Snakes and Lions

by GatewayGirl

Summary

When Ron and Hermione get together, they notice only each other. A nightmare prompts Harry to return alone to the empty Chamber of Secrets, and leads to a new look at an old enemy. Harry enjoys the company, but with Bellatrix Lestrange actively hunting him, how far can he trust a Death Eater's son? (H/D -- mostly friendship, progressing to mild slash) Sixth year.

Quote:
Despite himself, Harry grinned. “It’s a dangerous combination, I suppose – he has no morals and I have no fear.”

Notes

I wrote (and posted) this story before Order of the Phoenix came out. The posting date is when I finished the original version. Because it is a sixth year story, but the books had gone only through fourth year, I invented a fifth year backstory, parts of which match later canon (Percy split with his family, and Harry dated Cho briefly and disastrously) and parts of which don’t (Arthur Weasley is dead, and Sirius is alive). The only thing I’ve changed to match later canon is the first name of the character who was only "the Lestrange woman" in Goblet of Fire.

Because I wanted to finish posting the story before book 5 came out, I rushed the ending, and
a few months later, I later replaced the original final chapter with eight chapters, going a little further.

I'm currently working on a sequel to this story, *Teamwork*, and will be posting that here. The sequel complies with this one, including in the ways that didn’t match later canon.

**Rating:**
Rated for unseemly behavior (drinking, stealing, and Dark Arts), occasional cursing (the non-magical sort), and people talking about off-screen violence. One chapter (19) has an individual warning for content that merits archive warnings, but is only talked about.
Harry dreamed.

He was back in the tunnel that led to the Chamber of Secrets. This time, however, he was not accompanied by Ron and Gilderoy Lockhart, but by Ron and Hermione. This should have been an improvement, but was not. Ron and Hermione were strolling along holding hands, giggling, and occasionally stopping to kiss.

"Ron!" Harry yelled. "It's your sister, in there!" Ron didn't seem to hear him.

In the rubble of the old landslide, Harry left them. They didn't notice. He went on towards the chamber and found the door open.

At the end of the last tunnel, he peered out into the great chamber. The far end was lit by a circle of torches, each torch held by a hooded and masked figure. The dead and rotting basilisk formed a circle about them, and its stench rolled, in visible, chartreuse waves, to envelope Harry. He was sure there was a charm to clear the air, but he could not remember it.

At the end of the chamber, one of the Death Eaters hissed. The others echoed the sound. The great statue of Salazar Slytherin opened its mouth. Nagini slithered out; on her back was Voldemort.

Voldemort stood, in mid-air, above the Death Eaters. Nagini continued, making a circle that covered the rotting basilisk, and he arose, alive once more. The two serpents reared up, one on either side of the circle....

Quite suddenly, they struck at something inside the circle. A silver dragon shot out of the middle, and headed straight for Harry. Harry reached for his wand, only to realize that he'd forgotten to bring it. He waited for death, but the dragon simply raced past him. Harry noticed first that it was quite a young one, hardly larger than Norbert, and second, that the Death Eaters were coming after it, and therefore straight towards him. He turned and tried to run, but the tunnel was full of loose rubble and bones, with deep, slippery puddles of blood, or perhaps ink.

He caught up with the dragon just outside the Chamber door. A rockslide blocked their way. The Death Eaters came up behind them and arrayed themselves, in lines and lines — far too many lines — on the far side of the doorway. Harry pressed back against the piled rocks. He didn't have his wand, or even a knife, and Ron and Hermione wouldn't hear him if he called. The small dragon crouched beside him, growling and trembling.

Bellatrix Lestrange floated to the front, her dark hair shining thick about her. Regally, she pointed at them.

"Kill the spare," she said.

Suddenly, Harry realized that he was not helpless. Voldemort had not come with his Death Eaters;
only Harry and Voldemort could open the Chamber. As the Death Eaters' wands slowly rose and pointed, Harry hissed out a command.

The door swung closed and sealed itself.

Harry woke in his bed at Hogwarts. His sheets were tangled and damp with sweat. Automatically, he lifted his hand to his forehead, but he knew even as he made the motion that there was no pain. This had not been a vision then, he told himself, just a dream.

Nonetheless, he lay awake. Ron and Hermione ... Okay, obviously it bugged him that they had scarcely noticed his existence since their little talk on Halloween. The Chamber of Secrets — maybe he thought of it as a link to Voldemort, thus the Death Eaters, and probably Nagini reminded him of the basilisk. The rotting basilisk — well, that was what he would see if he went down there. The young dragon seemed pretty random. He considered it from several angles: A link to Hagrid? A monster that needed protection? Monster is as monster does? The last seemed the most likely, what with the hysteria generated by Dumbledore's latest allies, who seemed good enough, though ugly.

Then, the Lestrange woman — well, no mystery about that. After the death of her husband, Bellatrix Lestrange had announced to the world that she would kill him, so he pictured her in the Dark Lord's place, starting the cycle of Cedric all over again.

And at the end . . . Harry shivered. At the end, he had saved himself by speaking Parseltongue, because, of all the evil crowd that faced him, no other was a Parselmouth.

Why had he thought of that? Was he reassuring himself that the ability did not make him evil? Or did it — was he standing before Lestrange as the mirror of the Dark Lord?

Maybe it just means I should use what I've got, Harry thought. Or maybe I wanted out of the dream, and that was the only way I'd left not to die.

Just before he fell back to sleep, Harry realized that he had never closed the chamber door when leaving the real Chamber of Secrets. He was pretty sure he had heard the door close behind him, though. Had the Chamber sealed itself, or not?

Though the details of the dream faded, Harry was unable to stop thinking about the Chamber of Secrets. He had never explored it, he realized. It could have other things in it — after all, it wasn't called "The Chamber of Secret". He also wondered about the door. Did it need to be properly sealed, or did it seal itself automatically when the Parselmouth left?

A few days later, Harry woke from another nightmare, in which the Chamber was swarming with baby basilisks, and Hagrid cooed over them and would not allow Harry to kill them. Harry lay in the dark for a while, picturing the spreading yarn-ball of tiny, deadly serpents. He knew he wouldn't be able to sleep until he investigated. Quietly, Harry got out of bed and took his invisibility cloak from his trunk. He went to wake up Ron, but his friend's bed was empty and undisturbed. Frowning, Harry went to the window and looked out at the waning moon. It was very late. Where was Ron? He found his watch and decided not to wait. At this point, he would need to hurry to get to the Chamber, check it quickly, and be back before dawn. He closed the curtains on his bed, so it was not obvious he was gone, put on his invisibility cloak, and crept down the dark stairway to the
Cautiously, Harry moved through the dim-lit halls to the haunted girls' toilet. He looked to confirm no one was near, then opened the door and slipped quietly inside. A whispered charm set the lamps alight, and he pushed back his hood to look around.

Harry surveyed the dingy room and tried to remember what was where. He hadn't been in here for a few years, he realized. He identified Moaning Myrtle's cubicle first, then moved to the sink across from it. With a bit of effort, he found the little etched snake, and hissed to it to open. As it had four years before, the tap glowed white and spun. The sink sank down, leaving an open pipe, which still showed wide streaks in the grime, where Harry, Ron, and Gilderoy Lockhart had slid down it.

"Don't say hello, or anything," a petulant voice said behind him. Harry turned to see Myrtle hovering outside her cubicle.

"Um... Hi."

"What are you doing here?" Myrtle smiled coquettishly at Harry. "Have you come to visit?" she cooed.

Harry's stomach squirmed. "I ... I need to check on the Chamber."

"You never come to see me!" she whined.

"Look, Myrtle, I'm really not supposed to be in here..." Harry tried to smile engagingly at her. He didn't really like her, and he hated pretending to be friendly. It felt slimy.

"You said you'd come visit me. After I helped you, too." Myrtle advanced on him in a savage swoop. Her shade slashed through him like an icicle. Harry jerked back. With a wordless wail, she did it again, then again, until he had retreated all the way to the wall beside the door.

"Myrtle! This is a girl's bathroom!"

"You come in here, though! You used to come in all the time. It's fine when you have something to do!" Moaning Myrtle drew back far enough that Harry could focus on her and folded her arms over her transparent chest. "Well, I'm not going to allow it." The ghost hovered above Harry and smirked at him. "You're just using me, that's all. I'm going to call Peeves, and then you'll be sorry!"

"Myrtle, I'll be out in a min–"

"Peeves!" Myrtle shrieked. "There's a boy in my bathroom!"

"Myrtle, please don't —!"

"No. You're just another nasty boy who Pretends to be nice when you want something. Nasty, sneaky, lying Harry! I don't like you anymore."

"I just want to walk through your bathroom –"

"Well, you can't. Peeves! I have someone you can get in trouble!" At Myrtle's sing-song "trouble", a crash sounded from above. Harry threw the hood of his cloak back over his head and bolted out the door.

He rushed wildly away, stopping to be silent now and then. He heard Peeves cackling nearby several
times, but he never sighted the poltergeist, and he was not revealed. Harry made it back to his
dormitory before anyone else awoke.

Panting, Harry slid between the curtains and into his bed. So much for investigating. He was still hot
with anger and embarrassment. It wasn't until his heartbeat had slowed, and he was drifting off to
sleep, that he remembered — he had not returned the sink to its place. Myrtle's bathroom now had a
gaping hole in the place of one of the sinks, and anyone could wander in and go down to the
possibly unsealed Chamber of Secrets —

Harry stopped the thought there. *No one uses that bathroom*, he told himself. *No one will see the
hole. I can't shut it now. I'll shut it tonight.*

That night, Quidditch practice ran late. Harry was half-asleep before he thought of the sink.
"Tomorrow," he murmured, and drifted off.

Over the next few days, he worried about the sink often, but never when he was able to do
something about it. When he might have gone back, the matter slipped his mind completely. It wasn't
until he had another nightmare, worse than the first, that he was pressed to act.

It was late at night, not early in the morning. All his roommates were in and asleep. Harry again drew
his bed curtains, and returned to Myrtle's bathroom.

When he entered the room, the sink was back in place. At first, he was reassured, but after a second's
thought, this was more frightening than having it be gone. Only another Parselmouth should be able
to move the sink, Harry thought. He walked tentatively over to what he thought was the correct sink,
but he couldn't find the little snake. He kept expecting Myrtle to emerge and start yelling at him, but
she did not. He hoped she was gone or, better yet, snubbing him.

Unable to see the snake, Harry tried to run his hand along the pipe, but his hand went through it,
instead. He nearly fell into the open space.

Harry wrenched himself back so quickly he tumbled to the ground. A satisfied snicker came from
one of the stalls. Harry ignored it. He felt along the ground. The sink was not there — it just looked
like it was.

Harry poked his head through the intangible pipes and pedestal. Once inside the illusion, he could
see the real pipe, descending into darkness. Bracing himself carefully with his left hand, Harry pulled
out his wand with his right, and cast a ladder charm. Strong thin strands sped out of his wand and
spun themselves into a rope ladder, which bonded seamlessly to the floor. Harry climbed down into
the pipe.

It took a lot longer to climb down than it had to slide down, four years earlier.

Harry walked down the tunnel. It was long, but not as long as he had remembered. His previous
circumstances had probably distorted his sense of time. When he came to the Chamber door, it was
closed, but not sealed by the ring of serpents. Harry shivered. He set his hand to the circle of stone,
but it was flush to the wall and too heavy to budge with just his fingertips. He stepped back and
pointed his wand at it.

"Alohamora," he whispered. The door opened. Harry shook his head. This was bad.
Harry walked as quietly as possible down the last tunnel, his wand held low and behind him, to shed as little light as would allow him to walk. At the end, he peered out into the great chamber. It was entirely dark. Harry wasn't sure what he had expected — Death Eaters? Slytherins? Ron and Hermione? The last thought made him grin. This spot certainly had privacy!

Still moving cautiously, Harry climbed down the short ladder into the chamber itself. He walked forward, wondering how close he would need to come to the body of the basilisk, then realized he smelled nothing other than wet rock. He wondered if four years was really enough time for a creature that large to decay.

He nearly tripped over an object on the floor, and had jumped back precipitously enough to strain his ankle, before he recognized that the hard thing was just an unlit torch. Cautiously, he picked it up.

"Fax Incendia," he whispered. The torch flared to life, shedding far more light than Harry's wand. He pointed to the torch with his wand. "Fax Leviosa." He let go of the torch. It floated up above him, shedding a wider circle of light.

The first things Harry saw were the reflective lines of water. They led his eye, inevitably, to the massive statue of Salazar Slytherin which dominated the end of the Chamber. The statue's mouth, Harry noted with relief, was closed. There was no sign of the basilisk, however. Harry would have felt better if there had been bones, at least. Salazar sneered disapprovingly at an empty room.

Harry didn't want to look up at the huge monument to Salazar Slytherin's self-importance. He looked away, over at the wall on which Tom Riddle's memory had written his name, in words of blood red. That spot was blank now, but closer to Harry was new writing, in plain black. Harry walked closer, so he could read the words. They said simply:

**My friends suck!**

Harry's first reaction was to be shocked that someone had defaced the wall of such an important place. When the thought sunk in, he looked over at Salazar's statue, and slowly, he smiled.

"This isn't your manor, anymore," he said, quietly, but with satisfaction.

He looked back at the writing, and found he was tempted to add, "mine too," underneath it. Slowly, he brought out his wand. His friends didn't suck, not really — they just didn't notice him, now. Harry looked down at the water-stained stone of the floor. If he really had problems — ones he could tell them about — Ron and Hermione would make time. He was sure they still cared, really.

He looked back up at the wall. "My friends suck," he repeated under his breath. He took a step closer and whispered "Scriberio." Pointing at the mineral-streaked wall, he wrote:

**My friends don't have time for me.**

He felt a little nervous, under Salzar's disapproving frown. For a moment, he was tempted to deface the statue, just to make it less frightening. The Riddikulus spell sprang to mind, and he pictured Salazar in Neville's grandmother's clothes, and smiled.

Despite the moment of amusement, he decided he wanted to be away. His ankle ached, and he was dizzy with unused adrenaline. He would explore another day. He left the chamber, hesitating at the door, but finally leaving it open. At the bathroom, again, he hesitated. He looked back at the sinks and realized he would need to find the right one, again. Shrugging, he decided to leave it. If the worst thing that would happen was graffiti, he could deal with that.
Harry regretted that decision by the time he woke up. He thought about going back the next day, but Quidditch practice ran late, in a rain that turned to snow, and by the time he got back to the dormitories, he could think of nothing but burrowing into his warm bed and staying there. He woke up terrified.

"What was I thinking?" he muttered as he dressed. "I didn't even check to make sure it was safe! I need to go back, tonight."

Friday evening, the Slytherins had the pitch. Harry did his homework in the Common Room. He hoped Ron and Hermione could be persuaded to come along with him — it was always better to explore with friends. When he had finished, however, Ron and Hermione still were not there. He considered checking the Marauders' Map, then decided against it. He wasn't going to hunt them down for this. Besides, he wasn't certain he wanted to find them; he'd never dared ask Ron for details on how much he did with Hermione — Harry didn't even want to think about it — so he didn't know how embarrassing it might be to find them. Harry left the dormitory, threw on his cloak, and went directly to Myrtle's bathroom.

The Chamber of Secrets was empty, but the torch, and a second one, had been affixed to the wall with something that looked like spun stone. Harry lit both torches. The light reflected from the water, and lit a small, central section of the long hall. On the wall between the lights, under Harry's words, it now said:

I'm not certain I have friends, really.
I have lots of people.

Harry knew what to add to this. He wrote:

I do.

He thought about that. Ron and Hermione were his friends, and eventually, they'd remember that. Neville, Dean, and Seamus... He sighed. He liked them, well enough. They liked him. For all that, they weren't real friends — not the "share secrets" sort of friends. The same with Ginny. And Sirius — Sirius was something altogether different, perhaps because he was an adult.

With a whispered charm, he tried to erase "I do." It was difficult. The words seemed to have soaked into the stone. He managed to get the "do" faint, and changed the line to:

I have at least two friends. Usually. And some other 'people'.

Harry looked around at the pool of light. It was a good idea, he decided. He resolved to lift a couple of school torches on the way down, next time he came. He looked back at Salazar Slytherin, looming in the gloom at the end of the hall. His gaze tracked down to where Ginny had lain. A dark stain marked the spot. For one horrified moment, he thought it was blood. Slowly, he walked to the spot and knelt. The stones were black with spattered ink, but there was no blood or fang. He looked back along the wall to the space between the torches. His new words shimmered beneath the old.

