to him breathe. He could no longer tell himself it was because of the cold. And even though it was Harry who'd hurt him, being near him eased the pain a little.

That was the way Pomfrey and Snape found them when they arrived at last. No doubt Pansy and Theo had dragged their feet on the way to the hospital, probably hoping that if they stalled long enough, Harry might die of whatever magical injury he'd suffered. She paused in the doorway, holding her bag of remedies a little tighter.

"Harry," she said, coming next to him. "Are you all right?"

Harry barely tilted his head to see her, blinking in the light from doorway. "I'm fine. It's Draco that's hurt."

"Malfoy is under my care," Snape told him. "Madame Pomfrey is here for you."

Pomfrey did her best to ignore Severus and only paid attention to Harry. "You don't seem hurt," she said. She grabbed his chin and forced him to face her, pulling his eyes open so she could see them.

"He forced his way into Malfoy's mind and then dug into his emotions," Snape said in a clipped voice. "I thought the resultant lacerations and burning in Malfoy's mind might have affected Potter as well."

She let go of Harry and leaned back. "You did what?" she whispered.

"That's not all of it," Harry said, glaring at Severus. "Draco--"

Harry cut himself off so suddenly that Draco looked at him, trying to read his expression.


"'Did something'? Pomfrey repeated. "Did he hurt you?"

A small smile passed over Harry's face. "No. It was the most wonderful..." His voice drifted off at the memory.

Maybe Harry would hurt him again. Everything and everyone else certainly did whether they meant to or not. Draco squeezed his hand and smiled in return, and even the constant ache in his head couldn't make him feel any less triumphant.

A dark wizard's smile did nothing to reassure Madame Pomfrey. Her look darkened and she shot to her feet, looming over him with clenched fists.

"What did you do to him?" Pomfrey demanded. "What did you dark wizards do to him?"

"What--?"

"You think I can't guess?" she said. "I may not know all your tricks but I know how to find them out. I'll find out what spells you've cast on him. Give me your wand!"

Draco glanced at Severus, who nodded once. Not sure why his master would allow this, Draco drew out his wand only to have it snatched out of his hand. Pomfrey took it to the table and pulled something out of her bag. As she examined it, she frowned even harder.
"So many dark spells," she muttered.

"Requested from the faculty," Snape reminded her.

She threw him a look but finally set the wand down again. Undaunted, she dug out a bunch of bottles from her bag and set them in a row.

"I'll be using some of your empty vials," she said, sounding like she wouldn't take no for an answer. She glanced over her shoulder at Severus, who simply shrugged.

As she worked, Draco watched her until he realized she was performing the usual tests to see if Harry had been poisoned or drugged or charmed or jinxed, anything that might explain why the world's savior would cling desperately to a dark wizard. She worked remarkably quickly, almost driven to find a reason. One by one, she eliminated every possibility, growing visibly frustrated as she found nothing. When the last vial refused to turn whatever color she'd hoped for, she slammed it down so that the contents sloshed on the table.

"Is this some strange magic I've never heard of?" she demanded. "Something sacrificed? Trapped his soul somehow? What did you do?"

I was stupid and reckless, Draco thought but he didn't think Pomfrey would accept that. "I told him I love him."

Pomfrey opened her mouth to say something, thought better of it, then tried to say something else. She cut herself off before she could begin. Putting everything away with a little too much force, she shook her head as she shut her bag.

"I don't know what you're up to," she admitted, glaring not at Draco but at Severus. "You know Harry's mind is fine. But we'll see how the headmaster feels about all this, and no one can keep secrets from him."

And with that, she turned on her heel and left, scattering several Slytherin students who'd gathered unnoticed by the door. Once she was gone, Severus shut the door and cleaned up the little mess on the table.

"Are you satisfied?" Snape asked. "That no potions or charms influenced you?"

"I knew that already," Harry snapped. "Why'd you bother bringing Pomfrey down here?"

"To confirm to everyone else that Draco did not manipulate you, despite his best efforts." He put his hand on his apprentice's shoulder. "Draco, if you do this, there will be no turning back."

"I know."

"Your parents, the other dark wizards, they may not accept him. The school will become a death trap. The Ministry will hate you even more."

How he wished he could say he didn't care, damn all their opinions, it was his life, but the thought of their judgment and what they might do weighed heavily on his mind. He had so little left to call his own. But then hadn't he already cast everyone else aside in everything he'd done in these few short months?

"Let them hate me," Draco started, then paused as he remembered something. He glanced down at the boy still holding him. "Do you hate me?"
Harry looked up at him and thought for a moment. "I'm still angry at you. I'm tired of people trying to use me. I don't want you doing it, too."

"I'm a Malfoy," Draco murmured.

"My Malfoy," Harry corrected. "No. I don't hate you."

Draco was too tired to smile again, but the answer left him content. "I don't hate you either."

Severus' sneer left no doubt as to his opinion, but he went and opened the door, startling Theo and Pansy as well as Daphne and Blaise. "Go round up the children still wandering the dungeons. And make sure you tell them not to jinx Potter when they see him."

"That's it?" Pansy asked in disbelief. "Potter hurts Draco and nothing happens to him?"

"You're right," Snape said and looked over his shoulder. "Potter, detention for a week." Ignoring Harry's unsurprised snort, he turned back and stared at Pansy.

"Now go on. And this time don't drag your feet."

As they scattered, Severus glared impatiently at his apprentice. "Well, get up. You should be in bed before the children come back. You've made enough of a spectacle of yourself as it is."

Nodding once, Draco nudged Harry aside and stood up, leaning on the table for a few seconds until he felt able to walk back to his house. Harry stood beside him, awkwardly putting an arm around him.

"I can walk you there," he offered, sounding like he expected his offer to be refused.

"You'll do more than walk him there," Snape said. "As much as I would love to throw you to the wolves, you must stay in Slytherin."

"What?" Harry's head snapped up as he stared. "Are you mad? You told me I'd never see daylight again if they found me."

"When they find out Draco has chosen you, they'll let you live," Snape said. "Which is more than I can say for your housemates. We are accustomed to the occasional convert. Their pride cannot stand losing even one to the dark."

"They knew I was friends with--"

"Idiot!" Severus growled, cutting him off. "Oh yes, you can be friends with a dark wizard, you can work together, they'll tolerate that. But love? All their pretty words about trust and honor will mean nothing, and while they may not kill their savior, they will kill Draco. Purely for your sake, of course. All the tests will never convince them that Draco isn't controlling you."

Shaking his head, Harry turned to Draco. "That can't be true. I've lived with them for years. I know them."

"We've lived with them for centuries," Draco said. He took no joy in Harry being wrong. "We have known them for generations. If you don't renounce me, they will kill you, too."

"You will have the opportunity to see for yourself," Snape said. "When news of this leaks to the rest of the school and the world at large, you will see the true worth of their tolerance."

By the look on Harry's face, Draco knew he wasn't convinced. It didn't matter. He'd be convinced
soon enough.

Slytherin was still empty when they walked into the common room. Harry had to help him across the sprawled blankets and bedding to the same bedroom they'd slept in after the mob's attack. Severus gave them a stern admonishment not to leave and then closed the door, locking it behind him. Two torches flared to life, doing more to throw shadows around the room than light it. They did nothing to fight the chill.

Draco sat down on the edge of his bed with a sigh and reached up to undo the top button holding his robes closed. After the third try, he looked down and tried to focus on the little button, but his fingers kept slipping.

"Here," Harry said, sitting beside him. "Let me see."

Acquiescing as Harry undid it for him, Draco let his eyes close and shrugged out of his robes once they were loose enough. He dropped them on the floor and kicked off his shoes while he waited for Harry to pull the blankets back.

"Why's Snape letting me stay?" Harry asked. "I hit you. He hates me."

"Because he knows you're important to the war," Draco mumbled. "And because I want you here."

"You sure he won't hex me while I'm here?"

"He's probably just hoping you don't survive the war."

He settled back on the pillows and curled up slightly, watching Harry remove his own robes. Like himself, though, the Gryffindor didn't strip completely down.

Harry hesitated. "Do you mind if I join you?"

Draco burrowed deeper into his pillow. "Course not."

The bed jostled slightly as Harry lay down beside him, using the other pillow and scooting closer. Only inches away, his warm breath passed over Draco's cheek. He gently touched the lingering bruise on his fair skin, then resolutely met Draco's eyes. "I won't ever hit you again."

Although he didn't promise, it had all the weight of a solemn vow. Draco covered Harry's hand with his own.

"I won't try to manipulate you again," he said, his voice slurred. "Deliberately."

"Draco..."

"I'm Slytherin, dark and a Malfoy," he insisted. "Some things I can't help."

"You're more than any of that," Harry said. "And you don't have to manipulate me. All you have to do is ask."

Draco's brow furrowed in confusion. That wouldn't work. The world didn't work like that. He opened his mouth to argue but stopped as Harry pressed his fingers to his lips.

"We can argue about it later," he whispered. "You really look tired."

"S'your fault," Draco murmured.

Before he fell asleep, he felt Harry edge close enough to drape an arm over him, holding him
securely. As his eyes closed, he pressed a kiss to Harry's fingertips and reached up, finding his hand blindly and covering it with his own. To his surprise, Harry held the amulet in his hand.
In which Draco didn't inherit his father's taste

Obnoxious elf voices woke him up. Draco squeezed his eyes tight and buried his head deeper into his pillow, but the voices only grew louder. With a grumble, he admitted to himself that he wasn't going to fall back to sleep, but he didn't move from the warm blankets, not even when he smelled something good and cooked nearby. The elf voices disappeared with an abrupt popping sound.

"I know you're awake," Harry said from somewhere in the darkness. "It's time to eat."

Draco didn't answer except to breathe deep.

"Nice try," Harry said. This time he sounded closer. "But you fidget in your sleep. You're lying too still now."

"I'm not awake," Draco mumbled.

A hand gently smoothed back his hair and stroked his cheek. "You need to eat. I don't want my Malfoy wasting away now that I finally have him."

"Sweet words won't make me get up," Draco said, but he couldn't hide his smile. The words made him feel warm inside.

"How about fresh apple pastries?" Harry was only inches away, whispering in his ear. "Right out of the oven?"

"Dessert for breakfast?"

"Only if you wake up."

Draco groaned, but his stomach growled and he really did feel like eating something. He pushed himself up and rubbed the sleep from his eyes as he watched Harry pile the pillows together at the head of bed.

"What are you doing?" he mumbled.

"You were pretty sick yesterday," Harry said. "You shouldn't move around too much."

"So I get breakfast in bed?" Draco guessed, lying back down on the pillows.

He found he was comfortably propped up and only needed to move one particularly lumpy pillow. The cool air tingled on his skin, but before he could complain, Harry tossed another blanket around his shoulders to keep him warm.

"I could get used to this," Draco smiled.

His smile faded as Harry put a tray of something that was not apple pastries on his lap. He picked up a spoon and poked at the bowl, stirring up strange bits of meat and vegetables.

"Soup?" he said. "Harry--"

"Pastries after you finish," Harry said firmly. "And don't look at me like that. Snape said you had to eat it first."

"Figures." He grimaced when he found bits of celery floating around and began the painstaking task
of picking out every single one.

Harry sat down beside him and watched in bemusement. "That's not a potion, is it? It's plain old chicken soup."

"Severus adds things to it, but yes."

"That's kind of weird."

Draco spared him a glance between two disgustingly large pieces of celery. "Why?"

"I know I don't know much about the wizarding world, but I don't think I've ever had chicken soup when I was sick. Don't remember anyone else getting any, either." Harry gave him a look. "I thought it was a muggle thing."

Pausing with his spoon in the air, Draco hesitated as his mind raced. Neither Snape nor his parents had ever said anything otherwise, but he'd noticed little quirks that his master occasionally slipped into when he relaxed every so slightly. Living so close to Severus, it was impossible not to notice them after a few years. A muggle phrase, muggle cooking, even just a keen awareness of muggle fashion and history, and most of all, his habit of excusing himself from the conversation whenever muggles came up. While nearly every other wizard tried to hide a lack of knowledge, Draco suspected that Severus was hiding an abundance of knowledge.

But whatever he suspected, that was not his secret to tell.

"Severus said that some recipes fall in and out of favor," Draco said carefully. "Especially after certain restorative draughts were created. But sometimes you need something that will help a patient without interacting with the other charms or potions. Muggles just picked up on some of what we use."

"And it's just coincidence that no other wizard ever uses chicken soup?"

Usually he didn't have to come up with his lies on the spur of the moment. He shrugged once.

"You're not telling me everything," Harry said.

Draco met his eyes. To his surprise, Harry didn't look angry, just hurt. Which made Draco feel like he was doing something bad.

"I can't tell you everything," he said, looking away again. "For the simple reason that I'm not told everything. Besides, you wouldn't go around spilling any of the Weasel's secrets, would you?"

"Ron doesn't have secrets," Harry said.

"His father conducting illegal experiments on muggle artifacts wasn't a secret?" He laughed. "They all lie as much as we do. They're just more self-righteous about it."

Harry didn't answer. He still hadn't answered when Draco finished his soup and desert, and Draco found that the apple pastries didn't taste as sweet without Harry's voice, without his touch. He look at him hoping Harry might say something. Instead the Gryffindor wasn't even looking at him, absorbed with patterns in the floor.

"Do you regret loving me?" Draco suddenly asked.

Ruefully smiling, Harry glanced at him and raised his hand, touching Draco's face.
"No," he answered, tracing Draco's lips. "But you make it hard sometimes."

"I can't change what I am," he said. "I won't change what I am."

"I know." Harry let his hand drop and sighed. "Neither can I."

If that wasn't regret, Draco didn't want to know what was. He pushed his plate aside and beckoned Harry closer.

"Sit next to me," he murmured.

He was already close, but Harry scooted closer. Draco reached out and took his right hand, holding it between his own. Although he was the one under the blankets, Harry's skin felt much warmer. But when Harry's other hand rose to cup his face, he flinched.

"I won't hurt you," Harry whispered.

"I know." Draco tried to sound confident, but he was still more used to Harry's anger than his kindness.

Harry sighed as he stroked Draco's cheek. "I knew you were pushing yourself, but up close, it's obvious you've lost a lot of weight. And you were already scrawny to begin with."

"Was not," Draco said.

"Yes, you were," Harry said. His thumb dipped along Draco's cheekbone, then curled around his eye. "You're almost gaunt and there are circles under your eyes. If you keep this up, you're going to turn into a skeleton."

Draco turned slightly and rested his head on Harry's hand. "I have responsibilities."

"Like what?"

"Dumbledore's potions. Sev' and I've been working on them nearly every day."

In truth, the potions themselves were not difficult to create, but waking up before dawn to make them meant little rest when he was already tired.

"Keeping my Slytherins safe. Staying between them and the rest of the school. Quidditch. And the teachers all wanting demonstrations in their classes."

"Well, you won't be doing any more demonstrations," Harry said firmly.

"Who says you get to decide?" Draco asked with a sad smile.

"You're mine. I have to take care of you, since you don't seem very good at doing that yourself."

Draco blinked. He knew that Harry loved him. The Gryffindor had certainly said it often enough, but this protective streak was unexpected.

"You can't protect me from everything," he whispered.

"I can try."

"Your friends--"
"Won't do anything if they're my friends."

"But they will," Draco said. It was inevitable. The good and peace loving light wizards would try to hurt them. They always did.

"Then I'll stop them," Harry said simply, as if saying it was the same as doing it.

Draco almost smiled. Maybe for Harry, saying and doing really were the same.

They both heard a several footsteps and furtive whispers coming towards the door before someone knocked softly. Harry started to reach for his wand but Draco touched his hand, stilling him.

"It's all right," Draco said. "They've come to check on me, that's all."

"Who?"

"My friends. Go let them in, will you?"

Harry glanced mistrustfully at the door. "Are you sure they won't do anything?"

"Not unless I tell them to."

Not looking at all reassured, Harry opened the door and found Pansy and Theo glaring at him like miniature Death Eaters. Pansy pushed by him and rushed to Draco's side, sitting next to him and tugging the blankets higher against his chest.

"Look at you," she said, "sitting up when it's so cold. You look like you're about to collapse and you're not even standing. Did that brute hurt you?"

"I'm fine," Draco lied. "Just need some rest. And no, he didn't hurt me."

"You may not remember," she said, "but I saw Snape carrying you. He never carries anyone."

"And you didn't look like you were even conscious," Theo added.

"I was," Draco said. "Mostly."

"Draco..."

"There was a bit of a misunderstanding--" he started.

Normally Slytherins didn't snarl, but Draco thought Pansy was getting close. "I knew it!" she said. "He did hurt you!"

Before she could grab her wand, however, Draco sat straight and grabbed her hands, holding her still. She was about to argue until she saw the look in his eyes.

"Pansy," he said softly. "You're my friend. But you will simply have to trust me on this, because if anybody hurts Harry, I will personally tear them to pieces. Do you understand?"

She stared at him for a moment. "You're in love with him," she whispered.

"Yes."

Silence. They both knew the implications of such a deceptively simple statement.

Near the door, Theo stood upright. "Draco, if this gets out--"
"Chaos, death threats, and possibly being shunned from our community," Draco said. He shrugged once. "I was facing that already anyway, and Harry doesn't have the sense to care, either."

Theo grimaced but he didn't argue. Pansy stared at Harry for a moment before looking back at Draco.

"Does anyone else know?" she asked.

"Pomfrey," Draco said. "And Severus, of course. No doubt Dumbledore knows by now."

"I don't think anyone heard Potter yelling except us," she said. "And I know none of the children have spoken with anyone. I've kept them in since yesterday."

"Still," Theo said. "The Gryffindors are probably wondering where Potter is. If they don't hear from him soon, especially if it gets out that you're together, there could be real trouble."

"The whole school could turn against us," Pansy whispered.

"Gryffindor won't," Harry said, growling when they all scoffed. "I don't care if you don't believe me. They're my friends--"

"And they're our enemies," Draco snapped.

"They don't have to be," Harry said. "They accepted you--"

"That was before I stole their savior!"

"Let me talk to them," Harry insisted. "Before the news gets out, before the rumors start. If I can talk to Ron and Hermione, get them on my side--"

"No!" Draco cried. Just how stupid could Harry be? "They'd just hurt you and--ow!"

He clasped his hands over his head, wincing as a sharp stab went through his head just behind his right eye, traveling along the same path that Harry had burned into him. Pansy tried to hold him, but he shrugged her off and instead reached out towards Harry.

As if afraid he would break, Harry came within reach and held him lightly. Well, that simply wasn't enough, Draco decided, and threw his arms around him, holding as tight as he could and resting his head on his shoulder. Harry was warm, Harry was right here in his arms and if he left, Draco knew everything would turn cold and empty.

"You mustn't," he mumbled. "Don't talk to Gryffindor, don't leave Slytherin, don't even leave this room. You have to stay. I can't bear it if you don't stay."

"I know you're scared," Harry murmured. "But--"

"Everyone laughs at me for being a coward," Draco continued as if Harry hadn't said anything. "But I'm still alive. In this war, the brave keep dropping dead."

"He's got a point," Theo said. "If you're outside when everyone finds out, no matter what you think, they may not kill you but they'll stop you somehow. Even if it means locking you up until they've killed Draco."

"Might even make you watch," Pansy said. "That's how my great great uncle Thislen died, cut apart in front of his betrothed."
"No one'll get hurt," Harry said.

"Because you won't leave the dungeon," Draco said, leaning back to look him in the eye. "Please, Harry, promise me you won't leave. Please?"

A long moment passed, but finally Harry heaved a sigh and nodded once. "Fine," he said. "I'll stay inside."

Draco smiled and leaned against him again. Perhaps they could simply hole up and hide for the rest of the year. His headache eased but didn't go away, throbbing softly in the right side of his brain.

"But if I could talk to Ron and Hermione, bring them down here and just talk--"

Damn it! Draco groaned and held him tighter. Before he could argue, though, Theo spoke up again.

"You said Gryffindor was the house that accepted you first, right? Maybe Weasley won't listen, but that friend of his, Granger, she might listen. She's so bloody ignorant she might not attack the moment she sees you."

"She's not ignorant," Harry said. "She's the smartest person in this school."

"He said ignorant, not stupid," Pansy said. "And she barely knows anything about us. All she knows comes from books that're only half true."

"Then talk to her," Harry said, nearly at the end of his patience. "If I ask her to, she'll listen, and once Hermione convinces Ron, she'll have the whole house convinced."

They all looked at Draco, who closed his eyes and tried to hide against Harry's throat.

"It's worth a try," Theo said. "At the very least, we could get some allies."

"Harry's not leaving," Draco whispered.

"Then they can come here. I'll send a few of the older Slytherins," Theo said. "Blaise for sure, and Vincent and Greg for backup."

"Send Daphne and Zepha, too," Pansy said. "And Millicent, she can hold her own in a fight."

Draco started laughing. "And what will they say? Please come visit us in the dungeon full of dark wizards? Promise we won't eat you?"

"I'll write them a note," Harry said. "They'll come, trust me."

Trust him? After everything he'd done? True, Draco thought, Harry wasn't the one who'd tried to use a love charm but just because the Gryffindor was more blunt didn't make his violation any better. He shook his head.

Sighing in exasperation, Theo stepped closer and leaned over them. "Draco, we need allies. It's better if they find out from Harry than the Prophet."

I should never have come out to the school, Draco realized. Should never have even come here, just stopped long enough to rest and kept on going. Everything was so simple those first couple of days, fly away and kill when he had to. Now he felt too worn out to play such dangerous political games. It would be so easy to let his Slytherins make the decisions now.

But if he was honest with himself, he knew none of them could do it as well as he could. Politics had
always been a Malfoy game. Theo was too obvious, Pansy too overbearing and Blaise was simply too honest in his own way. Groaning as he moved back, he kept a firm grip on Harry's hands and refused to let go.

"Not today," he whispered. "Tomorrow. Or maybe the day after--"

"Tomorrow," Pansy said firmly. "Early, before classes. Before it gets out."

"Dumbledore kept Draco's darkness and two dragons a secret for awhile," Harry said. "We have at least a few days."

"Don't expect those days," Pansy said. "You'll just set yourself up for a nasty shock."

"Right," Theo said. "Tomorrow then. Write your note and get some rest. We'll wake you up before we go."

Once they had left, Draco lay back on his pillows and closed his eyes. How was it that staying alive felt like running a losing race? The simple matter of "us against Voldemort" had turned into "us against Voldemort, if you don't kill us before the fight."

Jostling the bed slightly, Harry climbed beside him and lay down, throwing an arm over Draco's body. As warm and comforting as that was, Draco wondered if Harry was always this physical, as if he wanted to be as close as possible. Now that he was allowed to touch Draco, he seemed to want to contact all the time.

"You should come under the blankets," Draco whispered. "Keep me warm."

"Are you sure?" Harry said. "Someone might walk in."

"Not unless they have a damn good reason. Come on, it's cold in here."

"It's not that bad," Harry argued, but he eased under the blankets and pulled them up over their bodies. "Or does being half wyvern make you more sensitive?"

"Don't know," Draco said. "Sit up a little more, would you?"

Confused, Harry scooted up a few more inches on the pillows. Once he was in the right place, Draco yawned and pillowed his head on Harry's shoulder.

"There," he said, smiling and nestling into a comfortable position. "Now don't move."

With a snort, Harry put his arm around Draco's shoulders and tugged him close. "You're just like Crookshanks."

"Who?"

"Hermione's cat. Sometimes he'll jump on top of us and refuse to move again, like he owns us."

His headache nearly gone, Draco smiled. "Well, betrothal's almost as good as ownership, so I guess you're mine."

Harry glanced at him, nuzzling his hair as he thought that over. "Pansy mentioned that, too. Betrothal. What is it?"

Rising up on one arm, Draco blinked sleepily as he looked into Harry's eyes. "I know you haven't learned much about us, but even you must know what betrothal is."
"Is it like getting engaged? Or promising to get married?"

"Exactly." A little relieved, Draco lay down again. "Actually, that's a better way of saying it than engagement. Good little wizards get engaged. We don't."

"What's the difference?"

"For one thing, they can break an engagement. And just listen to it. An engagement. Sounds so fleeting. You can have a dinner engagement, an afternoon engagement. A moment and it's done with."

"That's not--you're twisting the words around."

"Hardly." He shifted further onto his side, yawning and closing his eyes. "I admit, they can break up so often because they have the luxury of living for such a long time. When you're lucky to survive past twenty, betrothal's sometimes as far as you make it."

He yawned again. His body must've been catching up on lost time because he didn't think he could stay awake much longer. Content to rest against Harry, he didn't pay much attention to his Gryffindor's hand until it strayed down his right arm and around his long injured palm, rubbing soft circles over his scar. Draco moaned as the heat soothed cramps and aches he hadn't even realized were there, so used to ignoring them now.

"Where'd you learn that?" Draco mumbled.

"My wand hand used to get sore during defense practice. Oliver once showed me how to get rid of muscle cramps, so I just did the same for my hand."

Draco didn't think he liked the idea of someone else touching Harry. He mumbled something else, he wasn't sure what, but his murmurs seemed to make the boy beside him happy. Comfortably nestled against Harry's body and satisfied that, at least for now, he was safe, he drifted into a dreamless sleep.

When he woke up, he had no idea of how long he'd been out. Night in the dungeons was the same as day, and he didn't hear anything unusual outside, only the low voices of Slytherins teaching each other so they wouldn't fall behind. Harry still lay beside him, snoring slightly as he shifted in his sleep.

He shivered. Somehow the blankets had slipped down to his waist, and the chill bit into his skin. As he reached down and grabbed the blanket's edge, something beside him rustled against the nightstand. Taken by surprise, he turned too fast to grab his wand and gave himself another headache, grimacing and putting his cold hand against his forehead.

"Calm down," Severus whispered. "You know you're safe here."

"Could've said something," Draco grumbled.

"I figured you would wake on your own," Severus said. "Drink this."

Blinking the sleep from his eyes, Draco wrapped his hands around a container that seemed more like a vase than a glass. Bubbles churned a thick white cream with black flecks that he recognized as burned crow eyes. Not many recipes called for that, so he guessed that he was drinking yet another restorative draught.

"All of it?" he asked.
"As much as you can stand," Severus said. "The rest can be chilled and taken later."

Draco nodded and took several gulps. "Does everyone know yet?"

"No. You've only been asleep for a few hours. Pansy told me of your plan to try and bring Gryffindor to your side."

"Reckless and stupid?" Draco asked.

"Yes, but you seem to make that work for you," Severus said without a hint of humor. "I told her to wait until the day after tomorrow. While I agree that haste is necessary, I see no reason to let them see you so weak."

"Fine by me." He took another long swallow, then abruptly stopped and swallowed quickly before a coughing fit took him.

"That's enough for now," Snape said, taking the potion away and giving him a glass of water instead. "I'll leave it here with instructions."

"I know how to take that potion," Draco muttered. Although he was used to his master's insults, Snape rarely insulted his potion skills.

"Instructions for Potter," Snape clarified. "I assume he'll be the one to wake you up so you may take it."

"...oh." He gathered the blankets in one hand, torn between trying to hide the fact that he was lying next to Harry and feeling how stupidly useless the gesture would be. While he knew that Severus grudgingly accepted his decision, Draco still felt self-conscious being seen with someone in his bed.

"So," Severus said after a moment. "Potter."

"I'm afraid so."

"Tch. You obviously didn't inherit your father's taste."

Draco smiled indulgently. Snape could bark insults at him all day. He had what he wanted, after all.

"Have you cast the betrothal spell yet?" Severus asked. "If not, there's still time to change your mind."

"No, I haven't," Draco said, "but no, I won't."

"Why haven't you?" Snape demanded. "It isn't as if the spell is difficult. No doubt you could manage it now if you wanted. Or are you afraid he'll refuse?"

"I'm not afraid of that," Draco snapped. "I just haven't explained it to him yet. Been a little busy having my brain torn into."

"I see," Snape said, sounding like he didn't consider that a good excuse. "Then I trust you won't overexert yourself before then? Your father would have my hide if he knew I permitted you to share a bed before you were formally bound."

Doubly glad for the candlelight, Draco turned his face away to conceal how his face warmed up. Snape's tone left no doubt as to what kind of overexertion he thought his apprentice might indulge in.

"Of course not. I'm not an animal that can't control itself."
"You're a young man," Snape said. "That's close enough."

"You're worried about his honor," came a sleepy voice, "while there's a war on? You dark wizards have strange priorities."

Snape glared down at Harry, who hadn't even opened his eyes when he spoke. "I'm not surprised you wouldn't care about that, considering how you've already forced yourself on him once."

Harry pushed himself up on his elbows, almost snarling. That he had to squint without his glasses made him no less threatening. "You self-righteous bastard. You may see nothing wrong with manipulating people, but I have to know who I can trust."

"Your ignorance deeply scarred Draco's mind," Snape hissed. "Because you didn't know the difference between real magic and a child's toy."

"Neither did Draco," Harry snapped.

As their voices steadily rose with their argument until they were yelling, Draco winced and put his hands over his ears. His head already hurt, and their ranting only made the pain worse. When neither of them showed any signs of stopping, he decided that since they were treating him like a child, he might as well act like one, turning his back on Severus and forcing Harry to lay down so he could rest on top of him. Getting Harry to lay still wasn't easy when he was angry, but within a few seconds Draco comfortably settled on his shoulder.

Immediately the argument stopped as each of them stopped midsentence in surprise. A moment later, Draco felt the blanket being pulled up and the candle was blown out. He didn't know which of them did what, but a second later he heard the door close again and he didn't care. He half-smiled and yawned, brushing a soft kiss on Harry's throat.

"You manipulative little thing," Harry whispered, but his voice held a smile.

As he drifted to sleep, Draco wondered if he mumbled a reply.

He'd only just closed his eyes when someone shook his shoulder. He winced and burrowed his head into the pillow as the shaking grew more insistent. "Go 'way," he mumbled.

"It's time to get up," Harry said.

Had his Gryffindor's voice ever sounded so obnoxiously insistent? Draco turned on his side and yelped when Harry dragged the blanket off of him.

"What are you doing?" he whined. "You're supposed to let me sleep."

"You slept all of yesterday," Harry said. "I don't think you were really awake when I gave you your medicine."

"What?" Draco muffled a yawn and did his best to grasp what Harry was saying. "I wasn't asleep yesterday."

"Yes, you were," Harry said. "And you hogged the covers the whole time. Now get up. Nott came by a few minutes ago. They're about to go get Ron and Hermione. If we're lucky, we'll have time for a quick shower before they come back."

A day passed already? But he'd only shut his eyes for a moment. He pushed himself up on his knees and groaned, covering his face with his hands.
"Should've made it two days," he said to himself.

"Come on," Harry said. He put his arm around Draco and helped him off the bed. "You'll feel better when you've showered."