A shiver went through him as he remembered the diary. Now here he was again, conversing with an unseen correspondent. Somehow, though, "my friends suck," seemed like a very human -- a very student -- thing to write. Hesitantly, he raised his wand again. Deliberately picking the spot where Tom Riddle had written his old and new names, he wrote:

Are you here?
Harry stared at the words, but nothing happened. He crossed them out with a single line and began to explore.

After about an hour, Harry was convinced that nothing more lurked in the Chamber of Secrets. He had walked in the tunnels, marking each turning, and discovered they were overlapping and fewer than he thought. He had spoken to each carved snake in Parseltongue, and no further ones had moved. He had gone into Salazar Slytherin's opened mouth — an entirely creepy experience — and found the basilisk's old lair, but there was nothing in there but dried bones and more unresponsive carvings.

Harry left the chamber, climbed out the ladder, performed a quick cleaning spell on his robe, and headed back to Gryffindor tower. He wanted more than ever to talk to Ron and Hermione. When he got back to the tower, however, they still weren't in the Common Room. Ron wasn't in the dormitory, either.

"Hi Harry," Neville said quietly. He was doing his homework in the seat by the window.

"Hi Neville." Harry managed a quick smile. "Have you seen Ron or Hermione? I need to talk to them."

Neville shook his head. "I thought they might be with you, for once." He glanced down, then fearfully up. "We're supposed to be in, now," he said, almost accusingly.

"Yeah, well...." Harry shrugged slightly, smiling just a little. It wasn't so bad for him to be out, he thought, but Hermione was a prefect, and should be setting a better example.

"I know. You don't care about that." Neville shook his head. "I don't know how you avoid Filch so often!"

Harry laughed. "It's an inherited trait," he said. "So I'm told."

Neville's smile faltered quickly, and he turned back to his homework. Harry stared at the back of Neville's round head. What had Neville's parents been like in school, he wondered? Did anyone tell Neville about the things they did? Or did he just hear that were smarter, more talented? For the fiftieth time that year, Harry opened his mouth to ask — that was my dad, what were your parents like? — but he couldn't get the words out. He left again.

The Common Room was almost deserted. Two seventh-years were snogging on the couch. They might have heard the portrait swing closed, but Harry was safely out of sight by then.

He wandered about the school, looking in the dark library, the Astronomy tower, and some of the cozier classrooms. He didn't find Ron or Hermione, and he eventually got tired of walking in the cold stone corridors. He realized he should have checked the Marauder's map, and went back to his dormitory. Neville was asleep now, and Seamus's and Dean's beds had the curtains drawn. Ron's bed was still empty. Harry, rather than getting the map, lay down on his own bed, feeling suddenly angry. Well, then, maybe he wouldn't talk to Ron. What was the point, really? He imagined himself whispering his fears to Ron at breakfast.

"Ron, I've been down in the Chamber of Secrets, having a conversation by writing on the wall. Do you think it could be Tom Riddle, again? Or something older? I think it's just another student."

And Ron would gaze at Hermione, and say "Uh-huh. Yeah, I mean, likely so, right?"

And Hermione would say "You what! You can't go down there, Harry! What if Salazar Slytherin left some other little surprise?" or, worse yet, she wouldn't notice what he'd said to Ron, and just nod
when Ron nodded.

Harry decided Ron could just stay out of it, and Hermione with him. He closed his eyes and tried not to think. When Ron came in, he lay still. He heard Ron's breathing steady before he fell asleep himself.

He was tempted to go down to the chamber the next night, but Hermione was studying, and Ron wanted to play Exploding Snap. Harry was too surprised by the offer to refuse. They had a pleasant enough time, and twice Harry nearly mentioned the chamber, but he didn't want to be the first to talk about what he had been doing. Ron never asked. Ron's conversation consisted mainly of complaints about how he couldn't buy Hermione the Christmas present he wanted to get for her. Harry wished he could just give him the money, but Ron would never accept money from him. He tried telling Ron not to buy him a present, and spend the money on Hermione's, instead. When that didn't work, he suggested that his present to Ron could be buying Hermione's present, but Ron would not agree to that, either. Finally, Harry snapped.

"Honestly, Ron, she loves you! Get her anything she can keep and hold. As long as she can look at it and know it's from you, she won't care what it cost."

"You just don't understand anything!" Ron had shouted, throwing down the rest of the cards and causing a minor series of explosions. "When are you going to grow up?!"

Harry went to bed.
Taking Turns

Sunday night, right after dinner, Harry returned to the Chamber. He took a torch from the end of the first hallway, doused it with a quick spell, and hid it under his cloak. In the chamber, as he expected, a third torch had been added, this one on the wall across from the writing. The torches, Harry decided, were reassuring. A person was coming here, and someone who wanted more than wand light. Harry didn't know how to spin a sconce from the stone, so he just laid his torch down across from the other, completing a square. He made himself wait a moment before looking at the new words.

This entry asked:

Are they worth it? My friends are idiots. I can't talk to them about anything.

And no, I'm not lurking behind you in an invisibility cloak.

Harry thought about that for a while. Hermione was impressively clever, and Ron. . . . Well, Ron could be dense, sometimes, but he wasn't stupid — he just thought he knew how things worked, and often as not, he didn't. He was clever enough to be fun, though.

After some thought — remembering how difficult it was to obliterate the marks — he wrote:

Mine are smart enough — about most things. There are still things I don't talk about.
There are some things you can't explain to someone who hasn't experienced them.

On impulse, he added:

I need a girlfriend.

He regretted that immediately, and the longer he looked, the more annoyed he became. He didn't want a girlfriend. He added a carat after the "a" and added "friend without a".

friend without a
I need a^girlfriend.

He wondered if his correspondent was a boy or girl and thought about Hermione. She was an okay friend, really, though not as fun as Ron. On impulse, he added "or boyfriend," then looked the entry over and shook his head. What a mess! he thought.

Harry lay on his stomach on the cold stone and did his Divination homework, which was a long-range prediction meant to cover the next term. It was laughable easy to predict doom and despair. Subtle tragedies flowed from his quill with barely a thought, but with no sense of reality — isolation, betrayal, strange alliances, loved ones in mortal danger. He thought he'd keep himself out of danger in this one, just to avoid becoming too repetitive. Despite some stiffness in his muscles, he felt better when he left. At least his homework was done.

Monday night, he stayed in the Common Room, although Ron was studying with Hermione. It was, after all, his correspondent's turn.
Tuesday night, Quidditch practice went late again, but Harry managed to get himself down to Moaning Myrtle's bathroom, down the hole, and to the Chamber of Secrets. Under his last entry, someone had written:

Is that "need a girlfriend or boyfriend" or "a friend without a ...?"

Harry reddened slightly, and wrote:

I need a friend without a girlfriend or boyfriend. Sorry I was messy. I wrote the first bit, then realized I don't want a girlfriend, now. I tried that — I'm not ready to try it again, yet.

That brought the entries down almost to the floor.

Harry started doing his Defense Against the Dark Arts essay. This year's teacher, Professor Horsyr, had given them an interesting assignment — you were to pick a spell from a list of spells commonly classified as Dark Arts, describe how the spell worked, then write arguments both for and against allowing its use. Harry had just finished outlining legitimate uses for a spell that burned flesh, when his yawns grew too close together to continue. He sat and rolled up the parchment. On impulse, he wrote, high on the next bit of wall:

Today's assignment: write a personal advert for a friend.

Grinning to himself, he extinguished the torches and left the suddenly dark room.

The next night, Harry declined games with Ron. He was too tired to play. He did his Potions homework as well as he could, then went up to bed and fell immediately to sleep.

Thursday, the wall said:

Seeking friend: Must be intelligent enough to hold a conversation, difficult to intimidate, and capable of independent thought. (That is, must be able to break rules. Being under alternate rules, as in service to the Dark Lord, does not count.)

Harry read this a few times. Well, he was certainly all of that. He was unsure what to write for himself. He had spent most of Potions, while not defending Ron from Malfoy's sniping, thinking about what mattered to him in a friend, but he still found it hard to categorize. Finally, he wrote:

Seeking friend: Must be fun, perceptive, and willing to explore after hours. Must not treat me like a

He stopped. He couldn't think of anything to put there that would not be too strong a clue of his own identity. He found he liked being anonymous. He considered and discarded "freak" and "collectible" and "exhibit" and finally crossed out the "not" and finished with "real person."

Saturday afternoon, Harry was working on an essay for Transfiguration. He felt almost ready for
exams, except for Potions. Hermione, in contrast, was frantically revising. She actually snapped at Ron when he tried to cuddle her. The loud words caused Harry to look up.

"Not now, Ron! I should have done this days ago."

Harry saw Ron look over towards him. Quickly, he returned his attention to his parchment and quill. Ron came over anyway. He sat down on the couch beside Harry. Harry ignored him.

"Heard from Mum," Ron tried.

"How is she?" Harry asked. He wondered if he should repeat some things Professor McGonagall had said about transfiguration theory, just to show he remembered them.

"Fine. She...." Ron paused, and Harry glanced up at him. Ron looked uncomfortable. "She wants me to come home this year. With Hermione."

Harry concentrated on the parchment. "Have fun," he said.

"Will you be okay?" Ron asked anxiously.

Harry put on his best smile, and looked up at Ron. "I'll be fine," he said, pushing all his available sincerity into his voice and his smile. "You two have stayed for me every year, Ron — go home, for once." He forced a grin. "I could probably use the time to bring my marks up a bit."

Ron looked relieved. "If you don't mind, then. Bill will be there, and everything." He rolled his eyes. "It will be crowded."

"Tell him I say hi," Harry said. He blew on the end of his scroll to dry the ink. "I left Charting the Dark Arts upstairs, I think," he improvised. "See you at dinner?"


"Thanks." Harry turned away quickly.

He did see Ron at dinner, but they hardly spoke. Ron was busy detailing Weasley Christmas traditions for Hermione. Harry left early.

In the now well-lit center of the great Salazar Slytherin's Chamber of Secrets he responded to:

Neither of us wrote what we, ourselves, are like. Would that provide too much information?

with:

Yeah, I think so.

His correspondent also had a request:

Give me an example of something that cannot be explained.

Harry thought for a moment, then wrote:
Watching someone die.

He couldn't think of anything that didn't sound flippant after that. He did his divination homework again, lying in relative comfort on a rug he had carried from a hard-to-find parlor on the second floor, but the thought of holidays alone kept coming between him and the required dark visions. He was supposed to do a medium-range prediction, covering until the end of the holidays. He thought it should be something about isolation and loneliness, but that seemed a little too mild. He tried a tarot reading, hoping to get inspiration for something more specific, but that was a complete failure. First, he laid down the Sun, crossed by the Page of Cups, reversed. A quick scan of the rest of the reading showed nothing worse than the second card, and the only other thing that looked at all negative was the juggling act in the two of pentacles.

"Just what I need," Harry muttered. "An entire layout of happy cups and coins." Carefully, he noted all the cards and their places on the top of a new sheet of parchment. Below the record, he wrote, "For no fathomable reason, I am going to enjoy the holidays."

Harry looked at that, and frowned. If he was seriously going to say he would have a good time, he better be able to spin it. Maybe he could tie it in to the last prediction as a set-up for some disaster. At any rate, it would need thought. He rolled up the parchment.

Before leaving, he added to the wall:

Are you going home for Christmas?

Harry went back upstairs late and yawning. Ron was in bed, for once, or at least his curtains were drawn. Harry told himself he couldn't care less. He got into bed, and fell asleep. He dreamed of the Weasley Christmas, which was somehow a television show that he watched from the back of the Dursley's living room.

When Harry next went to the Chamber, the longest entry yet filled the wall below his. The graceful letters had shaken to a scrawl, as if his correspondent wrote with the quickness of anger.

I hate going home. My father will tell me what a failure I am and punish me for not achieving what he thinks I should, never mind that he has no idea what it's like here, now. Awful things will happen, just because it's home, and I'll have to pretend I don't notice, or that I'm impressed. Maybe I'll just stay. They won't care.

Harry felt immediately sympathetic. He contributed:

I don't have a "home." The people I live with despise magic. They hate me, just for being a wizard. Until I came here, they kept me in a cupboard. After my first year here, they didn't dare, so I got the small bedroom, but they put locks on the door and bars on the window.

A few years ago, I met a dangerous man, and now they are better to me, because they are afraid of him. They know he will protect me.

Harry looked at that, and was afraid. Would his correspondent recognize the boy who was kept in a cupboard as Harry Potter? He didn't think most people knew about that. He looked beyond the torchlight to Salazar Slytherin's scowling face. The statue's impotent disapproval cheered him. He settled on the floor with Charting the Dark Arts, Deliver Us from Evil, and a blank roll of parchment that filled steadily with a reasonable analysis of criteria used to evaluate the legality of new charms.
Monday night, he found that his correspondent had added to his own text. A red line under "The people I live with despise magic" led to a side question, also in red:

Are you a Muggle-born?

Similarly, a line under "wizard" went to the side comment

Ha! Now I know you're a boy. You had me guessing.

Under the main text, Harry read:

Dangerous friends are great — when they're not around. I'm fine at school, my father's such a terror, but then I have to go home.

Harry considered that. This was the second time his correspondent had written about his father as if he was afraid of him. Harry thought that must be worse than not having a father at all — having one you did not like or trust. He wrote:

I'm not really Muggle-born, just Muggle-raised. I'm only 2nd generation on one side, though. My godfather (the dangerous one) has never hurt me, but I can't live with him, because he's a fugitive.

The next response was disappointingly short, but intriguing. His correspondent had replied with:

What kind of a fugitive? Is he a Death Eater?

I know a few fugitives. I wouldn't trust any of them.

Harry wrote:

No — he's been convicted of a multiple murder. He didn't do it, really, but we can't prove that.

I wouldn't feel safe with a Death Eater.

The writing replied:

Is he really dangerous, then?

You wouldn't necessarily be unsafe with a Death Eater — well, on second thought, you would. Half-2nd generation isn't enough to get you on the victim list, though — it's just that all Death Eaters are unsafe.

Harry laughed at that. He agreed completely, he thought. He considered writing that he had met a few of the Death Eaters, but thought that might cut into his anonymity too much.

"Well, either that, or my correspondent will think I'm in Slytherin," he muttered. Harry looked at the first line, again, and thought about Sirius. He loved and respected Sirius, and would gladly go live with him, but...

Yes, he is, but not in the way people think, or as much as certain people think. (Okay, so I "forgot" to tell the Muggles he's innocent.) He's powerful, both physically and
magically, and he has a wicked temper. I know he's been willing to kill, before. I'm his, though. I am safe.

The week passed quickly. Harry and his correspondent chatted about testing. Harry picked up a useful pointer on the Potions exam ("Concentrate on procedure — you can sometimes deduce ingredients if you remember, for example, that the component affecting memory needs to be evenly sliced"). Exams were an intensity of concentration, and the Gryffindor party afterwards (supplied by Harry, Ron, and Hermione, now that Fred and George were gone) was an outburst of familiar energy. The expedition to Honeyduke's was the first special thing the three had done together since Halloween, and when it was over, and Ron and Hermione kissing in the corner, Harry felt lonelier than ever.

Harry got up late, the next day, and walked Ron and Hermione down to the train, but he hoped he didn't need to wait for long. Now that they were leaving, Ron and Hermione were more focused on him.

"Try to enjoy the holidays," Hermione said, looking worried. "I've left my present, and Ron is going to send his."

Harry shrugged. "Yours are in Ron's trunk," he said. "I snuck them in before breakfast."

Hermione giggled. Harry wondered if it would be acceptable for him to say goodbye and leave now. Hermione quieted, and the silence grew awkward.

"Will you be all right, Harry?" Hermione asked. "It's just a few weeks."

In the distance, Harry heard the train. Now that it was close, he felt braver, and decided to say something he had been trying to get up the courage to say since late November.

"Hermione ... I think you should be a better prefect, next term."

"What?" Hermione looked shocked. Ron glared at Harry.

"He just wants you not to wander off with me."

"You certainly could set a better example," Harry said, "but I don't care. Just ... You should be available more. No one can find you if they need help with anything. It would be better of you to have your little snogging sessions — or whatever — in your room, even if it looked more improper." By now, he was fairly shouting to be heard above the chugging of the steam engine. Hermione looked hurt, but there was no time to do anything about it besides hug her, and return the little kiss she placed on his cheek.

Harry smiled amicably throughout their goodbyes, and while the train was pulling out. As the last of the cars disappeared around the bend, he turned away and scuffed angrily through the scant inch of snow on the frozen ground. He saw Draco Malfoy up by the school. The Death Eater's son was staying, for some unknown reason. Perhaps his parents are going abroad, and don't want a whining spoiled brat with them.

He didn't want to spar with anybody, even Malfoy. On impulse, he turned to Hagrid's cabin. My usual refuge, he thought wryly, as he knocked.

"Harry!" Hagrid called, hurrying up behind him. "I wen' down ter see ther students off. Come in, then. I ha'n' see yeh since the snow fell."
Harry felt comforted the instant he entered Hagrid's hut. The warm room smelled of wood smoke, dog, and a dozen other things that Harry couldn't identified, but which all combined into "safe." Hagrid motioned Harry to a seat by the hearth and immediately set about making tea.

"Heard yeh'll be stayin' alone, this holiday," Hagrid remarked.

Harry shrugged. "Hermione is going home with Ron."

Hagrid shook his head, but his eyes twinkled. "Children do grow! Hardly seems bu' yesterday when I was bringin' yeh lot over the lake."

Harry's eyes blazed. "Can't I be lonely without being told I'm simply immature?"

Hagrid looked over, his brows drawn in a puzzled frown. "Why t'isn' that, Harry. Yeh jes haven' found anyone, yet, and they have. It don' happen all neat and scheduled, life don'." He set the lid on the filled teapot and turned to get cups. "It'll settle ou', though. They'll stop wanting to be together all the time, or yeh'll find someone else t'be wi' —" he laughed, "or, worse, both at once — but after a time, it'll settle." He set down the cups. "Now, who'd be saying that yeh're 'immature?'"

"Ron," Harry growled.

Hagrid frowned. "When he comes back, Harry, I'll have a talk with him. The boy can' tell firs' love from bein' all grown up!"

"No," Harry said quickly, in embarrassment. "It's okay."

Hagrid shrugged his great shoulders and drank his tea. Fang came over, and Harry slipped him a biscuit.

"Yeh all right otherwise, Harry?" Hagrid asked.

"I guess."

"Lestrange can't get you at Hogwarts, Harry."

Harry shrugged. "I'm not worried."

Hagrid stopped. His black eyes squinted at Harry. "Yeh shouldn' let 'em get to yeh," he said, "but they are sommat to worry abou'. Not too much, mind. Just enough."

Harry looked into the dancing flames and sipped at his warm tea. The small room was starting to feel stuffy.

"Yeh do know about the Lestranges, don' yeh, Harry?"

"They're couple of Death Eater nutters who got out in the fall of Azkaban, last year. They blamed me for the fate of Barty Crouch, and wanted to kill me. Messily." Harry shrugged. "Then I got away, and he died, and she hates me even more. What else is there to know?"

"They are terrible people, Harry. Her -- she's worse than he was. At their trial, she was proud — proud — of the horrible things she'd done...."

"I saw some of it."
"Yeh were a baby, Harry."

"In Dumbledore's pensieve, two years ago. I hadn't meant to pry — I didn't know what it was. He'd been reviewing pieces of trials — Karkaroff's, the young Barty Crouch... I found out Snape had been a Death Eater, and Neville's parents were tortured to madness...." Harry trailed off. He wondered if he would have been better off not knowing these things. "I'm too curious, sometimes," he muttered.

"Does Neville know yeh know?"

"No. It's awkward. He's never told anybody, as far as I know." Harry sighed. "I should get to know him better."

"Yeh don' sound eager."

"He's kind of boring." Harry shrugged. "Nice, but boring." He remembered Neville's tentative criticism of his night wandering, a few weeks past. "I can't see that we'd ever be real friends — I mean not like Ron or Hermione."
In the Great Hall, that evening, Harry looked around to see who had stayed. There were more students than usual, but that was still not very many, and the long house tables had been replaced by short ones with space for twelve students at each. None were close to full. At the Gryffindor table sat Harry, one seventh-year girl — Linda Talbot — and one second-year boy — Davey McDoughal. Hufflepuff had two third-years that looked barely familiar, but Ravenclaw had a full six people, all fourth year or above, who seemed coolly comfortable with each other. Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle, with one scared-looking first or second year boy, sat at the Slytherin table.

Harry surveyed each group several times. If his correspondent had stayed, he or she was somewhere in this room. Harry began to evaluate the remaining students, eliminating the ones who could not have written the words in the chamber.

Crabbe and Goyle he dismissed as too stupid, and the first- and second-year students as too young. No Hufflepuff, Harry judged, would have his correspondent's disregard for rules. He was certain that Linda, the remaining Gryffindor, would not wander around the school at night. That left all the Ravenclaw students — two girls and four boys — and Draco Malfoy. Harry decided he didn't want to think about that last possibility, right now. Perhaps he should investigate the Ravenclaw students.

As he lay in bed, however, in the otherwise deserted sixth-year boys' dormitory, his thoughts returned to Malfoy. Malfoy's father certainly was a terror, and his friends — at least, Crabbe and Goyle — were idiots, so those facts fit, but the attitude seemed wrong. Harry had never heard Malfoy speak ill of his father, or any other member of his family, before. Indeed, he tended to bring up his father to bully others ... Harry frowned. That fits, actually. But his family — he used to make fun of me for not having a family — I can't imagine him saying he doesn't want his own.

Quite suddenly, Harry remembered Malfoy, during their first year, saying loudly and insincerely how sorry he felt for people who couldn't go home for Christmas, because nobody wanted them. For a moment, Harry thought of Ron and Hermione, enjoying the merry chaos of the Burrow, and a wave of self-pity swept over him.

You told Ron you'd be fine, he scolded himself. It's not his fault if you lied.

He forced his thoughts back to Malfoy. Yes, that was what Malfoy had said their first year, but then, the second year, he had been here, himself. Harry, Ron, and Hermione had assumed it was because he was the Heir of Slytherin, but they had been wrong. Why had Malfoy been at school? Was he there to keep an eye on the plot, or had his family just not wanted him, that year?

The next night, there were no new messages in the Chamber. Harry, with mixed annoyance and relief, considered the possibility that his correspondent had gone home after all, though five days ago he had written "... I'm staying." Harry wondered if he should re-seal the Chamber. Under his message from the last day of exams, he added:

Are you a Parselmouth?

By the end of the next day, Harry reluctantly eliminated one of the Ravenclaw girls as someone who
would not go anywhere as dirty as the tunnel that led to the chamber of secrets, and all of the Ravenclaw boys as simply too unimaginative to find anything so far from the library. This, he noted apprehensively, left the other Ravenclaw girl and Malfoy.

On the twenty-third of December, he lay in bed, considering this.

Over holidays, he had planned to try to meet his correspondent. It seemed clear he had merely to violate the alternating-day rule and he stood a good chance of surprising the other. But if it was Malfoy, did he want to?

*I can go down there quietly, leaving my cloak on until I see the other person. If it's the girl, there's no problem. But what if it's Malfoy? What do I want to do then?*

*I could ignore it, never publicly violate the schedule, and be sort of friends with him, in writing, as if I didn't know.*

*I could stop writing to him.*

*I could take off the cloak anyway, and see what he does. He's probably as horrified as me, if it is him. He may be lying in bed now, thinking, "what if it's Potter?"*

Draco Malfoy, Harry remembered, had tried to make friends with him, the first time they met. He had gone about it in entirely the wrong way, trying to sound important, confiding plans to extract presents from his father, and warning Harry against the "wrong sort", but he had done so, nonetheless, and without knowing who Harry was.

Of course, ever since Harry had refused to be friends with him, during their second encounter, he had been perfectly horrid.

Dumbledore, Harry thought, gave people second chances. He was famous for it. On the other hand, what reason did he have to give Malfoy a second chance? Some vague expressions of unhappiness and fear? But then, if there was some good to Malfoy, what chance did he have of finding it, when they were enemies?

The next morning, Harry wandered aimlessly through the school. He thought he had best go down to Hogsmeade in the evening, after Honeydukes closed, take what he wanted, and just leave money. He had decided he wanted butterbeer, but wasn't actually sure where to get it, other than for drinking in The Three Broomsticks. Perhaps, he decided, he could ask Dobby. Fred and George had found some way to get bottles of the stuff.

On his way downstairs, he saw Albus Dumbledore, just inside the Great Hall. Harry slipped in through the door. No one else was in the huge room. The headmaster appeared to be surveying the twelve Christmas trees, all hung with gold stars. The enchanted ceiling was a flat slate grey, but everything below it glittered with Christmas cheer. Dumbledore swung round.

"Harry! We missed you at breakfast, this morning. Are you enjoying your holidays?"

Harry glanced down. "It's a bit quiet," he admitted.

Dumbledore nodded in understanding. "I've grown accustomed to seeing you with young Mr. Weasley, or with Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger. It requires practice to enjoy having the run of the place to oneself."
Harry nodded, though he wasn't sure he understood. Did Dumbledore mean he would learn to do without friends? He looked at the giant, glittering evergreen in front of him, and sighed.

"What makes people friends, sir?"

He thought it was an idiotic question as soon as it left his mouth, but Dumbledore appeared to seriously consider the matter.

"That depends, Harry, that depends. There are as many ways for people to be friends as there are for them to be lovers." He looked up at the nearest tree. "Perhaps more ways. Shared interests, complementary interests, sympathy, even just inexplicable love. Nor is that all."

"Ron just ignores me, now," Harry complained.

"Ah yes. He is in love with Miss Granger, is he not? It's hard to lose a friend to true love." Dumbledore sighed. "I recall when my daughter married. Suddenly, I had no one to play draughts with in the morning. I was compelled to take this job as Hogwarts Headmaster, so that I had available players."

Harry laughed out loud.

"You realize I don't believe that for a minute."

"And why not, young Potter?"

"I'm told you had your choice of this or Minister of Magic."

Dumbledore waved a hand dismissively. "There was never any contest, Mr. Potter. Ministry of Magic people play only wizard chess."

Harry grinned. A playing board, he noticed, was sitting out on the Gryffindor table. Either he had overlooked it, earlier, or it had just appeared. "Would you like a game of draughts, professor?" he asked.

"I could not imagine anything better."

At first, Harry played with great concentration. He did not have much practice at Muggle games, and Professor Dumbledore was a superb strategist. Ten minutes in, most of the pieces were still on the board, and Harry could see that Dumbledore's next move would leave him unable to move without being captured.

Suddenly, Dumbledore jumped three of Harry's pieces, exposing two of his own and opening up the middle of the board.

"Sir?"

"Your turn, Harry."

"But — why did you do that? You could have —"

"I did that because it was too fun to miss." Dumbledore's eyes twinkled over his half-moon glasses, and Harry grinned in response.

After that, both Harry and Professor Dumbledore played recklessly, taking any possible capture. In two minutes, only three of Harry's pieces and four of Dumbledore's were left, and every remaining piece had been kinged. They met in the middle for foolish duels, and Dumbledore won.
Dumbledore sat back. "Very satisfying," he said. "It is so rare that I encounter an opponent who understands how to play."

Harry looked down and smiled. Dumbledore was clearly commenting on his ability to play, rather than his ability to play draughts. He looked up.

"Another game, sir?"

"Something different, I think."

"Exploding Snap?" Harry suggested daringly.

Professor Dumbledore was properly silly about playing Exploding Snap. He patted his eyebrows nervously after a particularly exuberant explosion. Harry felt more relaxed than he had in days. On impulse, he asked:

"Professor? When do you decide to give someone a second chance?"

"Sorry?" asked Dumbledore politely.

"Someone like Professor Snape. Someone you know has done bad things. You're famous for giving people second chances. How do you know when to do it?"

"Ah." Professor Dumbledore thought. "It is hard to define. Sometimes you see a hidden goodness in someone — something that has had no opportunity to express itself. Sometimes you see some cause of ill behavior — and believe you may be able to counter it. Sometimes it is nothing more than sympathy for someone you see as trapped." He dealt out a hand. Harry's topmost card blew up, singing the ones beneath it.

"Children's stories would have you believe that when you release an animal from a trap, it is grateful," the headmaster added, his voice growing more serious. "This is not true. Most often, when you release an animal from a trap, it will turn and bite you. It is hurt. It is confused. It is full of hate for the world. People are only slightly better. When you release someone from a trap, you must be prepared for them to bite you; ready to endure that first, animal response. Soon after, you will know."

He paused. "You won't always be right, you realize. Even I am not always right."

"But how do I know when to try?" Harry persisted.

Professor Dumbledore peered over his glasses.

"If you are a good man, as I believe you will be, Harry Potter, son of James Potter, the glorious, son of Lily Potter, the perspicacious, you will feel the stirring of sympathy within your soul, and you will know when the time has come to take your risk." He held Harry's eyes for a moment, until three cards on the table simultaneously exploded. The headmaster chuckled.

"Well, I'm afraid I must get back to work — after this hand, of course. Thank you for the diversion, Harry — I haven't had such fun in too long a time."
Beer and Chocolate

Harry felt much more focused after his talk with the headmaster. He went down to the kitchens and talked to Dobby, who brought him six bottles of butterbeer, all packed in holly boughs in a basket, without question, which Harry found rather embarrassing. Harry had decided that if he was to try to make friends with Malfoy, a generous amount of butterbeer and chocolate was probably the best first step.

He went to Honeydukes in mid-afternoon, guessing they would close early on Christmas Eve. When he arrived, the shop was dark, with snow falling outside the grey windows. Harry picked out Chocolate Frogs, Fizzing Wizzbees, and Bertie Bott's Every-Flavour Beans first, then an assortment of other sweets. He left money on the counter, and was back at Gryffindor Tower an hour before dinner. Nervously, he packed the sweets around the butterbeer.

"Well, there," he said out loud, to the empty room. "If it's the Ravenclaw girl, she should be impressed, and if it's Malfoy, he should at least try some before challenging me to a duel." He frowned at Ron's perfectly made bed. "Maybe I should leave a note, so they know where to look for my body."

Dinner was a quiet affair. They were still sitting at the small house tables. Harry knew from experience that those were likely to be gone at Christmas dinner. The Ravenclaw girl looked unconcerned as she chatted with her friends. Malfoy looked pale and left early, without Crabbe and Goyle, who stayed for thirds on pudding.

When the Ravenclaw girl left, Harry left. He went upstairs and ditched his robe. He put on grey trousers -- his one pair that actually fit -- and a black turtleneck, so he looked as little the Gryffindor as possible -- then picked up his cloak and the basket of treats. Once in the corridor, he covered himself and the basket with the cloak, and he headed down to the first floor girls’ bathroom.

Harry walked quietly along the dark tunnel, the way lit only by the dim light of his wand. In sight of the Chamber entrance, he extinguished even that, and crept forward in the faint light that bled out from the torchlit center of the hall.

Halfway down the hall, he could see that his correspondent was indeed Draco Malfoy. Under Harry's last words, Draco was writing

No, I'm not Harry Potter.

Sorry I haven't been here. It was odd. I keep looking at the people at meals, wondering which one is you. Do I want to know?

Draco sat back. Harry watched him mutter something to his wand, probably canceling the Scribere spell, and then sigh. He looked pensively down the hall toward the statue of Salazar Slytherin.

Harry came within a few feet of Malfoy and put down the basket. He stepped back. This, he knew, made the basket seem to appear from nothing. Malfoy goggled at it.

Harry pulled off his cloak. Although he would have enjoyed seeing Malfoy's expression, he deliberately looked away from Malfoy's face, though keeping his wand hand in sight, to give the
Slytherin time to recover.

"I know you're not me," he said. "I was just wondering if I could seal the door, that's all. You need to be a Parselmouth to open it."

He looked back at Malfoy, who was regarding him with his usual sneer.

"Honestly," Harry continued with a smile. "You're the absolute prince of Slytherin, and can't even talk to snakes." He took a butterbeer from the basket and offered it to Malfoy. "Want one?"

After several seconds in which Malfoy did not move, Harry shrugged, opened the bottle, and took a drink from it himself. "I was afraid it was you," he offered. "We're a fine pair, aren't we? Happy Christmas, Malfoy. Take some of it."

"You have an invisibility cloak," Malfoy said finally, taking and opening a bottle of butterbeer as if he hardly noticed it. His voice was accusing. Harry grinned.

"Well, you knew that! You saw my head in Hogsmeade, right? Would have got me in major trouble if Lupin hadn't intervened for me. Snape's a git, but a clever one. He'd nicked me, all right."