Draco didn't believe it, but he grabbed a clean set of robes from his trunk and followed Harry out, pouting the whole way. Hot water did nothing to improve his mood and by the time he was fully dressed with his hair smoothed back, he wanted nothing more than to ease back into his warm bed and pretend the world didn't exist. Steam made the shower room warm and soothing, and Harry wasn't finished yet, so he leaned against the stall and drowsed.

Listening the water cascade over Harry's body, splashing around his feet, hidden only by a thin curtain made the corners of his mouth twitch upwards. Once they were betrothed, pre-marital relations would be frowned upon but not completely condemned, as long as they were discreet.

As his head drooped, he spotted Harry's glasses on top of his robes. Hoping Harry wouldn't finish up just yet, he bent and picked up the glasses, unfolding them and holding them up to his face. Through the lenses, the sharp lines of the shower stalls turned blurry. The closer he brought them to his eyes, the blurrier the room became. Finally he eased them on his face, setting them gently on his nose for fear that they would snap. The black frames made him feel like he was looking through tiny windows.

"How on earth does he stand looking through these?" he wondered.

The curtain pulled back and Harry poked his head out, a surprised smile spreading over his face when he saw Draco.

"Going near-sighted?"

"Don't these bother you?" Draco asked. "It's like wearing a box."

"I got used to it," Harry said. He turned off the water and stepped out of the shower with a towel around his waist. With a damp finger, he traced the fair skin around the glasses. "They're a little big on you."

"Is that why they feel like they're going to fall?" Draco didn't wait for an answer but took them off and carefully put them on Harry. "Why didn't you ever get your eyes healed?"

"They can't do it," Harry said, adjusting the glasses until they sat right. "Something about how they're not really injured."

Draco slowly smiled. "Want to give dark magic a chance?"

"I don't know," Harry frowned. "I can see fine with these. I don't want to risk my sight."

"Oh, no risk at all," Draco's smile broadened. "We can test it out on plenty of muggles first to make sure it's safe."

"Draco..."

Saying he was joking would've been half a lie, so Draco offered no apologies.

"Get dressed, our esteemed guests will be here any minute. Unless you want to surprise them, of course. Want to change robes? I'd love to see Weasley's face if he saw you with a Slytherin badge."
"We're trying to keep them from attacking you, remember?" Harry dressed quickly in his scourgified clothes, double-checking the badge to make sure Draco hadn't played a trick on him. "Promise me you won't deliberately make them mad."

"I should ask you to keep Weasley civil," Draco said. "Besides, they're the ones who always resort to violence."

As they arrived at the common room, Draco was struck by the lack of voices. Usually his Slytherins were noisy and talkative, but today only a handful of older students sat near the back of the room. Draco had no doubt that the rest of them were nearby in the various bedrooms, keeping a safe eye on the younger children.

They sat down on the couch facing the entrance and waited. Staring at the door made Draco feel vulnerable and he didn't know why until he noticed that all the other couches and tables were arranged neatly where they belonged. For the first time in months, he had no physical barricade between him and the door.

"Harry," he whispered, turning to face him. "If Weasley or Granger do try to hurt me, you'll stop them, right?"

"They won't try to hit you," Harry promised.

"But if they do try?" Draco insisted. "They've hit me before. They're absolutely uncivilized sometimes."

"They hit you after you insulted them," Harry said.

"And they never insulted me?"

"You want me to list everything you've done to us?" Harry asked.

Draco thought he'd be getting that list from Harry's friends soon enough, but the Gryffindor gave him no time to reply.

"Plus there's your hexes and --"


Harry gave a long-suffering sigh. "Fine. I promise in the unlikely event that they try to hit you, I will stop them."

"Or hex me?"

"You want me to hex you?"

"No! I mean if they try to hex me."

"But they'd be acting like proper wizards, then, right? So that's okay."

"Harry..." Draco didn't care that he was whining. Everyone in Slytherin knew that he whined or pouted in the rare instance that he didn't get his way, and whining usually got his way for him.

"Draco," Harry said in a firm voice. "You'll be fine. I promise."

He had to be satisfied with that because the door started to open. Taking Harry's left hand in his own
left so that their wand hands would be free if Harry was wrong, he steadied his shoulders and took a deep breath. For some reason, the squeeze Harry gave his hand steadied his nerves even more.
In which the lake waters churn

Flanked by several Slytherins, Ron and Hermione stepped into the common room, both of them holding their wands in their hands. When he saw that, Draco leaned a little closer to Harry, and the movement caught both of the Gryffindors' attention. Hermione frowned as she tried to understand what it meant, and while Draco didn't think Ron understood either, no doubt the pureblood thought that Malfoy had done something to Harry. For several seconds, everyone froze. Although every Slytherin knew that Harry belonged to Draco now, no one knew how the Gryffindors would take that revelation. Dozens of dark wizards and witches tensed, hands ready to grasp wands and fire a thousand curses to defend one of their own.

Despite his own feelings about them, Draco hoped that Harry's friends didn't do anything stupid like attack. When neither of them moved and the tension grew even thicker, he found his lip curling in impatience. What a wonderful relief that familiar emotion was. He could hide his cowardice behind a veneer of disdain.

"You're amongst serpents," he said to them. "Even lions would do well to tread carefully."

Behind the two, Theo visibly relaxed. The whole house seemed to let out a thankful sigh. Draco knew why. They wanted his leadership, but not if he was on the verge of panic. At least now he'd managed to get a hold of himself.

"What have you done to him?" Ron asked, sounding as if he'd fight despite being surrounded.

"You mean Pomfrey and Dumbledore really managed to keep this a secret?" Harry asked.

"Keep what a secret?" Hermione asked.

"I asked you a question, Malfoy," Ron said, stepping closer. "If you've hurt him--"

"Oh, be quiet," Pansy cut him off, stepping up behind Draco's seat and flanking him like a bodyguard. "We're the ones with a real grievance against your house, after what Potter did."

Draco raised one hand as if to quiet her, and he held his smile as she crossed her arms and stood still. His other Slytherins stood either at the door or seated themselves around him, creating a court-like atmosphere. It wasn't at all intentional, merely the result of living so close for so long, but it gave them an air of strength, something they desperately needed if they were to deal with Hogwarts.

He almost laughed. He'd felt so alienated from them, and yet he found himself fitting easily in their midst.

"I think we can forgive Harry's transgression," he said, as if speaking to Pansy. "It had such a happy outcome, after all."

If Harry felt that was a cheap shot, he kept it to himself. Draco wondered if he was feeling guilty or just didn't want to start arguing in front of his friends.

"I won't ask you again," Ron growled in warning, shrugging off Hermione's arm when she tried to hold him.

"I suppose the way you see things," Draco said, "I forced Harry to rip into my head and drag out my true feelings for him. Yes, it still hurts, and no, I cast no dark spells on him."
"Draco," Harry whispered sharply. "They're here to talk, not fight."

"If they're going to come in here with nothing but accusations, I don't see why we should bother."

"Harry said we needed to talk," Hermione said, shooting Ron a look when he seemed ready to mouth off again. "And obviously we do. Besides, we've already come down here, and that wasn't easy. Our whole house thought we were mad, walking out with Slytherins like an armed escort."

"They did that for their protection," Draco said. "You can't honestly tell me that you'd feel safe in Hogwarts if you were a Slytherin."

"If I was a Slytherin," she said, "I don't think I'd feel safe anywhere right now."

His eyes narrowed as he searched for any hint of sarcasm in her voice. When he found none, he sighed once and waved at the couch next to them.

"Have a seat. We're probably going to be at this for awhile."

"At what?" Ron asked, still glaring as he sat down. "And I still want an explanation for why you two are holding hands."

Draco opened his mouth to answer but froze, his voice suddenly unwilling to work. Because I love him and he loves me, he wanted to say, but he'd only just admitted that to himself. Admitting that to a room full of people was ten times harder, even if they already knew.

"I love him, Ron," Harry said, meeting his friend's eyes dead on. "And he loves me."

To Draco's surprise, Ron fell absolutely silent while Hermione squeaked.

"You mean," she said, one hand against her mouth, "every time you two were alone, you were--?"

She couldn't bring herself to finish that thought, blushing as she crossed her fingers.

"Of course not," Draco snapped. "Maybe you don't mind rampant--"

He quieted as Harry squeezed his hand, but he glared, ready to snap at him for interrupting. Then he noticed Harry's wary expression and followed his look to Ron, who had yet to do anything but stare at them both. The room grew tense as everyone waited for Ron to act, and as the time stretched, Draco wondered if Ron was as stupid as he always thought. The Gryffindor looked ready to fight, den of Slytherins or not.

And then Ron started to laugh. The sound was not pleasant. Derisive, it reminded Draco of the mocking taunts of a mob gathered around a stake.

"Him? This dark little snake?" He snorted and looked over Draco as if looking for something to like. "Don't know if anyone told you, Malfoy, but Harry doesn't go for cowards. You'll have to lie better than that."

Draco schooled his face not to flinch. It wasn't the first time his cowardice had been thrown in his face, but said while he sat next to Harry, worse, to hear it from an outsider, made him itch for a fight.

"We're not lying," Harry insisted.

"You've been given a love potion," Ron said with a smile. "Or a love charm. But don't worry, Dumbledore'll put a stop to that. Everyone saw us come down here, so even if they--" he nodded at the Slytherins "--try anything, they'll still get caught. Thank Merlin. You and that bastard, that's a
laugh--"

"Shut up!" Harry snarled. "You might not want to believe it, but it's true."

"Don't be stupid," Ron growled, coming to his feet. "He's dark! They can't love, they only know how to fake it with potions--"

"I looked into his mind," Harry said, satisfied when Ron's jaw snapped shut.

When no one else spoke, Draco winced and lowered his head. His Slytherins weren't stupid. They knew that must have happened when Harry chased him out of the common room. And they all knew how hurt he'd been after, left so weak from the mental attack that Severus had to carry him. He hoped they all had the good sense not to bring up the fact that Harry had to drag the truth out of his reluctant thoughts.

"Harry," Hermione finally ventured. "Have you gotten better control over your legilimency?"

"Um...not really."

Hermione winced. "Then you must have hurt him--"

"Whatever happened is between him and me," Draco said. "And I see no reason to discuss it. With anyone," he added for his Slytherins.

"Then why'd you bring us here?" Ron said lowly. "To gloat?"

Draco opened his mouth to do just that, but Harry's hand fell on his shoulder again. They couldn't afford to alienate potential allies. He took a breath to calm himself.

"No," Draco said. "We asked you here because we hope that, no matter how much you hate us, you would rather not see war between the houses."

"We don't hate you," Hermione said, ignoring Ron's snort. "It's just...you're all so difficult. You're mean to everyone. And if half of what those books said about dark magic is true--"

"Some of it is," Draco said. "It's true about night rides and cross-breeding and killing muggles. But tell me, did your books tell you anything about our point of view?"

"You mean what you told me in the library?" she asked, shaking her head. "They really do make themselves out to be blameless."

"And we are!" Ron said. "We've been defending ourselves from them for centuries. You heard him, they're all killers and monsters."

"Then why did you say you'd help him," Hermione asked, narrowing her eyes. "'Gryffindor will honor that trust', what happened to that?"

"'Cause he was helping us against You-Know-Who," Ron said. "And his house burned down and his parents are dead and--we couldn't just toss him out, it would've been heartless."

Draco closed his eyes for a moment. His parents were not dead, he simply could not believe that, but hearing Weasely say it seemed to make it real for a moment.

"Sides," Ron continued, "enemy of my enemy and all that."

"But what about after the war--" Hermione's started, but her voice faded when Draco waved her
"After the war can wait," he said. "We need to win the war first, and for that we need to be sure that we won't be cut down just because Harry loves me."

Looking like he was being forced to swallow something extremely sour, Ron leaned back in his chair and stared at Harry. "You really love the little bastard?"

"Hey--!"

"Yes," Harry answered.

"Even after all the horrible things he's put us through? After nearly getting Buckbeak killed, the inquisitorial squad, all that?"

"After he saved my life and shared his secrets," Harry said. "I know he loves me, Ron, and I'll stop anyone who tries to hurt him."

Again, silence as Ron thought it over. After a moment, he glanced at Harry from the corner of his eye.

"Will you let me cast finite incantatem on you?"

Everyone stiffened except Harry, who didn't seem to notice. "And then you'll believe I'm telling the truth?"

"I'll believe you're not under a spell." Ron sighed. "I guess that's the best I can hope for."

"Fine," Harry said, standing up.

Ron stood up with him, then froze as every single Slytherin drew their wands and held them at the ready. Draco aimed his wand at Ron's chest, the slender bit of wood shaking in his hand.

"If I hear anything other than that spell," he hissed, "it will take you years to die."

Nothing else needed to be said. Ron didn't even argue. Moving extremely slowly, Ron drew out his wand and aimed it at Harry, trying not to stutter as he cast a finite incantatem at his friend. The spell washed over Harry and faded almost immediately, and despite themselves, the Slytherins all leaned forward to hear what Harry would say, their wands slowly lowering back to the ground.

"You still love him?" Ron asked.

"Yup," Harry nodded. "Satisfied?"

"You're sure he's not using a potion or charm or something?"

"Ron--" Harry snapped.

"Okay, okay," Ron said, sitting back down. "You're both poofs. I'm convinced."

Ron's voice faded away as Draco grabbed Harry's arm as he sat down again, tugging him up against his side. His hands shook and he couldn't hang on very tight, but he did manage to dig his fingers into Harry's skin.

"Never let someone point a wand at you ever again," Draco whispered. "Ever."
"It's all right," Harry said, wincing as Draco clutched too tightly, but he didn't try to push him off. "I'm fine. We're all fine. Hermione and Ron believe us and they'll help us now. Right?"

"Right," Hermione nodded, nudging Ron with her elbow to make him nod. "If we want to win this war, interhouse unity is a must."

"I don't care if the three houses work with us," Draco said, turning his head just enough to see her out of the corner of his eye. "Can you keep them from trying to kill me or Harry for this?"

Hermione started to answer, but she paused in surprise as Ron leaned forward to answer instead. "It won't be easy," he said bluntly. "They don't know Harry like we do. They once thought he was the heir to Slytherin and a dark wizard himself. It'll be easy for them to go right back to thinking that."

"Not all of them," Hermione murmured, but she didn't sound confident.

"I'm not saying it can't be done," Ron said. "The muggleborns'll believe us fairly easily. But this is politics of blood, Malfoy, and you know how hard it is to change pureblood minds."

Draco reflected on his own conversion from loyal believer of Voldemort to a Knight of Walpurgis flying through a frozen sky. Changing a pureblood mind wasn't impossible, but it usually required a lot of pain and fear first.

There wasn't much to say after that. Draco remained silent while Harry thanked his friends for their help and walked with them up the stairs again, talking in hushed whispers that still carried through the cavernous common room. Without the threat of a potential fight, the tension in the room eased and the Slytherins started to relax, speaking with each other about what their next move might be. Draco listened to their thoughts for awhile, ideas of barricading themselves in their house, of escaping Hogwarts in the dead of night and flying to the continent, even the drastic suggestion of coming out of the common room and trying to reason with the other students.

Everything was up in the air and he didn't want to think about it. Not being able to change anything or even decide what to do tangled a knot of anxiety in his stomach. He had to get up, move, anything to work out this nervous energy. He stood and walked over to Harry, ignoring his Slytherins' curious glances.

Just as he reached the top step, a powerful blast like a thousand cannons shook the dungeons so hard that Draco was thrown to the floor. No one had time to scream as they were sent tumbling. As he pushed himself to his knees, Draco wondered if the strange noise had done something to his ears because he thought he could still hear its rumbling. After a moment, the rumbling grew steadily louder and he felt the floor vibrating beneath him.

"What the hell?" Ron got to his feet and looked down the long corridor. "Sounded like something exploded."

"Ron," Hermione whispered, her voice nearly lost in the growing echoes. "Something's coming."

"Draco!"

Suspecting what he would see, Draco turned and spotted Pansy by the huge glass window to the lake. Instead of the normal view of placid fish and dappled sunlight, strong currents pulled fish and merfolk and everything else in the lake, uprooting plants and hurling huge stones all in one direction. Like a window to a hurricane, he watched the lake swirl violently, growing dark with disturbed mud.
He grabbed his wand and pointed it at Ron and Hermione as they stared in shock down the hall. Waving them back inside, he had just enough time to see the wall of water crashing towards them before his spell slammed the door shut. The wall shuddered as the wave struck and passed, but Draco had no doubt that the dungeons were now flooded to the ceilings.

"It's started," he whispered.

Filch's runes was his first thought. They must have missed some of what he'd drawn, the little markers that would key certain areas to explode. They were cut off from the rest of the castle. He wondered how high the water would rise through the school or if anyone would be able to come for them.

But perhaps they were safe. Filch had been drawing on their door when he was caught. Voldemort had meant for their common room door to explode when the walls between them and the lake did, drowning them all in one fell swoop. He frowned. No, that was too easy. Voldemort had weeks after Filch's capture to alter his plans. There had to be something else.

He glanced over his shoulder. The glass had no cracks. No one had been allowed inside their house who wasn't trusted. He looked back at the door, a wall of stone that only opened with magic. Swallowing once, he touched his fingertips to the surface. The door was damp and drops were beginning to coalesce.

Somehow the water was eating through the magic in the door. He didn't think it would take very long before they drowned anyway.

Only now did he hear people screaming and yelling at each other. Walking by Slytherins accusing Gryffindors and other Slytherins babbling in confusion, he grabbed Pansy's shoulders and gave her a quick shake to cut off her questions.

"Get the children," he told her. "Bring everyone here."

"But Draco, what--?"

"Just go!" he hissed, almost throwing her towards the bedrooms. The push was all she needed and she ran into the darkness.

That left him with a room full of noise. He looked around at the handful of Slytherins who'd curled up in a corner, trying to make themselves as small as possible. How tempting that was, to simply close his eyes and pretend none of this was going on, hoping someone else would save them. But he knew better than to believe that anyone was coming to help, and the thought of drowning in the dark scared him so much that he couldn't trust anyone to rescue him better than he could rescue himself.

"Fyria raebaena!"

The bright ribbon flashed through the air and exploded in a shower of sparks that caught everyone's attention, but he knew their silence wouldn't last long.

"Shut up!" he yelled. "Quit acting like Hufflepuffs. You're not going to drown just yet. With any luck, we'll be out of here in a few moments."

A yelp of surprise came from the door as one of the girls noticed water starting to trickle in. "Oh God, it's not stopping--"

"I bloody know!" Draco snapped. "But if I'm not panicking, you damn well don't have an excuse."
"You have a plan?" another girl asked.

He nodded once. "Potter," he said, reverting to the familiar aloof last name. He couldn't afford to let himself panic and the name Harry triggered too many emotions to risk it. "Does the Gryffindor common room have a fireplace?"

"What? Yes, of course--"

"Is it connected?"

"What do you mean?" Harry walked towards him, not understanding. "I talked through it before--"

"But can you floo--oh never mind." Draco summoned a bottle out of the cabinets, breaking the door in the process. "Blaise, get over here!"

Still nervously watching the door, Blaise hurried over with one of the children in his arms. Draco set the bottle on the floor and took the girl out of Blaise's arms, pushing her into Harry's without a look.

"Blaise, listen. You have to floo to Gryffindor."

"What?!" The Slytherin stared at him in shock. "That's impossible."

"They're fireplaces, aren't they? It's our only way out."

"But no one's ever done that! Don't you think the Weasley twins would've tried it?"

"Blaise--"

"We don't even know if they're hooked up to the network--"

"Potter says he's spoken through the Gryffindor fireplace, so they must be linked, at least to each other. Hell, Dumbledore might've done something the moment we flooded. It's our only way out."

"Why me?" Blaise demanded. "You came up with it, you try it."

"Think, dammit," Draco said. "What would those Gryffindors do if I came tumbling out of their fireplace? They'd hex me! But they'll listen to you."

"But--"

"There's no time," Draco said, holding the bottle of what was now obviously floo powder to him. "Go. The children are coming right behind you."

Looking like he still wanted to argue, Blaise grabbed a handful of powder and stood in the fireplace. With his eyes shut tight, he held his hand up.

"Oh God please, Gryffindor!" And he flung down his handful. Flames shot up around him as he disappeared.

"He didn't burn to death," Draco said to himself. "Good. That means it's open. Pansy--"
"This is bad," she declared, looking at him. "I tried drying it up, but it just ate the spell. I think it eats magic."

"I guess that means bubble charms are out," Ron said. "We won't be walking out of here."

Draco looked over his Slytherins. There were so many of them that he knew they wouldn't all be able to floo before the water reached the fireplace and destroyed the magic inside. He aimed his wand at the mattresses and blankets piled along the walls and toppled them over.

"Help me make a barricade," he said, pushing the first mattress up against the door. A moment later the Gryffindors and a few of the older Slytherins were moving anything that wasn't bolted down, bookcases overturned and couches tipped over to absorb the growing puddle and give them a few extra seconds.

"Weasley, Granger," Draco said. "You'd better go."

"I'm not leaving--" Ron started angrily.

"This isn't about being brave," Draco cut him off. "There are dozens of Slytherins invading Gryffindor right now, and Blaise is probably up against a wall with a hundred wands pointing at him."

"He's right," Hermione said. "Ron, this might not be the only attack. You need to go back. Everyone will listen to you."

"I can't leave you here--"

"They might need me," Hermione said. "And besides, there's only so much time. I couldn't go knowing I took some child's spot."

Torn and not knowing how to argue her out of her, Ron cast a desperate look at Harry.

"Sorry," Harry said. "But she's right. You've got to go."

Hesitating just a moment longer, Ron finally yelled in frustration and went to the fireplace. The Slytherins were up to third years, and they made a space for him in line so that his departure would waste no time. A few seconds later, he was gone.

With the only sound in the room coming from each escaping student, they all gradually became aware of the growing noise of water splashing behind the barricade of furniture. It pooled out from under the couches and made its way across the blankets that did little to sop it up. Draco winced.

"Who's crossbred with something that can swim?"

No one answered at first. Secretive creatures by nature, dark wizards hid their crossbreeding from each other, sometimes for no other reason than embarrassment.

"I'm half selkie," Vincent finally said.


"Half mer," Nott admitted, crossing his arms.

"No one else?" Draco asked. No answer. "Then we're the last to go."
They all grimaced but didn't argue.

Alarmed at the reality that some of them would not be leaving dry, the students tried to disappear faster, slurring the word Gryffindor so that Draco had to hope they were going to the right place. Now the rugs were slowing the advancing water. Everyone watched it creep towards the fireplace with nothing else to get in its way. The sixth years finished and then it was the seventh years. Nott gathered up several of the books that had fallen when they moved the shelves and lined them up in a half-crescent wall around the fireplace. It bought them a few more seconds and they all gathered close. Draco started to hope that they might all be able to floo out.

A loud crack of stone breaking made him close his eyes. Too late, he thought again as the force of the released water threw aside the make-shift barrier and came towards them like an avalanche. The torches blinked out and the room went black. Hermione screamed and somehow Harry found Draco, wrapping him up in his arms as if he could protect him with his body.

Bracing himself for the impact, Draco slowly relaxed as he felt the water swirl around his feet and lap up against his knees but rise no further. Hermione cast a lumos spell and held her wand up high, but the light barely cast a small glow around them. Draco had to squint to see who was left. Theo, Harry, Hermione, Vincent—he froze.

Water filled half of the common room with the furniture floating around in front of the door. Although most of it had been stopped, some of it covered the entire floor, and now that he could see, he noticed that it was still flowing in, only at a much slower rate. A table and half of a couch had been shoved at them with such force that they had cracked the window behind them, only narrowing missing smashing the three girls standing with their hands clasped so tight that they trembled but never wavered as they sang.

"Wirds dauncen en ath, ic sawol claspen to ic sang." Less like a song than a chant, Pansy stared with wide eyes at the water she and her reduced gang of girls held at bay. "Daunciers vindr an wæter, auncien honos treysta. Wirds dauncen en ath..." Over and over, they repeated the words endlessly, their voices combining into one. May and Daphne huddled close to her, refusing to open their eyes.

"Why are we still alive?" Harry whispered.

"Sirens can summon up waves," Hermione said softly, afraid to speak and distract the three. "I guess they can force them back, too."

"But not forever," Theo said. He glanced at Draco while he undid the top of his robes. "I take it we're swimming out of here?"

"We'll see how long they can sing," Draco said, "but we'll probably end up swimming part of the way." He undid his own robes as he sank to the floor.

"Draco, wait," Harry said. "Let me carry you. The water's too cold--"

"Pretty warm, actually," Draco said. "Must be all the magic it's swallowing. I won't be comfortable, but I don't think I'll freeze to death."

He took a deep breath and summoned his transformation much as he had when he first turned into a snake with wings. Once again his skin felt like pins and needles, and he winced as he forced his legs to merge and his scales to form faster than before. His body flailed at the sudden sensory overload and he fell totally into the water, trying to rush it along.

When it was over, he pushed himself back up and leaned against the closest thing, Harry's legs,
panting from exertion as he curled his tail beneath himself. His hair straggled over his face and he gingerly pulled the straggling edge aside with his claws.

"Let me," Harry murmured, kneeling beside him. He reached into his pocket and pulled out Draco's ribbon, using it to tie his hair back. "You forgot it on the nightstand."

Draco half-smiled. "You're so calm. I guess you're used to fighting for your life."

"Just a little."

"You two done?" Theo asked, sitting on the broken sofa. He could sit on it without breaking it now that his body was thinner, almost gaunt. His unnaturally wide eyes didn't blink but shimmered with a protective film. Webbing lined his hands and feet and gills breathed gently on his sides. "I'd like to go now."

"Vincent," Draco said, "you'd better change. Stay near Pansy in case they need help. You too, Theo. Harry and Granger can hang onto me if the water gets too deep but I want those girls singing as long as they can. Once you've changed, we go."

"Are you sure we're the only ones left?" Hermione asked, looking like she'd wade through the dormitories to make sure.

"There's no time to check," Theo said.

"But everything happened so fast--children hide when they're scared--"

"You've never been in our house, Granger," Draco said, balling his robes up and tying the sleeves around his waist. "The halls are dark and serpentine. We'd drown long before we found anyone."

"If anyone's left, they have to save themselves," Vincent added as he slid his bulk free from his clothes.

His weight, too heavy for a human, made for a reasonably healthy seal. His transformation didn't stop the way Draco's did. Brown fur continued to cover his shoulders while his arms pulled in to make flippers. A few whiskers and one black nose later and Vincent could no longer speak, barking once and flashing a set of very sharp teeth.

"He's actually kind of cute," Hermione said despite the water creeping up her legs. She spotted his wand lying amongst his clothes and bundled it up, tucking it under her arm.

Taking a deep breath, Draco crawled forward and eased into the deeper water until his tail no longer dragged on the floor but undulated behind him, helping him move through the water like a true serpent. For a moment he forgot the deadly threat beyond the door in his newfound weightlessness and grace. Even the darkness became a comfort as his eyes adjusted more than he'd ever thought possible. The flooded and silent dungeons became damp caverns that felt like home.

"When I rebuild the manor," he vowed, "I'm adding a pool."

One by one, he pushed the bobbing furniture out of the way and cleared a path for Pansy to slowly follow after him. Hermione and Harry walked in front of her to keep the heavy bookcases from hitting her or Daphne or May as they waded into the deeper water. Her girls whimpered in their chant as the water rose up over their hips, but with each step, the water flowed around them and filled the space they'd just left, leaving them only half-submerged. Vincent swam beside them while Theo brought up the rear, his eyes reflecting in the faint darkness.
"Can you keep that wand above water?" Draco asked Hermione.

"I think so," she said.

They came out into the main hall. Now the siren song revealed its full potency, pushing the water out in all directions so that the level lowered as far as they could see. Aside from the constant chant, they heard water dripping from the ceiling and snuffed torches, heard the echoes of their own breathing.

"Look at all the bodies," Harry said, pushing a dead grindylow out of his way. Lifeless fish floated on the surface alongside uprooted plants and merfolk.

"I hope they're just bodies," Draco replied. He looked up and down the hall, knowing that if they made a wrong turn, the castle wouldn't be able to change the walls for him. "This way."

Several minutes passed as they waded through the dark corridors. Occasionally Draco would ask Theo's opinion of which way to go, but neither could be sure with every wall covered with slime and silt and every corner hidden in darkness. A route that they both could have run in a few moments and would have sworn they could run blindfolded now became a labyrinth without end.

The force of the initial blast of water ultimately saved them. Draco spotted a door floating not far away and swam closer, diving under the bodies for a moment until he got close enough to surface. When he recognized what it went to, he grinned and looked around in excitement.

"It's our door to the kitchen," he called back to them. "The one to the ladder."

He swam along the walls for a few seconds, ignoring Harry's worried cry to come back, coming back up when he discovered the exposed passage and the ladder leading up and into the kitchen. He looked inside and saw that the trap door had also been broken off, leaving their way inside clear.

"Found it!" he cried. "Vincent, change back so you can climb."

"Think the kitchen was flooded?" Theo asked as they waded closer.

"If it was, it's clear now," Draco said. "Go on up."

"Wait, Pansy should--"

Draco shook his head. "They have to go last or the water'll sweep us away. Go make sure it's safe."

With a reluctant grumble, Theo didn't waste anymore time arguing but climbed right up. Draco turned to tell Hermione to go next, but she went right after him, turning once she reached the top and holding her wand as low as she could so they could see.

Next went Vincent, his robe hastily draped over his shoulders. Not bothering to change since it would take too long, Draco swam behind Harry and put his arms around his neck, wrapping his tail around Harry's waist.

"Think you can carry me up?"

"No problem." Harry reached up to grab the first rung.

They were all swept off their feet before they realized something had hit them. Momentarily stunned, Draco blinked a few times before whipping his tail around and righting himself, swimming back to the surface. Water rushed around him in a strong current and he sank his claws into the wall, swimming against the waves as the water started to rise again. Harry cried out beside him, hands
reaching for his. Draco caught his arm, but their skin was too slick. As Harry started to slide out of his grip, Draco panicked and drove his claws into Harry's arm. Harry cried out but didn't fight to get loose.

Over the violent crashing of water against the walls he heard screams replace the chanting and strained to see through the churning froth. White tentacles curled over the waves and snatched Pansy off the ladder as the water finally hit the ceiling again. Though his eyes could see underwater, the silt made it nearly impossible to see her fighting against the tentacle wrapped around her waist.

Draco tried to pull himself forward but the current still dragged everything by him, pelting him with bodies and shattered bits of stone. As some of the water cleared, he saw Pansy open her mouth in a scream that pierced the water as the squid moved to tear her in half.

Something bright red flashed in the water, striking the squid's side. To his surprise, the squid flinched. Either whatever force in the water that swallowed magic could no longer swallow any more or the will behind that spell was especially strong.