"You put mud in my hair."

"I protect my friends." Harry tried to sound calm, but he kept a close eye on Malfoy's wand hand. "You're nasty to Ron, I'm nasty to you. Nothing personal." Harry tossed a Chocolate Frog at Malfoy, who caught it reflexively.

"So, where's Ron now?" Malfoy asked, smirking slightly. He opened the Chocolate Frog and pinned it expertly. Harry looked down, but mostly to hide a smile.

"At home, with his girlfriend."

"Mudblood Granger."

"That's right." Harry looked up. "Watch your mouth, Malfoy. He may not be my constant companion anymore, but I still love her. And don't try to turn that into anything scandalous, either."

"As you wish, my host." There was no expression at all to Malfoy's words, and his face was equally blank. Harry sat down on his rug.

"You're welcome," he said. Malfoy shot him a glare. Harry ignored it. "How did you find this place, anyway? I know I left the door open, but...."

Malfoy grinned. "There was the ghost in the Prefects' bathroom – some awful whinging girl."

"Moaning Myrtle."

"Her. She likes watching me naked."

"You let her?" Harry exclaimed.

"Well, it's not like she can touch me, or anything. I enjoy torturing people like that."

"Oh."

"So she came in all pleased, saying a boy had been awful to her, and she frightened him off, and he'd done something he shouldn't have done."
"She didn't say it was me, though?"

"Oh no. She wouldn't even say where. So I cast *Umbram Jubo* on her –"

"What's that?"

"A spell to control ghosts."

"Teach me it?" Harry said eagerly.

Malfoy smiled. "Maybe later, Potter," he drawled. "If I decide you can be trusted. Actually, it just enables you to give one command to a ghost."

"So you asked her...?"

"Where the boy had done the bad thing." Malfoy leaned back. "I was half expecting a dead body, the way she'd been carrying on, and instead there was just this hole where a sink should have been." He frowned at his butterbeer. Pointing his wand at it, he said, *Cale.* A wisp of steam rose from the neck.

"What was that?" Harry asked.

"What?"

"That spell? You heated it."

"Don't you know that?" Malfoy asked, frowning.

"Malfoy! You know I was raised by Muggles. I don't know a thing I didn't learn at Hogwarts."

"I'll show you," said Malfoy. He took Harry's bottle of butterbeer. "Watch the wand movement. That's important." His wand wavered up the bottle in an flickering motion. *Cale!* He handed the bottle back to Harry. It was a beautifully warm as if he'd just received it from Madame Rosmerta.

"Brilliant!" said Harry.

Malfoy looked arrogantly pleased. "I told you I could help you," he retorted. "It's taken you six years to believe me?"

"That wasn't what you offered to help me with," Harry countered.

"Not exactly, but it was implied."

"I just heard someone who talked about my new friend the way my aunt and uncle talk about me and my parents."

"What?" Malfoy said. He sounded confused.

"'The wrong sort,'" said Harry bitterly, "'people like that. They mean wizards and witches. I didn't care what you meant."

"Oh." Malfoy drank some of the butterbeer. After a few seconds, he added, almost sulkily, "I meant to be friendly, actually."

"Yeah," said Harry. "Well for friendly, I'd rather have someone who'd explain Quidditch, and the cards in Chocolate Frogs, and what the houses of Hogwarts are. I can choose my friends myself."
Malfy stretched back, ignoring the comment. "Where'd you get the goods?" he asked, taking a Fizzing Whizbee.

"The butterbeer's from the kitchens," Harry confessed. "And the sweets from Honeydukes. I know a secret passage into Hogsmeade."

Malfy's eyes widened. "Show me."

"Maybe later." Harry looked archly at Malfy. "If I decide you can be trusted."

Malfy smirked, but it didn't look so unfriendly, now. Of course, that was partly because he was now floating several inches above the grey stones.

Harry noticed Malfy had opened a third butterbeer, which meant there was only one left. He took it and held it out in his left hand, then cast Cale on it.

Malfy looked over at the light steam.

"There you go. Good thing you weren't brought up in a proper wizarding family – you'd be beating me at classes." He shivered slightly. "And wouldn't that have Father in a rage."

Harry leaned back against the wall, and wondered if there was a way to heat that, as well. Malfy had been alternating between friendly and cool all evening; he didn't think it was a good time to press for details on Malfy's relationship with his father. He looked at the butterbeer instead.

"I suppose at a certain point, you get too tiddly to do the right bit of waver?" he speculated.

Malfy shrugged. "At which point, you probably don't care that it's lukewarm."

"Mm." Harry looked speculatively at Malfy. "So...?"

"What?"

"Are we going to try being friends?"

Malfy was silent for so long that Harry was afraid the boy was going to attack him. He brought his right arm casually up across his knees, so he could get his wand back out in a hurry.

"It hardly seems advisable," Malfy said diffidently. "My house would despise me for it, and your house would despise you, and my father would have fits." He frowned for a moment, then smiled slightly. "Unless, of course, I persuaded him it was all an elaborate plot...." Malfy began to look rather dreamy.

"Er... maybe I'll just spend the holidays figuring out the last term of Potions, then," Harry said quickly.

"Well, no, we could do things together – I mean, during holidays. We'd need to be discreet, of course, but Crabbe and Goyle are hardly a challenge to avoid." Malfy smiled lazily. "Perhaps it would be fun."
Christmas morning was depressing. Harry tried to sleep late, but Hedwig kept crashing against his window. Finally, he got up and let her in.

Opening his presents wasn't as much fun with no one to talk about them with. He had the usual new jumper from Mrs. Weasley, and collectible Quidditch cards from Ron, including a complete set for one team, though not the Chudley Cannons — Harry suspected that would require Ron to get two full sets, as he wouldn't give away his first. His best present was from Hermione. It was a spherical compass that you could set to point back to anything. Harry set it to his bed, just to wander around and see it work.

At the end of Christmas dinner, Dumbledore asked all the sixth and seven year students to stay. That left Linda from Gryffindor, three of the Ravenclaws, Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, and Harry. Harry found himself glancing at Malfoy, who ignored him.

"Now," Dumbledore said, "you are still at school, but it is the holidays, and I feel some extra freedom is in order. You all have my permission to travel to Hogsmeade, as you wish, during daylight hours." Someone cheered. Harry grinned. "By sunset, you are all to be back in the castle. Is that clear?"

Everyone nodded. Several people, Harry included, murmured their assurances.

"Very well. Happy Christmas, and enjoy your holidays." As the students turned to leave, Dumbledore added:

"Harry? Would you stay a moment, please?"

Later that night, Harry wandered down to the Chamber of Secrets. That was odd, he thought, as he moved along the now-clear tunnels. He'd somehow managed to turn the nightmare into a place he hung out. He wasn't sure if Malfoy would bother with it, tonight, but the Slytherin was already there, sucking on toffee and playing with a miniature, lightning-laced cloud that floated between his hands, and sent flashes of brilliant, bluish light across his pale face.

"Happy Christmas," Harry said.

"And yourself," Malfoy returned absently. "What did you get?! My parents sent me this storm-light, and cakes, and a book of debilitating potions, and all sorts of things, and my aunt gave me toffees and chocolate, like always."

"Mrs. Weasley gave me a jumper," Harry answered, "as always, and Hermione gave me a sort of magical compass that you can prime to point to a particular thing, Ron gave me a set of Quidditch cards that's complete for one team, with some of three others, and my godfather sent me a book on Animagi. Fred and George sent a bag of their new inventions — I'm not sure I want to touch those, just yet. Perhaps if I get very bored."

"What about the Muggles?"
Harry smiled weakly. "Dryer lint. Honestly, I don't know why they bother. Two years ago, it was a single toothpick."

"It's some sort of spell," Malfoy said absently, his attention still on the cloud. "That will do for ritual."

"Malfoy — They're Muggles."

Malfoy frowned and looked up. The lightning gave him a small shock. With a curse he disabled the cloud, which turned into a small grey ball, and he sucked for a moment at the side of the injured hand. With the hand holding the ball, he waved Harry at the toffee. Hesitantly, Harry took a piece. He hoped it hadn't been doctored with any debilitating potions.

"So what did Dumbledore want to say to you?" Malfoy asked. Harry suspected this question, and wanting to show off his new toy, was why Malfoy had bothered coming down. He wondered if Malfoy was envious, or if he hoped Harry had gotten into trouble.

Harry shrugged and sat down. "Since Lestrange has stated she's out to kill me —"

"You can't go to Hogsmeade," Malfoy guessed.

"I can, but he wants me to be with another student at all times." Harry let his annoyance at that show a minute, then stretched back, looking at the faraway, dark ceiling. "Strange as it may seem to be asking a Death Eater's son to come guard me from the Death Eaters...." He glanced over at Malfoy, who was watching him coldly. "Want to go into Hogsmeade with me? Tomorrow?"

"A long walk in the wet snow," Malfoy said mockingly. "How inviting, Potter."

"Walk?" Harry laughed. "Honestly, Malfoy — you and I own the two best brooms in the school! And a quick flight — in the brilliant winter cold — sounds inviting to me, especially if there's a hot drink at the other end of it."

Malfoy actually smiled.

"Yes," he said thoughtfully. "Yes, I could enjoy that."

The rushing air was cold, but the bright sunlight so beautiful that Harry could not suppress the desire to go fast. He streaked ahead of Malfoy, who immediately set chase. To his surprise, Harry found that in the straight, flat race, Malfoy was inching closer. Harry leaned as close to his broom as he could. He felt like he was sledding, without touching the ground. The snow should be flying up around him ... Grinning, Harry moved lower, closer to the powdery snow.

The gates, hung with icicles, were near, and Malfoy but a broom's length behind. Harry dipped lower still, until his feet were nearly touching the white powder. Then, quite suddenly, he pulled up the front of the broom, letting the twigs cut down into the snow for several yards of forward motion. Malfoy yelled.

Harry went higher again, and turned to see Draco Malfoy. The blond was covered, head to toe, in powdery snow.

"Potter, you arse!" he screamed.

Harry grinned, but his smile faded as Malfoy whipped out his wand. The spell caused a large crack
behind Harry, and he turned to see a large icicle, broken from the great gates, coming at him like a spear. Harry yelped and started to fly. He dodged the first pass of the icicle easily, but then it began to turn for a second run. Harry whipped out his own wand and pointed it at the gate. A second icicle came loose and sped towards him, but this one was under his control. Harry flew up, fast, then dove, getting some distance between himself and Malfoy's icicle, then he paused to regain control of his own icicle and brought it up to Malfoy's. The missiles crashed. A cloud of glittering shards descended from the impact. Harry brought what was left of his icicle against what was left of Malfoy's.

"Ya!" Malfoy yelled.

They did it again, then again, until no icicles of worthy size remained, and the lawn before the gates glittered as if it was strewn with diamonds. Malfoy flew up to hover by Harry. He surveyed the dazzling scene in silence, for a while. He seemed to have forgotten his earlier rage.

"Brilliant," he breathed. "Like a field of broken glass."

Harry snorted. "I'd thought diamonds," he said.

Malfoy looked at him oddly.

"Let's go, Potter. I'm wet and freezing, thanks to you."

He took off, and Harry followed. They didn't stop until they reached the door of The Three Broomsticks.

They drank a warm butterbeer apiece, and Harry, afterwards, enjoyed actually browsing in Honeydukes. He found a sweet he hadn't seen before — one that was enchanted to stay just out of reach until you wanted it enough.

"Like chasing your food, Potter?" Malfoy asked, with some amusement, as Harry bought a bag of the elusive confections.

"As long as I win," Harry remarked absently.


Harry felt himself blushing brilliant red. He didn't want to talk about houses with Malfoy — not just yet.

"Where else shall we go?" he asked.

They spent much of the next week together — flying, going into Hogsmeade, and talking about people. The first day, they arranged to meet at the Quidditch pitch after breakfast, and, by unspoken agreement, continued with that every day until the weather turned grim.

That day was dark with sleet. Harry, after some internal debate, headed down to the pitch anyway, but there was no one there. The changing rooms were dark. He took refuge at Hagrid's hut on the way back.

"Come in, come in," Hagrid roared. He drew Harry through the door with a pull that hurt Harry's shoulder. The moment he was inside, Harry forgave him. Hagrid's fire was cheering, and the hut warm. Hagrid took Harry's cloak and pushed him gently towards the hearth.
"What yeh be doin' out in this weather?" he asked. "Can' yeh see it's not fit for a stroll?"

"I just ... I was just going down to the pitch," Harry confessed. "Habit."

"And yeh'd be flyin' in this?" Hagrid asked. His beetle-black eyes were almost hidden by the furrowing of his brow. "Or lookin' for someone ter fly with?"

Harry looked into the fire, hoping his sudden shamed blush was hidden by the glow.

"I've seen yeh with Malfoy," Hagrid said grimly. "No good comes o' his sor', yeh remember tha'. Never been a Malfoy that weren' as bad as they come, an' I've seen how he torments you — an' Hermione."

Harry stared into the flames. "His sort" again. He supposed it had more meaning here than it usually did.

"He's my fun for the holidays," he said lightly. "Anyway, he hadn't said he wasn't meeting me, so I had to check. He'll tell me I'm an idiot Gryffindor, as usual."

That night, Harry worked on his Potions homework in the cheery Common Room until the questions of Davey, the second-year student — mostly concerning the disastrous Triwizard Tournament — grew too annoying. He packed his books, parchment, ink, and quill into his school bag, and then headed down to the library. Malfoy was not there. On impulse, Harry continued down to the chamber.

Harry came in sight of Malfoy in the corridor outside Myrtle's bathroom. Malfoy whirled at the sound of footsteps. He was visibly relieved to see Harry.

"No cloak, tonight?"

"No cloak."

They went into the bathroom and down into the pipe. At the bottom, they walked along the tunnel to the true entrance.

"Want to see how it works?" Harry asked. "It's kind of neat."

At Malfoy's affirmative reply, Harry closed, then reopened, the chamber. Draco Malfoy watched, openly awestruck, as the circling snake caused the others to retract out of its path. He and Harry were in the chamber itself before he spoke again.

"What did you say at the door?" he asked.

"Open."

Malfoy shivered. "What's that like, talking to snakes?"

Harry shrugged. "The first time wasn't bad. That was a boa constrictor."

"A pet?"

"No, an exhibit. I was at a zoo, with my cousin Dudley. He's awful — you can't meet him, you'll think he validates your anti-Muggle prejudice."
"So?"

"Later. Anyway, Dudley had been banging on the glass, yelling at the snake to move, and when he
gave up, I stayed and apologized to it. It answered me, and I didn't know what to say. I hadn't known
I could talk to snakes. So I asked him about Brazil."

"You what?"

"Well, the plaque said he was Brazilian. He pointed out that it also said he was born in captivity.
Then Dudley was worse, and I made the glass go away -- just by accident, you know, as wizard
children will."

"So what did the snake do?"

"Ah -- he thanked me and took off. People were screaming all over the place. It was a very strange
day."


"Yeah. The second time was the one you set on me."

"Sor-- It was meant to be impressive."

"It was fine — would have been, if Lockhart hadn't been there. That time, though, I was just yelling
an order."

"What was it?"

Harry shivered. The scene rose before him — the great, angry snake, his eyes fixed on Justin....
"Leave him!" he commanded, again.

"I was hoping for it in English, Potter," Malfoy drawled.

Harry pulled himself back from the memory. "Sorry. I said 'leave him,' that was all."

"What other snakes have you met?"

Harry shivered again. He remembered being bound to Tom Riddle's headstone, Cedric's body in his
sight, with Nagini slithering near.

"I haven't really talked with a snake since the boa constrictor. I heard the basilisk, whispering 'kill!'
as it slid through the pipes, and I kept getting in trouble following the sound. I heard Nagini,
speaking to her master, as he held me tied to his father's headstone." Harry shuddered. "It's rather put
me off snakes, actually."

Malfoy was looking at him with wide eyes. "Nagini is the name of the Dark Lord's serpent," he said.

"Yeah," Harry replied. "That one. Bloody huge, poisonous, nasty thing that was promised me for
dinner."

Malfoy looked uneasy. When they settled under the torches in the Chamber, and Harry took out his
homework, Malfoy jumped at the opportunity to help. He seemed relieved to be discussing potion
ingredients and the influences of changes in preparation, rather than his father's master. Harry
listened, asked questions, and wrote until his seat was sore from cold. He put aside the parchment,
and stood to stretch.
"Am I going too fast for you?" Malfoy taunted.