Hopefully both, he thought. The squid flinched as several more red bursts hit it, obviously weakened but still potent enough to cause pain. It let go of Pansy and drew its injured tentacle into itself, its eyes blinking rapidly. As it flailed, Draco finally got a good look at the large rune in the center of its head, pulsating with black and green light like a festering wound. Perhaps the rune itself allowed magic to work around it.

He saw Pansy's legs kicking frantically as she fought her way up into the tiny passageway, finally disappearing as the squid backed away. He hoped the other two girls had survived and realized he had no idea how to escape now.

Draco blinked. The squid wasn't backing away--it was coming towards him. With the kitchen cut off, he had to turn and swim in darkness, putting one arm around Harry's waist as he flew with the weakening current. It was only when he felt Harry's arm go slack around him that Draco remembered that Harry couldn't hold his breath the way he could.

He turned to look over his shoulder. Tears stung his eyes when the saw the squid gaining on them, its own eyes wide and unblinking, its body driving towards them with single-minded intent. Its rune provided the only light in the gloom. Draco swam as fast as he could, but his body had never been designed to run for long. He was more suited to hiding and cowering in the shadows, but even if he could have transformed into a little snake again, he couldn't bring himself to let go of the boy in his arms.

While he was looking behind, he struck something hard beneath himself and tumbled up onto a wet stone floor. Delicate bones in his right arm broke and his scales tore on the rough surface. Harry ripped out of his grasp but tumbled only a few inches.

Whimpering in pain, Draco dragged himself across the floor and put his good arm around Harry, trying to pull him away from the water. Torchlight told him they'd come up beyond the flood's reach, but the water in front of them churned as the squid came closer, bursting from the surface and spreading its tentacles in all directions as it gained its balance.

There was no way he could run any more. Draco lay on top of Harry's prone body and curled his left hand's claws. As the squid came closer, extending a tentacle towards Harry's leg, Draco fell on it, slashing and biting when that wasn't enough. His teeth gouged through the soft skin and then ripped across the surface as it snatched its arm back, streaking his mouth with blood.

He knew he couldn't stop it forever, but by God, he would go down fighting.
"Sectumsempra!"

The squid fell back in a spray of blood, but not until it floated in two unmoving halves on the surface did Draco realize it was dead. In shock, he started to shiver and had only enough presence of mind to turn and watch as his master appeared next to them, kneeling next to Harry. Severus turned Harry on his side and pressed his wand against Harry's back, pushing hard with a short spell that sounded more like a bark than a word.

Harry violently coughed several mouthfuls of water from his lungs and took a choking breath as he lay on his back again.

"Draco, hold still," Snape commanded, singing his apprentice's bones back into place.

This time he had no pain killing potion and Draco bit his lip, his sharp teeth slashing his own mouth as his bones knitted. In a moment, that slash itself was healed and the rest of his injuries flicked away. The shock didn't fade but, aside from the feeling that he might throw up and the fact that he couldn't stop shivering, Draco felt enough like himself to meet his master's eyes.

"Ch-children," he stammered. "Th-they--"

"They all arrived in Gryffindor," Snape said, drying off his hair and plucking off his own robe to put around Draco's shoulders. "And I will never call you stupid again. That was a stroke of genius."

Rare praise indeed, but he would savor it later. "It's all fl-flooded. Think P-Pansy got away, but th-the others--"

Footsteps interrupted him and he tried to turn, but his tail refused to cooperate. It twisted so that he slipped on the wet stone and fell sideways, just catching himself on his elbow. He abruptly tasted the squid's blood in his mouth and spit it out, wiping the back of his hand across his mouth.

"Wyvern claws and teeth against a kraken," came a familiar voice. "My God, there's a little courage in this family after all."

As if to belie that, Draco refused to move, refused to believe that he wasn't hallucinating. Only when strong hands took his arms and helped him sit up again, when he saw the silver ring with its green serpent crest, did he let himself look up into his father's kind, arrogant eyes.
His face partially darkened by the low hood of his cloak, even without his mask Lucius looked like a
death eater, dangerous and willing to cause pain. He also looked thinner with shadows around his
eyes, but there was strength in his grip as he set Draco back upright.

"You're alive," Draco whispered, putting his hands on his father's. "I thought--I was starting to think--
-why didn't you tell us you were alive?"

"I wanted to," Lucius said. "But we couldn't take the chance. He's been hunting for us. We've been
moving around from house to house, killing his followers when we could. If we'd tried to send an
owl, he would've spotted it."

"Mother?" Draco asked.

Lucius sighed. "I don't know. But the few death eaters we captured didn't know anything, either, so
there's hope."

"You can worry about her later," Severus said behind them. "Draco, can you change back?"

"I think so," Draco answered. "But I lost my clothes--."

Severus dropped a wet pile by his tail. "They tore free when you hit the floor. You're lucky your
wand didn't snap."

"How's Harry?" Draco asked. "Did he break anything?"

"We'll see to him," Severus said, obviously loathe to discuss Potter in front of Lucius. "Change."

Although they were alone, Draco felt exposed transforming in the middle of the corridor and rushed
the magic along, gritting his teeth as his skin rippled. While he dressed, he noticed that both his father
and Severus had fallen silent, looking over Harry and tending his few injuries. Which was good,
since he would have expected them to kill Harry on sight, especially his father. Their hushed voices
mingled with the lapping water as Lucius asked why Harry had been in Slytherin. Dreading the
coming conversation, Draco wondered if he could stall it.

"What else has happened?" he asked as he pulled on his shoes. "Slytherin floods and no one comes,
not even to gloat."

"The dark lord attacked all of Hogwarts," Severus said over his shoulder. "Destroying Slytherin and
Gryffindor was merely his first strike--"

"Gryffindor?" Draco echoed. "Was it Filch's runes--?"

"Yes, we missed a handful of runes on the tower," Snape said. "After the blast, it was all we could
do to keep Gryffindor tower from collapsing before we could evacuate all the students, and then
when the Slytherins started coming--"

"But you said they all came through!"

"And they did," Snape snapped. "McGonagall took them away with the Gryffindors after the first
attack. I don't know where. And there's no way to communicate with anyone but Lucius' knights."

"Might be able to help there..." Harry mumbled.
Wriggling between Severus and Lucius, Draco bent over Harry, slipping an arm around his waist to ease him up. After spending so much time leaning on his Gryffindor's strength, he felt awkward holding Harry in his arms, cradling his head against his chest. Somehow his glasses had stayed put throughout that wild ride, and Draco gave them a tiny nudge back into place.

"Feel a bit waterlogged," Harry murmured. "What happened?"

"You almost drowned," Draco said, pushing his wet hair from his face. "The squid nearly killed us, but Severus killed it first."

"Hermione?"

Draco smiled to reassure him. "She got away with the others--"

"Severus...what haven't you told me?"

His father's voice, low and angry and threatening, brought Draco back to reality. Lucius did not know what had happened in Hogwarts over the past few months but had clearly guessed something of truth. He looked up, expecting to see his father holding a wand aimed at Harry. Even if his father meant to kill him, Draco thought he could reason with him.

Instead Lucius ignored his son and focused his attention solely at Severus. Draco's breath hitched. He'd always known his father was a dangerous man but only to other people, blood traitors and mudbloods and muggle vermin. His grip tightened on Harry as Lucius glared at his master, but even more frightening was how Snape drew back, lowering his head as if admitting he was wrong. Severus never gave into his father's tantrums. But Lucius wasn't throwing a tantrum now.

"There was no way to contact you," Severus started.

"I'm here now." Lucius stepped closer, looming over his master.

"The boys have grown close," Severus said, not meeting Lucius' eyes. "They have saved each other's lives"--he drove on over Lucius' sharp breath--"and while they are not yet betrothed--"

"Betrothed?" Lucius hissed. "Betrothed? Bind my son to that half-blood bane? To that blood traitor? After everything he's done? Has Draco's honor been broken--?"

"No, of course not--"

"Of course? I find things are not running according to course. You have permitted--"

"I permitted nothing," Snape insisted, but he still didn't look up. "They have not yet consummated their--"

"Their what? A union between their kind and ours? Has he embraced the dark? Has he renounced the Ministry? Will he still stand by Draco when the world turns against--"

"He already has," Severus said.

Lucius moved in a blur, wrapping his hand around Severus' throat and pushing him against the wall. Draco felt Harry tense as if to speak and put his fingertips on his lips, shaking his head. Not only was this between his master and his father, but for the first time in his life, he didn't want his father's attention.

"If anyone but you told me this," Lucius whispered, "anyone but you, Severus, I would not believe
Severus met his look without flinching. "But I am telling you."

Lucius stared as if challenging him to recant. Severus met his look. Neither moved for several seconds. Then Snape's hand came up and lightly touched Lucius' wrist.

"You promised," he whispered.

At first Lucius didn't move. His anger still burned and wanted to lash out at the man he'd entrusted his son to. But Severus didn't try to force him to let go and soon Lucius' hand loosened, withdrawing enough to linger over the faint marks he'd made on his pale skin. Lucius exhaled, nodded once and let his hand fall.

"I did." He glared over his shoulder at the two boys on the floor. "This is not over," he said, "but there are more important matters at hand."

"Marginally," Snape said, his customary disdain back in place as if nothing had happened. He looked at Harry. "You said you had an idea?"

"I might," Harry said, looking between them hesitantly before reaching into his robe's pocket. "If the water didn't destroy it. Hermione said the water ate magic--"

"'Ate magic'?" Severus whispered, looking to Draco for confirmation. He sighed and stared at the water as if he could simply will it away. "And my workshop is completely submerged. I'm sorry, Lucius. My potions will be of no use now."

Draco bit his lip. He hated to mention it after the fight, but he had to know. "Sev', the grimoire was in your office."

Lucius winced and lowered his head. "Then it is lost," he whispered.

"No," Snape said, touching his shoulder. "It was in my workshop, but the box I put it in is waterproof."

"But any spells would be destroyed--"

"Ah, not that kind of waterproof," Snape said, surprising Draco by lowering his eyes in--embarrassment? "It was a muggle box."

A soft smile of realization graced Lucius lips and he reached up, touching Severus' hair not so much to brush it from his eyes but more in simple fondness. "Old habits, I suppose."

"Found it," Harry interrupted, drawing out what Draco recognized as his map of the school.

Waterlogged and stuck together, it fell open before Harry could swear he was up to no good, hanging limp in his hands. He winced and spread it out, gingerly unfolding it on the floor.

At first Draco didn't see anything besides wet ink smearing across the paper, but after a moment he made out faint footprints inside the halls. They flickered in and out of view and the names were harder to read.

"There's Sprout and Flitwick," Harry said, pointing at two marks that faded out of view before another one flashed in front of them. "And Fenrir?"

Lucius knelt beside Draco and read over his shoulder. "Yes, here they are," he said, hovering his
hand over the great hall where dozens of footprints turned the paper black so that it was impossible to make out names. "Looks like they've rounded up several students, too."

"But where are the dark children?" Draco asked. He'd never realized Hogwarts was so big. It was impossible to look over the whole map, especially while its drained magic faded in and out, but he finally spotted a mass of footprints inside one small room. "There! Goyle and Weasley!"

"The Room of Requirement," Snape said. "That must be where McGonagall took everyone."

"And there's Hermione," Harry said, pointing at the kitchen. "Weird. They're haven't gone anywhere."

"There may be death eaters nearby and we simply can't see them," Lucius murmured. "Strange. I left my knights near the library."

All of them looked at the spot he pointed at, but the library looked empty.

"They may still be there," Severus said. "We may simply not be able to see what's happening."

"Then we'll go there first," Lucius said, rising. "Draco--"

"I can't go with you," Draco said, forcing himself to keep going when his father gave him a look. "We can't risk Ha--Potter in the middle of a fight between dark wizards. And I won't abandon my Slytherins."

Lucius opened his mouth to argue, then thought better of it and nodded once. "You'll be safer away from the fighting, true. And the heir of the Malfoy lineage must not take unnecessary risks."

His gaze flicked towards Harry for a moment before settling back on Draco. "This discussion is not over."

"No," Draco agreed. "It's not."

Lucius took a breath and stared at him. "Get out of here and keep going," he said. "You're our only child. You can't risk your life in this battle."

"I understand," Draco said, but understanding didn't mean agreement and they both knew it. "Father, don't die."

Stupid for a dark child to demand of a parent, but he couldn't help asking.

Despite himself, Lucius smiled. "We will see you when this is all over. Be sure you live to see the end of it."

After an awkward pause, Severus and Lucius both turned and walked down the hall, disappearing in the darkness. Draco let out a breath and closed his eyes, resting his head on Harry's.

"Is he going to try to kill me?" Harry asked.

"I don't know."

The thought made him nauseous and not just because he didn't want to imagine Harry dead. If his father truly intended to murder Harry, Draco knew he wouldn't be able to live with the consequences. Not when saving Harry would mean killing Lucius. Two outcomes, both impossible to live with. So he had to make sure neither of them came to pass.
"We're closer to the kitchens," he said, turning his mind to happier thoughts of war. "But the Slytherin entrance is underwater."

"We can use the Gryffindor entrance," Harry said. "It's in the hall with all the paintings of food."

Draco nodded once, remembering the painting he'd seen the first time he met Harry in the kitchen. He just hoped they didn't meet anyone on the way. He stood up and extended his hand, helping Harry to his feet.

"You've got that charm I gave you, right?"

"The honey amulet?" Harry asked, touching the vial beneath his shirt.

"No, the one that protects you from dark magic," Draco said. "The coin?"

"Oh, that." Harry reached into his pocket and pulled it out, the metal and leather cord dripping in his hand. "But it was in the water. How could the magic have survived?"

"The same way we could transform in the water," Draco answered. "Blood. Keep it with you."

Wands drawn, they headed up and out of the dungeons, listening for any footsteps before they turned the corner and walked back into the castle. Worse than screams or spells crackling through the air was the silence broken only by their soft breathing. Was everyone dead and the fighting all over?

"Some war," Harry muttered. "I can't even hear anything."

"Don't say that like it's a good thing," Draco whispered. "Nothing worse than a savior who's late to the party."

They reached the hallway without any problems, and Draco raised an eyebrow at the way Gryffindors snuck into the kitchen. He wondered if every house had its own particular entrance because there was no way any self-respecting Slytherin would fondle fruit just for a snack.

As the painting swung back, he let out a sigh of relief that they had arrived unseen, but it turned into a gasp as he grabbed Harry's waist and yanked him sideways, barely missing a red colored spell that exploded on the opposite wall. Harry's own spell--secestram or something, Draco didn't hear it clearly--flashed into the kitchen, knocking the death eater into a row of pots and pans with a spray of blood that startled both of them.

Getting back to his feet, he followed Harry inside and closed the painting again, scanning the kitchen to make sure there were no more death eaters. They only heard silence and the lapping of water against the trapdoor.

"What the hell was that?" he whispered.

The body lay nearly in half, cut from face to waist and bubbling blood up from the middle. He nudged its side with his foot and the two halves of the head split open like a flower.

"A spell I learned last year," Harry murmured, standing next to him. "Hadn't had a chance to try it out 'till now."

Draco opened his mouth to scold him from using an untried spell, then figured it was no use. As Snape had proved time and time again, they simply could not scold a Gryffindor into acting like a sensible Slytherin.
"They don't teach spells like that here," he said. "Where'd you learn it?"

No response. He glanced at Harry and found him staring at the body in morbid fascination, half-turned as if he wanted to look away but couldn't bring himself to move. Blood still gushed from the monstrous gash in a widening pool that reflected their faces. Harry swallowed reflexively.

Tilting his head, Draco took a small step toward him and touched his cheek, turning his face towards him. Harry's eyes stayed on the body.

"Are you all right?"

A pause.

Harry opened his mouth, closed it, then tried again. "I don't..."

Draco frowned. He recognized the stunned look on Harry's face, but he was surprised to see it. He knew Harry had seen Cedric Diggory die, had fought with Death Eaters and even faced Fenrir. Harry shouldn't look like a child seeing his first dead body.

"You've been in fights before," Draco said softly. "You've seen death."

"It wasn't like this," Harry said. "I didn't..."

"You never killed someone," Draco said, understanding. No wonder. Facing death was easier when other people did the killing.

"Well, there was Quirrel, but that wasn't really--so much blood." Harry's voice dwindled as the blood began to slow, the last few drops sending ripples across the floor.

Living with the memories of hundreds of dying wizards and witches inured dark children against death early on. Their memories were so full of death that by the time they made their first kill, they felt like they were joining in a family tradition. Their hands were covered in blood long before they took a life.

Not so for light wizards. Their parents had the luxury of shielding children from death. For a moment Draco wondered what growing up was like without screams echoing in his ears, without the images of mangled or burned corpses still contorted with fear or rage.

But dark children grew up knowing how to kill. In a world that wanted them all dead, sometimes children had to kill the light wizards who'd killed their parents. Until that stopped, he would rather grow up with hellish reality than live in a heavenly illusion.

"It's messy," Draco agreed, "but it was quick. Quicker than he would've given you."

"I'm not using that spell again," Harry said, finally turning from the body. "It must be dark. It even felt heavier."

"It probably is," Draco said. Anything to steer the conversation away from the body. "Where'd you learn it?"

"A school potions book. But it's got all these notes inside, some of it about strange spells. Whoever wrote it was a real genius." He almost glanced at the body again but stopped himself. "A vicious genius."

"He didn't leave a name?"
"Just called himself the half-blood prince."

Draco's eyes widened.

Of course.

How could he have been so stupid?

He'd always known Snape's mother's name. Pureblood genealogy was simply one more facet of his education. But names missing from pureblood tapestries were also common in every family, only remembered insofar as crossbreeding might affect later generations. Snape's own father hadn't been blotted out of the books because he'd never been written in the first place. Draco had long assumed he'd been disgraced, but perhaps Snape's mother had been one of the handful of purebloods who fell in love with a muggle before realizing their mistake and retreating back into the family.

No wonder Snape knew so much about muggles. He frowned. But if Severus was a mudblood, why would Lucius take him in like he had?

"Draco?" Harry narrowed his eyes in thought. "Do you recognize that name? You do, don't you? You know who he is."

"I think I do," Draco said softly.

"Who--?"

Draco shook his head before Harry could finish. "No, I can't. It's not my secret to tell."

Harry sighed and looked ready to argue, but one of the cabinets on the far side of the kitchen clattered open and a blur of bushy hair stumbled out with a squeak. Draco raised his wand in a panic, but Harry grabbed his wrist and forced it to point at the floor.

"Potter--!" Draco snapped.

"Don't hex her," Harry said. "It's Hermione."

He had planned on something stronger than a hex, but Draco kept that to himself, rubbing his wrist when Harry let go. Big dumb Gryffindor didn't know his own strength.

"Are you all right?" Harry asked, walking over and extending his hand to help her.

"She's bloody fine," came another voice from deeper inside the cabinet. "She wasn't the one almost torn in half."

"Pansy!" Draco rushed over and flung open the cabinet doors.

Curling up tight in Theo's lap, Pansy winced as the light hit her. She raised a hand to shield her eyes, revealing a stretch of bare skin under her torn and soaked robes. He grimaced. The squid's circular suckers had twisted into her, leaving deep messy bites when it yanked at her body.

"You've been sitting like this the whole time?" he asked, glaring at Theo as if it was his fault.

"The water splashed all over us when the squid attacked," Theo said. "Drenched our wands. I don't know how I managed to cast the spells at it, but after the last one, I couldn't cast any more."

"We were soaked helping them up," Hermione said. "We couldn't heal her and then we heard someone come in--" She spotted the corpse and her voice died in her throat.
Behind them, satisfied that it was safe, Vincent poked his head out from one of the bottom cupboards. Both May and Daphne peered over his shoulders. As they clambered out, Draco knelt by Pansy accio'd one of the dish rags, using it to dry off the gouges. He grimaced. Not only were they ugly, but he felt dark magic pulsing around the wounds, the magic that affected the squid now lingering in her body.

"This'll hurt," he warned her.

Both of them knew the cuts were too deep to merely flick away, and dark magic was not designed for the caster's comfort. Even their healing spells exacted a price. There would be pain, but more importantly, silencio didn't work on sirens or anyone with their blood.

She nodded once and shut her eyes. "I won't scream," she promised, reaching for Theo's hand. Instead of holding it for reassurance, she brought his palm up to her mouth, covering her lips.

With one last look to make sure she was ready, Draco cast sticenia on her injuries.

Pansy's skin crawled, the ragged edges of each wound twisting and knitting across mangled flesh with a wet sound. Fresh blood drenched her robes and black wisps of magic bled out as well. She stiffened in Theo's arms, her gasps and whimpers muffled behind his hand clenched firmly around her mouth. Her fingernails scraped the wooden shelves.

The skin finished stitching itself together with little bits of red tissue still visible between the thin threads of flesh. Theo's hand turned damp with her tears, but he didn't let go. Draco took a deep breath to steady himself. The pain wasn't his, but it made him shake anyway.

"Haean," he said, starting the second part of the spell.

The stitched skin slowly filled in, regrowing what had been lost. Pansy's whimpers turned shrill and her fingers turned white around Theo's wrist until finally the squid's attack was completely erased from her body. She went limp, her head lolling back on Theo's shoulder.

"Is she breathing?" Draco asked.

Theo put his ear to her lips, then nodded once. "She'll be fine once the shock wears off."

"'Shock'?" Hermione echoed, her eyes wide in horror. "What was that?"

"Dark magic," Draco said, stepping back so that May and Daphne could help maneuver Pansy out of the cabinet, laying her on the floor with her head in one of their laps. Vincent came up beside him, drying off his wand on a dish rag and trying a lumos spell. The tip of the wand glowed, flickered a few times, then glowed a little stronger.

"It'll take awhile before they're back to normal," Draco said. "Was it just that one death eater you heard?"

Vincent shook his head. "We heard a few running around outside. Don't know how he got inside. Then it was real quiet, except he was rummaging around looking for us. What do we do now?"

Everyone looked at Draco except Hermione, who looked at Harry only to frown when he also looked at Draco expectantly. He had a feeling Harry just wanted to hear his idea first before deciding to charge off on his own.

"The Slytherins and Gryffindors are in the Room of Requirement," Draco said. "We'll go there first and decide what to do next."
"Draco, I have to--" Harry started.

"You're coming with us," Draco cut him off. "If you go running around by yourself, you'll be outnumbered. With all the dark lord's followers here--"

"All the death eaters are here?" Hermione asked. "Is Voldemort here, too?"

"Probably," Draco said.

"So's Draco's father and the Knights of Walpurgis," Harry said.

Draco winced but didn't say anything. Trust Harry to blurt it out. Hopefully none of them would get caught and interrogated.

"And they'll help us fight Voldemort?" she asked.

"Sure," Draco said. "But what they do afterward is anyone's guess."

"What do you mean?"

"He means," Theo broke in, "that they're our parents. Dark wizards who don't care much for the ministry. Hell, if the aurors get here soon enough, they might even sit back and let them fight it out with the dark lord and then kill off anyone who survives."

There was also no way of knowing if they'd attack Harry on sight. Draco bit his lip. They might even attack a Malfoy, too. A little wayward wizard spilling dark secrets might be considered as much a traitor as a Weasley, even if he was just trying to survive.

"I know you don't want me to go," Harry tried again. "But Voldemort's going to be looking for me--"

"He might think you're already dead," Draco said. "That you drowned with me or you died when Gryffindor fell off."

"It fell off?" Vincent sniggered, but there was no humor in his voice. "You mean it really came true, then? We flooded and they fell off."

"Everyone's alright," Harry hurried to tell Hermoine, although she didn't look too comforted. "They're in the Room of Requirement. We just need to get up there."

Up to the seventh floor, and every floor could be filled with death eaters if they didn't stumble upon the dark lord himself. No one spoke for a moment. Then May picked up Pansy, holding her in her arms and standing with a little help from Daphne.

"Let's go while it's still clear," she said.

Draco put his hand on Harry's shoulder to forestall another argument. "I can't get them all to the Room of Requirement by myself," he said. "If you don't help, I don't know that we'll all survive."

A cheap ploy, using Harry's concern against him, but Draco was hardly above manipulation. With a grumbling sigh, Harry nodded once and headed for the door.

Using Harry as a shield, Draco kept step behind the Gryffindor as they started out, peeking over his shoulder down the hall. Harry reached back and found Draco's hand, gripping it tightly before they ventured out. The others followed single file with Vincent and Theo bringing up the rear.
"Go right," Draco whispered when they came to a corner. "There's another way up so we don't have to use the main stairs."

Long weeks of lurking in the shadows away from the students paid off as Draco guided them through the halls grown dusty from disuse. Cold wind blew out from under the doors they passed as if something breathed behind them, and even the dark children would have preferred to fight death eaters than to go inside rooms where the windows had turned black on the inside.

"Why are there places like this in Hogwarts?" Hermione whispered behind him. "They feel like they've gone bad."

"Didn't you know?" he whispered back. "Human sacrifices. Even muggles did it to keep their bridges from falling down. I'll tell you about it someday when we're not trying to avoid being killed by death eaters."

He all but spit that last part out, and to his relief she didn't ask anything else.

On the fifth floor, their luck gave out.

Harry came to an abrupt halt, causing Draco to bump into him and Hermione to bump into him before the rest of them noticed. Shooting a glare at Granger, Draco stood on his toes for a good look over Harry's shoulder, but whatever he'd seen lay around a corner.

"What is it?" he whispered.

"Death eaters," Harry whispered back, his face pale. "Five of them. And--Flitwick and Sprout."

Understanding what Harry left unsaid, Draco breathed out and swallowed once. The first casualties, then. Or at least the first casualties that he knew about. For all he knew, all of Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw students might be dead. And while he didn't know Sprout's combat ability, he knew Flitwick would've been able to defend himself fairly well. This would not be an easy fight. He didn't want to face so many death eaters, at least not without a broom and a blinding blizzard.

He blinked. Well, he didn't have a blizzard, but a broom he might be able to swing.

"Think you could accio your broom?" he whispered.

Harry stared at him in surprise before considering it. "I guess. Fred and George did that once. But why? We can't fly us all out of here."

"We're not going to. But if we can distract them, even kill a couple and get them to follow us, then everyone else can make a run for the Room of Requirement."

He knew Theo and Vincent wouldn't be able to summon their brooms with their wands still recovering from the flood. Everyone else's brooms were either underwater or crushed under rubble. Only Harry's and his own were safe under lock and key in their quidditch changing rooms.

"See?" Harry whispered. "You really are brave."

"No," Draco argued. "Just more afraid of not doing anything and dying."

Moving in synch with Harry, he raised his wand and summoned his besom. He glanced over his shoulder and whispered for everyone to get ready to run, and Theo cast a weak charm on Pansy so that she didn't weigh as much in May's arms.
Around the corner, the nearest window exploded in with shards of glass spinning like knives around the two brooms. The death eaters yelled and ducked, letting them zoom overhead. Draco had enough time to kick himself for thinking they would come in through a door and zip through the halls before the besom was in front of him. Mounting it as he had during the quidditch game, flat along its handle, he threw one last look at his friends and wondered if he would see them again.

Flying just behind Harry, he came around the corner and found four of the death eaters coming towards them, wands raised. No new recruits, these were hardened veterans of the last conflict. He recognized his aunt's black hair and her dark eyes behind her mask, and beside her stood Fenrir, his massive bulk easy to spot. Behind them, the bodies of his two teachers and three more death eaters. At least the professors hadn't gone without a fight.

His besom jerked left around a hurled crucio as he cast a quick athama spell at Fenrir. The werewolf deflected it, but his aim was poor and it flew into the face of the smaller death eater beside him. Her body jerked in surprise before the top half of her head slid free, following the line of Draco's cut as it fell to the floor.

Draco reached the end of the hall and pulled his besom up short just before he crashed into the wall. Harry stopped next to him, breathing hard. His own target lay on the ground writhing in pain from a furnunculus curse so strong that it left him disfigured and blinded, but despite how powerful Harry's curse was, it lacked the visceral impact of a dead and mutilated death eater whose halved mask showed that she was just as young as they were.

"Blood traitor!" Bellatrix screamed, aiming two more hexes at him and shrieking as they each missed.

"Mordred and Morgan!" he yelled back before he realized what he was saying. Although he'd never set foot on the ancient battlefield of Camlann, his blood knew and remembered the war cry of Mordred's army, hurling it back faithfully from a thousand years. After all this time, Malfoy blood reaffirmed its loyalty to the darkness.

He had enough time to cast spiora, sending a thousand ugly black spiders charging out of his wand and across the floor at his enemies, before turning and flying down the hall. If they thought he was trying to cover his escape, they would give chase and never notice the Slytherins waiting just around the corner. So far so good, he thought, turning to say as much.

Harry flew ashen-faced beside him, but before Draco could ask him anything, they both heard an enraged snarl so loud that it rattled the windows. Pausing and looking back, they saw Fenrir stumble around the corner, his body covered in black spiders as he smashed a glass vial on the floor. His skin ripped and tore around thick tufts of fur, splitting his robe and leaving a giant wolf standing on two legs. With paws as big as his head and claws like fingers, Fenrir shook the spiders off of himself and roared once more before lunging forward, fangs glistening in the torchlight.
In which the students lead a cavalry charge

Draco saw a flash of gleaming fangs before he jerked his besom around and tore down the hallway, dimly aware of Harry flying close at his side as they turned the corner so sharply that only years of practice on the quidditch field kept him from being thrown off. He'd never flown anywhere except outside, often high amongst the clouds, and his brief time flying through trees during Voldemort's blizzard hadn't prepared him for diving through stone hallways. Turning too late or clipping the wall or Harry would send him crashing at such a speed that no amount of magical protection would save him.

Behind him, Fenrir's heavy paws slammed against the floor, occasionally hitting the wall as he turned and ran almost sideways in his rush. Draco spared a quick glance at the werewolf and then looked forward, telling himself not to look back again. Fenrir was all fangs and claws and muscle, and every inch of him strained forward, intent on ripping the Malfoy heir to pieces and splashing the castle red.

In the brief moment it took Draco and Harry to whip around the next staircase, however, Draco decided that he had to turn backward again. There was no choice. If they didn't kill Fenrir before they reached the next floor, then they'd lead him right to the Room of Requirement and a feast of children to devour.

Spinning his besom around, Draco sacrificed precious distance between himself and the werewolf to aim and cast another athama spell at Fenrir's head. Although the death eater couldn't deflect it in this shape, he easily sidestepped it and lunged. Only the besom's matching lunge saved Draco from losing more than a few shreds of his robe in Fenrir's outstretched claws.

"What are you doing?" Harry yelled over the wind rushing by them as they flew.

"We've got to kill him!" Draco yelled back. "Before we reach the--!"

But he had no more room to maneuver. His one chance wasted, he flew only inches away from Fenrir's reach. Even at their speed, the werewolf's breath prickled at the back of his neck, the heavy heartbeat roared in his ears. In less than fifteen seconds, he'd gone from scattering the death eaters to becoming an imminent snack.

The besom jerked in his hands, nearly sending him crashing but saving him from a face full of flames as a fireball hurled over his shoulder and into Fenrir's mouth. The werewolf's fur ignited and his furious howls echoed through the castle as he tried to shake off the fire.

"Watch where you're casting!" Draco yelled at Harry.

"Why didn't that stop him?" Harry said, his eyes wide as he watched Fenrir keep on them, looking far more ratlike than Lupin with his fur falling out in blazing clumps and charred black skin landing on the floor behind him. "It barely slowed him down."

"Because he's a werewolf," Draco snapped. "You've got to get him with silver or cut off his head--"

They turned another corner and Draco's eyes widened. The hall ended with the staircase to one side but right in front of him was a large glass window, far too close to slow down for, let alone stop. He had no time to raise his wand and force it open. Screaming and raising his hands to protect his face, he crashed through in an explosion of glass and sailed out into the night.

His besom came to a stop out of sheer inertia. Sitting in mid-air, he whimpered with sharp pain all over his body, but pain could not drown out the panicked howl behind him than quickly grew
fainter. He looked down and spotted Fenrir plummeting to the ground, his legs snapping as he landed.

Stupid werewolf couldn't stop either, he realized, looking back at the much larger hole Fenrir had left in the window. Blood dripped from the jagged ends of glass. Draco hoped most of that was Fenrir's.

The fall hadn't killed the death eater, but it certainly slowed him down. Dragging himself by his front legs, Fenrir turned toward the nearest door and moved at a surprisingly fast pace for a crippled werewolf. But not fast enough. Draco raised his wand and cast athama once more, and this time it connected. A second after he cast it, Fenrir's head neatly popped off and the body sprawled on the grass. Just to be sure, Draco accioed the head and sent it flying toward the Forbidden Forest.

Task done, he let his hand fall and slumped on his besom, catching his breath. Two death eaters killed already, bringing his total dead up to four, not including the ones he'd indirectly poisoned through his work with Severus. And one of them was a werewolf. Not bad for a craven little Malfoy.

"You're bleeding."

Draco blinked. So that's what the pain was, a thousand messy little cuts perhaps. He looked down at himself. No, just a few cuts, but they were very messy and they weren't at all little. Gouges on his shoulder, his left arm, his left thigh and one jagged line on his waist left him and his robe looking like a mess of wet black ribbons. They looked even worse, no doubt, because of the green light coloring his skin.

Green light? They both met each other's eyes and looked up.

A huge dark mark floated over Hogwarts, the luminescent skull waving like a flag over a captured fortress.

"He's here for sure," Draco murmured. "The dark lord."

"Then let's get out of plain sight," Harry said, taking his good hand and leading him back inside. He stopped and stared at Draco, grimacing at the blood dripping down his wand. "I don't think I can fix those. We need to get to the room."

"Right," Draco said softly. Amazing how pain could suck all the fight out of him. "Lead on."

Their flight had taken them nearly to the other side of the floor, but fortunately they flew the rest of the way without incident. Draco followed with his head bowed, just hoping to reach the room in one piece and before he bled to death, but Harry's soft gasp roused him from thinking about his injuries. At first he couldn't tell what had caught Harry's attention. The torches were all dark with only a bit of green light coming in from a window at the other end of the hall. As they flew closer, he made out three bodies lying near the center of the hall, two wearing masks and one not.

Since they were all adults and Draco didn't care about anyone he knew would be here, he paid attention only to the death eaters, flicking their masks away. He didn't recognize either of them. Their faces were open in silent screams of pain, frozen in their final moments. Not until he made out the twisted outlines of their bodies under their robes did he understand why. Their arms and legs were violently twisted around.

"Hell of a jinx," he mumbled.

"Wouldn't expect less of her," Harry said softly.

Draco turned his attention to the other body and sighed. Now that he was close, he could tell it was
McGonagall. Her eyes stared at nothing. Unlike the other two, she seemed to have simply fallen in a heap. The killing curse, most likely.

One less ally they could count on, he thought, but he didn't say it out loud. He simply put his hand on Harry's shoulder and gave him a soft shake.

"We've got to get inside," he whispered.

Harry nodded once, but it took another moment before he could turn away and leave her.

Despite Voldemort's magic-draining trap swirling in the dungeons, the rest of the castle still acted as if it had a mind of its own, revealing the door to them without any problem. They both stepped off their brooms, and Draco flipped his besom around to use it as a crutch.

"You shouldn't walk," Harry started, but Draco shook his head.

"No cushioning charms. Rather walk."

With a frustrated sigh, Harry turned and opened the door, going in first with his wand raised.

The Room of Requirement looked like a strange cross between a hospital and the room for hiding things. Tall piles of junk stacked on top of cabinets dwarfed the dozens of children seated on ancient chairs and mismatched mattresses. The sound of children crying filled the room, and several first years huddled in a corner with thin blankets over their shoulders. There were no adults. The oldest students tried to tend to the younger children, but there were only so many of them and they were all just as shocked. He glanced at a pair of Gryffindors sitting by the door, an older student holding a child but it was the older student who was crying, rocking back and forth with her arms around the first year and murmuring "she pushed me in and closed the door, she pushed me in and she closed the door" over and over.

The last student in, then. He snorted, but not too loud. That was the thing about light children. They just weren't equipped to deal with someone else's sacrifice.

Students sat neatly divided with red scarves on one side and green scarves on the other, and despite his injuries Draco smiled in relief. Although some of his little ones had bruises where falling stones had hit them, they were all there and in one piece. Even Blaise had escaped unscathed, although Draco thought he probably owed that entirely to the confusion when Gryffindor tower started to fall off.

"Harry!"

Draco winced as everyone turned to look at them, or rather at Harry, as Ron came towards him. His hand tightened around his wand. If Weasley had betrayed them and told everyone about their savior's tryst with a dark wizard, they could find themselves fighting their way back outside into the comparatively safer company of death eaters.

"Come on," Harry said, putting a hand on Draco's shoulder. "I know Hermione can fix you up--"

"So can Blaise," Draco said softly. He moved out from under Harry's hand and took a step away from him.

"But--"

"I'll be fine. Go find out what they know." He met Harry's gaze and shook his head. "I know you don't believe me, but please humor me. I'm safer here if we keep our distance."
Unconvinced, Harry frowned but didn't argue. Trusting that Harry would be safe for a few moments, Draco limped toward his Slytherins. They all sat close together and kept a watchful eye on the Gryffindors, which making it hard to spot individual faces as he picked his way over forgotten trinkets toward them.

"Draco!" Vincent waved and came toward him. "You made it!"

All around him, Slytherins lost in their shock looked up and smiled in relief only to falter when they saw how hurt he was. Like a snake creeping back into a familiar den, he felt them moving around him and surrounding him, helping him sit down on the floor where Theo held Pansy in his arms. Dimly aware that Vincent had sent one of the girls to fetch Blaise, Draco leaned back against the wall with a sigh.

"Draco," Theo winced in sympathy. "You look like you've been cut to ribbons."

"I'll be fine when Blaise gets here," Draco murmured. "Besides, small price to pay for killing Fenrir."

Theo's eyes widened. "Fenrir? We heard howling but--"

"Oh yes, he was transformed and snapping at my back," Draco said. "Went through a window and the stupid thing followed me without a broom of his own. Managed to take his head off finally."

"Chased by a werewolf, nearly killed by a window," Pansy murmured. "Such a great warrior."

"Good to see you in one piece, too," he said.

With a wan smile, she put her arm around her waist. "Doesn't quite feel like it yet."

"If it's any comfort, the squid is dead. Snape sliced it in half."

"Did he? Yes, it does make me feel a little better."

"You saw McGonagall when you came in, right?" Theo asked. "You think Snape's dead, too?"

Draco shook his head. "No. Don't go spreading it around but he's with my father. I don't know how the fighting's going. The dark mark's floating over the castle and the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws have been rounded up in the great hall."

"They wouldn't send up a dark mark just for McGonagall," Theo said. "Who else is dead?"

"We are," Blaise cut in as he arrived, kneeling down next to Draco. "That's probably the only advantage we've got. The dark lord thinks he's already killed half the school."

"Not for long," Draco said. "I'm sure my aunt is rushing downstairs to tell him me and Harry are still alive."

He winced as Blaise examined his cuts, tugging the shreds of his sleeve and the side of his robe away to get a better view, and he shivered as the cool air touched his skin.

"Can you fix 'em up?" he asked.

"You don't think you can do it yourself?" Blaise drew his wand and sat down. "You're better at this than I am."

"Liar. You're just squeamish."
Blaise grimaced but he didn't argue. Draco considered himself lucky to only need a few heaen spells rather than the sticenia he'd cast on Pansy before, and he pressed his good hand against his mouth to smother his groans. If a girl could take it without screaming, surely he could, too.

By the third cut, he wasn't so sure.

"Theo," he hissed through gritted teeth, asking questions to distract himself. "Did everyone make it?"

"Yeah," Theo answered. "Greg said it was touch and go for awhile, the seventh years kind of grabbing kids and throwing them out while the professors tried to keep the tower from falling off. Didn't help that Blaise almost got his head hexed off when he came through."

"You owe me one for that," Blaise murmured as he worked. "For putting you back together, too."

"Just one," Draco ground out. "Saved your bloody life sending you through that fireplace."

Finally Blaise finished, adding two quick charms that cleaned off the worst of the blood and mended the biggest rips. It didn't hide the fact that Draco had been in a fight, but at least he didn't look so mangled anymore. After a few deep breaths, he got back to his feet, leaning heavily on his besom on wobbly legs.

"Whoa, don't rush yourself," Blaise said, putting a hand on his arm. "Take some time to rest."

"There isn't time," Draco said. "The dark lord is here--"

"But we're safe here," Blaise said.

"Don't be naive," Draco snapped. "We're safe only because he thinks we're dead. The moment he finds out we're here--"

"No, Harry, it's too dangerous!"

Draco's head snapped up in time to see Harry stop in front of several of his housemates, all of them looking typically stubborn. Harry had Hermione and Ron at his side, and no one looked ready to budge. Draco had no doubt as to what they were arguing about. The Golden Trio loved running headlong into danger and a castle full of Death Eaters probably seemed like a delightful romp and nothing would convince them otherwise.

He sighed. Not even the Slythrin Harry loved. Holding his besom a little tighter, he started towards them, feeling everyone else's eyes watching him.

"--don't care what you think," Harry said, glaring at Seamus. "Voldemort's going to kill everyone in Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw, if he hasn't already done it."

"I don't like it either," Seamus said, obviously offended by the implication. "But Harry, it's You-Know-Who and all his Death Eaters. They already destroyed our tower and flooded the dungeons. Three professors are dead--"

"--that we know about--" someone muttered.

"--and no one's come yet." Seamus shook his head. "There's no way we can do anything."

Harry opened his mouth to yell at them, but Draco cut him off.

"Such cowardice," Draco sneered. "Aren't you Gryffindors supposed to be the brave ones, running headlong where sensible people fear to tread?
The crowd of Gryffindors bristled while the room fell silent on both sides. The younger Gryffindors wondered if their house was about to finish what the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws started, while the Slytherins slowly reached into their robes, wondering if Malfoy was going to get them into a fight. Harry just looked happy that Draco was no longer bleeding to death.

"Shut up, Malfoy," Dean growled. "This isn't a conversation for dark wizards. For all we know, you might've helped You-Know-Who."

Draco glared back, but his anger didn't focus on Dean. Dumbledore's habit of keeping secrets might have helped the headmaster manipulate the school, but it also made things difficult when the old bastard wasn't around to explain his machinations. He looked around at the angry faces glaring at him and took a small step behind Harry, pride be damned, and besides, everyone knew he was a coward anyway.

"Draco isn't the enemy," Harry said, putting his arm protectively in front of Draco. "He's on our side."

"How can you be sure?" Seamus asked. "The little snake might've helped get the Death Eaters into the castle--"

"Without Dumbledore noticing?" Hermione asked. "Or any of the professors?"

"Sure," Seamus said. "Finch managed, didn't he? Convenient he was caught by Malfoy."

"I suppose You-Know-Who wouldn't mind me killing a few of his Death Eaters either," Draco drawled. "I'm sure he'll be happy to hear Fenrir's dead."

Seamus' jaw snapped shut. "Fenrir's dead?" he said after a moment, looking to Harry for confirmation.

"Draco took his head off," Harry said. "And he saved my life tonight. You don't like him, but Voldemort wants him as much as me."

"Don't have to say that like it's a good thing," Draco muttered. "So, is it just the four of us then?"

"Four?" Harry echoed.

"He means us," Hermione said, pushing her damp hair out of her face. "And yes, it's just us against Voldemort unless anyone else wises up and sees what's going on."

"In Gryffindor?" Draco gave a low, humorless laugh. It was easy to be brave behind Harry. "Really, Granger, you shouldn't expect lions to understand a snake's schemes."

"What scheme?" Dean demanded. "You-Know-Who doesn't know we're here. If we stay put and wait for help--"

"--then our rescuers will find our corpses under a pile of rubble," Draco said. "You-Know-Who's going to destroy the castle before the night's out. Filch's runes were found almost everywhere. Hogwarts was supposed to crumble in one strike."

"But we're still in one piece," Dean said.

"For now," Hermione said.

"You believe him?" Neville asked her, finally saying something.
"He's right," she said.

"You can't expect us to fight all the Death Eaters," Dean said.

"Unless you think you can lead everyone safely into the forest," Draco said, "that's exactly what we have to do. You're not helpless little first years, you're nearly of age--hell, some of you are of age. And you don't have to kill if you can't stomach the thought of it."

"So, what then?" Neville asked. "We charge straight to the Great Hall and face off with wizards even Aurors have trouble with?"

Draco sighed. Charge straight into battle? Was that the only way Gryffindors knew how to think, in nothing but straight lines?

"No," Ron murmured. "No, we couldn't match them in a straight fight, but if we come at this from an angle..."

"Like a bishop?" Hermione asked with a smile.

Ron smiled back at her, but he started glancing around the room as if he was searching for something. "You think we could get brooms in here?"

Harry shrugged. "If you need them, the room should make them."

"But will we be able to take them with us?" Ron asked.

Hermione paused to think. "Well, I know Filch used to get cleaning supplies from in here, so maybe it'll let some things out. Or maybe it brought them from somewhere else."

"So we need our quidditch brooms," Ron said. "Although it's a bit of a ways to the--"

A loud clattering behind them made everyone draw their wands as they turned, ready to attack whatever had snuck up on them. Instead they stared in surprise at the pile of brooms that had appeared on the floor. More than the Slytherin or Gryffindor brooms, the pile included every spare broom and every Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw broom, enough for almost all of them.

"Merlin," Neville whispered, walking over and picking one up. "It's mine, all right. How'd it do that so fast?"

"Maybe all the magic that can't get to the dungeons is making the rest of the castle kind of supercharged?" Hermione said. "Or maybe the castle's as desperate as we are. Or maybe--"

"Doesn't matter," Ron said, cutting her off with an apologetic look. "All right, quidditch is pretty good training for fighting anyway. Players, get to your brooms."

"This might work," Harry said, looking more open to the plan as he started to get an idea of what they could do. "Draco and I flew circles around those Death Eaters. Probably none of them have brooms."

"Blaise, Theo, Pansy," Draco called over his shoulder. "Get over here!"

"Right here," Theo said at his side, startling him. "We've been listening, just didn't want to get close in case they hexed you."

Draco nodded. Completely understandable. "Get our team together, all of them, even the young ones. Vince, see if you can't find anyone crossbred with something with teeth and claws. Make sure
they can still cast spells, though. If they can't hold a wand, don't bother."

"Half-breeds?"

The surprised whisper that floated through the other house reminded Draco that they were surrounded by light wizards who'd never witnessed this aspect of dark culture. He glanced at the sea of red and gold scarves and wondered which option to take, to ignore them or to make a big deal about the Slytherins trusting them. Either way, they had no choice. To win this fight, he would need every dark witch and wizard using all of their talents. They'd worry about the consequences if they survived.

Voldemort saved him the explanation. The castle rumbled and shook beneath them. A few of the smallest children started crying again as screams and explosive bursts echoed up from the Great Hall.

"He's killing them," Neville breathed.

"No," Draco whispered. "Listen."

Two bursts and a long crackle of lightning accompanied another round of screams.

"It's a duel," Hermione whispered. "Probably against Dumbledore."

"Like he did with me," Harry said. "But he was always scared of Dumbledore. Why would he fight him now?"

"Maybe Dumbledore got free," Ron said.

They listened to the muffled echoes of the duel below them for a moment, none of them saying a word as they imagined the battle. Draco felt the familiar urge to find a dark place to hide, a little hole he could pull in after himself and be safe.

"Draco," Pansy whispered. "What do we do?"

Pansy's question focused everyone's attention on him, even the Gryffindors if only to hear what he'd decide. He met her look, then gazed at the Slytherins with their brooms, the quidditch team ready to fight and a dozen older students standing with Vincent, ready to transform at his word. The youngest children stood in pairs, doubling up on Ravenclaw brooms, ready to escape while everyone else fought.

"We have to kill the death eaters before they kill us," Draco said. Turning on his heel, he flipped his besom around and kicked into the air, facing his house. "This is our only chance. They still think we're dead. We fly in, take them by surprise and fly out again. Don't stop for nothing."

"What?" Ron gasped. "You'd leave the Huffle--"

"You want 'em so bad, save 'em yourself!" He watched as Blaise ordered the players into the air and as Vincent took his halfbreeds towards the door. To his surprise, only May rounded up the children. Pansy instead took her place beside Theo. Not that Draco wasted time arguing. He had no doubt that her siren blood would come in handy later.

"Wait!" Harry yelled, mounting his own broom.

"Everyone," Ron shouted to the Gryffindors, "get on your brooms. We'll fly in after them."

"And let them get first shot?" Dean said. "Not bloody likely. We all go in together."
"If you insist," Draco muttered under her breath.

In only a few seconds, both houses hovered side by side, children in the back, fighters in front. Draco tightened his grip on his besom. He didn't want to go downstairs and yet he did, torn by his fear and by his knowledge that his world could very well rest on how well he killed tonight.

"Nice job," Harry whispered as he flew close. "First they wouldn't go 'cause they didn't trust you, now they're flying for the same reason."

As if Draco would still be here if he thought he could convince Harry to escape with him. Draco smiled. Well, if he died tonight, at least he died with one person believing he was better than he really was.

"Harry--"

Draco cut himself off. He couldn't ask Harry not to throw himself into danger or avoid Voldemort or any number of heroic stupidities that could kill him. Useless to even try. Cursing the Gryffindor presence that kept him from even touching Harry, he resigned himself to a wan smile.

"Don't get killed," he said.

Harry smiled back. "I won't. Promise."

A sick feeling welled up in Draco's stomach. Likely they would lose sight of each other as they flew. Everything was about to go to hell and all he had was a word and the anxiety twisting him in knots. He turned away and met Vincent's look.

"Follow right after us," he ordered. "Don't fall behind."

Vincent nodded and pushed open the door, then stood back as the entire house of Slytherin flew by him. In the blur of black and green, the handful of students with Vincent altered their shape. No wonder they never revealed themselves before. Numerous broken taboos stood before him, including a troll with too intelligent eyes, a girl with acromantula legs under her robe and black fangs that dripped with poison, and a boy with claws and fangs and fur that proved that some family in the past had found a way to breed themselves with a werewolf.

Vincent gripped his wand as the troll picked him up and put him on its shoulder. He couldn't do anything in his seelie shape, but his mixed blood made him the best suited to lead the tiny troupe that wouldn't have listened to anyone else in these forms. Wands in hand, they followed the rest of their house, jumping over the bodies at the foot of the door.

At the front of the charge, Draco wondered how the Gryffindors reacted to the sight of their crossbreeds. Did they gasp? Freeze? Try to hex them? He stopped wondering as they sped through halls that felt narrow and confined now that they were airborne. Taking them through doors wasn't an option, and he led them around a corner to an archway that led to the main stairway. Like thorns, most of the stairs had been broken in pieces that lay far below, the remaining stumps connected to the floor looked burned.

The castle had probably fought back, he thought. The floors went by in a blur, and he almost didn't blast the Great Hall doors open in time. They exploded back into the room and he angled his broom up to the ceiling, clutching his besom tight as he flew upside down for a few seconds to get a quick view of the battlefield.

The dark lord stood in the middle of the hall, his eyes wide as his mouth froze midspell. Several paces in front of him stood Dumbledore, also stunned into silence. His robes were blackened and...
torn, and Draco saw that the old wizard's arm was burned to a charred skeleton. He didn't know what had changed, but Voldemort wasn't just dueling, he was winning.

Away from the duel, Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw students huddled in a corner with several death eaters standing around them, wands drawn. If there were any professors still alive with them, he didn't see. They all looked like a blur of shadows at the taller death eaters' feet, so he aimed at anything standing.

"Caldea!" he yelled, casting a blue light into the eyes of the first Death Eater he spotted. Watching only long enough to make sure that the man's eyes froze and exploded, he relied on his besom to avoid another Slytherin. Dark children filled the air, all of them casting the vicious familiar spells that turned the great hall into a blaze of lights. The Death Eaters, caught off guard, drew their wands too late. As fast as they were, only a few managed to draw in time to aim the children flying like ravens overhead.

Blood splashed the walls. Bodies fell, some of them with burning holes where their hearts had burst from their chest. Draco spotted the man that he'd blinded on his knees screaming, but his view jerked to the side as his besom twisted around. A green light flashed by and struck the ceiling, leaving a black scorch, but the twist left him vulnerable as a jinx struck the shaft, sending him tumbling out of the air.

He landed hard on a table, but he moved on instinct and rolled towards the wall, using his wand to flip the table on its side and save him from another avada kedavra. As he ran along the wall, casting an athamia to decapitate a Death Eater in his way, he realized that he could hardly hear himself as he called out spells. Everyone was screaming.

Chancing another look at the fight, he saw that they had been joined by the Gryffindors, although the red scarves seemed clumped around the wandless Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs. Most of them were hurried out with Gryffindors providing cover, but several of them proved that they'd wisely hid their wands before being taken hostage. To Draco's surprise, Dumbledore also fought, his destroyed hand hidden in his sleeve while he dispatched the remaining Death Eaters.

No, Draco thought, watching the Gryffindors looking around for any more targets. Even the Slytherins lingered, the fight over so fast that they hadn't thought to escape yet, and their halfbreeds gathered at the other end of the hall trying to change back quickly. No, this wasn't right. Where was Voldemort?

He looked, but the other doors were all closed and blocked with broken bits of tables or masonry. Only the main doors stood open. The dark lord couldn't have tried to escape into the flooded dungeons and not even Voldemort would have risked moving alone in a castle that was trying to fight back.

"Draco!" Pansy called out, flying down and landing beside him with a smile. "Can you believe it?"

"No, I can't," he said. He jumped up on one of the only tables still standing and looked out the window.

His heart sank.

Hogsmeade was in flames. The distant red glow against the black landscape and the starless sky looked like a corner of hell had crept up onto the earth. And by the fire's glow he saw the demons, Voldemort's giants and vampires and werewolves and legions of the dark lord's followers, marching over the road and the hills. Had the dark lord summoned them when his plan fell apart? Probably. While he stood there, he felt people climbing beside him.
"Merlin..." Harry whispered.

Draco looked up. Dumbledore stood on the other side of the table gazing at the approaching army. Suddenly aware of the silence, Draco glanced behind and found everyone staring out as well.

"No doubt the entire wizarding world is at war," Dumbledore whispered. "We cannot expect any help. We are alone."

Draco thought of mentioning his father and his Knights, but even if they were still alive somewhere in the castle, their presence hardly meant anything against Voldemort's army.

"We can't apparate," he said. "And there certainly aren't enough brooms to go around."

"Voldemort's magic has ripped holes in Hogwarts' defenses," Dumbledore said. "Did you meet any of the professors? Anyone?"

"Some," Harry answered. "McGonagall, Sprout and Flitwick are dead."

Dumbledore closed his eyes in pain.

"But Severus is still alive," Draco said. "He's with my father somewhere in the castle."

"Lucius is alive?" Putting his grief on hold, Dumbledore took a moment to steady his voice before he could speak normally again. "Are they alone or--?"

"The Knights of Walpurgis are here," Draco said. "I don't know how many are still alive, I don't even know where they are. For all we know, I might be the only one left."

"If Lucius and Severus are together," Dumbledore said, "then they are alive. And the knights are the counterparts of our aurors. I am confident in their ability to fight. I trust if we were to meet that we would fight on the same side, yes?"

"...as long as you didn't fire first," Draco said slowly, increasingly aware that he had been put in the position of negotiating an alliance. "And only until the danger passes."

"Indeed. No more could be asked." Dumbledore stared at the throng of creatures and wizards coming towards Hogwarts, sizing them up like a tired general. "Running is not an option. Even if we all escaped, they would follow us and destroy us."

"How on earth can we fight that?" Draco asked.

"I believe muggles call them combat multipliers," Dumbledore said. "But we will have to work quickly."

Turning and facing the crowd of students gazing up at them, Dumbledore raised his good hand to quiet them. Draco spotted Madame Hooch and Slughorn also in the group, perhaps the only two teachers alive except for Severus.

"My students," the headmaster said, his voice ringing through the bloodied and scorched hall. "Voldemort's army approaches. We have little time to prepare, but this fight is not yet lost. Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff, you must return to your houses and gather up your wands, then return and join Gryffindor and Slytherin."

"Most of you have studied defensive fortifications. You must lay charms and jinxes upon every window and door of the castle. Strengthen the walls if you can. Gryffindor, take the southern
As one, a flurry of red and gold scarves vanished out of the Great Hall. Draco listened with half an ear as Dumbledore gave directions to the other two houses, but most of his attention focused on gathering his Slytherins to himself. From the corner, Vincent left the other halfbreeds as their representative. Once they were in a tight group beneath him, Draco knelt and glanced over them for injuries.

"Did we lose anyone?" Draco asked.

Pansy shook her head. Her eyes were wide and frightened, but not panicked. "Everyone's fine."

"All right, listen. Sounds like we're getting the rear of the castle. Set the nastiest traps you can think of. I'm sure everyone else'll be going for clean kills, but I want you to try for mutilation spells. Get the blood pouring, set the vampires in a frenzy, turn on the giants' blood lust, you know. The more chaos, the better. And see if you can't avoid those Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs. I still don't trust them."

"Vincent, tell your lot to stay changed. If things get bad, they'll have to blend in and pick off the bastards from the other side, but for now see if that girl can't spin a web." He glanced at Pansy and Daphne. "You two, think you can summon up the water from the dungeons?"

The girls exchanged a look.

"Maybe," Daphne said, but she didn't look at all confident.

"If someone could blast a hole in the floor," Pansy said. "It'd make things a lot simpler."

"I'll get the headmaster to do it," Draco said. "Everyone else, go start on the windows, go!"

Draco didn't bother to watch them leave, too busy heading for Dumbledore. The old wizard looked like he was casting several layers of traps on the main doors that would affect much of the outer castle as well. No doubt the first wave of Voldemort's army would fall immediately, but there were so many after that.

"Can you keep those spells on the outside of the castle?" he asked.

"That's where I'm setting them," Dumbledore answered, not turning from his work. "Did you have something in mind?"

"The water flooding the dungeons, it's spelled to suck in magic, but Pansy and Daphne can summon it up. If it won't destroy your traps, I think they could throw the whole lake at the dark lord."

Dumbledore paused and looked at him. "How can they summon it?"

"They're both part siren." Draco studied his face for any change no matter how slight. Instead of a flinch of disgust, however, Dumbledore smiled broadly.

"Excellent. I assume I will need to add a few holes of my own in the floor, but it's a small price to pay."

Draco turned and spotted Daphne and Pansy standing in the center of the hall, their hands clasped as they sang. Their faces were as white as ice as they concentrated.

"And what will you do?"
"My father is somewhere in Hogwarts," Draco said. "I have to find him."

"Alone?" came a whisper from behind him.

Draco smiled. Even with death marching towards them, the sound of Harry's voice calmed his heart. He felt Harry's hand on his shoulder and turned, taking the opportunity to lean against him.

"Only if you go chasing after the dark lord," Draco whispered.

"Voldemort's not here right now," Harry said, sounding like that was the only reason he hadn't left already. "And you seem like you need a bodyguard."

"Always." Draco accioed his besom and hopped on, relieved when it held steady. The jinx hadn't been permanent. "Up for a trip to the library?"

"Only with you." Harry mounted his own broom and wheeled it around toward the door. "See, I said you were brave."

Draco shook his head. "Just too scared to run."

Passing dozens of students on the way, they flew up the empty stairwell and onto the floor containing the library. The sounds of students nervously chatting and casting spells faded to a dull muffle and then to silence. They slowed down and floated quietly, straining to hear the slightest whisper, the rustle of billowing robes. Nothing but the growing roar from outside.

Madame Pince lay in the doorway of the library, crumpled in a bloody heap but surrounded by three charred Death Eaters. Draco tilted his head, impressed. He'd never thought she could fight.

The narrow shelves made it too risky to fly. Harry and Draco both hopped off their brooms and picked their way across the floor, careful not to slip on the books scattered in all directions. When they came into the main study area, they found a few bodies draped over chairs and dropped haphazardly on the carpet. Black scorchmarks lined the walls and a few of the shelves were still had a few small flames clinging to them. One of the windows had been shattered and the tables lay in a smashed heap.

"What do you think happened?" Harry whispered.

"Death Eaters versus knights," Draco whispered. "Don't see any knights, so maybe they--"

He cut himself off and raised his wand. Although the library was silent again, he knew he'd heard something crinkle, as if someone had stepped on an open book. He took a step back, then silently cursed as Harry moved past him toward the sound. Hoping it was just a mouse or Filch's damn cat, he kept close behind Harry as they eased closer.

The library had never seemed so confined before. Like a tomb, without lights the library shelves loomed over them and every empty row could have been a place to set a dead body to rest. Glad there was no one to see, Draco slipped his arm around Harry's waist. Harry was warm, Harry was taller and stronger and more powerful. But Harry didn't stop even when they heard a book knocked to the floor and the startled hiss that accompanied it.

When in danger, wyverns held absolutely still because the little winged snakes were not stupid enough to go roaming around outside of their safe nooks where dragons and monsters could spot them. Despite every human instinct telling him to run, Draco froze, yanking Harry to a stop with him.
He knew that serpentine hiss, the slow draw of breath and the cold presence of dark magic built up over far too many years. He knew that cautious, deliberate step.

The dark lord had not escaped outside. Voldemort stood on the other side of the shelf, just around the corner.
In which the battle is decided

Draco’s besom clattered to the floor. He hated to drop it, but Draco knew he couldn’t escape with a wriggling Harry otherwise. Before Harry could prove how brave he was, Draco clamped one hand around Potter’s mouth and wrapped his arm around Potter’s waist, dragging him backwards. Although Harry struggled, fear lent Draco strength enough to pull him behind a tall shelf with only a few gaps of missing books.