"This place needs chairs," Harry returned. Malfoy scowled.

"If you know the Contraction Charm, by all means, bring some down. It's a tricky spell though — so easy to break things."

"There's a Contraction Charm to make things smaller?" Harry asked.

Malfoy looked at him as if he was a Martian. "Yes," he said, finally.

Harry frowned at the space. "Muggles have some chairs that are inflatable," he offered.

"Inflatable?"

"Like a balloon. You fill them with air. They're not elegant, but they're comfortable enough."

"How would we get them down here?"

"Uninflated."

Malfoy laughed. "Might be worth it. We can't play on the pitch once the other students are back. Can you buy these chairs?"

Harry shrugged. "I don't even know where we are. Is there a Muggle town nearby?"

Malfoy stared. "We're not supposed to go past Hogsmeade."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Malfoy, we're not supposed to be out of our dormitories at night."
Despite his assumed nonchalance, Harry wished they could have gone immediately, so he need not worry about Malfoy writing home and having an ambush set up for him. He realized, however, that he did not want to travel in the sleet, and that he needed Muggle money. It turned out that Gringotts had an exchange counter in Hogsmeade for converting Galleons into pounds, and Malfoy took him to do that the next day, which was overcast and frigid, but not actively wet. Harry was amazed at how many pounds he got to the Galleon. The gold he had brought came to well over two hundred pounds. He told Malfoy they would go to the Muggle town the next night, then, in the hall after dinner, changed it to that night.

"You need your compass," Malfoy said.

"I have it," Harry replied, pulling out the object, which was hanging on a cord from his neck. Malfoy nodded.

"Good. We'll stop at the Shrieking Shack and prime it to the gatepost there."

"Why?"

Malfoy smiled. "Hogsmeade is enchanted so people don't walk into it," he said. "So is the school. We have an advantage in that we know they're there, and, of course, that we're wizards, but it would still be difficult without assistance. The compass will tell us how to get there, even when our instincts are screaming to veer away."

He smirked at Harry. "Incidentally, I know why you're pressing to do this now. It's a good precaution, and I'll do it, but it's not necessary. I won't tell anyone."

"Wouldn't your father be pleased, though?"

Malfoy scowled. "You'd think so, wouldn't you? But I've thought it before. Fuck him."

The sleet had stopped. Thin clouds slid rapidly across the waning moon as Harry and Malfoy flew -- low to the ground and keeping to cover -- from Hogwarts to the Shrieking Shack, and from there to the west. After twenty minutes of cautious flying, they crested a hill, and looked down upon a bright-lit town at the edge of a dark loch. Malfoy landed, and Harry followed suit.

"There it is," Malfoy said. He sounded nervous. Harry looked at him curiously, and saw him bite his lower lip, turning it dark. Suddenly, Harry understood. Malfoy had been brought up to hate Muggles, but also to avoid them. Hatred of that sort was very close to fear. He had probably never walked into a Muggle area without his parents or guards. *Or perhaps*, Harry amended uneasily, *Death Eaters."

"There's a little ruin," Harry pointed to an old stone building near the town. "We can stash our brooms there, and walk. Come on, now! We probably have only another two hours with any chance of open shops."

They stashed their brooms where Harry had suggested, then walked under the invisibility cloak to the road.
"This is odd," Malfoy said.

"Sharing the cloak? You get used to it."

"Not that. I mean the whole thing. I didn't think you'd do this."

Harry laughed. "What? Why not?"

Malfoy gave an annoyed snort. "Well, you're the Good Boy, right?"

"Oh, do tell!" Harry laughed. "Say that to McGonagall; she'll laugh in your face. I'm well known for being where I shouldn't, Malfoy."

"Really?" Malfoy sneered. "What does the headmaster say about his darling pet?"

"Fawkes?" Harry asked, in assumed innocence.

"What do you mean?"

"Fawkes is a phoenix — Dumbledore's pet."

"You know what I mean."

"Yeah. I know. I don't think it's right, though."

"But?"

"He says I'm like my father. As Lupin said, as Snape says..."

"Did your father go where he shouldn't?"

Harry grinned. "My father headed a group that called themselves 'The Marauders.'"

"Marauders?" Malfoy snorted. "Potter, I didn't think Gryffindors used names like that!"

They had reached the road. Harry pulled the cloak off them, and took the time to roll it and stow it in the front pocket of his bag.

"Well, they did. It was my dad, Sirius Black, and a couple others."

Malfoy shuddered. "Black. Now there's a nightmare."

"And just as real as one. He's not that bad."

Malfoy stared. "Potter... Black betrayed your parents. You know that, right?"

"No. It was really Peter Pettigrew."

Malfoy frowned. Further down the road, Harry could see a bus stop sign. "I think I've heard the name before," Malfoy said, "but —"

"How about 'Wormtail' — does that mean anything to you?"

Malfoy flinched. "The Dark Lord's servant?" he asked, uneasily.

"That one. He's Peter Pettigrew. He betrayed my parents. Sirius was set up."
"Oh." They walked. The sign came closer. "Sirius Black is your dangerous friend, then."

"That's right. He's my godfather. He gave me the Firebolt."

"Should you be telling me this?" Malfoy asked cautiously.

They had reached the sign. Harry stopped and began scanning for the next bus. He thought it unexpectedly generous of Malfoy to warn him. "I expect your father knows. Voldemort certainly does."

"He told me Black betrayed your parents!"

"Consistency helps the plot, I'm sure. He may have even believed it, at the time — until Wormtail returned." Harry sat on a nearby rock. "Let's stay here. It's less than ten minutes until the next bus, and we'll get in faster that way."

"You need to wait for Muggle buses?"

Harry looked up the road the way they had come. The road curved along the shore, preventing him from seeing far. A sign on the curve of the road warned Caution — Black Ice. "Yes. They go on a schedule."

They found a store which carried inflatable chairs, and Harry bought two — one in neon green, and one in international orange, which was as close as he could get to a Gryffindor color. He found inflatable cushions in gold and silver moire, though, and bought one of each. Malfoy looked on disapprovingly as Harry stood on line to pay.

"Just throw on your cloak and walk out," he whispered. "You don't need to give Muggles money."

"I'm buying these things," Harry hissed back. "I don't mind paying for them."

They left the store with two heavy bags. Malfoy did not offer to carry either of them. In the alcove by the door, Harry transferred the cushions to his pack, which helped a little.

The people they passed stared at them, though most only briefly. Harry had tried to get Malfoy into Muggle clothing, but the closest he would come was an acceptable pair of black cuffed trousers topped with a midnight blue velvet tunic with elaborate silver embroidery at the neck and sleeves. Over that he wore a black wool cloak edged in interlocked silver dragons. He looked a bit odd — beautiful as an old portrait, Harry thought, but odd. Of course, Harry admitted, he hardly looked more normal, if a good deal shabbier, in Dudley's baggy old jeans, cinched in tight as he could get them, and sweatshirt, whose enormity somewhat concealed how the jeans slid down to his hips. Lacking a Muggle coat, Harry also wore a cloak, though just a plain school one.

A few doors on from the first store, they came to an off-license. Malfoy paused at the window.

"We're not old enough," Harry whispered. "The Muggle world has rules about that." Malfoy, after a brief glare at Harry, marched in. Apprehensively, Harry followed him.

The shopkeeper noticed them immediately. He would need to have been blind not to have, Harry thought.

"You two eighteen?" he called over. Harry thought it was sort of a friendly warning. Malfoy raised his head as high as it could go.
"That is no concern of yours," he said haughtily.

The man laughed. "Long as you don't try to buy nought, true enough. But I'll be wanting identification if you do."

"What does he mean?" Malfoy asked Harry quietly.

"There are — official documents you get from the government that say what year you were born. He'll require one to sell us liquor."

Malfoy frowned, then addressed the shopkeeper again. "Mother would like some cognac," he said, in his perfect, cultured English. Harry tried not to shrivel at the painfully aristocratic tone. "Fleur d'el Charme, 30-year, is her favorite."

The shopkeeper glowered. "Never heard of it. Out o' here, I say, or I'm calling in the police."

Malfoy seemed to realize his error. Before he could recover enough to speak, Harry pulled at his sleeve. "Come on, Malfoy," he urged. "This is not home. You cannot buy liquor here, trust me. Let's go."

The baleful eye of the shopkeeper on them, they left the shop, but Malfoy lingered at the window.

"Come on, now," Harry said again. "Let's go."

"No," Malfoy retorted. "I want cognac. I will have cognac."

"We're not attacking them."

"Hardly necessary, Potter. They're only Muggles, after all."

Malfoy pulled Harry closer to the window. "I don't know what it would look like. The Muggle names must be different. Do you see any?"

Against his better judgment, Harry looked. Uncle Vernon sometimes bought expensive brandies, and cognac, Harry knew, was a classy type of brandy. He looked for a familiar bottle, and saw one in a wood and glass display case next to the cash register.

"There," he said. "In the case."

He had hoped the inaccessibility of the object would discourage Malfoy, but Malfoy's head came still higher. "Very well," he said. "When do they close?"

Harry checked the door, then the clock inside. "In ten minutes."

"Come along, then."

Malfoy led the way down the street, then into the next alley. They followed a narrow track behind the shops.

"Malfoy," Harry said urgently, "I don't think we should —"

"This would be the door, wouldn't it?" Malfoy asked, as if Harry had not spoken.

"Probably," Harry admitted. "Look, I —"

"Alohamora!" Malfoy had pointed his wand at the door. To Harry's disappointment, it responded to the simple charm and opened, revealing a storeroom lined with crates of liquor. Malfoy looked in.
"This would be a good time for your cloak, Potter."

"I am not helping you steal brandy!"

Malfoy looked disdainfully over his shoulder. "As you wish, Potter. I wouldn't think you'd like to risk getting caught. . . ."

They heard footsteps. Draco Malfoy darted inside and into an alcove between the crates and the wall. Harry followed, letting the door close behind him.

"Who's there?!" called a voice.

Harry fumbled with the front pocket of his pack, and managed to get the invisibility cloak out and over them, just as the storeroom was flooded with light. Footsteps stalked nearer, and Harry adjusted the cloak to cover the edge of his bags. The shopkeeper looked into their alcove, tested the door, then stomped back to the shop.

"This is brilliant!" Malfoy whispered. "I'm going to have Father buy me one."

Harry whisked the cloak off Malfoy. "I am not," he tried again, "helping with this."

Malfoy turned and smirked at him. "Oh, yes you are, Potter. And it's very amusing." With that, he pointed to a small window above the door into the shop. "Levitate me to there, so I can get my bearings."

Harry considered refusing, but letting Malfoy look seemed harmless, and more than a bit funny. He had discovered the previous year that the attention of the Ministry to magic at the Dursley's house was not common to most places. He levitated the other boy up to the window. After a minute, Malfoy motioned to the ground, and Harry let him down again.

"He's closing up," Malfoy confided. "We'll wait until he leaves, then I'll go open the case."

"They probably have motion detector alarms," Harry warned.

"What are they?"

"It's. . . ." Harry had noticed, the last summer, that his grasp of Muggle science was a bit weak. He supposed he would have learned more about it in Muggle schools. His knowledge of alarm systems was mostly based on a video game Dudley had played non-stop throughout July. "I think it's some sort of beam. You can't see it, but when you cross it, with your foot or something, the alarms go off."

Malfoy thought about this. He looked quite studious, and somehow, rather proper, which Harry found amusing.

"They'll be by the floor, then?" he asked.

"As far as I know," Harry returned, trying to make it clear that asking him about Muggle alarm systems was probably as useful as asking Malfoy about magical housecleaning techniques.

"Good, then," Malfoy answered. "You levitate me over to the case, and I'll open it without going near the floor."

"Malfoy. . . ."

"Oh, come on, Potter! Where's that Marauder spirit?"
"Look. . . ."

"You're not afraid of breaking some Muggle law, are you?"

Unexpectedly, the taunt crystallized Harry's feelings about the matter.

"No," he said. "I just don't approve of cheating people. It's hard enough for wizards without money; it's worse for Muggles. This is expensive, or it wouldn't be in a case. I don't want the owner to lose money."

"I," Malfoy said stubbornly, "want cognac. And you'd like it, Potter — pleasant and fast."

"Tell you what," Harry offered. "You agree to leave money — the right amount of Muggle money — where the bottle was, and I'll help."

"I am not paying a Muggle."

"Would you let me -- leave my money?"

Malfoy looked absolutely scornful. "If you insist."

Harry could hardly breathe while he was levitating Malfoy over to the case. No loud noises started, no lights came on, and no doors opened. He started to relax. A minute passed, then another. Malfoy was having trouble with the door. Harry could feel the knife he had gotten from Sirius weighing down his pocket.

Harry pulled Malfoy back.

"Potter!" Malfoy hissed.

"Send me over," Harry growled, holding out his hand for the money. "I can open a goddamned case."

The cognacs ranged in price from thirty-five pounds to slightly over a hundred pounds in price. Harry took a fifty-pound and a seventy-five pound bottle, which used up most of his remaining Muggle money. He motioned to Malfoy to float him back. In the storeroom, they stashed the bottles in Harry's pack.

"You're brilliant!" Malfoy exclaimed, and Harry found a pleasant glow had taken over his embarrassment. He felt giddy, now that it was over. The alley out back was empty. They slipped down it, then out onto the nearly empty street. The buses had stopped running by now, but Harry remembered their turn.

"Such a surprise, you are," Malfoy crooned. His pale eyes flashed in the harsh artificial light of the street lamps. "I think I like you, even if you do coddle the Muggles."
Tuesday, the students were due back at school. Harry and Malfoy spent most of Sunday afternoon out on the pitch, even though it was a cold, grey day. Once, Harry looked down and saw Hagrid standing by the gates, watching them. He pretended he hadn't noticed.

When they landed, in the icy, refrozen snow, Malfoy nudged Harry. "My place tonight — in Slytherin, I mean. Wear your cloak, and meet me in the library after dinner — we can walk down together." With that, he jogged off towards the castle. Harry gave him a bit of a head start, then walked up more slowly.

When Harry got to the library, he saw Crabbe and Goyle first. They were frowning at nearly-empty rolls of parchment. The Slytherin second year was sitting with them, glowering.

"Why do I have to help them with writing?" he whinged.

From the stacks, Harry heard Malfoy's voice.

"You don't have to, Ruthven," he drawled. "You could finish your Potions homework by yourself, instead."

The boy looked sullenly back at Crabbe and Goyle, then bent to read Crabbe's work. Malfoy chuckled. Harry went around the other end of the stacks and tapped Malfoy on the shoulder.

Malfoy spun, and Harry had to step back quickly to avoid getting hit by the boy's arm. He was startled to see that Malfoy had pulled his wand out while turning. Malfoy blinked at the empty space, then mouthed Harry's name.

"Hi," Harry whispered.

Malfoy nodded and relaxed. He tucked his wand back into his robes.

"See you in the morning!" he called to the three students. Harry could picture Malfoy's smirk just from the tone. Malfoy strode for the door and Harry followed.

A level below the Great Hall, Malfoy slowed. "Still there?" Harry replied. Malfoy smirked and strode on.


They went down, further and further under the castle, not meandering aimlessly, as Ron and Harry had done the time they had gone looking for the Slytherin dormitory, but at Malfoy's assertive pace. Finally, Malfoy stopped in a corridor that Harry would not have known from the others, and whispered to the wall. A section of it slid back, giving entrance to the low, dim Slytherin Common Room.

Harry stepped nervously into the light of the hanging green lamps. The burning fire at the end of the hall turned everything before it into a dark silhouette.

"You can take the cloak off, now," Malfoy said, in a normal tone. "Everyone else is in the library, and Snape's away for the evening — I saw him leave."
Harry had seen Snape, during dinner, twitch with sudden pain, then leave the Great Hall, his left arm pressed inconspicuously to his side. Snape, then, was with the Death Eaters, and Malfoy sounded like he knew it. Harry hoped he didn't have any visions while with Malfoy. Voldemort seemed unaware that Harry had these glimpses of his actions, and Harry wanted to keep it that way as long as possible.

Harry took off the cloak. He and Malfoy moved up the Slytherin Common Room. From further in, Harry could look back on the fire-lit sides of things, which made the room a little less creepy, though no more cheerful.

"This way," Malfoy said. He went through a door to the right of the fireplace, down a short corridor, left, up, and left again. The next door brought them into a square dormitory slightly larger than Harry and his yearmates' tower room. From there, Malfoy went through another door, into a smaller room with one bed.