His rush backwards made them slip on several fallen books and torn pages, making enough noise to catch the dark lord’s attention. Draco heard Voldemort’s hiss and threw himself on his side, bringing Harry with him to the floor as the top of the shelves exploded in flames. Burning pages fluttered around them.

"Let me go--" Harry growled, twisting in Draco’s grip.

Draco didn’t bother to answer. Nothing he could say would change Harry’s suicidal mind. He scrambled to his feet and grabbed Harry’s waist with both hands, digging his heels into the carpet as he yanked him farther down the aisle away from the dark lord. Taking advantage of the knowledge that Harry would not hurt him, Draco dug his fingers into Harry’s skin hard enough to leave deep bruises. He ignored the other boy’s grunt of pain as he pulled him along.

"Potter!" Voldemort screeched, his voice tense and cold. "Come face me, boy!"

They were at the far end of the aisle now. Draco looked over his shoulder. So close, just a few more feet and they would escape the high shelves and reach the door.

Two arms came out of the seemingly solid shelf and grabbed him, pulling him in and taking Harry with him. A strong hand covered his mouth and muffled his scream. Beside him Harry grappled with another hand clamped firmly over his mouth.

"Quit squirming, you idiots!"

The hissed whisper made Draco freeze. He knew that voice. As soon as he stopped struggling, the hand lifted and he turned, grabbing Harry and shaking his head silently to make him stop. Harry’s eyes widened in confusion and although he stilled, the hand didn’t leave his mouth. Draco looked up but Severus didn’t offer an explanation. Both of them knew better than to trust Harry on his own.

The tiny room Severus had dragged them into was barely big enough for all of them. If Draco had put his arm out, he could have touched Voldemort. Just a few feet away on the other side of the illusion of a bookshelf, the dark lord’s robes slid along the carpet, the soft rustle like snake scales gliding along the floor. Draco pressed against Harry and buried his face in his robes, closing his eyes when he felt Harry hold him.

The dark lord’s breath grew loud in the silence, overwhelming Draco’s senses. Voldemort paused right in front of them, listening for the slightest slip, the tiniest crinkle of a page. Draco held his breath and felt his master raise his wand, not risking a spell unless he had no choice.

A muffled explosion from below made the shelves shake and tipped teetering books onto the floor. The distant rumble sounded like thunder but Draco knew it had to be Pansy and Daphne sending the water over the first wave of their enemies.

The sound called to Voldemort and he forgot searching for the two boys for the moment, intent on joining his army on the ground. His rasping breath faded as he left the library, but neither Draco nor
Severus moved for several long seconds, waiting to make sure it wasn't a trick.

Finally Severus sighed and lowered his arm, releasing Harry at the same time. Although Harry tried to yank himself away from the older Slytherin, he couldn't budge Draco. With an irritated sigh, Harry put his hand on Draco's head, letting him hold on for a little while longer.

"What are you two doing here?" Severus whispered, still loathe to speak. "I thought you were going to the Room of Requirement."

"We did," Harry said when Draco didn't answer. "But first we had to go to the kitchen and--"

"Spare me the details of your adventure," Severus said. "How do things stand now? Draco?"

Harry's jaw snapped shut as he was ignored. Draco swallowed once and turned his head slightly so his voice wouldn't disappear in Harry's robes.

"McGonagall, Sprout and Flitwick are dead," he whispered. "So's Fenrir. All of us in the Room of Requirement flew to the Great Hall, and we got the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs free."

"The headmaster?"

"Still alive." Draco slowly forced himself to stand straight, although he kept Harry's robes clutched in his hands. "Hogsmeade's in flames. There's an army--vampires, giants, other things--there's no way anyone's coming to help."

"The students?" Severus asked.

"Defending the castle with Dumbledore, but I don't think they'll last long." Draco took a deep breath and eyed Harry, knowing he wouldn't like what came next. "I came to find my father and prepare to withdraw the Slytherins somehow."

"What?" Harry stared at him in betrayal. "You said--"

"--that I was going to find my father," Draco said. "I never said we'd stay to commit suicide."

Although he knew it was inevitable, Draco still flinched when disappointment filled Harry's eyes.

"I kept believing you were brave," Harry whispered. "Even when everyone told me you were a coward, I still believed in you."

"I never pretended I was anything else," Draco snapped with more force than he'd intended. The tiny room felt far too cramped and he longed to get out, even if that meant facing the dark lord's army. "Severus, my father?"

"Probably with his Knights in the hospital wing," Severus said, not commenting on their argument. "Pomfrey might have the last potions ingredients in the castle, but the dark lord surprised us. In the confusion, we were separated. Luckily the castle hid me."

Muffled crumps of explosions and quick spell blasts made him want to rush, but Draco took a few seconds to consider his options. The children were already gone, safely flying through the night. Hopefully they would escape unnoticed. To extract the rest of the Slytherins, however, he would need magical ingredients and possibly a complicated spell to escape from Hogwarts and its anti-apparition charms. His memory flew back to the Room of Requirement. No doubt something there could help, but he dismissed that thought almost immediately. He simply didn't have time to look.
"To the hospital, then," he said softly.

"You can run and hide," Harry growled. "I'm going after--"

"You're coming with me," Draco hissed, "if I have to float your unconscious body through the castle."

A little surprised that Draco looked at him with such hostility, Harry stood straight and met his glare. "I'm not running."

"So you'll throw away every student down there?" Draco asked, gratified to see Harry blink. "You know they can't hold out for long. If you want to have a wizarding world to save, you'll help me find a way out of here. For all of us."

Harry stood still for a moment digesting that thought, but the moment took too long and Severus pushed his way out from between them, grumbling low in the back of his throat.

"When you two idiots finish bickering, perhaps you'll remember there's a war on," he said.

Draco almost snapped back, but he reminded himself that Snape was immune to the Malfoy temper and kept his thoughts to himself. There wasn't enough time to trade barbs, not when he had to convince Harry to act sensibly.

"Your friends or your fight," Draco said. "Which is more important?"

"If I kill Voldemort, then my friends will be safe," Harry said.

"You think that army will collapse if the dark lord dies?" Draco shook his head. "Maybe before the fight started, but now the die is cast. After what they've done, there's no way the dark lord's army will surrender."

"It doesn't have to be that way," Harry argued. "We could negotiate, send them away, anything to just stop fighting--"

"They'll stop fighting when you're dead," Draco said. "Harry, please, you aren't dark. I am. We don't give up for anything. We might run, we might hide for a thousand years. But we don't surrender."

Harry opened his mouth to argue again, but Draco raised his hand to cut him off.

"We don't have time for this. Please, damn it, don't fight me."

At the furious look on Harry's face, Draco grasped his wand, ready to stupefy him.

"Fine," Harry forced out between clenched jaws. "But if I see Voldemort--"

"You'll do your best to throw your life away, I get it," Draco grumbled.

Keeping close behind Severus, Draco and Harry left the library, retrieving their brooms on the way out. The way to the hospital was surprisingly clear. The worst obstacles in their path were a handful of charred bodies, the blackened skin sloughing off in messy handfuls as they passed. Draco forced himself to look straight ahead and not jump at a groan of escaping air from a nearby body's mouth. It was one thing to kill. Walking amongst the dead was a completely different matter.

The sound of his father's voice drove his anxiety away. As they came into the hospital, Draco counted a handful of Knights sitting on the beds tending cursed and jinxed comrades while the rest crowded around Pomfrey's ingredients. Although he relaxed a bit to see his father in their midst, he
grimaced at the confused discussion.

"You can't mix gillyweed and illpop roots," someone snapped. "Not unless you want an explosion."

"Don't bother explaining," someone else said. "Goyle never got beyond third year potions."

"Like yer so much better," the elder Goyle grumbled. "Sides, don't we want an explosion for outside?"

"Yes, outside, not in here," Lucius sighed, holding a gloved hand to his temple trying to ward off a headache. Somehow over the cacophony of voices he heard the footsteps at the door and raised his head.

"Thank God," he said, his voice tinged with relief as he saw Draco and Severus. "You're both all right. Get in here and make something useful."

"As you command," Severus said with a touch of annoyance, giving Lucius' drawl a run for its money, but he obeyed and pushed the Knights out of his way. Most of Pomfrey's furniture and bottles had smashed on the floor in Voldemort's first strike, but a few remained intact and had been gathered on the table.

Harry stopped at the door, refusing to walk any further, and Draco found that he couldn't scold Harry for acting rationally for once. He wouldn't have walked into a room full of aurors either, even if they all swore they wouldn't hurt him.

"You won't take off after the dark lord, will you?" Draco asked.

Harry shook his head once. "I promised, didn't I?"

"Not many of the people I know often keep their promises," Draco said, but he smiled despite himself. There was something to be said for Gryffindor honor. "Keep watch then."

"On both sides," Harry said, glaring at the room full of former death eaters.

After leaving his besom by the door, Draco stood beside Severus and surveyed what little they had. A handful of cracked jars, some spilled rowan, and an assortment of medical herbs. He grimaced. This was going to get messy.

"No time for finesse," Snape said. "We'll have to create yaga artifacts."

Draco nodded in understanding and raised his hand to catch his father's attention. "Bring us little things like combs or needles or--or thimbles if you find any."

"I know what you mean," Lucius said and directed his Knights to gather what the two potions masters wanted. Draco felt a little odd giving his father orders but rationalized that he was simply telling his commander what he needed.

"And a knife if you can find one," Severus called after him.

The thought of how much blood each spell would need made Draco flinch as a woman he recognized as Nott's mother lay a scalpel before them. This was yet another duty of an apprentice, serving as the source of blood for the master. He bit his lip in thought. Harry was so keen on sacrifice, maybe he would volunteer if asked--

"Hey, it's the Potter brat."
Everyone was a former death eater stared at Harry, old habits demanding the boy's capture. The room suddenly fell silent. Draco wasn't sure to go for his wand or stop Harry from raising his, but neither of them had to. A blast of blue light covered the wall in sharp slivers of ice directly beside the woman who'd spoken. Her jump and Lucius' angry face made it impossible to tell if that had been a warning shot or if he'd missed.

"Yes, it's the Potter brat," Lucius hissed. "And he's here to fight the dark lord, so unless any of you want to take on our former master?" When no one answered, he lowered his wand again. "Good. Miriam, you heard Draco's order. Move."

The search took only a minute. Most of the bedside tables were empty, with just a couple of leftover combs and one hairbrush. Pomfrey's desk yielded a few needles and hair ties, but almost everything else lay smashed beneath the fallen cabinets. Lucius lay the last salvaged item, a large button, on the table.

"Your ribbons as well," Severus said.

Lucius and Draco both stared at him, but he met their stares and after a few seconds both father and son pulled off the ribbons holding their hair back with a grumble.

"Draco," Severus said. "It's time. No more stalling."

With a long-suffering sigh, Draco picked up the scalpel and held it to his palm, glancing at his master. Snape shook his head once. Draco slid the scalpel up to his wrist, and this time Snape nodded. Squeezing his eyes shut, Draco slashed the sharp edge across his veins.

To his surprise, there was no pain. The scalpel had been spelled not to hurt. Nevertheless watching his blood flood over the metal and drip onto the table made him tremble. His legs felt weak and chills spread through his body. He dropped the scalpel and held his arm so it wouldn't shake and embarrass him.

Severus gathered the combs, needles, brush and button in the growing puddle, coating them completely and sprinkling on what was left of Pomfrey's feverfew and vervain. Once he no longer needed Draco's blood, he hastily pushed his apprentice's arm out of the way and began his incantation.

Left to heal himself, Draco reached for his wand only to find his right hand trembling worse than his left. His fingers wouldn't close on the slender shaft of wood. He'd seen blood before, but never this much of his own.

Fortunately he did not have to heal himself. His father's hand closed around his arm and held it up at a better angle for his healing spell. The wound was too deep for the usual flicking away, but shallow enough that the dark spell knit the veins and skin back together quickly. Once that was done, Draco leaned on the table and closed his eyes. After everything he'd gone through today, he was starting to feel hollow.

The castle shuddered as if struck once, then twice. Lucius left Draco's side to look out the window, cursing under his breath.

"There's no more time," Lucius said, coming back to the table. "They've broken through the western wall. Gather what we have. With any luck, we'll be able to shore it up again."

While everyone moved past him, Draco took a few seconds to catch his breath and steady his nerves. Severus grabbed the pile of combs and needles and held them gingerly in his hands, but as he turned
he didn't notice the broken comb that slipped between his fingers and landed back in Draco's blood.

Draco picked it up and held it tight in his fist. It looked like the rest of the Knights expected him to bring up the rear, and he might need that little comb. He turned and jogged after them, picking up his besom and keeping pace beside Harry, and wondered if the Knights would be annoyed if he flew instead of walked.

"Doesn't seem like they're trying to find a way out," Harry said, one eyebrow raised.

"Maybe he thinks we can still win," Draco replied. He wished he had time to talk to his father, to learn what his plan was. Or perhaps it was better to believe his father had a plan and that he wasn't doing what Draco did, improvise and con his followers into thinking he knew what he was doing.

Harry opened his mouth to answer but a shout from close-by cut him off. A bolt of green light struck the ceiling overhead, knocking chunks of stone down on them, and everyone separated and pressed against the walls to make themselves smaller targets. The sounds of rapid fire spells came back from the front of the group, but Draco had no way of telling what had happened. Probably run into a group of Death Eaters looking for stragglers up here. From the sound of the spellfire, they wouldn't be going forward anytime soon.

"Pull back!" someone yelled.

Sliding along the wall, Draco trusted the rest of the knights to keep the Death Eaters occupied and turned his attention to the way they'd just come. Spells occasionally smashed into the floor and ceiling, sending fiery streaks along the stone or smashing holes in the wall, but Draco forced himself not to freeze or slow down. He kept his eyes focused on the far corner, knowing that if he made it, he'd be out of their range of attack.

Because of that focus, he saw the pack of night things come around the corner before they even noticed him. Hags with straggly hair and crooked teeth, a pale and fanged daughter of Annis, a raw head with its skinless body. Their mouths dripped with fresh blood, their claws were covered with strings of gore. Voldemort had chosen his army well.

Although he was of age, Draco was close enough to his childhood to feel the primal fear of the devourers of children. His besom clattered forgotten to the floor. Casting a protego charm felt like a waste of precious seconds as they came towards him, clinging to the shadows along the wall, and he aimed his lightning at the closest one, catching the hag in the chest and throwing her blackened body against the far wall where she burst into cinders.

A spell from Harry's wand caught the Annis on fire but it refused to collapse, and Harry had to cut it apart piecemeal before it finally fell. By that time the raw head had reached them, its long arms and legs carrying it swiftly towards Draco.

He cast an athamia spell to cut off its arms, but the spell slid off the creature's bones and struck the wall. As its hand wrapped around his throat, he tried a hemoragia spell. The creature ignored the blood coagulating on its body as if it didn't feel and hauled Draco off the ground, jerking him towards its gaping mouth. Through gritted teeth he ground out the only spell he could pronounce without air, strican. The jolt of black energy from his wand knocked the raw head off center, and its teeth closed over his shoulder instead of his throat. Small comfort as blood spurted down its throat.

Draco slammed into the wall at the same time he heard Harry call out a haetus heorte spell. The raw head let him go to scream and put its hands over the gaping hole where its heart should have been. Flames and black ichor poured out of its body. Its arms flailed and caught Harry across the face, but even knocked to the floor, Harry held his wand straight at its head and yelled a sectum sempra.
The raw head cracked as more black liquid bubbled from the wound, and another spell forced the crack wider. Draco clamped his hand over the bite on his shoulder and scrambled back along the floor, trying to get away as its wild movements smashed everything around it. It stood straight, shrieking in an impossibly high voice, and crushed part of the ceiling.

When the floor shifted under him, Draco's first thought was relief as the raw head slid backwards and tumbled away. Only as he started to slide as well did he realize the castle was coming apart. He turned on his hands and knees and tried to grab the wall, the floor, anything to keep from falling. As the floor slanted even more, he saw the break in the corridor just a few feet in front of him and Miriam aiming her wand at him. He felt himself lift a few inches as she pulled him towards her, but a red flash set her robes on fire and blasted her wand out of her hand. Her screams drowned in the rumbling as huge blocks of masonry tumbled around him.

Freefall. He saw his wand plunge over the side before he did and suddenly he was outside, the winter air turning his breath to steam. For an instant he saw the entire battlefield.

His father was wrong. The enemy hadn't broken through. The students had collapsed the wall themselves, using the castle itself as a weapon to bury their enemies. Young wizards and witches peered through the windows alongside what looked like dozens of elves, but he couldn't be sure from his quick glimpse.

Beside him he saw surprised vampires and goblins and nameless shadowy things with luminescent eyes clinging to chunks of the wall as they fell. Swaths of Voldemort's army covered the grounds surrounding the castle and a massive heap of broken bodies lay against the trees, crushed by Pansy and Daphne's flood. Centaurs stood just outside the forest attacking their flank. Dumbledore had his own allies, including the creeping carpet of spiders surrounding the giants.

Something heavy struck his shoulder. He shrieked in pain and tilted in the air to see the ground rise up towards him. Natural magic protection or not, he didn't want to crash with huge stones falling around him, but he had no wand, no besom--but he did have something sharp in his hand.

He threw the broken comb down ahead of him and when it landed on the dirt, thick vines exploded into the air. It pushed giants and bodies and vampires out of the way as it spread in all directions around the castle, providing yet another barricade and cushioning Draco's fall, setting him gently down in the middle and growing over his head, sheltering him from the remaining fragments falling after him.

He spotted his wand within arm's reach, held aloft by twisting tendrils as the vines stopped growing. As he yanked it free with his left hand, the vines suddenly hardened and turned brown and sprouted long thorns. He gingerly brought his arm back and scraped himself only a little. Once he was free, he cast a quick spell to slow the bleeding in his shoulder, but he knew that he'd need a real healer to mend the bite.

One athamia spell after another cut through the vines, but he hesitated near the edge. The battlefield raged all around him. Between the thorns and tendrils he watched the childrens' spells cut down monsters and Death Eaters alike, and he knew if he made it to the windows that they would likely attack him, too.

He peered out at Voldemort's army trying to gauge its strength. Although they had suffered losses, the battle was by no means decided. While the common soldiers lashed out at each other, the major players had not yet stepped onto the field.

Then Voldemort's army parted and Draco saw the dark lord himself crossing the grounds and stepping over bodies in his haste. At first Draco had no idea what he was so focused on, but he
looked further down Voldemort's path and noticed the huge muddy stretch of land where Pansy and Daphne had thrust the lake. Broken furniture, grindylow bodies and assorted junk had come up with it, and he noticed his master's scattered potions ingredients and a cracked desk cracked. As Voldemort drew closer to Snape's things, Draco spotted it. A plain box with its lid flipped up and the Malfoy grimoire half-standing for all to see.

If the dark lord got his hands on that, all the dark lore and tradition he'd been denied for years and years, the war would end.

Draco sliced the last vines in his path and aimed his wand as Voldemort bent to grasp the book. His accio spell brought his grimoire safe in his hand, but it also brought Voldemort's attention. The blizzard, the dragons, the Prophet, Harry, everything of the past few months faded and he was back where he began, standing in front of the dark lord with the world on fire around him.

But one thing was different. Voldemort's eyes had widened in startlement when the book flew out of reach, and when he looked at Draco, a moment had passed before he realized it had been spelled away. A natural reaction, a reaction bred of a childhood spent without books that read themselves and toys that danced at a word.

"Mudblood," Draco whispered.

For years his pureblood parents had served Voldemort, obeyed him out of admiration and then fear. The dark lord rallied the wizards and then trapped them in his dark mark. He terrorized them, used them up as cannon fodder and let them languish in Azkaban until he needed them again. All this time, Draco had been afraid of a vicious, spiteful mudblood. His indignation pushed aside his paralyzing fear.

This time as Voldemort drew near, eyes boring into his own, Draco did not freeze. At the first sharp touch into his mind, Draco turned and ran.

Plunging wildly across the battlefield, Draco threaded his way beneath giants and past vampires, out of their reach before they even noticed him running by. Spells passed behind and in front of him and blasted the creatures around him. Bodies fell out of his way or dropped down in his path, and he rolled over a dead giant to land at full speed on the other side. A centaur's arrow missed him and sank into the eye of a werewolf coming towards him.

The grimoire dragged at his mangled shoulder, but he didn't stop. If he could get around the castle to the far side of the forest, perhaps he could disappear with the book. He knew he had a chance. Draco knew he could outrun dragons.

But dragons couldn't cast spells. He slipped while running across the mud and as he stumbled forward, a green spell flashed overhead and struck the ground in front of him. Mud and rocks exploded from the earth. When he opened his eyes, he found an impossible crater before him. Too far to jump, too wide to pass before another spell hit him.

He shifted the book to his bloodied arm and raised his wand, but Voldemort simply stood several meters away and watched as three giants stomped towards him, their clubs ready to smash him into the mud. Draco swallowed once. Too close, too close, even if he killed one there was no way he could stop the other two. Why should the dark lord bother killing him? He thought of apparating but the lake water hadn't eaten through the castle's strong wards.

So when the first giant fell over, cut in half at the waist, Draco thought he was hallucinating. The other two giants looked around in shock trying to see who'd cast that spell, and a second later their heads slipped off their shoulders at the same time, blood pouring out of their severed necks in a
torrent.

Voldemort drew his wand and Draco took a step back, teetering at the edge of the crater. But after a second Draco realized Voldemort wasn't looking at him but rather something above him. Before he could look, something blurred in front of his face and blew his hair over his eyes. Harry dropped his broom and spoke over his shoulder, never looking away from the dark lord.

"You all right?" Harry asked, raising his wand.

"Alive," Draco said, tossing his head and his hair back.

Being shielded by Harry didn't make him feel safe. He felt instead like he had more to lose than his life. Clutching the book to his chest, he peeked around Harry as Voldemort came within dueling range.

"At last you face me," the dark lord said, his low voice carrying over the fighting. "Tonight I finish what I started seventeen years ago. Your mother isn't here to save you this time, boy. Any protection she gave you doesn't matter now."

"I don't need it anymore," Harry said. "I can take care of you myself."

They attacked at the same time. Draco heard the dark lord cast a killing curse but he didn't hear Harry's charm. Perhaps he didn't cast a specific spell but simply attacked with pure magic. It didn't matter. Their spells slammed into each other with a thunderclap that vibrated deep in Draco's chest. For the first time in his life, he saw two wands lock and saw the safeguards on magic fail. The air around him tore and crackled with life and their magic turned on itself and burned between Voldemort and Harry. He'd never imagined they were so powerful. Their wands channeled everything they had and turned the battlefield as bright as day and as hot as hell.

Draco whimpered low in the back of his throat and fell to his knees behind Harry, curling up with the grimoire in his lap. He was at the center of a hurricane. If he moved even a little in any direction, the storm would swallow him and tear him to pieces.

"Malfoy!" Voldemort roared. "Son of my right hand!"

What? Draco turned his head just enough to see the dark lord struggling to hang onto his wand.

"Strike Potter down! Strike him down and I will welcome your family back to your rightful place at my side. Strike him, and rule by my side!"

"Shut up!" Potter yelled through grit teeth as he kept both hands on his wand. "He won't listen to you!"

But Voldemort knew what to say to keep Draco listening through his fear. "I can destroy the Ministry! You can end the war between Merlin and Morgan right now!"

Destroy the Ministry. Destroy the wizards who slaughtered his kind for hundreds of years. All his ancestors demanded vengeance. The dark lord could give him vengeance. He could smash Azkaban and crush the Ministry underfoot. Even if the dark lord didn't care at all about his followers, he could still give them what they wanted.

"Kill Potter while he can't fight, and you will have power beyond your wildest dreams!"

"He's not like that!" Harry shouted, but his voice wavered as if he was trying to convince himself. "He's not--"
"He's a viper like the rest of his family!" Voldemort yelled. "Poisonous little coward, he has no choice but to join me! They all will!"

Peter Pettigrew, Draco thought. The dark lord had taken in that little coward and protected him. Even if he didn't trust him, the dark lord kept his promises.

One little jinx in return for the world.

He slowly stood and nodded once at Voldemort.

"Draco?" Harry's voice rasped, raw from the power moving through him. His uncertainty made him seem all the more vulnerable. He'd seen too much of Draco to be sure one way or the other.

"He's right about me," Draco said, unable to meet his eyes. "I am a viper."

Holding the spine of the grimoire in one hand, he drew close behind Harry and opened the book, letting the pages flip to a random page. Blood coated the cover and the edges of every page, and the book fell open to a circular diagram with complex symbols and glyphs.

"Your viper," Draco whispered. And he began to read.

Vampire-like, the book absorbed his blood. The little charms protecting his shoulder failed and the bite reopened with blood flowing down his arm again, dripping on the ground beneath him and mingling with the blood of the giants. The drops rippled through the blood and the expanding circles spread out around them. The circles didn't fade but coalesced into visible rings that began to fill with strange swirls and lines that Draco couldn't read but that his blood knew. The diagram in the book drew itself and began to glow a faint red, casting the shadow of glyphs on Harry and himself.

The magic between Harry and Voldemort snapped, but while Harry stumbled and found his wand freed, the dark lord's magic circled the boys, trapped within the diagram. The glyphs shuddered and began to burst one by one as Voldemort's magic overpowered them.

"Now, Harry, kill him!" Draco couldn't force himself to speak above a whisper. "Quickly, before it breaks!"

But Harry didn't need to be told. He didn't try to attack Voldemort. Instead he held his wand straight, and without a word he summoned the trapped energy to himself. Voldemort's magic, Draco's diagram, and his own magic all funneled into his wand, leaving the battlefield dark and silent for a moment. Voldemort stared at him with his mouth open in shock.

"Goodbye Tom," Harry said simply, and released all of it back at the dark lord.

Wild without a spell to command it, the wave of magic flew at Voldemort and punched through him and into the earth. Voldemort howled in pain until his voice dwindled to nothing and his body stilled. His skin went from white to gray and cracked. His left arm broke off at the elbow, then the shoulder. His eyes dried out and crumbled to dust. Sucked empty of magic, his skull collapsed in on itself and his body disappeared in a thick mire of residual dark magic that melted into the rest of the mud.

No longer needed, the grimoire snapped shut and slipped from Draco's hand into the puddle of blood.

Harry held his wand up a little longer, then sighed and slowly lowered his wand. His shoulders drooped out of exhaustion, but his eyes were clear as he looked at Draco with a tired smile. "You all right?"
Just like that. No wild explosions, no desperate struggle with the last of their strength, not even a bit of applause. For some reason he'd imagined Voldemort's death would have some kind of dramatic music accompanying it. Draco wanted to go and spit in the mud just to make sure he was dead, but he couldn't force his legs to move.

If Voldemort's army noticed the loss of their leader, they didn't show it. When the light faded and only the partly-collapsed castle and distant Hogsmeade provided any light, the black shapes of things with far too many claws and fangs still flitted against the orange windows. Occasional bursts of light colored the battlefield but neither side showed any sign of slowing. The war was far from over.

"We need to get back to the castle," Draco said, summoning the grimoire back into his arms. "Before they see us."

For once Harry didn't argue. He called his broom to his hand and pulled Draco to sit sideways in front of him, then kicked up into the air so fast that Draco's stomach seemed to stay on the ground. In a instant, they saw the entire battlefield like a chaotic chessboard and not like the blood-strewn stretch of mud. Huge puddles of water gleamed in the firelight.

"Harry," Draco said, turning almost completely around. After months of riding his besom, flying awkwardly on a broom with proper charms felt like a luxury. "The Knights and my father, and Severus, did they get away?"

"They were fine last I saw," Harry said, but he didn't sound very confident. "I didn't see the end of the fight. I was coming after you, but I lost you when that big plant sprung up."

From the sky, Draco didn't think the wall of vines was all that big. Yaga combs usually spread their vines out for miles to stop powerful pursuers from catching their victims. The result from a broken comb was tiny in comparison. More important to him was how they were going to get back inside the castle. Half of the castle was impenetrable wreckage and the windows and main door were too full of fighting.

"Think you could clear a path for us?" Draco asked.

"...I don't think so," Harry said. He didn't even reach for his wand. "That last spell took a lot out of me. You?"

"The same. I need to get to a bath. I can feel dark magic clinging to me."

Harry frowned and brought them higher up, but every hall and exposed room was filled with rubble. Both Gryffindor and the Astronomy tower lay on the ground far below like smashed toys. He stared for a moment at the remaining upper level windows, but their enemies may still have lurked inside and he didn't want to fly straight into another one of those rawhead things.

They were saved from having to make a decision by a powerful concussive force from below. The broom shuddered as it was pushed up, but the main blast went straight from the castle's front doors through the army itself. Giants tumbled along the ground while vampires and other lighter creatures flew backwards.

As the broom wobbled, Harry put his arm around Draco so he wouldn't fall and brought them around for a clear view.

A row of elves stood at the door, their hands raised as they moved forward step by step. They didn't look like Hogwarts elves. Their eyes had turned glittering black, their teeth looked sharp even from this distance, and their upraised hands ended in claws. They were still recognizable as elves, but even
their torn pillowcase clothes had been exchanged for thick leafy vines draped over their bodies.

"Those elves are almost feral," Draco whispered. "They've gone back to the land."

"Not that I'm complaining, but where'd they come from?" Harry asked.

"I don't know. They--" Draco cut himself off and squinted, trying to make out the details one of their faces. Their gnarled bodies look much like one another, but he recognized the shortest one on the side, a young female elf with light gray skin. Filly, one of their house elves, and if she was here, that meant--

"She's alive!" Draco yelled, leaning forward and dangerously tipping the broom. "Get us down there now!"

Only Harry's arm kept Draco from leaping off. Taking them down behind the line of elves, Harry yelped as Draco slid off the broom before they'd landed. Draco hit the ground awkwardly and fell to one knee, but he didn't feel anything except elation and he stood up. All around him, students with cuts and burns and bruises all aimed their wands at him, lowering them as they realized he wasn't a monster who'd slipped in somehow. Dumbledore stood off to one side, his blackened arm now completely gone and his sleeve limp, giving further orders to a handful of students.

And in the center of the room, Lucius and Narcissa stood wrapped up in each other, oblivious to the world around them. Severus stood close but did not touch them, obviously loathe to do so in public.

"Mother?" Draco said softly.

Her long hair was pulled back in a ponytail, her cheekbones were too prominent after months of not eating well, and a long scratch marred her cheek, but she smiled as she turned towards him, extending her arm. It was all the invitation he needed and he ran towards her, throwing his arms around her waist. Her cloak fell over him, soft and warm. He hissed as she touched his mangled shoulder, and she gently pulled the cloth away from the wound for a better look.

"My poor son," she whispered. "I am so sorry I did not come sooner."

"You're here now," he said. He sighed and took a step back, looking at her scar. Although he'd grown enough to look her in the eye half a year ago, he still wasn't used to seeing her face to face, not when he had to look up at almost everyone else. "Our elves found you?"

Narcissa nodded. "I'm glad you sent them after me. I wish you had taken Filly, though. It seems you needed some help here."

"Nothing I couldn't handle," he said.

The Malfoys all ignored Severus' snort of disbelief.

"Narcissa, Lucius," Severus began. "There is little time. We should--"

"They're running!" someone shouted.

Draco turned. Voldemort's army was indeed fleeing towards the forest, forced to cross the huge crater Voldemort had created and crushing each other in their panic as the centaurs picked them off from one side and the forest of thorned vines raked them from the other.

Strange, he thought. The elves certainly helped, but there was no way they had done this on their own.
"Look!" Ron yelled, standing on a table and pointing out the window. "It's aurors!"

Aurors? Draco saw spells crashing into the army as they flew in on brooms, dozens of aurors all racing as fast as they could towards the school. His mind raced. Did that mean Hogsmeade was under wizard control again? What about the rest of the wizarding world? Was the Ministry still standing?

The students around the front door parted to let a handful of them land. His cousin Nymphadora and a few other aurors stepped inside, moving to talk to Dumbledore before Shacklebolt noticed the Malfoys in the middle of the Great Hall. Although they were on opposite sides of the large hole in the floor, it still felt far too close for both groups.

"Dark wizards," he growled.

Before Draco could raise his wand, Narcissa pulled him back while Severus and Lucius stood in front of them.

"They helped save the students--" Severus started,

"Then they won't mind laying down their wands," Shacklebolt said. "If they're innocent, they'll let us make sure."

"Us? Trust you?" Lucius scoffed. "You incompetent bastards couldn't even get here in time to do anything except mop up."

"The Ministry's been completely destroyed," a witch with an eyepatch said, her voice pure steel. "By Death Eaters and foul things we haven't seen in hundreds of years--"

"If you hadn't noticed," Severus said. "So has Hogwarts."

"Please," Dumbledore said, raising his hand to try and calm the aurors. "These dark wizards truly aided us. Without them, I doubt any of us would have survived. Please, it would be the height of hypocrisy to--"

Draco never knew what it was that startled the auror with the eyepatch. Perhaps a stray blast from the battlefield crashed too close, or maybe she saw one of the nameless night things creeping back into the darkness now that the war was lost. Or perhaps it was nothing more than a flickering shadow from one of the dying torches on the wall. Whatever it was, she shrieked and aimed her wand at Lucius, casting a quick spell that Lucius deflected. His motion of waving his own wand set the other aurors on alert, however, and all of them took direct aim at both Lucius and Severus.

Loud singing was their only warning. A wave of water crested out of the hole in the floor and doused the aurors, drenching them in an instant. Near the door, Pansy and May ran past them to Severus' side. The handful of Slytherins in the room also gathered around the Malfoys.

"Kept some of the lake in reserve just in case," Pansy whispered to Draco.

Nymphadora was the first to recover, trying to cast a spell and tossing her useless wand aside when she couldn't. Instead she drew a small glass vial from a pocket and uncorked the stopper, pulling her hand back to throw it. Draco recognized the pale green liquid inside as one of the many poisons he'd brewed himself, a vile recipe that would rot flesh from bone. He wondered if she even knew what it was.

"Rotianan!" he yelled in warning.
Severus didn't need the warning, easily yanking the potion from her hand and throwing it into the water far below, but Draco's yell prompted Narcissa to turn and head for the far door, dragging him with her. Pansy, May and the Slytherin students followed them, and Draco heard a few sharp curses from his father to cover their retreat.

His first thought was that he'd left Harry behind. Worse, he hadn't even been able to say goodbye. He quickly rationalized that Harry would be cheered as the world's savior and wouldn't need to worry about the stigma of befriending Draco. Killing Voldemort would surely excuse his behavior, especially with Draco gone.

They passed startled Ravenclaws who were busy shoring up the walls where they'd been breached and collected Slytherins as they went, running into Lucius' Knights and the remaining dark children near the rear of the school. The halfbreed children saw them and rounded everyone from one side closer, the half-troll picking up Vincent whose left leg showed deep slashes. Draco just hoped they weren't from anything contagious.

"...we cannot apparate," Severus said, his voice growing louder as he and Lucius caught up. "Unless you have a portkey, we will have to run for the forest."

"My cane will serve," Lucius said. They came around the corner and found the small group waiting for them. "Is this everyone?"

"Everyone they know about," Draco said. "Anyone we miss can slide under their notice."

"Then everyone get close," Lucius ordered. "If you can't touch the cane, then make sure you touch someone who can."

Draco knew better than to ask where they were going, but he couldn't help looking over his shoulder hoping Harry would appear and come with them. The hall remained empty.

"You cannot stay," Severus whispered beside him. "Our world is not his."

Of course not. A viper had no place in Harry's world, no matter how much either of them wanted otherwise. Draco stared at the floor and didn't reply. Perhaps it was foolish to believe the dark and the light could co-exist, and yet he found himself unwilling to give up that dream even now. A second later, the portkey drew him and everyone around him out of the castle.
In which Draco partakes in diplomacy

Snowstorms and paranoia kept the dark wizards trapped within the small castle that Draco only suspected might belong to his family. For the three days, when he wasn't in a potion-induced sleep, he paced the room in which he and all the other injured had been placed. Vincent lay in a bed beside him, and Miriam sat up across from him tending her own burns.

Most of the beds were occupied by children who'd suffered frostbite or stubborn flu from flying here through the night. They were lucky to have arrived. From Millicent who'd been left behind, they learned of Aurors sweeping the Forbidden Forest and interrogating the remaining Slytherins, many of whom had vanished as soon as they could. Every day more arrivals straggled to the castle, finding their way by owled letters in the language of dark children, as the entire British dark community went warren.

Fear could only keep the healthy children inside for so long, however, and when the snow stopped falling and left the ground unblemished white, they poured out for snowball fights. Their laughter made the stone walls a little less oppressive.

Draco wished he could join them, but the rawhead's bite in his shoulder healed slowly despite his mother and masters' best efforts. Without the excitement of a battle raging around him, the wound throbbed when he was still and flared painfully when he moved his arm. On the third day, tired of watching his friends through the window and with his arm cradled in a sling, he left the makeshift hospital and explored the rest of the castle. He steered clear of his father and his Knights in the main hall, instead checking in on the kitchen as a few witches and wizards cooked for an entire community. Elves would have been a help, but no one wanted to risk summoning theirs from homes where Aurors might've been waiting.

Once he had slipped everyone's notice, Draco headed up the narrow, lightless stairs alone. On the second floor there were open windows, no charms to keep out the cold and no torches, so he pulled his cloak a little tighter around himself and kept up a lumos charm so he wouldn't blunder into any cobwebs. Exploring kept his mind off his old home and Hogwarts and Harry, but there was little to explore. The castle was old and in disrepair. Most of the furniture had long since been removed. A few threadbare tapestries hung on the walls, but they were gray and molded. The upper castle was so bereft of magic that he hadn't found doxy infestations or even one boggle. Nothing but a few bird nests empty for the winter.

At least the view was worth coming up here. A thick black forest surrounded them, the branches coated in ice and covered with a light layer of snow.

"I thought I might find you up here."

Despite the stern tone, Draco smiled and glanced over his shoulder. His mother stood at the top of the stairs bundled up in a gray cloak lined with fur. Since he'd never seen that particular cloak before, he supposed she'd killed and skinned whatever animal it was herself during her time in hiding. Coupled with the long scratch down her cheek, it made her look less like a wizarding world socialite and more like a wild witch lurking in the forest.

"Hoping to find something interesting," he said. "Nothing so far, I'm afraid."

"It must've be terribly boring for you stuck in bed," she replied, coming to meet him halfway down the hall. "But if you're well enough to come up here, perhaps you could help your father."
A tempting offer. Lucius was looking for a new place they could hide, someplace fit for a whole community and more comfortable, someplace where the Aurors would never find them, but so far the search had been fruitless.

"Severus said I'm not fit for any kind of work for another week," he said.

"Severus says a lot of things," she replied.

"All of them perfectly sound."

Draco winced as Severus appeared at the top of the stairs, his winter cloak billowing so that he looked like a demonic bat coming towards them. Narcissa sighed in fond exasperation as she turned.

"You are so cautious," she said, "that if we listened to you all the time we should never do anything at all."

"And we would all be much happier, I think," he said, not reacting to her glare. "If you had listened to me, you would have been comfortable and safe in Paris, not starving here with nothing but elves for company."

"Better company than some," she said. "And I wasn't starving."

"Then once again you weren't listening to me," he said. "Haven't I always said you do not need to diet?"

She sighed again, but there was no anger in her voice. "You strange creature. Even your compliments sound like insults."

"Because you never listen."

"Because you are incomprehensible--"

Draco inwardly groaned. The two of them could go on like this for hours, but if he tried to sneak away, they'd both turn on him. As fast as his wit was, they simply had more experience at biting sarcasm. Rather than be torn to pieces, he resigned himself to a long wait.

"Owl!" someone outside yelled.

Their verbal duel instantly forgotten, Severus and Narcissa moved to the nearest window. Draco looked over his mother's shoulder, ignoring the ache in his shoulder when he moved too fast. Although he knew better, he'd hoped to see Harry's snowy owl every time someone spotted a new messenger in the sky. Once again his heart sank at the owl's dark coloring, but as it flew closer, he thought it looked familiar nonetheless. Dark gray and much larger than a snowy owl, he wasn't sure until he clearly made out its patterned feathers.

"Ilmauzer!" he laughed, holding out his left arm. He hadn't even thought his owl had survived.

Snape said something about it possibly being a trap, but Narcissa's voice drowned him out and Ilmauzer landed easily on Draco's arm. The letter tied to his foot was not one of Millicent's plain missives, but rather a large envelope with two gold seals and an address written in calligraphic script.

Because Draco couldn't use his other hand, Severus took the letter and headed for the stairs. He didn't have to argue with Narcissa over this. The seals were from both Dumbledore and the Ministry. Whatever lay within had to be opened by Lucius.
They found him in the large hall by the fireplace with most of the other Knights, all pouring over maps and one ancient globe. A fire kept out the chill and Lucius claimed the prime spot, seated on the warm stones of the raised hearth. The comfortable seat didn’t seem to ease his headache as he deciphered tiny handwriting while everyone bickered around him. Upon seeing his family enter, Lucius sat straight.

"Ilmauzer?" he said. "What did he bring?"

"This." Severus handed over the letter and paper.

Lucius turned the envelope over slowly, examining the seals first and then the script. "To Lucius Malfoy, Commander of the Knights of Walpurgis, and Company."

Now he had everyone’s attention. Hesitating only a moment, he broke the seals and drew out a letter on two pages, both edged in gold.

"In the hopes that this letter has the honor of addressing Lucius Malfoy and the Knights of Walpurgis, the Ministry of Magic, in conjunction with the Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, extends our deepest apologies for the hostile actions of our Aurors at the conclusion of the Battle of Hogwarts."

His voice dying to a whisper, Lucius blinked in shock. Around him, a few hushed murmurs flitted through the room as they all pushed closer.

"Our Aurors were unaware of the full extent of the dark community's aid in this battle. More importantly, however, their judgment was swayed by the long-standing war between what has recently come to be known as the dark and the light. Both Albus Dumbledore and Harry Potter have assured us that your community wishes for the war to end, and to live in peace with us. Most of the Hogwarts students themselves have repeated this.

"Recently our society has been forced to examine our past and discover ugly truths that were previously hidden. While we do not believe we will ever truly map the entirety of our history, we begin to see a larger picture than we did before.

"For these and other reasons, not the least of which are young Malfoy’s unprecedented overtures of trust and goodwill, it is our greatest desire to offer the olive branch. The war between our two worlds has gone on longer than even we remember. It is time for the war to end before any more blood is spilled."

In a rush, Lucius turned the page and read the next part.

"Because the Ministry will be under reconstruction for some time, we hope that you will do us the honor of joining us at the Diggory estate this coming Saturday at 10:00 a.m. A diplomatic envoy of myself, Albus Dumbledore and Harry Potter among a handful of others will receive you. We understand you may have concerns for your security and are willing to work out any reasonable requests.

In Great Hope, signed Rufus Scrimgeour, Minister of Magic, and Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts."

No one knew what to say. Unprecedented was an understatement. Miraculous, perhaps. If it was true.

"A trap," someone breathed. "It has to be a trap."
"They might've followed the owl--"

Snape's voice cut through the worried murmurs.

"We would have seen anyone following it," he said. "And there are no charms on that letter, either."

"Then they're hoping to lure us in," said the witch who'd first thought of a trap, Pansy's mother Draco recognized. "Lure us into an ambush."

Goyle nodded. "Scrimgeour's hunted us for years. Killed my dad himself."

As others attacked the letter's credibility, Lucius sat down and closed his eyes in thought. Draco watched him for a moment, then looked at the rest of the room. How strange that they were all content to bicker amongst themselves when Lucius would make the decision. Except for Snape and Narcissa, he noted, who simply waited for the head of their family to speak.

After leading his Slytherins for so long, however, Draco was not content to wait. Pausing only to give his owl a chance to adjust its balance, he sat down on the other side of the fire and faced Lucius.

"Father," he said.

Lucius opened his eyes and regarded him.

"Someone has to go."

Draco spoke softly but the bickering stopped. Or rather, it turned on him with stunned retorts of "are you mad?" and "is he insane?" with a few disparaging words to the effects of Snape's potions. Lucius raised his hand to quiet them, then stared at his son for a few seconds.

"Why must someone go?" he asked.

"We can't hide forever. Even the hidden families can be found. We can't fight them without most of us dying anyway. If there's a chance that they're honest, we have to take that chance."

"And if they're lying and they kill whoever we send?" Lucius asked.

Draco closed his eyes. Cut down in a petty ambush after killing Voldemort himself seemed like such a cheap way to die. "Then you've only lost a handful of wizards. The rest of us can try to hide for whatever time we have left."

Behind him, Narcissa made a small noise of protest, but Lucius surprised her with a half-smile.

"Draco, you've been spending too much time with Severus," he said. "You sound as cheerful as he does."

Severus made a not-so-small sound of indignation but he didn't try to argue.

Lucius glanced at the letter again, re-reading it and then staring at the worn and faded globe. The world seemed much more manageable when he could spin it under his hand.

"I will write back with several demands," he finally decided. "Some unreasonable, even for a Malfoy."

A bit of unwilling laughter crept out of his Knights, relieved both that he'd come to a decision and that he had a plan.
"If they agree to everything," he continued, "we will know not to trust them."

"If they don't?" Goyle asked.

"Then we'll be prepared. My cane might be able to portkey us out if things go to hell."

Narcissa refused to look at him. "Who will go?"

For a moment he didn't answer. "Myself, Severus, and Draco."

Without another word, she turned and left the hall. Lucius didn't watch her. He lay the letter on top of the maps and looked up at his Knights.

"Continue searching for suitable places," he ordered. "Consider every country. If you have to move everyone to bloody Shanghai, then do it."

He stood and pulled his shoulders back, stretching out several hours of sitting hunched over.

"Draco, Severus."

Neither needed to be told to follow him. They simply did, walking at his side to Lucius' shared chambers. Severus, however, came to a halt several meters from the door and put his hand on Draco's shoulder to stop him as well. They watched as Lucius knocked on the closed door and waited for Narcissa to invite him in. After a moment, the door opened and he slipped in, leaving the door wide expecting Severus to follow. With a whispered spell, Severus shut the door and leaned against the wall to wait.

"If he thinks I'm going to face that woman's anger, he's even more foolish than you are," he said.

"She won't hex him, will she?"

"No--" a muffled curse came from inside, then the noise of a deflected spell-- "but only because he's a better duelist."

The next few curses made him wince, spells that could do real damage if Lucius didn't deflect them, but Draco did his best to ignore them and leaned against the other wall facing his master.

"You know why I want to go," he said. "Will you really come with us?"

Severus' expression darkened. "Malfoys aren't just reckless. You must have a damn death wish. Blithely walking into the Ministry--it's like sheep visiting a lion because it invited them for tea."

"If they attack us, then we will know better than to trust them ever again," Draco said. "If they play at negotiating a peace deal but are really just lying, buying themselves time to attack us, we have to know. If they're stalling, we might be able to strike preemptively."

Severus tilted his head. "I thought you said we couldn't hope to fight them."

"I needed father to agree to send me there," Draco said.

"You little snake in the grass," Severus whispered. "Not that Lucius hadn't already decided. And now you want to make sure I will agree to go."

"We need you there," Draco said. "You keep us from killing ourselves."

"Don't ever forget it," Severus snapped. "God only knows how your family managed to survive
without me."

Draco knew from his dreams. "Not long. But now we're the longest lived dark wizards in history."

"Despite your best efforts."

"Master..."

"Have I ever abandoned this family?" Severus sighed and shut his eyes, rubbing his temple with one finger. "Of course I will go with you."

Relieved to hear it said out loud, Draco smiled.

"I shudder to think of the damage you could do if left to your own devices."

Draco's smile fell and he opened his mouth to complain, but he was cut off by the door slamming open against the wall.

"Severus! Get in here!"

The voice was so shrill that Draco couldn't tell which of his parents had yelled. He stumbled as Ilmauzer opened his wings in startlement, clinging a little tighter to his arm.

"Wait here," Severus said softly. "No doubt your mother will want you close by once she calms down."

Silently watching Severus enter the bedroom, Draco gave a little laugh. In a few days he was going to walk into the lion's den and hope it wouldn't eat him. He wanted his mother when she calmed down, too.

Ilmauzer hooted softly, making Draco smile.

"I don't have any food for you," he said. "But if you go to the kitchen, I'm sure they'll give you something."

He went to the window and let Ilmauzer hop onto the sill. His owl gave him a moment to stroke his feathers before taking flight again, winging around the side of the castle and out of sight. Draco sat on the sill and looked out. The snow outside was pristine, unplayed in, and he put his hand out into the crisp air. The difference in temperature from the charmed warm air of the castle and the winter wind sent delicious shivers through him.

"Harry," he whispered. "I'm coming."

~

Four days later, he stood at the fireplace by his family's side. His right arm still hurt, albeit less so, and his utilitarian sling had been replaced with fine silk snipped from one of his mother's few remaining dresses. It matched his black robe, the rips and burns and stains carefully mended and cleaned until he looked respectable enough for a formal gathering. His wand lay tucked inside a pocket, and he hoped he wouldn't have to use it. Although they all thought the potential reward was worth risking three Malfoys, Draco didn't want to have to fight for his life ever again.

"I wish we could have gotten you something more elegant," Narcissa said, picking a bit of lint from his high collar. "You look like Severus."

"No one will mistake him with that hair of his," Severus countered.
A black ribbon kept his hair back so that he looked like a strange mix between his father and his master. And his mother, he knew, since he got his slight build from her. Useful as a snake, but annoying as a human.

Beside them, Lucius addressed his Knights, giving them what could be his final orders. Draco didn't want to listen and tuned him out as best he could.

"If you don't hear from us by the end of today," Lucius said, "you will move again. Narcissa knows where to go. Listen to her as you would me. She commands you until I return."

He tugged on a pair of gloves and grasped his cane, taking a deep breath as he stepped in front of the fireplace. Goodbyes had already been said. All that remained was to step through. They all took a handful of floo powder and stared at the twisting flames.

"Be careful," Narcissa said softly.

Lucius nodded once, hesitated another moment, then went forward, calling out "Diggory estate" as he disappeared. Severus followed on his heels and Draco right after, knowing that they stood a better chance in an ambush together than alone.

He stepped into a private library with sunlight from a large window streaming onto a desk covered in loose parchment. He couldn't help comparing it with his father's more impressive library, but that had burned with the house and the memory stung. Since there were no shouted curses or spells, he took it that they were safe for the moment and the meeting would go as planned.

All this occurred to him as he stepped around Severus and stood by his side, but he forgot all of it when he saw Harry standing in front of them, looking a little uncomfortable in formal robes. Draco knew there were other people with Harry but for a moment all he could see was the Gryffindor's smile. He didn't look like he'd lived through a battle. All of his injuries were mended with only faint shadows around his eyes and a lingering pallor to his skin hinting at what he'd endured. Draco hoped he didn't look too ragged in comparison. Then someone started speaking, and Draco had to at least look like he was paying attention to the world around him.

Rufus Scrimgeour and Dumbledore stood next to Harry, and if the Minister of Magic resembled a lion, the Headmaster looked like a cat who not only eaten a canary but gone back for some cream. Draco wondered what kind of schemes Dumbledore had manipulated behind the scenes to arrange this meeting. Scrimgeour looked downright nervous.

"Honored guests," Scrimgeour said, his smile painfully polite. "Please let me be the first to extend our thanks to you for your aid in the war against You-Know--ahem, against Voldemort."

"The dark lord's death is a great weight from all our minds," Lucius said.

Draco controlled his flinch, but he couldn't stop himself from straightening a little. He'd gone a long time trying not to call Voldemort the dark lord in front of anyone. To hear it spoken aloud in front of the Minister was a stark reminder of how things had changed.

"Indeed," Scrimgeour said. "Although you already know them, please permit me to introduce them in their official capacities. The Boy Who Lived and Destroyer of Voldemort, Harry Potter. Headmaster of Hogwarts, Albus Dumbledore. And I, Minister of Magic, Rufus Scrimgeour."

"Well known indeed," Lucius said, keeping an eye on Scrimgeour's wand hand. "In our capacities as envoys, then, I am Lord Lucius Malfoy, commander of the Knights of Walpurgis. These are my most trusted attendants, Severus Snape and Draco Malfoy."
Scrimgeour inclined his head, also never taking his eyes off of them. "All of you are quite well known. Forgive me for asking this, but are you three all that will be arriving? We had expected more."

Lucius nodded. "We were unsure of your true intentions. The only reason we even risked this much was because you turned down my request to completely lower Apparition wards while we spoke."

"You mean--" Scrimgeour blinked. "That request really was fake?"

"Of course."

Dumbledore chuckled. "This meeting was nearly called off because of it. Certain members of the Ministry swore it was a trap."

The dark wizards made small noises of contempt. Such an open attempt at a trap was almost an insult, nevermind that they'd used it as such. Dumbledore must have noticed their looks because he waved his hand dismissively.

"No harm done, though. Shall we go inside?"

Scrimgeour reached back for the ornate door knob, but paused mid-turn. "Because we expected more of you, I'm afraid we will have a surplus of attendants on our side."

They entered into what used to be a large dining room, lit by tall ceiling to floor windows with blue curtains. Plush blue carpet muffled their steps as they approached their side of the ornately carved table. Draco didn't notice until he was right in front of it that it was round. Yet another relic of Merlin's philosophies.

Fortunately there were not so many people that they would fully wrap around the table. As introductions were again given, Draco took the moment to size them up. Griselda Marchbanks of the Wizengamot faced them as if they were locked in the chair before her court. Remus Lupin and Nymphadora Tonks took their places at Dumbledore's side, and Draco felt sure that their presence was due solely to the headmaster's influence. Kingsley Shacklebolt did his best to seem pleasant and failed miserably. Cornelius Fudge did nothing to hide his irritation. Goading the man would be counterproductive so Draco tried to conceal his satisfaction behind his smile. How the tides of war changed everything. Fudge was here no doubt in some Ministry capacity, but Draco was part of a small diplomatic retinue, far more important than one of many Ministry officials.

A handful of quills and parchment had been set out for anyone's use, as well as several glasses and a communal jug of water. It had to be communal. No one would trust it otherwise.

As Rufus and Lucius spoke, exchanging polite words as if there had never been a war between them, Draco glanced at Harry only to find the Gryffindor already watching him. Although they couldn't speak, Harry put his hand to his throat and tugged the leather cord up from under his robes to show off his honey amulet. Draco smiled and hoped his fair skin wasn't turning pink.

Sitting so close and unable to even speak was torture, but worth it to be able to see Harry and make sure he was all right. As the minutes stretched, he wished he could at least pass a note across the table.

"I'm afraid what you ask is entirely out of the question," Fudge said.

What? Apparently he'd missed something. Draco glared at the man and resisted the urge to look at his father.
"Cornelius--" Griselda started, but he ran right over her.

"This farce is a complete waste of time," Fudge snapped. "We all know we can never come to any agreement. Just listen to these demands. Decriminalize dark magic, permit crossbreeding, restitutions-Merlin, next they'll be wanting to legalize necromancy!"

Lucius somehow kept a straight face when he replied. "I admit that was next on my list."

Fudge grimaced and turned away, his thoughts clearly expressed by Shacklebolt's hiss of disgust. Griselda blanched and did not interrupt again. While Dumbledore sighed and shut his eyes, he did not try to silence anyone.

"Legalize necromancy?" Shacklebolt spat. "You think we're too scared to say no? That we'll just roll over and let you butcher people--"

"Of course not," Severus said, finally speaking. "We were hoping you might permit yourselves to be educated on the matter so you don't continue to rant about something you know nothing about."

"I arrested three Death Eaters in the middle of brewing potions with bodyparts in their cauldrons," Shacklebolt said. "I think I know something about it when I see a little girl's head bobbing around, her eyes boiled out."

"That wasn't necromancy," Severus said.

His voice was a flat contrast to Shacklebolt's yelling, and the Auror paused as he narrowed his eyes.

"What do you mean, not necromancy?"

"Necromancy is the theft of a little life, a bit of the soul if you wish," Severus said. "You can perform it without killing anyone or anything. Really, if necromancy was about killing, then all the dead animals we put in potions would certainly qualify."

"Kingsley, Cornelius," Rufus said, his voice stern. "Sit down. That is enough."

He didn't like the man, but Draco was a little impressed at how the two obeyed his command. Rufus was about to say something when the scratching of a quill caught his attention, and he glanced aside to see what Griselda was noting down.

"It seems to me," she said, reviewing her spidery writing once more, "that we cannot meaningfully discuss any plans to integrate our worlds peaceably until we understand more about your practices of dark magic. I suggest we put negotiations on hold and spend at least the next few days reviewing some of your basics, to give us a broader understanding that we can get a handle on, so to speak."

"Perfectly reasonable," Lucius said. "Severus can give you a list of things we will need for proper demonstrations."

"Excellent," Rufus said. "Perhaps it would be best to recess for the day?"

Severus lowered his eyes and Lucius softly lay his fingertips on one of the parchments he'd written on. Draco didn't like their silence and although he tried to match their calm demeanors, inside his stomach began to twist. They were scheming and they hadn't told him what about.

"There is one more thing I think we'd best discuss, at least briefly," Lucius said. "It should be brought up now rather than later."
"And what would that be?" Rufus asked.

Lucius drummed his fingers on the table a few times as he carefully crafted his response. "Dark wizards perform our most lasting and important magic with blood--"

"Merlin," Fudge whispered, "if you're asking for a damn sacrifice--"

"Not at all," Lucius said. "I mean that in matters of negotiations, we do not trust solely in a piece of paper and goodwill. If my community is to believe any agreement we come to, they will need something more substantial. In this case, as we unify two disparate worlds...I believe no less than a marriage will do."

"Marriage?" Nymphadora echoed, speaking for the first time. "Like royalty uniting two nations?"

"It makes sense," Dumbledore said. "Political marriages are common enough in our history. And if I understand their feelings about loyalty and family a little, then this would cement our ties better than anything else we might do."

"I will not see any young witch forced into a marriage against her will," Griselda snapped. "And to who? Will this be one of those arrangements of a child married to a wizard three times her age?"

"As to who," Lucius said, "the dark wizard will be my son."

Draco's stomach tightened into one big knot. He couldn't raise his gaze from the table, let alone meet Harry's look. No wonder his father had said nothing before. He'd known his son would argue, scream and--

No. Lucius knew his son would do nothing but his duty. Loyalty before everything, especially his own happiness. He slid his hand under the table and clenched the edge of his robes. The same loyalty that would have led his parents to die to protect him also bound Draco to their will.

"And does he agree to this arrangement?" Griselda asked, her voice soft and disbelieving. "To be put up as a peace offering?"

"If my father wills it," Draco said simply. He felt everyone watching him, felt Harry's hurt without having to look at him. There was nothing else to say.

"As to your half of the arrangement," Lucius continued as if there had been no interruption, sliding the parchment across the table to Scrimgeour. "I have a list of attributes we expect."

"Attributes?" Remus said, looking sideways at the list. "Not names?"

"You may think us monsters," Lucius said, "but we value ability and intelligence a little higher than you might think. I will not see my family united to any opportunistic witch who can stomach our magic to get to our fortune."

"Of age," Scrimgeour read, his pace quickening as he grew more dismayed, "at least half-blood, well-regarded, of high character, leader amongst her peers, keen dueling ability, proven bravery, proven ruthlessness, experienced in dark magic, a disregard for the opinion of the Ministry--Merlin, Malfoy, I don't know how you expect to find a young lady to fit your rather unorthodox requirements. If the peace of our worlds depends on this match, you've shot down any chance of it."

Severus turned slightly and leaned towards Lucius, whispering something only they could hear. Lucius frowned and whispered back to Severus, clearly arguing, and Severus whispered something else, then added a quick remark that turned Lucius' frown into a snarl. But the snarl was not directed
at anyone but Severus, and without a word he took back the parchment, struck out one word and wrote in another. Still fuming at his friend, he thrust it back to Scrimgeour, who read the alteration.

"Leader amongst 'his' peers," Rufus said softly. The whole side of the table straightened as their minds not only recognized the change but immediately came up with a solution.

Everyone looked at Harry, who stared back with wide eyes.

"Me?" Harry looked around for confirmation. He stared first at Dumbledore, then at Draco, who stared back with the same confusion.

"Don't see why it has to be him," Lucius grumbled to Severus, just loud enough for Draco to catch. "Draco would like the same attributes in anyone else. Anyone but him."

"If you can find a Girl Who Lived," Severus whispered back, that infuriating smug look comfortably settling on his face. "Neither of the boys is betrothed, correct?"

"That's not the point, you insufferable--"

"An elegant solution," Dumbledore said with a smile, as if he'd known all along what would happen. "However, I must insist that because this decision is so monumental, especially for young Malfoy and Mr. Potter, that they be given time to think and perhaps get to know each other a little better before they formally agree. Is that acceptable to you?"

"Eminently," Lucius muttered, looking anything but sincere.

"As long as they are chaperoned," Severus said since Lucius was in no state to think about it. "At all times. God only knows what trouble young men can get into these days, especially these two."

"Quite true," Dumbledore said. "Their time at Hogwarts would almost read like a cheap penny-dreadful parchment, all adventure and close calls."

"'Close calls'?" Lucius echoed, glancing at Severus. His frown darkened when Severus would not meet his eye and instead seemed entranced by his sparse notes. "I think I'd like to hear about those."