"Father pays for me to have my own room," he said proudly. "Of course, that enables me to do certain things. . ." He met Harry's eyes and smirked. Harry repressed a shudder. He suspected Lucius Malfoy coached his son in Dark Arts, and this room provided privacy for practice.

"So? What do you think?" Malfoy prompted.

Harry looked around. The room was impressive. The bed, trunk, and desk were all of ebony with silver inlay. A thick carpet in green and black covered the floor between the bed and the desk, which was closed. A signed and framed Quidditch poster, with five wizards and two witches, all in blue and silver, was the only break in the Slytherin colors.

"Wow," he said. "Very ... um, Slytherin."

Draco walked over to a huge, medieval-looking sideboard, also ebony and silver, that stood beside the door. It had four doors below and a wide shelf above those. Carved columns of dragons rose from there, supporting an upper, narrower set of cabinets, fronted with narrow diamonds of opaque Tudor glass, and letting them overhang a still narrower, solid set at the back of the counter.

"Well, of course, Harry."

Harry stared at Malfoy's back. Malfoy had just called him 'Harry'. He was glad Malfoy was facing away and so could not see his face. He wondered if he could manage to call Malfoy "Draco." He wasn't sure it would come out right.

Malfoy opened an upper cabinet, and took out two crystal snifters and the more expensive cognac. "I hope you don't mind that I brought this up here — I haven't had any yet." He demonstrated this by unsealing the bottle. "I thought it would be pleasant to be someplace comfortable, for a change."

Smiling, he walked back and handed Harry one of the snifters. Seen from above, the cognac seemed to barely cover the bottom of it. Harry looked at it from the side and found the pouring looked deeper that way. Malfoy sat in the room's only armchair (ebony and green velvet, Harry noted, only just managing not to roll his eyes), so Harry sat in the chair by the desk.

"Skol," Malfoy said, lifting his glass. Harry did the same, then took a cautious sip.

The cognac burned, but at the same time, tasted pleasant. Harry took a second sip and held it on his tongue for a moment, trying to categorize the flavor.

"Do you need some water in that?" Malfoy asked with a smirk.
"No, that's fine."

Harry glanced over at the desk. It was closed, but a few books had been left on top. He picked up the first one, a slim, red book with plain, black lettering. "The Dueler's Dictionary," he read. "Effective One and Two Syllable Hexes."

"Isn't that great?" Malfoy said. "In spontaneous fighting it doesn't matter much, but when your opponent knows the exact second you can start, it helps to use short incantations."

"Or you can just cheat," Harry said, in mild rebuke.

Malfoy rolled his eyes. "In something overseen by Snape and Lockhart, I can cheat. There are times that is less advisable."

Malfoy sat a moment, then jumped up. "I know something you'll like," he said. Thence followed what seemed like hours of Malfoy showing Harry things. There were toys, like the stormcloud, books, ornaments, animate games, knives and other small hand weapons, and pictures, mostly of other things, such as Malfoy Manor, which Harry would have classed as a small castle. Harry sipped a refill of the cognac, which he had decided to characterize as "butterscotch, followed by a burn and tingle" and tried to comment politely on what he was shown. Most of it would have been interesting individually, but taken altogether, it was stupefying. Finally, while Malfoy was rummaging through a drawer to find something else, Harry lay down on the thick carpet.

"Too much cognac?" Malfoy asked solicitously, bending over Harry at a dizzying angle.

"Too much stuff," Harry protested, wishing his tongue didn't feel so thick. "Don't make me look at any more stuff. It can't be interesting when there's this much of it."

Malfoy went away. Harry closed his eyes, and immediately the room began to spin clockwise. This was interesting and fun for about three seconds, then it was horrible. He opened his eyes and focused on the ceiling beams.

"You know, you just grabbed the floor," Malfoy told him, teasingly. Harry followed the voice. Malfoy was lying on his side on the bed, regarding Harry thoughtfully.

"Okay," Harry acquiesced. "Too much con-- brandy. Ooo!" He'd let his eyes drift closed, and the room had taken off again, moving in quick, clockwise quarter-turns. His eyes snapped open. He focused hard on the edge of the desk and willed it to stay still.

"If you're going to be sick," Malfoy said, "try to make it to the bathroom. It's that door." He pointed, and dizzily, Harry looked.

"Don't think so," he said. He was feeling better, he thought. He just had to continue to focus on something with straight lines.

"If you're not going to be sick, I think you'll find my bed more comfortable than the floor."

Harry dared a glance over at Malfoy, who smirked, and patted the space in front of him. The bed looked very far away, and much too high up. Harry cautiously let his head relax back. "But that would mean standing," he answered lazily. "I'm comfy here."

"As you wish," Malfoy returned. He was silent for a while. "What's wrong with 'stuff?'" he asked finally.

Awkwardly, Harry tried to explain why things could only be interesting a few at a time. Finally, he
gave up on that. "The thing is," he said "you talked at me for a long time, but I don't know any more about you — just about your stuff."

Malfoy was silent for a long time. Finally, he said:

"I've got one more thing to show you, and I think it matters. I'll wait until tomorrow, though, because you won't appreciate it now."

Harry thought that was a good idea. After that, he must have fallen asleep, because he woke later, in complete darkness. He could faintly hear Malfoy breathing somewhere above and in front of him, probably on the bed. By moving away from the sound, Harry managed to find the bathroom. He used the toilet, then drank several handfuls of water from the tap, stumbled back to the carpet, and went back to sleep.

"Wakey, wakey!"

The irritatingly cheerful voice was accompanied by the even more annoying feeling of someone tickling his nose with the feather end of a quill. Harry swatted the hand away and felt slightly nauseous from the motion.

"Jesus, Draco, what are you doing in —" Harry stopped abruptly, as his surroundings came into focus. He was lying on the floor of Draco Malfoy's room, and had apparently slept there, which explained the crick in his neck, and perhaps some of the headache.

"In my room?" Draco asked wickedly. "Well, let's see ... maybe because it's my room?"

"Fine. Ouch."

"Aww. Poor widdel gryffy have a drop too much?" Draco teased.

Harry grimaced. He managed to roll over to his side and get up to one elbow. "My neck hurts," he said petulantly. "And my head. And I seem to have a nest of snakes in my stomach."

"Well, let's see," said Draco, with a wicked smile. "Butterbeer is two to three percent alcohol. This cognac is ..." he lifted the bottle and peered at it — "forty-four percent alcohol." He put down the bottle and looked back at Harry. "You do not need three glasses of it. I don't even need three glasses of it."

Harry managed to sit up. Slowly, he tried standing. He didn't feel any better, vertical, but he didn't feel any worse. "Great," he said. "This would have been useful information twelve hours ago."

He headed for the toilet. As he closed the door, Draco called, perhaps unnecessarily loudly, "Don't forget — we're going to Hogsmeade today. Last chance!"

Harry felt a bit better after using the toilet, and though he wouldn't consent to go to breakfast, he agreed to meet Draco in thirty minutes, outside the Great Hall.

"Before you go...?" Draco sounded almost shy. Harry had never heard anything like it from him. He felt a little better when he looked at Draco and saw the sly smile on his face.

"Yeah?"
"I want to show you my collection."

Draco crossed back to the sideboard, pointed his wand at one of the solid doors at the back of the counter, and whispered a charm. The door clicked and swung open, as did two of the other three. Inside each compartment was a large rack partially filled with something. Harry came closer and saw the racks contained glass vials — almost like old-fashioned test tubes — filled with all sorts of different liquids.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Potions. I nick two samples of anything we make that looks useful."

Gingerly, Harry slid a vial out of the rack and read its label. "The Hair-Raising potion is useful?"

Draco rolled his eyes. "I'll think of something," he said.

Harry looked at more of the potions in the front of one rack. Draco seemed to have sorted them by type, so they went from physical effects at the left to mental effects in the middle, then emotional effects at the right. Harry pointed this out and Draco nodded a confirmation.

"Are the racks different?" Harry asked.

Draco pointed. "Beneficial, Neutral, Harmful."

"Ah. Good to know." Harry wondered what was in the fourth cabinet. He looked at the potions once more and nodded. "I am impressed. We'd better go, though, if you want breakfast."

Harry felt better yet after walking up to Gryffindor tower, changing his clothes and washing his face a second time. He put on his winter cloak over his robes, got the Marauder's Map from his trunk and tucked it in a pocket, then went down to meet Draco.

"Here," Draco said, handing him a napkin-wrapped bundle. "I nicked some toast for you. There's nothing on it — it should stay down. You need to eat something, or you'll feel sick all day." He gestured to the door. "Shall we go?"

Carefully, Harry shook his head. "I have a sort of present for you. Follow me."

He started up the stairs, and Draco followed. They went to the third floor.

"Gryffindor isn't this way, is it?"

"No."

"Where's my present?"

"It's not an unwrap sort of present."

"Oh." Draco pouted. Harry had to laugh.

"You have enough stuff. This is a place. We're nearly there," he said.

However, in sight of the one-eyed witch, Draco cocked his head to the side.

"Someone's coming," he said. Harry, listening, heard footsteps.
"Duck in here — quick!" he said. He pulled Malfoy into an unused classroom. The door muffled enough sound that they could no longer hear the approaching person. Draco knelt down and pressed his ear against the door, but Harry motioned him back.

"We can't hear!" Draco protested.

"It's okay."

Harry pulled out the map and unfolded it. Currently, of course, it was a blank piece of paper. Draco stared.

"What — are you going to write an essay?"

Harry took out his wand and tapped the paper. "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good," he whispered.

Draco stared. Then he covered his mouth with both hands, presumably to keep from laughing. Harry thought Draco might actually be biting his fingers. Harry checked the map.

"It was Snape," he said. "But he's leaving. Half-way down the stairs."

This seemed to cut through Draco's hilarity. He edged forward and looked at the map. Harry pointed to the dot that said "Severus Snape".

"What is this?" Draco breathed. He would have taken the map if Harry had let him, but Harry was sure he didn't trust Draco that much.

"The Marauder's Map. It was made by my father and some of his friends, but I actually got it from Fred and George. Anyway, the coast is clear." Harry rerolled the map. "Let's go."

Out in the hallway, Harry brought Malfoy to the statue. "You touch the hump here," he said, bringing out his wand, "and say 'Dissendium.'" The hump opened. "Climb in," Harry offered.

"You first."

Shrugging, Harry climbed in and slid down to the passageway, then moved out of Draco's way. He whispered "Lumos." Draco followed seconds later.

Draco looked around at the bare passage. "I'm not thrilled, yet," he said.

Harry smiled. "This is the passage to Hogsmeade. The other end of it comes up in the basement of Honeydukes."

Draco's eyes widened. "Now that," he said, "is worth the trouble. Let's go!"

In Hogsmeade, Draco suggested Harry get some clothes that fit.

"I'm low on money," Harry explained. "I mean, I have plenty in Gringotts, but I probably won't have a chance to go there until next September."

Draco stared at him. "So send someone! Hagrid goes in every few weeks or so — you'd trust him to get some gold from your vault, right?"

"Of course."
"Well, all right, then. I'll loan you some for today."

"For what interest?" Harry asked suspiciously.

Draco looked offended. "I am not a merchant, Harry, and I've said that I like you. A loan, no interest --" he scowled — "but only if you do not insult me again."

"Sorry," Harry said quickly. "I didn't mean ... I'm not used to you being generous, that's all."

"Well, I'm not used to associating with people who dress like house elves," Draco drawled, "so let's remedy both of those, shall we?"

An hour later, Harry had spent a theoretical twenty-four galleons on clothing, and had a pair of almost normal-looking black jeans, some flowing, loose-legged black trousers that wouldn't pass on Privet Drive, a dark crimson velvet tunic with black and gold edging at the neck and sleeves, a bright red silk top with gold embroidery, and a plain black silk shirt. He also had comfortable socks and underwear. Draco had failed to persuade him to try anything in green.

"It would bring up your eyes," he said a final time, as they left, "really."

"I don't want people looking at my eyes."

Draco dismissed the matter with a shrug. "In any case, this will be much better than what you have had."

"I'm kind of embarrassed I never thought of it," Harry confessed. "I don't have any money when I'm with the Dursleys, so buying things never occurs to me."

"You could take money home."

"Then they'd find out I had money in the wizarding world, and then they'd try to take it from me. No, I just need to wait until I'm eighteen."

Draco shook his head. "That's so ... strange. Imagine you being no one at all."

The Three Broomsticks was quiet on a Monday afternoon. Draco went to claim an inconspicuous corner spot. When Harry got back from placing their order at the bar, Draco had a present out on the table.

"It is the unwrapping sort," he said. "Go ahead."

Harry unwrapped his present. It was a book, bound in red leather. A gilt stag and sparkling wand adorned the front cover. The title read simply The Potters.

"What is it?" Harry asked, at a whisper, as he opened the front of the book. The title page was a little more helpful. It read:

The Potters:

The complete lineage, with edifying anecdotes and events of an historical interest.
"It's your family book," Malfoy said. "All the old wizarding families have one. If you'd been raised properly — by wizard relatives, I mean — you would have been given a copy between the ages of six and eight. I could tell from how you've talked that you've never seen it."

Harry turned to the back of the book. The last page detailed that the only currently living Potter, Harry James, had survived his parents and was currently enrolled at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, in Scotland. Oddly, it had no mention of Voldemort, curses, scars, or murder.

"See?" Malfoy said. "From 1196 — your family isn't terribly old — to now."

"What's yours like?" Harry asked.

Draco rolled his eyes. "Ours," he said, "is the union of two lines. One goes back to 519 — not terribly old, either, just terribly pure — in Norway, and the other to 138 BCE — which is quite respectable — in Rome. The name "Malfoy" is much more recent, of course."

"Where did that come from?" Harry asked. He'd always wanted to know — "bad faith" seemed like such an odd name to keep, much less be proud of. Of course, Malfoy probably thought the same of the plebeian "Potter".

"From an ancestor of mine who was murdered as a devil worshipper — by Muggles who knew he practiced magic," Malfoy said haughtily. "They ambushed him in his keep, then burnt it to the ground. The family kept the name in his honor when they fled to England, in 1292."

"They were in France rather briefly, then?"

"In Perche — that's part of Normandy, now — for a few centuries. One of my Norse ancestors conquered part of it during the Viking age. That's where they married into the Roman line. Of course, we've maintained a tendency to marry into French families." Malfoy smiled tightly. "This is the sort of thing you should know about the Potters, Harry. You may not be a pureblood, but your father's name is enough to get you into the best parties —" Malfoy shrugged apologetically — "politics aside."

Their drinks came. Draco took a long swallow of his butterbeer. Harry, who was still feeling rather unwell, sipped cautiously at his own, and wished he'd thought to order pumpkin juice, instead.

"I rather wish you would," Draco commented idly, "so they wouldn't also be the most boring parties. I'd bring you, but you'd be murdered, I'm sure. A pity."

"Quite what I'd say myself," Harry said boldly.

Draco looked coldly at him for a moment, then smirked.

"Yes, I suppose that would be worse for you. It would at least provide some excitement for the rest of us."
Houses and Risks

On the way back to Hogwarts, Harry decided to invite Draco up to Gryffindor. His House was so much nicer than Slytherin that he couldn't resist the chance to show it off.

"I can't conveniently dispose of everyone," he said, "but there are only two of them. If we leave dinner early, we should be able to get up to my room."

In fact, it turned out to be just that easy. Harry whispered the password, so that Draco would not hear, wondering as he did so if this type of unsanctioned visit was the reason the passwords were always changed the first day after holidays.

Draco goggled at the cheery Common Room. Belatedly, he shielded his eyes. "Dear Merlin, Potter! What is it with Gryffindors and gaud? I've seen Thai street markets that were more sedate!" For all that, he crossed over to the chairs before the fireplace and sank into one. "Comfy, though." He smirked. "You lot are all soft, really."

"We better get up to my room," Harry urged. "Davey never eats much."

Draco nodded and followed him to the stairs.

"Put that back," Harry ordered, catching sight of Linda's Shrinking Chess Set in Draco's hand.

"But it was just out there," Draco protested, wide-eyed.

"I don't know about Slytherin," Harry retorted, "but in Gryffindor, we respect each other's property. You do not steal from my housemates, Malfoy. Put it back."

In the tower room, Draco seemed drawn to the windows. The night was still moonless, but the dark was broken by splashes of light at Hagrid's hut, and an eerie glow somewhere in the forest.