"Very well," Scrimgeour said, "this meeting officially concludes for the day. Gentlemen, you have a handful of guest rooms to select from if you wish. It seems we worked through lunch, but you'll have access to a handful of kitchen elves whenever you like. If there's anything else?"

Lucius paused and tapped one finger on the table, then nodded. "The Malfoy Gringott's account, is it still frozen?"

"No," Rufus said after a moment, eyeing Cornelius to make sure he wouldn't start complaining again. "Against the will of some in the Ministry, I ordered your assets unfrozen yesterday."

"Thank you. If you could arrange a proxy for us, we can prepare a list of purchases we'll require. I'd rather not set foot in Diagon Alley just yet."

"Understandable," Rufus said. "Remus, if you would be so kind?"

Draco didn't bother listening to the rest of their conversation. He knew he should be happy, but he couldn't feel anything except a whirlwind disbelief. His world kept spinning in all directions and he wasn't sure if it was going to come to a stop anytime soon.

At his father's command, he stood and followed him to what he thought would be their guest rooms.
Instead Lucius opened a side door to a small courtyard safely enclosed by the rest of the house. A handful of weeping willows shaded a few benches from the winter sun's glare, and the light snowfall didn't cover the moss and ivy working to claim every corner and surface.

"Your cousin Nymphadora will be along to serve as a chaperon. Do not do anything untoward."
Lucius paused. "If you hurt him, I'll set you on fire."

Draco blinked in surprise, but his father's threat had been aimed at Harry who had come up behind them. He steeled himself for Harry's sharp reply, but Harry surprised both of them with nothing more than a nod of acknowledgement. After one more murderous look, Lucius backed away and closed the door.

Now that they were finally alone, Draco couldn't make himself move closer. He knew Harry had to feel some betrayal for how quickly Draco acceded to his father's plan of marriage before knowing who he would wed. He'd seen Harry's disappointed face before, and while he wasn't a hopeless romantic to say that it hurt more than Harry's fist, the sting of it certainly lingered worse.

"Harry...I--"

Two warm hands cupped his face and brought his head up for a kiss.
In which two marriages occur

Finally released, Draco looked into Harry's eyes and found no betrayal, no disappointment. His relief made him feel lighter than air.

"You're not angry?" he asked.

Harry put his arms around him and drew him close, folding him up so he couldn't get away. The embrace put pressure on the bite in his shoulder, but Draco swallowed the ache.

"I..." Harry sighed. "That's the price of a dark family, isn't it? You have to do what your father orders."

"Loyalty before everything," Draco whispered. "Harry, I'm sorry. I wanted to tell him no, but--"

"But you have no choice." Harry stood straight as a thought occurred to him. "I hope your father doesn't expect me to follow his orders."

"I don't think father's thought about that yet," Draco said, and he certainly didn't plan on bringing it up. "Severus probably doesn't expect it, either."

They both stepped apart as the door opened and Nymphadora came in. She smiled at Harry and gave only a curt nod to her cousin.

"Dinner'll be served at five," she said. "You've got 'till then."

"Three and a half hours," Draco murmured. "I hope we don't have to spend that all outside."

"It's not that cold," Harry said. "The sun's even come out."

"Feels a bit worse when you're on the mend." Draco watched with some amusement as Harry noticed that he was squeezing Draco's shoulder and drew back as if afraid he might break him.

"That bite of yours is still healing?" Harry didn't wait for an answer but drew Draco towards one of the wooden benches, wiping the snow away with his hand and sitting beside him. "Does it hurt? Oh Merlin, I was holding you too tight, wasn't I?"

"I'm fine," Draco reassured him. "It was worth it anyway. Sitting so close for hours without being able to talk to you...torture."

"I was just happy to see you alive," Harry said. As if he couldn't bear letting go for long, he put his arm around Draco again, this time careful not to touch his bite. "I was afraid I'd never see you again. You ran off all of a sudden."

Draco didn't miss the hurt accusation in Harry's voice and looked away.

"I'm sorry," he said softly, staring at their footprints in the snow. "Things happened so fast and we had to run. And--for awhile I thought you'd be better off without me."

"What?" Harry turned and, when Draco wouldn't meet his eyes, put his hand under Draco's chin and made him look up. "Are you mad? You'd face Voldemort but you wouldn't--"

"I didn't face the dark lord." Draco sighed and slumped against Harry. It was a move he'd seen his mother use against his father, and it didn't fail him now. As he spoke, Harry held him and his touch
turned gentler. "I cowered behind you. Get it through your head, Potter, I'm a coward. I'm a dark wizard. If it wasn't for the political necessity of this, the whole world would shun you as much as it does me. As it is..."

He closed his eyes and nuzzled against Harry's warm robes. "I'm afraid someone might kill me to free you."

Across from them, Nymphadora leaned against a willow tree, careful not to shake the snow from its branches. "We won't let that happen."

"It's you aurors I'm most afraid of," Draco grumbled, glaring at her from the corner of his eye.

Nymphadora stifled a groan as she stared at the sky. "Despite Fudge and Kingsley yelling in there, I think you'll find that most of us want this to work. Voldemort destroyed so much already. No one wants another war."

"We'll see," Draco said. "After we're married and no one tries to kill anyone else. Then I might believe it."

Harry smoothed back his blonde hair, twirling the ends around his fingertips. "You thought this might be a trap, didn't you?"

Draco nodded. "If father doesn't send word back before tonight, they'll assume we're dead and move again."

"Mm." Harry pressed a kiss to his hair. "And you still came."

For a moment Draco didn't answer. Coming here had gone against everything he knew from his memories and dreams, and his master was right that it was a stupid, reckless Malfoy thing to do. That they might save their community was little more than a happy footnote to his real reason for coming.

"I wanted to see you."

A soft, satisfied chuckle answered him. "You keep saying you're a coward, but look at all the things you've done."

"Ran from dragons and dark lords?" Draco muttered. "Hid in my common room? Let myself be lured into a potential trap just because I miss you?"

When Harry smiled and nuzzled his hair, Draco wished he could make himself feel at least a little resentful at being ignored. But Harry was warm and wrapped him up so that he felt safe for the first time in…

Draco sighed. He hadn't felt safe since his father had been arrested.

"For some reason," Nymphadora cut in, "I don't think you two need all that much time to 'get to know each other'."

"I wouldn't mind," Harry said, "but if I got to know him any better, I think we'd have to go find a bedroom."

Draco's eyes widened slightly in realization. "Well, we are intended now. I don't think we have to wait for a betrothal spell--"

"Oh no you don't," Nymphadora said, straightening. "You two aren't allowed to do anything
interesting until you're married. 'Sides, Dumbledore said you dark wizards were big on marriage and wedlock. Aren't you supposed to be worried about your honor and all that?"

Draco stiffened, squirming when Harry tightened his grip around him. Sanctimonious blood traitor talking like she knew everything about him. Bad enough Severus lectured him all the time, but if he had to take scolding on his own culture from an ignorant little pissant--

"Wait," Harry said, glancing up at her. "That's right. You're not a dark witch. I thought you were from the same family, though."

She sniffed and leaned back against the tree again, staring at the sky. "Not everyone from a dark family is dark."

"Your family wasn't dark," Draco snapped. "Miserable damn mu--"

"Draco," Harry murmured.

The slur evaporated from his mouth. He didn't think Harry would really hit him if he called anyone a mudblood, but he didn't want to tempt Harry's anger. The memory of the Gryffindor's enraged attack in the dungeons seemed so impossible for the boy holding him and touching his hair, but Draco knew the strength of his intended's hands.

"But Harry," he whispered. "She's not dark, she wouldn't know. She's just going on about things she doesn't have the slightest clue about."

"Did he feed you that line about being born dark?" Nymphadora laughed and shook her head. "I'm sure they wish it was true. Those of us who leave the fold grew up with the family secrets, so the Ministry's always keen to get us."

"You might've been in the family," Draco hissed, "but you weren't born dark. Your magic's tainted with muggle blood." His voice dripped with disdain as if her mere presence tainted him as well.

She opened her mouth to argue, but he continued over her.

"We worked it out once, you know. What you get for betraying family," he said. "From your paychecks. Two hundred galleons for a dead wizard. One hundred fifty for a witch. Seventy-five galleons for a dead child--"

The accusation visibly stung her and she roared back. "Aurors don't kill children! We don't kill anyone who surrenders."

"No, you just lock them all up in Azkaban until their souls die," he said, finally squirming free of Harry's grip and shooting to his feet. "Their blood's on your hands as much as if you'd killed them--"

"Your society's the one that love's blood--"

"You honor that child-killing Merlin--"

"As if your Morgan didn't kill as many of us--"

"She was the only one who'd protect us from you blood-thirsty--"

"Hypocrite! You might pretend your night rides are just joy rides--"

"We had to survive somehow when you lot started killing us--"
"You were murderers! I'll not apologize for my ancestors!"

"Nor will I!"

Draco's hand was already on his wand and so was Nymphadora's, but before either of them took aim, Harry stepped between them and spread his arms both to shield Draco and to block any spells he cast.

"Enough! Both of you!" He glared at them and waited until they looked away from each other, all of them taking a deep breath when it became clear that no one was going to kill anybody.

The courtyard door opened and Severus stepped out, his own wand drawn, but he slowly lowered his hand when he saw no pitched battle in front of him.

"I heard raised voices," he said, drawing near Draco and ignoring everyone else. "Are you all right?"

"Fine," Draco grumbled. "Although in the interest of avoiding a diplomatic incident, perhaps we'd be better off with a different chaperon."

"Fine by me," Nymphadora said between gritted teeth. Without another word, she turned on her heel and stomped out of the courtyard, muttering obscenities under her breath all with Draco's name attached.

Harry sighed and gave him an exasperated look. "Draco…"

"Don't start," Draco muttered. "Don't--I just want to sit with you for awhile, and she goes off like some damn know-it-all about something she doesn't even understand, and it's not like I'll just sit and take being called evil or--"

"I know." Harry put his arms around Draco and let him lean on his shoulder. His fingers ran through Draco's hair and he was a cloud of warmth in the cold air. "I know."

Severus put his wand away with a sigh. Nymphadora's voice carried from inside the house, muffled as she complained to someone, probably Scrimgeour. If they hadn't caused a diplomatic incident, Severus would count himself lucky.

"Your father will not be pleased."

"That I didn't kill her?" Draco asked. "I didn't think--"

"No, you didn't." Severus turned and walked away, not bothering to look over his shoulder to see if they were following. "You never do, so I don't know why it always surprises me."

Draco hurried to catch up, but when they went inside, he had to settle for walking just behind his master's shoulder. Nymphadora, Scrimgeour and Remus all stood together watching them go by. To run in front of any Ministry wizards would have been unthinkable. Draco knew they had to present a united front, even if that meant the apprentice had to cater to a sullen master.

"He's already angry that I let you two grow so close, and now thanks to the headmaster's damn comment, he's trying to drag every last detail of the past few months out of me."

"Got to the part about the dragons yet?" Harry asked with a grin.

Severus whirled and snarled at him. "You will say nothing of how close that was. If he knew--"

"If I knew what?"
Lucius stood in the open doorway of their room, an inked quill twirling in his fingers. The picture of idle aristocracy, his effect was marred by his intense glare at Severus.

"For someone as enamored of subterfuge as you," Lucius said, slowly drawing out each syllable so that they weighed down on Severus, "you've never been good at keeping secrets from me. I wonder why you keep trying."

With some effort, Severus stood straight. "Old habits."

The ghost of a smile flickered over Lucius. "Ah yes. I remember."

Despite the fond tone or because of it, Severus glared back at him, his expression as sullen as Draco's when he didn't get his way. Lucius' drawl made everything he said seem sharper.

"Oh, get in here before you make even more of a spectacle of yourself." Lucius stood straight and gave them room to pass by, his gaze never leaving Severus so that the potions master kept his eyes averted. "And then perhaps I will finally hear about what went on while I was away."

"We survived and helped save the world," Draco offered, concerned for his master. "Kept the children alive, stayed out of Azkaban, finally got the Prophet on our side--"

"Yes, the Prophet." Lucius shut the door and locked it with a brass key that grew tendrils which burrowed into the knob and door frame, sealing it shut against intruders. Or against escape. Severus glanced at it and turned away, opening a small cabinet against the wall to reveal an assortment of alcohol which he rifled through. He offered nothing to anyone else as he poured a small amount and slammed it back.

If the Diggorys had survived the war, which Draco didn't know, he couldn't tell by looking around these guest rooms. No pictures adorned the walls, no mess made it look lived in. Much like the foyer that he now realized was probably the dining room, the furnishings were impeccably inoffensive. Blue carpeting, cream walls, tasteful curtains and dark wood everything else, from the bed to the scattered chairs to the small desk in the corner. Tall windows let in the sun's glare and warmed the clear glass panes. No doubt his father felt at home in this impersonal, office-like setting. Draco felt stifled, although he wasn't sure if that came from living so long in the cool, shadowy dungeons or from the scheming gleam in his father's eyes.

"We were able to pick up a stray copy of the Prophet here and there," Lucius said. He sat down beside the fire and watched their faces for any tattletale looks, but his gaze came to rest on Harry as if he were vermin. "Potter."

Draco grabbed Harry's hand in the hopes of keeping him quiet. No such luck.

"Lucius." Harry tilted his head with a growing smirk. "So. While we were fighting off saboteurs and the dark lord's schemes, you were camping in the woods?

"Harry--" Draco whispered, but his father cut him off.

"Potter, because for some unfathomable reason my son finds favor with you, I will tolerate your nonsense to a point." Lucius' drawl became a warning. "But only to a point."

"I killed the dark lord," Harry said in some surprise. "Why should I care what you think?"

"Because Draco cares what I think," Lucius said, his words clipped and precise. "Draco will obey my every command."
Shoulders squared, Harry drew in a sharp breath. "You talk like he's a robot."

Lucius frowned and Draco tilted his head in confusion, but before they could ask, Severus answered them as he set his glass down too hard.

"A muggle contraption," he muttered. "Like a poppet made of iron. No mind of its own."

Unimpressed that muggles had something approximating their own magic, Lucius turned his attention back to Harry.

"Obedience has nothing to do with lacking will," he said, "and everything to do with loyalty."

"He's not a dog to be ordered about--"

"Why do you twist things like loyalty and obedience into something evil?" Lucius snapped. "Children obey their parents--"

"He's not a child--"

"He is part of this family--"

"You're treating him more like an elf--"

The rising voices crushed on top of Draco until he gave up, standing and crossing the room to stand beside Severus. The air felt like mud. The walls felt too close. If this was how his master felt every time he retreated to the liquor cabinet--he poured his own drink, ignoring Snape's raised eyebrow. If he could just let his anxiety slip away for a moment--

"Draco, no."

With a harsh hiss, Draco slammed the glass down, sending untasted alcohol sloshing over the edges onto the wood.

"Father…" he whispered. "Please."

"You know how it reacts to our blood," Lucius said. His voice turned soft as if puzzled by his son's behavior. "It will make you sick."

"Then don't drive me to it." Draco looked over his shoulder, but he didn't meet his father's eyes, instead staring at a spot on the floor. "Don't make me choose, please."

No one spoke. Lucius tried to speak, thought better of it, opened his mouth again and still remained silent. Opposite him, Harry glowered at Lucius and found his anger useless when Lucius wouldn't return the same.

After a minute and no one showed any sign of saying anything, Severus breathed out. "Lucius, Draco, would you please go into the other room? Perhaps you need some time to speak alone."

"I think you're right," Lucius said, rising smoothly to his feet and disappearing into the adjoining chamber. A moment later, Draco followed him, closing the door after himself with a soft click. He didn't look up at his father, instead studying the speckled pattern of the carpet. His robes, tight beneath his cloak, felt like they might suffocate him.

"You are a Malfoy," Lucius said. He paced a few steps and drew up short at the wall, irritated that between the four poster bed and the chest of drawers, there wasn't enough space to work off his frustration. "That will never change."
"I don't want it to change," Draco sighed. He ran his hand through his hair as he leaned against the door. "I just…"

"Just what?"

When Draco refused to answer, Lucius stepped in front of him, seizing his son's chin in his gloved hand and forcing his face up. "I have lived longer, gained more experience and understanding. I command your obedience, just as you shall command your own child's. Why is this so difficult for you now? You've never defied me before."

"And I'm not!" Draco pulled away and took a step back, accidentally backing into the door. "For God's sake, I was about to let you condemn me to any strange girl that fit your list. How bloody obedient do you need me to be?"

"I would not have arranged a marriage to someone you could not grow close to," Lucius insisted. "Arranged marriages need not be unpleasant. Your mother and I fit perfectly."

"And Harry and I do not fit perfectly," Draco admitted. "I know this will cause problems, but…"

A long pause followed. Lucius stared at him, waiting until he grew impatient.

"If you know this union will cause problems for all of us," Lucius asked, "then why?"

Draco's shoulders slumped and he sighed, staring at the ceiling. "Because it isn't all problems. Yes, we argue and he hates some of my ideas and he's so stupid sometimes. But father, I--when he holds me or looks at me, it's like--it's like--"

He couldn't finish. Explaining why he and Harry worked made no sense in his own mind. How could he hope to explain to a dark wizard who valued blood over love? Something so intangible yet physically impossible to live without?

"It's like the light is softer."

Hearing the muted tone of his father's voice, Draco glanced up at him in surprise.

"Without them, food loses all savor and the world is that much colder." Lucius breathed out and stared at the door as if he could see Severus through it. "I know. Believe me, I know."

Lucius sat down on the edge of the bed, loosening his hair from its ribbon as he carefully considered his next words. "Potter is joining this family. I will expect him to abide by our rules. Do what you can to make that stubborn little brat understand that."

"Harry's always been pretty stubborn," Draco mumbled. "And he doesn't like you."

"The feeling is mutual," Lucius muttered under his breath. "Remind him that love isn't just the autumn whirlwind it's been for you so far. It's compromising your comfort and sanity for your intended's needs."

"Mm. So far I think I've done most of the compromising." Draco sat down next to his father and let his shoulders slump. He'd never tell his father about Harry punching him in the dungeons or tearing into his mind, or threatening to hurt him for saying 'mudblood.' "He keeps trying to believe I'm brave or good or something I'm not. Then he acts betrayed when I don't live up to his standards."

"Yes, sounds like a Gryffindor," Lucius said. "On the other hand, I'm sure he's easy to manipulate."
"Sometimes," Draco answered. "His temper is really good for that."

"I wouldn't trust in a Gryffindor's temper," Lucius said. "They tend to be rather volatile. You're as like to be hurt as to get your own way. At least it's easier to manipulate someone who loves you. Manipulating violent Gryffindors can sometimes backfire."

For a moment, Draco remembered something Severus had said a long time ago, about his father surviving a fight by the skin of his teeth and only worrying about potential scars. Wondering if that fight had occurred in Hogwarts, he was about to ask when they both heard Severus' raised voice over Harry's as the potions master struggled to verbally beat something into Harry's head.

Draco frowned and reached for the doorknob, but his father's hand closed over his, stopping him. Without a word Lucius leaned close and held his breath, straining to make out each word. Draco followed suit.

"--ildren," Severus was saying. "There's no help for it."

"Is he talking about when we have our own children?" Draco whispered, scowling as Lucius shushed him.

"Don't expect for a moment that you can change them," Severus continued, sounding like he was pacing back and forth. "Childish, arrogant, overbearing…and acting the same way in return will only make them worse. If you're going to survive living as part of their family--don't make that face. You knew damn well marrying Draco would make you a Malfoy--"

Severus paused unexpectedly. "Don't tell me that never occurred to you?"

The lingering silence swallowed Harry's reply, but Severus' next comment more than made up for it.

"Did you honestly think that he'd take your name? You know how important blood and family are to them. You're lucky Lucius even permitted this. And there's another thing. You'd better learn to take orders from him--don't bother whining. He's in charge of this family and there's no getting around it."

A pause. Harry was talking. Draco could just make out his voice as he snorted.

"Yes," Severus said, "he's childish, but he's also a brilliant manipulator. Don't underestimate him just because you've bested him before. You faced him in a physical fight, but Malfoys are politicians at heart. Even if he can't manipulate you, he can manipulate everyone around you. Pick your battles carefully, boy."

"My sweet defender," Lucius muttered, but the amusement in his eyes belied his tone. Draco knew that look well from his own reflection. Backhanded compliments were the only kind his master ever offered. He wondered if Severus even knew how to compliment someone without pushing them away at the same time. In a way, it made him more endearing.

"Potter won't change his name," Draco whispered. "It's all he has left of his parents, really. Except for a couple odd mementos."

Lucius gave him an incredulous look, but after a few seconds he shrugged. "Saves us the indignity of having him with our name."

Nothing would have changed his father's mind, so Draco didn't bother trying. They both listened for any further sounds from the other room, but Severus and Harry seemed determined to speak in lower tones. Perhaps Severus knew his Malfoys well enough to guess that they would eavesdrop. Draco frowned. If Severus felt comfortable enough to call them names if they were listening, how awful did
his comments have to be for him to lower his voice?

Bored now that they could no longer listen in, Lucius turned his attention back to his son. "While we're on the subject, why Potter? I know you've been through a lot lately, but I never would have guessed stress would addle your mind so badly."

No doubt this was merely the start of all the teasing, questioning and plain confusion over why he would choose Harry. Draco hated hearing it, but he couldn't bring himself to blame his father, either. He knew he'd never be able to give anyone a reason beyond--

"I love him."

Which didn't impress Lucius in the slightest, but at least he merely sighed like a martyr and didn't ask again.

"I will refrain from baiting him," he said. "But I expect the same in return. Do you understand?"

"Yes, father." Draco sat on the edge of the bed and closed his eyes, running one hand through his hair.

He wasn't sure he could convince Harry to stop antagonizing his father and master. Demanding his obedience would probably backfire disastrously. Perhaps some fake tears and sugary pleading? He winced at the thought.

The problem could wait for a little while, though. The wedding would not be for some time yet, no doubt. With any luck, he'd think of something by then.

~

A week later, he stood in front of the most important people in the wizarding world, still clueless and struggling to hide his nervousness in front of a crowd used to dueling at the drop of a galleon.

Aurors and Knights stood at attention, eyeing each other and the crowd of witches and wizards packing the Diggory estate. Dozens of strong anti-curse and anti-jinx charms lay over the entire house like a complex net, but neither side trusted the other not to have left gaps in the security. Although the rest of the house was guarded, the courtyard perimeter swarmed with almost as many guards as guests.

Draco felt keenly aware of the world's eyes on his back. Most of the surviving upper echelon of the Ministry sat on Harry's side, taking up the pews lined up to the far side of the garden. Harry's handful of guests filled the first two rows with a line of red heads and Gryffindor school robes, with one Ravenclaw stringing corks on a new cord.

On the other side of the courtyard, nothing but dark wizards sat in their black robes, their hoods pushed back so they didn't look too ominous. Some of them visibly squirmed under the light wizards' gaze as their identities lay exposed. Light wizards stared at their acquaintances and neighbors as if they were strangers separated by a wide, impassable gulf.

Beneath the snow-covered willow, Draco slid his hand into Harry's and felt a reassuring squeeze. His other arm no longer lay in a sling, but despite his master's best efforts, his hand also no longer curled into a complete fist. He counted himself lucky that he could still grasp a wand, but he knew he would never regain full use of it. Already it ached when the weather turned wet and chilly.

"May your marriage be blessed and each of you a comfort to the other," Scrimgeour said, pronouncing the last few lines of the ceremony. There had been far too many references to Merlin
and the Ministry for Draco's liking, but this marriage had to satisfy the light wizards. "By the power
vested in me by the Ministry and our founder Merlin, I now pronounce you husband and husband."

Harry leaned forward to take his kiss, obviously eager to enjoy at least a little of the boring
ceremony, but Draco put his hand on Harry's cheek and forced him to keep it chaste. As far as Draco
and his society were concerned, the real marriage had not yet taken place.

"Draco?" Harry whispered, confused. "We're married now. It's all right."

"Wait until sunset," Draco whispered back. "Please. I promise it'll be worth it."

Frowning slightly, Harry didn't understand but he didn't argue.

No dancing followed. Tensions ran too high for a normal reception, and in the ballroom the light and
dark wizards kept themselves segregated on opposite sides of the room seated at their own tables,
mingling with no one. Draco and Harry had to remain in the center to speak with both groups,
reassuring the skeptical that Harry was not under a spell and that Draco was not renouncing the
darkness.

Annoyed by the attention, Harry kept up a fake smile as he endured Ministry officials and the cream
of British wizarding society. Every wizard and witch with an official title, from the Minister of Magic
to the lowliest Third Clerk of the Department of the Lost and Found, came by with a word of
congratulations or an offer of help "if Harry ever needed it for whatever reason."

Draco kept close at Harry's side, never more than an arm's length from him, scared someone might
try to curse either one of them. Overcast skies and a gray sun cast a pale light, and as the
scrupulously polite conversation constantly murmured around him, he watched the shadows grow
longer and deeper, and felt the inexorable pull of night's promised shelter.

People pushed around him. The air grew heavier and heavier. No one looked at him with anything
except nervous suspicion. Better than threats or curses, of course, but the wary glances never let up
and Draco felt as if his body would begin to twist up in knots like his stomach. He grabbed Harry's
arm and pulled him away from the last well-wisher, dragging him through the crowd to a table in the
corner.

Narcissa noticed them first and flicked her wand at a pair of extra chairs, pushing them out for the
boys and touching Draco's shoulder as he sank into the closest seat. She gathered the loose wisps of
his hair out of his face and smoothed them back, redoing the bow holding his hair in place.

"You should have come sit down earlier," she murmured. "You look like you're about to fall over."

"I feel like it," Draco said, closing his eyes and turning his head slightly so she could reach his hair
easier. "I don't like being surrounded by them. I want to go to the Serpentia grounds."

"Not until sunset," Lucius said on the other side of the round table. He gave Harry a dirty look for
letting his son exhaust himself, but kept his expression towards Draco mild. "You'd feel worse there
now. Wait until the moon rises."

"But it's in the sky already," Draco moaned, not expecting to get his way but driven to protest by a
sense of wounded fairness.

"When the moon is the only light," Lucius clarified. "When the candles and bonfires light. The
shadows you're hoping for haven't come out yet."

An unlit candle stood in the center of his family's table, just like all the other tables, waiting to be lit.
As soon as the sun dipped low enough against the horizon, the candles would flare to life and the wedding party with all guests and guards would move to the spot his family had chosen for the real wedding. For now, lumos charms kept the creeping dusk at bay.

"Of course you have another ceremony to endure before you can escape," Severus said mercilessly. Everyone at the table shot him a nasty look, but Narcissa gave her son a reassuring pat.

"A short ceremony," she said. "Much shorter than this one. And then you can slip off wherever you like--"

"--within the grounds--" Severus added.

"--and enjoy some time alone," she finished, glaring at him again.

Her look did nothing to faze him. "Until the morning when you have to act like diplomats, tour the damage in Hogsmeade, make appearances, tell everyone how committed you are to peace. Bright and early."

At Draco's wince, Harry put his arm around Draco's shoulders as if to shield him from his master. "That's not 'till they've finished clearing out all the jinxes left around Hogsmeade, and that won't be for another day or two at least. He'll have plenty of time to rest up."

"The Prophet will be at your doorstep the moment the wedding ends, if they aren't pressed against your bedroom window," Severus said.

"Your elves are back, aren't they?" Harry asked. "Can't they keep the reporters away?"

Draco looked up from his self-pity long enough to see his father shake his head.

"They went feral," Lucius sighed. "They'll take orders from Narcissa, but it'll be a long time before they're real house elves again. Unless we wanted the reporters torn to shreds. Tempting, true."

With a grumble, Harry slumped in his chair. "Then I'll have to chase them all off myself."

Nestling his head in the crook of his arm on the table, Draco reached out and found Harry's hand, holding him like a rock in a storm. If Harry said he would do something, unless Draco himself found a way to talk him out of it, Harry usually did it. And antagonizing the entire world didn't sound so awful if he meant he could sleep for another day. The reception blurred into background noise as he closed his eyes, drowsing amongst his family. It wasn't sleep, but at least for a little while he could pretend that the world didn't exist. Minutes crawled by, accompanied by the soft murmurs of his father's voice mingling with his mother and master's.

A scratching sound and the smell of a burning candlewick.

Draco looked up and found the candle aflame. All around them, every candle flared to life. The chandelier burned bright. The lumos charms around the ballroom all extinguished themselves, so that the swaying flames became the only light. A relieved sigh came from the dark wizards.

Shadows crept up around Draco like a comfortable blanket, concealing and covering him from the last rays of the sun. On the other side of the room, light wizards gathered together in tight groups, glancing around the room as if there might be creatures skittering along the walls.

For a few seconds Draco watched the flame burn steadily, the tiny fire almost perfectly still. On the other side of the candle, the moon shone through the window, silver and glowing brighter with every
"Now?" he asked needlessly.

"Now."

Lucius rose, Narcissa and Severus following his lead. Draco stood up too quickly and felt himself suddenly grow lightheaded, but he swayed only a little before Harry put a steadying hand around him. Draco smiled despite himself and touched his hand.

"I'm fine," he whispered. "Just a little tired."

"Not too tired, I hope," Harry whispered back with a smile. "I'm looking forward to tonight."

"So am I," Draco replied, leaning closer. "I think we've waited long enough."

A cold hand clenched on Draco's good shoulder, not too gently pulling him straight again.

"You can wait a little longer," Severus said, steering Draco toward the door. "There are spells to protect your honor. Don't make me use them."

Draco cringed as Harry opened his mouth to argue, but to his relief, Harry thought better of it and let the comment pass. They walked out under Severus' supervision, following Lucius and Narcissa to the center of the courtyard, past the pews, to the same willow tree they'd stood beneath during the day. Lucius wiped some of the snow from the bark, revealing a rune carved into the tree.

"Berkana," he murmured, and disappeared.

Narcissa portkeyed out next. Draco couldn't resist a quick glimpse over his shoulder at the crowd behind them. Dark wizards and witches gathered behind them, pulling their hoods up out of habit. Clustered near the back and speaking in hushed whispers, the light wizards took hesitant steps after them, as nervous in the night as the dark wizards had been in the light.

When he appeared at the portkey's destination, he found himself in a wooded grove surrounding a pond. At once he shivered and drew close to Harry as soon as he emerged. The air here lingered on his skin, damp and warm despite the late season.

"What is this place?" Harry whispered beside him. "I can feel it all around me."

"It's one of the places the old gods used to travel," Draco replied, tugging the hood of Harry's cloak over his head. "Through the pond there. A snake spirit, I think."

"But then why's the magic--" Harry had to lower his voice as more people appeared behind them "--why's the magic still hanging around? They left hundreds of years ago, didn't they? Shouldn't the magic have all gone by now?"

With a sad smile, Draco looked up at him. "Now do you understand how powerful they were?"

Draco slipped his hand into Harry's and led him further down the path. Crickets leaped out of their way while fireflies flickered to life around them. Low hanging tree branches touched their hoods, but there were no leaves to block their view of the stars sparkling overhead. With the moon and the lumos charms in almost everyone's hands, the dark path looked more like a swath of swaying light and shadow.

They came to a stop at the pond. Kept bubbling by the lingering magic, the pond gave off a faint mist
that swirled in a thousand directions around their feet. As before, the wedding guests split into two
groups, the light wizards standing on Harry's side and the dark wizard's on Draco's.

Unlike during the Ministry's wedding, however, the dark wizards now stood straight, their hoods
framing their faces. They knew this pond, were familiar with the grove and the woods around them.
For centuries they had met here, and for centuries before that they had offered devotion and service
to the god of the water. As the light wizards clustered together in tight clumps and looked over their
shoulders at the black trees, the dark wizards relaxed and waited.

"We stand at the edge of Arviragus pond," Lucius began, his shadowed eyes scanning the crowd for
the slightest movement. "Chosen for this occasion because of its legacy for our kind. Once the path
between worlds for our old gods, it is also the place where our old religion died and our new faith
began. A fitting place, then, where perhaps one era ends and another begins."

"Often dark wizards and witches are little more than children when they wed, forced to bind
themselves together for protection after losing their families. The fortunate can cast their vows in a
sacred place, but even that is hastily done. Because this union is so vital, we risk a true ceremony for
the first time in decades."

As important as this was, sighs escaped from the light wizards around them. Draco smiled. They
were used to long, drawn-out spectacles, especially at political events where the minister spoke for
ages about Merlin and history and their hopes for the future. The brevity of this wedding would
surprise all of them.

"Draco Malfoy," Lucius said, turning to his son. "True potions master, brother in the Knights of
Walpurgis and son of the Malfoy lineage, you reaffirm your devotion to Morgan and Mordred, to our
arts and our faith, and come to wed Harry James Potter before the eyes of God?"

The ceremony paused as Draco stood in mute shock. True potions master? Even Lucius had no say
as to whether or not his master set him free from his apprenticeship. Before he could stop himself out
of dignity for the ceremony, he looked to his right and spotted Snape next to his mother. His master
nodded once.

Master no more. Severus was simply Severus, as he had been before Draco turned seven. Draco
blinked. He no longer needed his master's approval or correction, but the sudden freedom felt as if
not only had a weight been removed from his back, but as if a safety net had been removed from
beneath him as well.

"I do," he breathed, forcing himself to speak.

As if there had been no pause, Lucius faced Harry, and this time his voice turned a little forced and
strained. "Harry James Potter, the Boy Who Lived, Destroyer of Voldemort and son of the Potter
lineage, you come to us from the other side of the sunset. Do you embrace the dark, renounce the
Min--ahem, renounce the works of Merlin, and come to wed Draco Malfoy before the eyes of God?"

"I do," Harry said.

Lucius reached into his robe and withdrew a small knife. Draco recognized it from his master's--from
Snape's workshop when they slit open birds and trimmed delicate flowers. An all purpose knife,
versatile and razor sharp.

"Grasp the blade."

Even though Harry had been told about this part of the ceremony, Draco clutched the sharp steel
first. His memories of such weddings were faded with age, but his blood knew the ritual. With a soft h, he jerked his hand once down the blade, slicing the skin deep enough that blood dripped down the metal and onto the damp earth.

Harry grasped the knife next, staring at it with a little trepidation but with no hesitation. He cut himself and then held his bloody hand out, wincing around his growing smile as Draco took his hand. Their blood mingled and welled out from between their fingers.

"The pain and joy of marriage is now yours," Lucius said. "Forever part of the other without beginning or end. I now pronounce you honorably bound."

Still clasping Harry's hand, Draco stepped forward for his kiss, and this time he let Harry take whatever he liked. Harry's free hand came up behind his neck and held him close as their bodies pressed together. Draco closed his eyes. This close, he thought he could feel a touch of the power sleeping within the Boy Who Lived, a reassuring shield between him and the world.

Perhaps it was the kiss which made everyone feel like this was less a political union and more of a love match. Perhaps it was the late hour and the warm forest. Perhaps it was simply because everyone was hungry and hadn't had much of a dinner before. Whatever the reason, when the wedding party finally left the grove and came to the clearing outside the woods, nearly everyone cheered when they saw several tables on the grass, each already sagging under the weight of conjured food. Tall bonfires lit the field and the full moon provided plenty of light where the flames couldn't reach.

As inviting as the food looked, Draco wondered why it was there. Dark weddings always ended with everyone else going home to safety. Draco glanced at his father, who shrugged.

"I figured a small concession to their social niceties was in order," Lucius said. "Besides, your mother wanted to properly celebrate your marriage."

"Properly celebrate" also seemed to include music, Draco thought as he heard the familiar strings of a traditional song celebrating the dark wafted through the crowd. Good thing most of them couldn't understand the old language. "Swa signe eower lagu an promyses secgan deorc oe ded, an couren bi oe heorth fyr an hyden bineoð an eower bed" sounded beautiful when sung, but it would have offended half of the guests.

"Do we have to stay here?" Harry asked, clearly hoping the answer was no.

"Not if you leave before anyone notices." Narcissa put her arms around Draco briefly and held him close, then stood back with a smile. "You'll be safest at the pond. It's warded a dozen times over. Tomorrow morning you can sneak back to the Diggory estate."

"You mean spend the night on the ground?" Harry asked.

"It's tradition. You'll be comfortable enough." She gave them both a gentle shove back toward the path. "Go on, before everyone comes to congratulate you again."

The warning cut off whatever Harry was about to say. Still hand in hand, they both disappeared back into the forest, passing a pair of Knights standing guard. Once they reached the pond again, they looked around for a suitable spot. Soft grass covered most of the ground, but for privacy Draco was forced to cast a grywania spell on the surrounding plants. The bushes grew thicker and taller while he coaxed vines around tree trunks and branches until he'd created a bower just big enough for them both. Harry unclasped his cloak and spread it over the ground, smoothing it out as Draco sealed up the opening so that no one could see them.
"She was right," Harry said. "It really is comfortable."

Draco sat down beside him and undid his own cloak, letting it pool on the ground. As he touched the first button of his collar, however, he realized he wouldn't be able to. The cut on his hand stung too much. It seemed useless and reckless to leave them unhealed, but the cut wasn't deep and healing it with magic was considered bad luck. As he gave it one more futile try, Harry stopped him, gently pushing his hand aside and undoing Draco's buttons himself. Not knowing what to do, Draco held still and let Harry open his robe and push it off of his shoulders down his arms. It felt wonderful, all of it did as Harry finished undressing him and put a hand on his chest, laying him down and easing on top of him while favoring his cut hand.

"Harry..." Draco murmured. "I don't know--I've never--"

"I haven't forgotten," Harry assured him, undoing Draco's ribbon and freeing his hair, twirling it around his fingers. "Don't be scared."

"I'm not," Draco spoke too quickly. He rose up on one elbow as Harry sat back, both of them regarding each other.

For a moment, neither of them said anything. They both knew there were dozens of things they should talk about, especially now that they had some time alone--Harry's legilimancy and his anger, Draco's family and what they'd expect of him, the Ministry, the inevitable effects of the war and Voldemort's death--but it could wait. It could all wait.

"I love you," Draco whispered. Strange how it grew easier to say each time.

"I love you."

It was the last thing they said for the rest of the night.
In which the moon still sails slowly

Gulls screeched overhead, flying low over the black, broken rocks of the seashore and turning sharply through the ocean spray. Muggle ships lined the harbor, but a stone path masked with a "Danger--Do Not Enter" sign charmed to ward away muggles led down the coast behind a rocky outcropping. Where the path ended at the coast's edge, Draco and Harry took a sharp right turn and disappeared onto pier 39 and a half, where a sparse crowd slowly marched onto a warped, barnacle-encrusted pier and up the gangplank of an ancient galleon.

"Looks like a ghost ship," Harry whispered.

Draco frowned in thought. The ship's sails, tattered and frayed at the edges, swayed gently in the wind. Creaking comfortably on the mild waves, the ship swayed as the small crowd made their way up the gangplank. The starred flag on the mast seemed out of place, not only because it wasn't muggle but also because it wasn't British.

"Ghosts can't steer ships," he said. "Or is that another muggle thing?"

Smiling, Harry tipped his head back and stared at the sky. "I guess. I'll explain when we get home."

Only a handful of people remained on the pier. Pansy stood at the back of the crowd, her hands tucked into a puffskein-hide muff. She craned her head to see up the path, and when she spotted them, she waved and moved towards them.

"I was worried you wouldn't make it," she said as she put her arms around Draco. She briefly glanced at Harry but did nothing more than nod once to him.

"Sorry, had to give the Ministry the slip," he said.

She nodded once and stepped back, but her hands lingered on his shoulders. Both were loathe to let go. For all they knew, they might never see each other again.

The dark wizards were leaving England.

Not all of them, and most of them were those that no one knew existed until now. Draco didn't recognize most of the faces on the ship. They came from the hidden families now reassured enough to come out of their exile, but only enough to scurry to the ships that would take them to different countries. Ships like these were usually expensive and took a few weeks to arrive at their destinations, but they were safer than taking Ministry-managed portkeys and far easier than flying.

"Draco," she murmured. "You're sure you won't leave?"

"Pansy..." he sighed. They'd had this discussion several times in the past few days, but he didn't stop her from trying again.

"Your manor is gone, and they know what you are," she said in a rush. "And there won't be much of us left here anyway. There's so little holding you here now--"

"Pansy."

She stopped, giving him the annoyed look he knew he would miss. "Stupid reckless Malfoy," she muttered.
"Not as reckless as you think."

Draco reached into a pocket and brought out a brass wyvern no larger than his hand. Its outstretched wings glimmered in the sun, and Pansy took it with a knowing smile.

"A portkey?" she asked.

"Exactly. You're our escape route if things go bad here." He shrugged self-consciously as if he wasn't entrusting her with their lives. "Keep it some place with a lot of room."

She snorted at the extra effort he was making her go to, but anything she was about to say was cut off as the ship's sails unfurled with a sharp snap. The ship lurched forward as if eager to get underway, and the anchor's chain drew taut. Pansy gave a little cry of surprise.

"I have to go," she said, pocketing the little wyvern. "Draco, you have the book I gave you--"

"I'll write in it, I promise," he said. "And you'll write too?"

"Of course. I'll tell you what Grinset looks like." Once more she hugged him, closing her eyes for just a moment. "I'll put the statue somewhere safe."

"I trust you." He stepped back, still holding her in his hands. "You sure you'll be okay?"

Pansy nodded. "We're going together, so we won't be alone. And we've already got host families over there, other dark families. We'll be fine."

"Tell Theo I said to take care of you," he said.

"Sure," she said. As she backed a few steps away, she finally smiled once at Harry, but the smile was cold and full of poison. "If you hurt him, I will find out."

Harry hesitated, trying to think of a reply, and she halfway into the boat before he came up with something. The gangplank disappeared after her and the anchor came up out of the water. From the pier, Harry and Draco both watched the captain open a bag near the aft, releasing a strong wind to fill the sails. As the ship slowly slipped through the waves, Pansy appeared on the railings next to Theo and a young wizard Draco recognized as Kytel. They could only wave wordlessly at each other, and in a few seconds the ship had moved too far to do even that.

Even so, Draco waited until the ship was a dot on the horizon before turning his head away.

"Take me back to the cottage," he said softly.

Harry didn't know how Draco could stand side-along apparition, but in the past few weeks since their wedding, he'd found that Draco wouldn't do anything if he could get someone to do it for him. He didn't know if it was because of all the fighting or if he was just that lazy.

"You really are a spoiled brat," Harry murmured without any heat, wrapping Draco up in his arms from behind. "Are you always going to make me do everything for you?"

"Forever and ever," Draco said. "I trust you."

A moment later they stood on the grassy clearing in front of the cottage. Draco stood still for a few seconds, taking a little time to study the house. Two-storied with narrow windows and stone walls, it looked more like a miniature fortress, notwithstanding the cellar and the hidden hearth. It did not look welcoming, but it looked strong and blended well into the landscape. Lilac blossoms covered the ivy
draped over every inch of the house and the weeping willows around it gave it a feeling of permanence, especially since it was all growing out of season, but witch's gardens tended to do that.

Until they rebuilt the Manor, this was home. Comfortable, of course, and formal enough to receive visitors in a manner befitting Malfoys, but still...not his own bedroom or his father's library or his mother's workshop. He hoped the new Manor would feel like home, but that wouldn't be built for a long time to come.

In the past week since their wedding, he'd visited the ruins of the wizarding world with Harry and the Prime Minister, making appearances of reconciliation and helping with the clean up, at least until the Daily Prophet had stopped taking pictures for the day. Fortunately Draco's ragged and raccoon-eyed appearance convinced everyone that his laziness and apathy were really exhaustion and battlefield trauma. No one protested when Harry took him home, although if that was because he was dark or because they felt sorry for him, he didn't know.

He suspected Harry knew how little he cared about Hogsmeade, Hogwarts and all the other battlefields scattered across the countryside. The burned, blackened rubble of the shops held no interest for him. The roads smashed by giants and gouged by werewolf claws didn't impress him. Destruction no longer shocked him.

His home lay in smoking ruins for months now, and while other wizards had fled from Voldemort's army, he had fought them. Unwillingly, true, but he'd faced them, drawn blood, killed death eaters and a werewolf and even helped Harry kill the dark lord. Let the light wizards gossip about his exhaustion and apathy and arrogance. Reckless, cowardly Malfoy, only fighting when it suited his ends. At least he was willing to fight. Hogwarts was still standing while the Ministry had fallen, and he knew the wizarding world had noticed. Arrogant, reckless Malfoy or not, the dark society's victory ingratiated them somewhat with the light wizards. Even his father's time in Azkaban no longer mattered to anyone.

"Harry," Draco said slowly. "About my father..."

The thought lingered in the air, but only for a moment.

"He's been in the house, right?" Harry mused. "I know we've barely left the bedroom, but I can hear him sometimes, him and Snape."

"Mother's here, too," Draco added needlessly.

Narcissa rarely raised her voice or stomped when angry, but she made herself known by the spicy scents and the occasional explosion in the potions workroom. If Draco and Harry heard Lucius tapping his cane on the floor or heard Severus snapping at someone, no doubt Narcissa was close by. They never intruded on the boys, letting them answer their own owls from the Ministry for another photo opportunity or good will meeting.

"They've given us a lot of time alone," Harry said. "Or do we just keep missing them?"

"A little of both," Draco said. "They make a show of the Knights visiting with Aurors and being nice. We just don't go to the same burnt out ruins they visit."

"Hm."

Draco turned in Harry's arms and faced him, pushing the messy hair from Harry's eyes as the wind blew over them.

"You're still Harry Potter," Draco said. "But you're part of the Malfoy family, too. I know you don't
like my father or Severus, but I promise they won't hurt you. It'll take time for everyone to get comfortable around each other—"

"That might be hoping for too much," Harry said. He sighed as Draco bit his lip in anxiety. "Look, I can't promise things will go perfect, but I promise I'll try not to start anything."

"Just... just please try not to snap at anyone," Draco said. "I don't-- I can't choose between you and family, I can't. And father said he won't intentionally bait you, but I know you two clash no matter what."

"Suppose I can't threaten to hit him if he says mudblood," Harry muttered.

When Draco stiffened, Harry winced and put his hands on Draco's shoulders, holding him a few inches away. Cupping his hand around Draco's cheek, he circled his thumb below the blonde's eye where his fist had connected before.

"I'm sorry," he murmured. "I hate that word, but--I'm sorry. I'll never hit you again, I promise."

Draco would believe that when it didn't happen, but he also didn't mention that Harry had hit him for manipulation, not for saying the word. He didn't see any reason to bring it up. With any luck, Harry wouldn't notice when Draco gently guided him to his own ends. All in Harry's best interests, of course. Besides, he'd had three excellent teachers who manipulated each other regularly, to varying degrees of success, and Harry was nowhere near as insightful as his parents or his master--Severus.

When they went inside, he heard his parents' voices in the parlor. Draco quietly removed the hooded cloak he used whenever he left the house and draped it over the chair in the hall. One of the elves would put it away.

"Draco, Harry," Narcissa called. "Where did you run off to today? I didn't know the Ministry had owled you."

"They didn't," Draco answered. "We went to see to Pansy off. I gave her the wyvern."

He steeled himself as he walked inside with Harry at his shoulder. She wasn't alone. Severus sat opposite her at the table with an array of ingredient bottles between them, while Lucius lounged in the chair by the fireplace reading. With a soft snap, Lucius closed what Draco saw was his father's diary and set it aside, giving his family his full attention.

"The last boat out, if I'm not mistaken," Lucius said. "I trust all went well?"

"The last boat out, if I'm not mistaken," Lucius said. "I trust all went well?"

Draco nodded once.

"If you knew, why weren't you there, too?" Harry asked.

Wondering if he would be able to teach Harry etiquette, Draco winced slightly and hoped his father did not take offense. For Harry, he doubted the question was meant to be hostile, but he wished he'd phrased it as "Yes, I rather wish you had attended," or "I'm sorry, I thought you knew." During polite conversation, one simply did not speak to the head of the family in such a manner.

The room fell silent for a moment and Harry sat a little straighter, but his puzzled face revealed that he knew that he'd done something wrong but he didn't know what. Lucius paused before he answered.

"I felt it best if Draco and I do not attend the same gatherings," he said. "Especially in your presence."
Harry stiffened, but he didn't respond at first, giving Lucius time to explain. His hands flexed a little, though, betraying the rise in anger that Lucius' comment provoked.

"Two Malfoys and the Boy Who Lived?" Lucius continued. "That'd be a tempting target for anyone who wants this fledgling peace to fail. I would've advised you two to do the same except you need to demonstrate how joined at the hip you've become. Your marriage must not be seen as weak." He half-shrugged and leaned back in the chair, relaxing somewhat as it became clear that Harry would not harangue him.

"Besides, I saw the first ship off for Roanoke," he finished.

"'Roanoke'?" Harry echoed. "Is that a country?"

"The oldest magical town there," Draco said. "Most of the dark wizards will probably settle there, but there's another community called Grinset down the coast. They should be safe in either town."

"So how many dark wizards are left here?" Harry asked.

"Not many," Severus said. He dumped out a bottle full of leaves on a cloth spread on the table and began sorting them. "Not that there were enough in the first place. We wouldn't have survived a real fight against the blood traitors before, but now we'd be lucky to run away with our lives."

"Cheerful as always," Narcissa muttered.

"If you think we can take on the Ministry with less than a hundred wizards altogether, I'd love to hear your strategies," Severus said.

"I'm sure you could come up with much better ideas," she said, "since you find fault with everyone else's."

"I agree," he said, "that it's a terrible burden being the only sensible creature in the house."

"Sensible creatures by their very nature should know when to listen to their betters," she said.

"Then my betters by their very nature should be able to outwit me," he said. "Sadly, that is not yet the case."

Narcissa straightened in her chair with a dark look on her face. Severus replied in kind and Draco began to reach for his wand just in case he needed to cast a shield spell. Instead Lucius sighed and leaned back in his chair, looking over them like cats about to snap at each other.

"'Cissa, Sev', if you must fight, please do it outside. We've already burned down one house."

"Fine," Narcissa said in a clipped tone. "I'll be in the garden planting nightshade. One of us should be doing something useful at least."

"Oh yes," Severus drawled. "Because we certainly don't have enough nightshade."

Draco squashed his snort of laughter. Most of the bottles on the table were full of various nightshade parts, but it wasn't her fault if she hadn't been able to shop in Nocturne Alley yet.

"I suppose I could plant gorweed," she snapped.

This time Draco couldn't hide his wince. Gorweed attracted dragons, and he had no doubt Lucius knew about the dragons in Hogwarts now. He noticed Harry opening his mouth and quickly grabbed his wrist, giving him a quick shake of the head. For God's sake, he thought, don't attract their
attention right now.

As she stomped off in snit, disappearing into the hall, Severus grabbed one of the bottles off the table and stood.

"If you'll excuse me," he said without looking at anyone, "I have to scatter tanglevine weeds throughout her garden and then hide for a few hours."

Once he left, Draco let go of Harry and breathed out. Beside him, Harry stared at Severus with wide eyes.

"Wow," he murmured. "Not at all like the Weasley's."

"You'll have to forgive them," Lucius sighed, closing his eyes and touching his temple as if he had a headache. "They do care about each other, but they can't stand not having the last word. Having him home all the time will just make the home that much louder."

"But..." Harry took a moment before he said anything, and when he spoke he sounded a little stilted, as if trying to make sure he didn't say the wrong thing. "You're the head of the family, right? Can't you just order them to stop?"

Lucius stared at him with wide eyes before he decided Harry was serious. A rueful laugh escaped from him.

"Order those two to stop? I can survive an assault from one, but two?" He shook his head once. "No, better to let them spend their energy on each other. Besides, they both had permission first."

Harry blinked. "They did?"

"Severus didn't leave until he was sure father wouldn't stop him," Draco said. "And mother only left once father mentioned going outside to argue."

"Oh."

Harry glanced at Lucius. Although he didn't say anything, the meaning in his look was clear. Harry would play by some of the rules for Draco's sake, but expecting him to ask permission for everything was out of the question.

Lucius returned the look, facing Harry as warily as he had when he met him in Dumbledore's office after thwarting his plan with the diary. The Boy Who Lived now a Malfoy, in marriage if not in name. Part of him rebelled against the boy even sitting safely in front of him and demanded revenge for every ruined scheme. But part of him admitted how Harry had crossed the Ministry and safeguarded Draco.

"I understand that you were learning dark magic for awhile," Lucius said.

Confused at the subject change, Harry just nodded once.

"I think it will be best if you continue learning our spells. Final exams will not be held for quite some time anyway while everything is being rebuilt, so you'll have time to practice." He tilted his head, not sure how Harry would react to the next thing. "You will also avoid joining the aurors."

Indignation and surprise clouded Harry's face. "What? I've been planning on that for years. I thought that was part of the big peace deal, that Draco'd be a knight and I'd be an auror."
"Some of those in the Ministry might have assumed that, but that's nowhere in the written agreements," Lucius said. "Besides, you're a Malfoy, whether you take the name or not. You have more important matters to keep you busy besides picking off stray death eaters."

"Like what?"

"Acting as liaison between the dark wizards and the light," Lucius said. "They're touchy enough just being in the same room as us. Cooperation between the two sides will go much more smoothly when they have you to talk to instead of me."

"And I answer to you?" Harry demanded, brindling at Lucius' assumption that Harry would agree without question.

"You answer to the dark community," Lucius said. "Just as I do."

Harry narrowed his eyes. "And what else would I have to do?"

"Much of what you're doing now. Visiting people, making appearances, only now you will help set policy. You will help write the new laws and oversee their implementation."

"You'd be very powerful," Draco said softly.

"I don't care about power," Harry said.

"But you do care," Lucius said. "When your sense of justice is offended, you care enough to act in spite of everyone telling you not to. Do this, and you would no longer merely complain about the unfairness of the world. You could actually do something about it."

Harry didn't answer for a moment, lost in thought. Draco exchanged a look with his father, and Lucius' slight nod of his head told Draco to say something that would tip Harry over to agreement. Draco's mind spun in circles until he thought of something.

"Better you than someone who doesn't have the good of both communities at heart," Draco said, leaning against Harry and touching his knee. "I can't think of anyone else both sides would trust. But it has to be decided quickly, or else someone might try to step in and start dictating rules."

Musing for a few more moments, Harry finally looked at both of them. "Why me? Quit trying to steer me into it. I want the truth."

Lucius pressed his lips in a thin line and Draco sat back in his own chair, more upset at being forced to be straightforward than at being caught.

"Because you'll try to make it work, for Draco's sake if nothing else," Lucius said. "I have no doubt you'll tell me when you think I'm doing something wrong, but I also know you won't let the Ministry walk all over you. That's why. Now will you do it or not?" He considered demanding that Harry do it or force Lucius to cast imperio on him, but he stopped himself in time.

To both their surprise, Harry smiled. "Of course I'll do it, Lucius. You only had to ask."

Lucius hissed and clenched his hands on the chair arms, tensing as if he meant to fight. Without asking permission to leave because he was sure he had it anyway, Draco grabbed Harry's arm and dragged him out of his seat.

"We'll just leave you be then," Draco said in a rush as he backed for the door. "Go off for a ride, maybe. A long ride. Don't wait up."
"Glad we got this decided, sir," Harry called over his shoulder as they escaped.

"Draco, I'd better not see you 'till after sunset!" Lucius yelled. "And take your worthless husband with you!"

"Wonderful," Draco grumbled as they rushed upstairs to their chambers. Harry's laughter did nothing to improve his mood. "Can't wait to see what dinner'll be like."

"Maybe a food fight?" Harry asked, smiling far too much for Draco's liking. "I could definitely see your family throwing things at the table."

Draco didn't mention that had happened once when he was an infant, but in the family's defense, they'd been under a lot of stress at the time. And the flying food had stopped Draco's crying and made them all feel better, so it worked out for the best.

"I'll be happy if they don't cook you," Draco said. He gathered their brooms from the corner beside the bed and handed the Firebolt to Harry.

Harry frowned. "They wouldn't, would they?"

"Never underestimate my father," Draco said. "Or Severus, or mother."

"What about you?" Harry asked, coming up behind him and nuzzling the back of his neck. "Can I underestimate you? You wouldn't cook me, would you?"

Draco smiled and tipped his head to the side, giving Harry better access. "Mm, I don't know. I've had a taste and I rather liked it."

"As long as you don't bite too hard..."

"You're mine now," Draco said. "I'll do what I want with you."

"I could say the same," Harry said. He wrapped his free arm around Draco and pulled him back against himself, holding him securely. "Who says you get to decide?"

"I'm a Malfoy," Draco said. He craned his head around for a kiss. "And we always get what we want."

"You forget, I'm a Malfoy, too."

"Exactly. You got me."

Harry laughed and let him go. "So where are we flying? We've got half the day."

"And some of the night," Draco said. "I want to show you what a night ride is like."

"Without the thievery and sporting with muggles?" Harry asked, echoing his past words.

"You'll sport with no one but me," Draco said, deliberately ignoring the part about thievery. He went to the window and eased sideways out of it, taking the air and leading the way across the sky. Harry followed at his shoulder.

The noise of the Malfoy house faded as they swept over muggle roads and towns, just high enough to be taken for owls by anyone who happened to look up. Harry flew a little closer and explained what the tv antennas and satellite dishes were, trying to convince a skeptical pureblood that the muggle vermin could put machines above the earth. Not to his surprise, Draco refused to believe that...
they had walked on the moon.

When they grew tired, they flew lower over empty fields, skimming across the grass and playing tag on their brooms. After several minutes of darting after Draco, Harry finally caught up and grabbed him off his besom, spilling them both on the ground. A couple of tumbles left Draco beneath Harry, and after a token struggle, Draco relaxed and let Harry pin down his hands.

"Got you," Harry said, panting from exertion. "You turn faster than a bloody snitch on that old thing."

"Gonna let your snitch go?" Draco asked as he squirmed underneath him.

"No." Harry let go of one hand so he could touch Draco's hair. "Never."

In retrospect, Draco thought as he lay unclothed beneath Harry who had yet to even kick off his shoes, perhaps he shouldn't condemn light wizards for rutting on the ground. Although he knew dark wizards were at least smart enough to do it on soft grass, not rocky dust.

Later on, because Draco absolutely refused to walk into a muggle town, let alone stop to eat at one of their restaurants, Harry had to walk half a mile into the nearby town, buy lunch and then bring it back for him. Draco didn't offer to help but watched with a sense of morbid curiosity as Harry spread an assortment of sandwiches and cookies in front of him.

"What are the cans for?" he asked, picking up a red and white can and shaking it to see if he could hear what was inside. The can was almost painfully cold.

"It's pop. You drink it." Harry popped the tab and tried not to laugh when Draco dropped his own can like it was a snake. "Here, you take this one. Just try it."

Draco looked inside to see what was inside, then slowly brought it to his mouth and took a tiny sip. The sharp bite surprised him, but he took another, deeper drink this time.

"Not bad," he conceded. He stared in surprise when Harry opened the can he'd dropped and a fizzy foam poured out onto the grass. "What on earth?"

"That's what happens if you shake them," Harry grinned.

After they finished, Draco made sure to wave his wand and flick the leftovers and trash away, as if he was destroying rid of evidence against himself. But he made sure to remember the name on the pop can so he could ask Harry to bring more for him later.

They took to the sky again as the sun set. In the deepening twilight, Draco returned to the heights he'd flown at through Voldemort's blizzard. His memories of fear and pain faded as he replaced them with new ones, dipping through the clouds as the stars glimmered and the moon lit his way over the tree tops. The wind lifted him up higher and higher until he watched the land fly by like a patchwork quilt dotted with houses and barns. There was no need to hide from muggles or light wizards, and as they crossed the countryside he found himself smiling. He lowered his broom in an easy swoop and came back up again for the sheer pleasure of the night air swirling around him.

"You were right," Harry said. "It's even more beautiful when the sun sets."

"You can only see the stars at night," Draco said.

"Even the wind feels different," Harry said. "Wilder."
"Of course," Draco said. "The night's belongs to us."

Their sun still sets, he thought, and our stars will never fade.

He wondered if Morgan would be satisfied with this outcome, neither side winning but instead living together. Certainly Merlin wouldn't, and perhaps that alone would satisfy her. A handful of dark wizards had survived despite Merlin's best efforts, and all of the Ministry's machinations had done nothing but drive Harry to the dark and the dark into the light. He smiled to himself. Just like the fairytales where the hero fights a war and kills the evil villain for the hand of his beloved.

He thought it might make a nice story for the books, if anyone bothered to put it to paper.

~

Coda

Slowly Sailing Moon, a traditional dark wedding song
(translated from the old language)

Scribe's feather on his parchment
with ink and stone and quill,
he writes the ending of the night
and how the moon was killed.

Of how the stars all faded
and the wild winds were tamed,
how gold o'ertook the silver
all to the sun's acclaim.

And all across the kingdom
the proclamation swore
the sun would reign forever.
We'd see the moon no more.

The wheat and lambs and children
would grow up to the light,
the war between the day and dark
now ends without a fight.

Peace, proclaimed the kingdom,
nightmares, dreams and dusk,
the haunts along the traveler's road
no more shall trouble us.

And the people cheered their rulers,
"the night is gone at last,"
but the sun still sets, the shadows grow,
and the moon still sails past.

So sign your laws and promises,
and say the dark is dead,
and cower by the hearth fire
and hide within your bed
for the moon still sails slowly
and the night is all our dream
and we'll haunt your roads forever
while the wild winds blow free.

Works inspired by this one: [Ophiuchus](#) by [slashaholic666 (queerlybeloved777)](#)

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