"I'd like to see this in the daylight, sometime," Draco commented. "What can you see, when you can see?"

Harry came up beside him and pointed. "That fire is next to Hagrid's — no idea what he's doing — and the glow is a bit into the Forbidden Forest. It's a pretty good view in the day, or when the moon is close to full."

"Can I stay the night? Or come back in the morning?"

"Whatever." Harry grinned. "I don't have any cognac, though."

"Shall we get it?"

"God, no." Harry shuddered, and Draco laughed maliciously.

"I suppose we should be well-rested when the others return," he said idly. He looked down at the worn sill and ran the side of his thumb along it. "So. . . ."

"So?"
"When people come back."

"Oh."

Harry watched Draco curiously. The blond boy was looking at the grain of the wood with great concentration, as if it was a crystal ball and no more inclined to reveal the future than the crystal balls Harry had used. Backed by the Gryffindor tapestries, he looked less pale than usual, his hair more gold than white.

"I think we had best behave towards each other as we always have," Draco said pensively. "It won't be the same, of course — more of a game — but they shouldn't know that."

"Would you really get in trouble for being friends with me?"

"Of course." Draco looked up. "And, honestly, Harry, what would they do to you? Granger? I mean, the only person I've been worse to is the Weasel, or maybe you."

"Could you not be quite so awful to them?" Harry asked quietly. "I mean, nothing noticeable like being nice, just not go to such lengths to get at Ron. . . ."

Draco tossed his head dismissively. "I'll think about it." He grinned. "Shall we catch some of your sweets, Harry?"

Harry got out the bag of Tease Toffees, which he had quite forgotten, and they had a fun and exciting time chasing the elusive candies around the room. Harry managed to break a rod of Neville's four-poster leaping on a sweet that had perched there, and Draco had to mend it. By the time they had caught the last one, both were breathless and flushed. Harry flopped, spread-eagle, back on his bed, and sucked on the soft toffee, which was still squirming slightly.

"Is that your bed?" Draco asked. Harry nodded. "Whose is this?" Draco asked, pointing at the bed next to Harry's.

"Ron's."

Draco smirked, and settled himself territorially on Ron's bed. "I can sleep here, then — unless you'd rather I was in reach."

"Honestly, Draco!" Harry exclaimed, almost laughing. "I don't mistrust you that much."

They rested for a while. Draco examined the various objects on Ron's bedside table. He looked closely at a perfectly ordinary, though beautiful, seashell as if trying to figure out what it did. He read the postcard from Bill, who was vacationing in Indonesia. He picked up a magical timetable that highlighted in red upcoming classes for which you had not completed your homework. It was currently quite festive.

"I can't imagine why he bothers to have this," Draco commented. "Unless he just likes the Gryffindor color."

"It was a birthday present from Hermione."

"That I can imagine." Draco put down the timetable. "Why do you like Ron, anyway?" he asked, a bit petulantly.
"He's fun," Harry returned, surprised. "He likes games, he tells jokes, he's willing to risk getting into trouble to go places and find things, whether because we need to or just for fun..." Harry shrugged. "At least, it used to be like that. I don't know if it will be again when he and Hermione get past this... stage, or if he's just grown up in some other way than me. And he's more bitter, now. I'm tired of that. At least while he's obsessing about Hermione, he's not obsessing about money."

"And Hermione?"

"Hermione is great. She's really smart, she's really nice, she's brave as anything, and she can break rules when she thinks it's the right thing to do. The only problem with Hermione is that she thinks everyone should try as hard as she does. The Hat said I could go anywhere, but Hermione's really the one. She's clever as a Ravenclaw, diligent and loyal as a Hufflepuff, ambitious as a Slytherin, and so brave and... well, chivalrous, really — a protector — that no Gryffindor would ever question that she's one of us."

Malfoy ignored Harry's praises of Hermione. "The Hat said you could go anywhere? The Sorting Hat?"

"Well, not exactly anywhere. I don't think it ever implied Hufflepuff. It really wanted..." Harry stopped. Draco was staring at him. Harry hadn't intended to bring up his Sorting.

"Does it... I remember how long it took to choose for you, and you looked terrified. ... Did it think at you?"

"The Hat thought I'd do well in Slytherin —"

"Slytherin!"

"More precisely, it said that Slytherin would help me to achieve greatness. I just sat there and said 'not Slytherin, not Slytherin,' until it put me in Gryffindor. It had noted at the beginning that I was brave and smart, so I guess it had been considering Gryffindor and Ravenclaw."

Draco continued to stare. "Slytherin!" He shook his head. "I always wondered why some people took so long. I knew I'd be in Slytherin — when the Hat touched my head, I was thinking it had better be Slytherin — it would horrify the family if I was put anywhere else."

"Maybe if you're certain, it just believes you."

"But I'm certain Slytherin is where I belong. I suppose I could qualify for Ravenclaw, but I'd be bored silly." Draco grinned at Harry. "You too. And it's just as well you're in Gryffindor — you turn such a fine Gryffindor red —" he smirked — "when I get you to act like a Slytherin."

Harry, to his embarrassment, could tell he was blushing a "fine Gryffindor red" at the observation.

"Why do you put up with Crabbe and Goyle?" he asked, dragging the conversation back to friends. "I mean, I'm sure they're fine bodyguards, but you hate it when people are stupid, and Crabbe and Goyle are the absolute essence of stupid."

"It doesn't matter that they're stupid when they're my things," Draco replied. "They were trainable. Their fathers know my father, and he thought they were suitable companions for me — as long as I kept them in their place — so we already knew each other before Hogwarts, and they knew they needed me to survive."

"I've seen their fathers with your father," Harry said.
He felt a wave of cold wash over him as the words slipped out. He had stopped feeling that time alone with Draco was dangerous, but discussing what he knew of the Death Eaters took the association to a different level. Harry rolled onto his side, and brought a hand across his chest to be near his wand.

Draco just looked annoyed. "Yes, I heard father ranting. You saw all of them, he said, then escaped."

Harry laughed. It sounded a bit hysterical to his own ears. "Voldemort is an idiot, really. He could have killed me so easily after the Triwizard Tournament, but he had to show off — no, to play. To prove he could kill me after I had my wand back."

"He had your wand and gave you it back?!" Draco sounded horrified.

Harry smiled in grim satisfaction. "I had a twisted ankle, I'd been bled, he'd hit me with the Cruciatus curse — I'm sure it seemed safe. But really — he could have just slit my throat while I was tied, or at least cast the Killing Curse while I was unarmed. But that wasn't good enough — oh no — so he gave me my wand, and I escaped."

Draco bit his lower lip until it turned dark.

"Does that bother you?" Harry taunted, rolling onto his side. "That Lord Voldemort makes stupid mistakes?"

"Of course it bothers me!" Draco snapped. He settled back, looking sullen. "Father's doing it, too, since He returned. He's gone from being effectively ruthless to damaging his own efforts with ... with useless displays of power."

"Voldemort was not convinced of your father's loyalty. He chided him for it. Your father may be trying to prove his devotion."

"If Vo- the Dark Lord wants devotion, he should recruit Hufflepuffs," Draco spat.

Harry stared at Draco in amazement.

"Do you know what they do?" he whispered. "The Death Eaters? I watched then crawl, one by one, to kiss the hem of his robe and call him 'master.' They debase themselves before him. Your arrogant father, edging forward on his knees — I suppose I should have enjoyed it, but it was too sickening. He wasn't the worst — Avery, Wormtail —" Harry choked on the memory. He couldn't say any more.

Draco turned over, so his back was to Harry. Harry rolled on to his back and looked up at the canopy. After about five minutes, Draco pointed his wand at the lights and doused them. Harry wasn't sure whether to get up and get into his pajamas or just stay in his clothes. It seemed safer not to move, and have Draco stay silent.

After about five minutes of lying in the dark, Draco spoke.

"The Cruciatus Curse is awful, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Did you scream?"

"Yes."
"Good. It's not just me, then. I hate being weak. I still scream."

"Everyone does." Harry stared into the blackness. He wondered what Draco was talking about. 
"When did you get hit with Crucius?

"Father does it, sometimes. For training, or just because he's angry. It used to be only for training, but since ... You-Know-Who ...."

Harry didn't know what to say. He wondered what one could possibly learn from being the target of a Crucius Curse.

"Have you ever cast it on anybody?" Draco asked.

"Of course not!" Harry exclaimed. What was Draco thinking? The Crucius was one of the Unforgivable Curses. . . . He suddenly realized that perhaps the Crucius Curse itself was one thing to learn from being hit by it. "Have you?" he asked.

"Of course not," Draco said, blandly. "And I wouldn't tell you if I had, now would I?"

After Draco's breathing shifted to the sounds of sleep, Harry got up, changed into his pajamas, and came back to bed. He looked across to the vague form in Ron's bed. He wondered if Draco thought he had a good deal, or not. How much stuff and prestige was it worth to take the Crucius Curse?
In and Out the Windows

Harry woke late, to sunlight streaming in the narrow windows. A stripe of it had settled across his eyes and pulled him back to consciousness. Harry groaned and turned over in his comfortable bed. He'd meant to settle back to sleep, but in the next bed was Draco Malfoy, fully dressed and groomed, and lying up on one elbow, watching him.

"No wonder these things have curtains," Draco commented. "I'm amazed you managed to sleep this late."

"Sorry," Harry said, sitting up and rubbing his eyes. "Have you been awake long?"

"About an hour," Draco said. He yawned. "But not very awake." He reached over to his bag and pulled the Honeydukes packet from it. "Let's have the pumpkin pasties — that will do for breakfast."

And in fact, they did quite well. Afterwards, while Harry was changing into his robes, Draco went back to the window seat and looked out.

"This is amazing. Do you ever see anything happen by the forest?"

Harry thought about Sirius and Crookshanks.

"Occasionally," he said. "The deep forest creatures, though — centaurs, unicorns, giant spiders, those things — don't come that close to the edge." He grinned. "I saw when Hagrid was setting up the Niffler class — I was wondering all day why he was turning a new vegetable bed."

Draco nodded. "Good way to keep an eye on him. Is that why you trust him so much?"

Harry stared. "Draco...." He thought about how to explain Hagrid. "Look," he said firmly, "Hagrid was the first person I ever remember being nice to me. He gave me my first ever birthday present, right before I started here — Hedwig. He took good care of me when I was first accepted here, and I learned later that he was the person who got me out of the wreckage when my parents died and brought me to Dumbledore. I've never had any reason not to trust him."

Draco looked astonished. "Well, he —" he began uncertainly. He stopped. "You'd never got a birthday present till you were eleven?"

"Never," Harry said. Because Draco was still staring, he ended up telling the story of his eleventh birthday, starting with the letters from Hogwarts, Uncle Vernon's increasingly mad efforts to keep Harry from the letters, and his rescue by Hagrid on his birthday itself, complete with birthday cake (also a first) and sausages cooked in the fire, and Dudley's pig tail. Harry hadn't told the story since it had become long enough ago to be simply absurd, and he played it up, trying to bellow like Uncle Vernon under the rain of letters, and managed a good enough impression to have Draco on the floor with laughter.

When they had finished gasping, and Draco had picked himself up and settled back on the window seat, his normally perfect hair a bit tousled, he met Harry's eyes and smiled. Not smirked, Harry thought, actually smiled, so that the corners of his eyes showed the change.

"Very well then," he said, magnanimously. "I won't torment the giant, unless he deserves it." He frowned slightly. "I'm not putting up with Blast-Ended Skrewts, the way you three did."
"That's fine," Harry said. He smiled. "That's great."

Draco turned away and opened the window. He looked down at the far-off ground, and flinched. Then he looked out, back to the forest. Hagrid was just leaving his hut, Fang bounding happily beside him. Draco looked down again. A slight smile played slyly about his lips.

"You know," he said, "you could fly out of here."

"It's too narrow," Harry objected, looking at the window.

"Well, you'd need to get up on the sill, then mount your broom in the air," Draco said casually. "But that's not too difficult. I wouldn't suggest it to Neville, but I'm sure you could manage it."

Harry poked his head past Draco to look out the window. He looked down ... and down. He decided he probably could fit through the embrasure, but not comfortably. He'd need to stand and step sideways. He stood up and tested the thickness of his body against the space.

"Well, I could get through, but I wouldn't have space to turn forwards."

"The broom is going to be parallel to you anyway," Draco said, as if this were obvious. He smirked as Harry stepped down. "Don't tell me my Gryffindor is scared!"

"Of course not," said Harry absently. He thought, again, about seeing Crookshanks with Sirius. If he'd been able to get down there quickly. . . .

Harry got his broom out of his trunk and stood up on the sill, again. Draco, to his surprise, drew back, moved quickly to the next window, and poked his head outside. Harry ignored him. This would need to be fast, he thought, or he'd panic. He put the broom outside the window. It was difficult to force himself to hold it with only one hand, but he needed to brace the other against the embrasure. The wind outside the tower window was fierce, though it didn't look bad below.

"Harry," Draco called. He said something else, but the wind carried it away. Harry ignored him. With one hand tight around the hovering broom, he stepped sideways off the tower ... and plunged downward.

Two sets of windows lower, the broom was with him. He matched the plunge, then pulled out of it, still well above the castle walls. He zoomed up in a dizzying rush of exhilaration, past his windows, with Draco Malfoy still hanging half out of one, clutching his wand. Harry flew three times around the tower, waiting till his grin had faded enough that he thought he could talk, then went back down, to hover by the window.

"That was great!" he crowed at Draco. Draco's usual pallor seemed to be overlaid with a slight ashen tinge, and he was visibly shaken.

"Harry," he said hoarsely.

"You should try it! It's brilliant. I don't think I can get in, this way, though. Go down to the Common Room and let me in? The windows are bigger."

"Yeah," Draco croaked, and vanished into the tower. Harry swooped around, remembering belatedly to keep the tower between himself and the place he had last seen Hagrid. In less than a minute, he heard Draco calling, and saw an open window below. He glided in and landed triumphantly on the carpet.

"That," said Draco fiercely, "was idiotic. I thought you'd die."
Harry blinked. Draco was visibly upset, almost angry.

"You told me to," he said.

"Yeah? So? Hasn't anyone ever warned you not to do every stupid thing your friends tell you to do?!"

"You said it was easy."

"Well, I lied, okay? I didn't think you bloody do it! And then you ignored me when I told you not to, and all I could do was wait there, hoping I could cast Leviosa in time. . . ." Draco broke off, and turned away. "Stupid, Potter," he said quietly.

"Well, it was fun," Harry said quietly. "You should give it a try. It really wasn't hard."

"You are mad, you know that, don't you?"

"Go on, now, Draco," Harry urged teasingly. "Your turn. I'll wait with my wand out, if you like."

"I am not jumping out of a tower window!"

"But it's fun!"

Try as Harry might, he could not persuade Draco to mount his broom out the tower window. Eventually, they went down to the pitch, and flew there until lunch time. After lunch, they had only a few hours until the train came. Most of the students went to the library to finish up homework. Harry and Draco went up to the Astronomy Tower, from which they would be able to see the train arrive. A light snow had started.

"I'll miss you," said Draco.

"We can still meet in the Chamber."

"Yeah."

"Every other night, again?"

"I guess. Tomorrow?"

"Sure."

"I'll bring the cognac," Draco suggested.

"Oh, thanks."
Old Friends And Ancestors

Hermione ran off the train and hugged Harry in quite her old manner, and for a little while, Harry was happy and sure that everything would at last go back to normal. He rode back to the castle with Ron, Hermione, and Neville. Neville chattered cheerfully about a cousin he had just met again, after a gap of eight years.

After dinner, Harry finally got a chance to settle down with just Ron and Hermione. They sat in a corner of the Common Room, Hermione on Ron's lap in one chair, Harry alone in another one. Harry was anxiously wondering how much he should say about his holidays.

"How is everybody?" he asked politely.

Hermione launched immediately into a funny story about something Fred and George had done to Charlie. She and Ron went on for a while, trading the lead in telling Harry all about events at the Burrow. It was all entertaining, except for when Ron was whinging about Fred and George actually making money ("So now I'm not even better than them"), and Harry enjoyed hearing about the Weasleys. Afterwards, however, as Harry lay in bed readjusting to the sound of four other people breathing, he noted that he had never needed to decide what to answer when asked about his holidays; Ron and Hermione had never asked.

The first day of classes was fairly normal. Potions and Transfiguration, the classes the Gryffindor sixth years had with Slytherin, this year, were the oddest, because Harry saw Draco, but did not speak to him. Though Draco had said they should treat each other as they used to, he did not launch any barbs at Harry, and Harry could not bring himself to start anything, or even to encourage Ron.

"What do you suppose is up with Malfoy?" Seamus asked, at dinner. "Never seen him so quiet."

After dinner, Harry collected his homework, put on his cloak, and fled to the Chamber.

The next night, Harry settled alone in the Common Room. He had finished his Potions essay with Draco, the night before, and needed only to do a quick timeline for History of Magic. When that was complete, he finally took out the family book Draco had given him and settled down to read.

The book started with an overview, noting the tendency of the Potters, including an unusually high percentage of Potter women, to die in early adulthood, in accident or battle. Harry sniggered. There was a map of England showing areas that had been, at any point, Potter lands, and a few charts, including an overview of Sortings for Potter children who had attended Hogwarts (71% Gryffindor, 17% Slytherin, 11% Ravenclaw, 1% Hufflepuff (rounded)). After that, it had a biography of the initial wizarding Potter, a Muggle-born potter's son who did glazes for his father, until a local alchemist noted that several of his designs were impossible by Muggle standards of the time, and took him as an apprentice.

After that, the book went into long sections of genealogy, broken by occasional anecdotes on the more interesting or historically significant members of the line. Harry found some of them, such as the story of one of the women single-handedly taming a griffin that had been sent to eat her, rather unlikely. On the other hand, he supposed most of his life was rather unlikely, as well.
He flipped ahead to the end of the nineteenth century, and began reading about his great-great grandfather, who, under special license from the Ministry of Magic, had bred Kneazles to some sort of monkey-like thing to produce a new magical creature that detected (and disliked) the aural residue left by the use of Dark Arts. It was called a Quiri (Kee-ree) and had been used by Aurors until the defeat of the dark wizard Grindelwald, after which the whole population of Quiris had staged a mass escape. Harry's great-great grandfather, who had been lobbying for Being status for the Quiris for twenty years, had refused to recreate them. There were occasional rumors of self-sustaining colonies of the clever creatures, but no one had ever captured a living one.

"Hello!" Ron said.

Harry checked the clock. The library would just have closed, so Ron and Hermione were not late, for once.

"What's the book, Harry?" Hermione asked. Hermione would, of course, recognize that it wasn't one of his textbooks.

Harry raised the volume so that she could see the cover. "I'm reading about Quiris," he said.

"Quiris?" Hermione asked. "The Auror creatures from the beginning of the century?"

"That's a family book," Ron said flatly.

Harry looked up. Ron was angry. Harry shrugged. "They were created by an ancestor of mine, Leslie James Potter, in 1892."

"Really?" Hermione looked impressed. Ron did not.

"What are you doing with a family book, Potter? Going to start looking for a good breeding prospect soon?"

"Somebody gave it to me for Christmas," Harry responded indignantly. "And I think it's neat. I never knew there was this much information on my ancestors."

"What's a family book?" Hermione asked.

Ron sighed. "There are these books," he said. "Lineage records, with some questionable history, for the wizarding families that are deemed important enough —"

"I thought all the old wizarding families had them," Harry interrupted. "Yours doesn't?"

"We're not important enough," Ron snorted. "The Weasleys only date back a few centuries, at least in England." He rolled his eyes. "Now the Malfoys," he said sarcastically, "have probably been here since the fifteen hundreds, and--"

"Twelve hundreds," Harry answered, without thinking. Ron stared. Harry thought quickly. "At least, well, I have a Malfoy ancestor from then."

"You're related to Malfoy? I wouldn't admit it, if I were you."

"It seems rather ... a small pool, I suppose. I've found quite a few surnames I recognize. I seem to be related to Neville several ways, for example."

Neville heard his name and jumped up. He came over to them. "What about me?"

Harry held up the book. "We're fortieth cousins, or something."
"You have a family book, Harry? That's great!"

Harry smiled. Hermione, who had been looking uneasy at Ron's reaction, relaxed at Neville's.

"I'm told I should have got it by the time I was eight."

"That's usual, though some people wait longer, these days. I got mine when I was six." Neville smiled weakly. "Gran is a bit old-fashioned, that way."

"Do you know how this Eudora Selene Longbottom fits into your family?"

Neville glanced over his shoulder at the graph. "No. I'd need to look her up."

"Can I look at your family book?" Harry asked. He saw Neville's expression and backtracked hastily. "I mean, if that's permissible. I just want to see how like each other the family books are."

"There's no rule that you can't. They can be bought by people who aren't members of the family. I don't have mine at school, though." Neville forced a smile. "If you check the library, you'll probably have your choice of family books. The Cauldwells might be more interesting, or the Malfoys, perhaps. Black, like the one who was after you a few years ago, is another old name."

"Oh, that might be interesting," Harry said. "Perhaps I'll research his line." He winked at Hermione. "It could be useful to know what the family talents are."

Ron scowled. Harry deliberately looked back to his book and began reading about Leslie Potter's sons, Frederick and Raymond.
The next night, Draco left dinner early, and was already in the Chamber when Harry arrived.

"This," he said, punching the neon green inflatable chair he was sitting on, "is driving me insane. Back to Crabbe and Goyle, all bloody day, and anything they notice I do will make it back to Father. Pansy wanted to know why I didn't 'say anything' when you knocked over Hermione's beetle eyes."

"You probably should have," Harry advanced. "I mean, it would be uncomfortable, I suppose, but not as much as having you ignore me."

"How's your life?"

"About the same as before holidays, except Ron is offended by the family book."

"Hermione isn't?"

"No. Neville isn't, so she's not. Of course, Ron might change her mind."

"Did you see what Blaise did?"

"With the beetle eyes?" Harry grinned. "Yeah. That was actually creative enough to be funny." He sat down on the orange chair. "I wish we could talk in class."

Draco looked thoughtful for a moment, then shook his head. "Well, we can talk now, anyway." He frowned at Harry. "You've got the ribcage of something stuck to your robe," he noted.

"Great." Gingerly, Harry picked the brittle old bones out of the weave of his hem. "We've got to do something about that tunnel."

"I enjoyed the atmosphere, initially," Draco drawled, "but it has become tiresome. I trailed a mouse skull all the way to Slytherin, the other night. Congac or butterbeer?"

Harry considered. It was early, but he had a lot of work to do. "Butterbeer," he decided. Harry took the proffered bottle. "Cale," he said absently, as he wiggled his wand up the length of it.

"I had an idea for the tunnel," Draco advanced.

"Mmn?"

"The Bone-Burning Curse."

Harry flinched. The curse had been one of the available options for the Defense Against the Dark Arts essay evaluating an illegal Dark curse. "Did you find instructions in the restricted section?" he asked pointedly.

"Guess again." Draco smirked at him.

Harry bit his lip. "You learned it at home."

"Very good. You're a smart little lion, aren't you?" Draco stretched back. "Shall I teach it to you?"
No," Harry said quickly. "Draco, I am not doing any Dark magic."

Draco snorted. "Well, I am," he said. "And honestly, Potter, how often does one get a chance to do something like that with no harm to anything?" He smirked at Harry. "I've just been waiting for an audience. Come on."

"Do you think it will work?"

"It worked on the basilisk."

"Oh."

Harry took a sip of his butterbeer. It was far too hot. He really ought to pay better attention when casting charms. Reluctantly, he followed Draco out to the tunnel.

Draco stepped over the first few feet of bones, to position himself at the start of a long, straight stretch of tunnel, where they were thicker. Harry watched him draw his wand and take a deep breath. Draco's face was hard with concentration. He took another breath, sighted along the rock and bone strewn floor, and lifted his wand.

"Osum Crema!" he bellowed. Red fire shot from his wand and blazed across the bones, flaring to blue on contact. Harry counted. In four seconds, all the bones in the hallway had been consumed, leaving only a thin layer of ash.

Draco laughed. Harry though an evil cackle might match the devastation, but this laugh was instead a sparkling of delight. Harry turned his attention from the flame-scoured tunnel to his friend. Draco was flushed and breathing quickly, and his pale eyes glittered in Harry's wandlight.

"Like diamonds," Harry thought, or perhaps broken glass.

"You want the second stretch?" Draco asked, a bit shakily.

"No." Harry shivered. "You're frightening me."

"There are worse spells."

"I know. It's just how pleased you look."

"Ah. Yes, it's a brilliant rush. Certain you won't?"

"Completely."

"You may never get another chance to do this with no harm."

"Still. If I want a rush, I'll jump out my dormitory window, thanks."

Draco laughed again, a bit more steadily. "You're an odd one, Lightning."

Harry made no comment on his sudden nickname. He wasn't sure if it bothered him or not, but he was certain that now was not the time to discuss it. He walked beside Draco down to the edge of the ash, and Draco cast the spell a second time. He didn't ask about the third and final stretch, just did it, with an icy voice that reminded Harry of the elder Malfoy and a maniacal grin that was all his own.

"Let's go back," Harry suggested. They walked back to the chamber and Harry sat down. Harry noticed both of them were covered in fine ash, nearly up to the waist, with spots of it higher. Draco, who had stopped to finger some of the silky residue, had managed to smear it across his forehead and
"That was fun," Draco said. He sat by Harry's feet and leaned lazily back against Harry's near leg, letting his head rest back against Harry's knee, so he could look up at him. "You should have seen the basilisk," he added. "It was worth the stink just to see it flare up. The entire chamber was twisting from fire shadows. I nearly passed out from the loss of air." He thought for a moment. "I probably would have, if it wasn't for the air purification charm I was using against the charnel reek."

"I wondered what had happened to it," Harry said. "The lack of dead basilisk was a bit nerve-wracking, actually." He wasn't sure how to react to Draco leaning against him, so he ignored it. He rested his near arm along the back of the chair, so it was safely clear of Draco's head.

"You thought something dangerous was here?" Draco suggested.

"Exactly."

Draco smirked. "You were right."

The Slytherin rolled his head once, and sat up straight. He twisted to look at Harry. "Let's go flying," he said eagerly.

"Now?"

"Right now."

"I can't."

"Why not? We'll take the tunnel to Hogsmeade, or slip out one of the garden entrances. No one will see us."

"I can't get my broom." Harry did like the thought of flying. "We could do it on school brooms," he suggested reluctantly.

"Of course you can get your broom. Put on your cloak and go."

"I can't get in and out of the Gryffindor Common Room, now. It's early enough that there'll be people there to notice if the portrait hole opens."

"What, are your housemates going to report you?" Draco said incredulously. His eyes narrowed as he watched Harry's face. "They would, wouldn't they?"

"None of the sixth year boys would," Harry said defensively. "Actually, I'd pretty much trust everyone fourth year and over, unless that person is angry at me. Lavender, mind you, is angry at me pretty much constantly, and Ginny Weasley has spontaneous fits of it. You can't trust the younger kids, though — they take it too seriously."

"If anyone in Slytherin did that we'd destroy him!" Draco snarled. "We'd be queuing up to put the boot in on him, and competing for the best curse. I go in and out as I damn well please."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Borrow a broom for me, then?"

"And what am I to say about why I need a second broom? Shall I tell them it's for Potter?" Draco mocked.

"Slytherins are supposed to be sly, right? You come up with something. Or tell them it's for me, if you'd rather."
Draco snorted. "Rather not. All right, Potter, I'll get you a decent broom. Meet me outside the Entrance Hall."

"By the roses," Harry countered. "Hagrid has exceptional night vision."

"Ah. Good to know."
Two nights later, Harry arrived at the Chamber to find Draco engrossed in a large book. Harry sat down and peered curiously over, trying to see what the book was about. Only the chapter heading was large enough to see. "Insignius: Rendez-ici to the Dark Mark," he read.

Draco flipped the book shut to show him the title, *Magical Signaling through the Ages*.

"I was looking up Insignius charms — the Dark Mark is the only one in current widespread use, but they were formerly quite common, especially in medieval times," he said. "The Ministry discourages them now — officially because Muggles monitor so much of the sky; really, I think, because it reminds them of the Dark Mark — but they are still permissible for emergency use in rural areas." Draco suddenly focused intently on him. "So," he advanced, "I've been thinking. . . ."

"Uh-oh. Call Professor Trelawny — I'm finally developing an Inner Eye. I sense..." Harry raised one hand dramatically to his temples — "Trouble! Danger! Flagrant disregard for rules!"

Draco smirked. "Oh, shut up and listen." He leaned over to pour Harry a glass of cognac. "You can tell me I'm brilliant later." Draco stoppered the bottle, and passed both the glass and the book to Harry. "Page 184. Follow along, now."

Harry opened *Magical Signaling through the Ages*. Pages 184 through 186 detailed a way to split a book into two books which would remain linked, such that anything written in either book appeared in both. The creation of such books did not seem to be proscribed in any way — notes detailed its current usage in government and business record-keeping applications. The principle limitation seemed to be a distance limit of three furlongs.

"How far is a furlong?"

"220 yards. I don't think we can do Slytherin to Gryffindor, unless they're vertically more in line than I think, but we can easily talk in class."

"And my notes are your notes."

"And vice versa. The procedure doesn't look too bad, but the ingredients will take some doing. We need a book, first, bound in the undyed and unbleached skin of a white goat, with papers that are similarly not dyed, bleached, or marked in any way. I can order that, by owl. It will take a few days to get it. Then we need some potions ingredients for the title ink, but I can lift that from Snape's stores — if he catches me, he'll just approve of my dedication and interest. Then one of us needs to cast the Fissum spell, and the other Geminus, simultaneously, off a copper mirror, which, again, I will need to order by owl. The spells are not hard, but the timing — and aim — must be precise."

Harry frowned at the written instructions. He realized Draco was no longer talking and looked up. Draco was looking at him expectantly.

"Is this the bit where I tell you you're brilliant?" Harry asked innocently.

"If you like."

"Draco — you're brilliant!" Harry toasted Draco with the cognac. Draco smiled.
It took them less than a week to complete the books. Both were more willing to spar with each other in class when they could have a secondary conversation in writing, and their classmates seemed put at ease by the resumption of strife. In Potions and Transfiguration, they also used the white book for notes, since it would not do to be seen writing in two books, and discovered they had very different note-taking styles. Within a few uses, they had taken to using quadrants — the left page was Draco's and the right Harry's; the top of each for class notes and the bottom for commentary and making plans. Now that they could easily communicate schedules, they did not meet every other night. Sometimes they met several nights in a row, and sometimes not for two or three nights.

_Chamber, tonight?_ Draco wrote, that Thursday in Transfiguration.

_I guess. Moaning Myrtle has started threatening to tell, though. Can you stop her?_ Harry scribbled in his quadrant. He watched Draco's reply appear.

_How would I be able to stop her?_

_That spell you used to find the place?_

_I told you, that spell is limited to one command. One really effective one, that is. I could use it on her a second time, but it would not work as well._

Harry thought that was an odd restriction. _Why?_ he wrote.

_It's something about ghosts. There's no physical brain to help — you need to do all the manipulation exclusively on the soul, which is more resilient, at least after death, or something like that._

After a moment, Draco added:

_Do you still want to learn it?_

_Can I tell her to never tell anyone anything about people who go in or out of the Chamber?_

_Yes, but it's a bit drastic. She couldn't tell you, then, if anyone had gone in before us._

_She wouldn't anyway — she hates me now._

_Well, think about other phrasings that get you what you want. It's not a difficult spell — I could teach it to you tonight._

_What if I get it wrong, though? Can I do it to her again if it doesn't work the first time?_

_There's a forester's ghost in a shack near the edge of the Forbidden Forest. He never comes up to the castle, and I doubt he would protest if you did something trivial to him. We can fly out there for your first try, after Quidditch practice._

_Trivial?_

_Make him sing the school song, or something._

_I don't think I could stand that!_
Harry managed to keep himself from laughing at the memory of Dumbledore, Fred, and George singing the school song. There was nothing he could claim was particularly funny about McGonagall's dry explanation of turning books into bats.

Harry had just tucked the Marauder's Map in beside his wand, and was putting the invisibility cloak into his bag when he heard a noise at the door. He quickly stuffed as much of the fabric in as possible. If the person opening the door had been anyone other than Ron, he probably could have succeeded in looking innocent. Ron, however, knew the cloak well enough to identify it from a brief glimpse.

"Where you going to?" Ron asked curiously.

"Just around," Harry said, as casually as possible.

"Can I come? It's been a while since we did anything, you know?"

I know, Harry thought. School had resumed almost two weeks ago, and this was the first time Ron had indicated noticing they no longer did things together. Harry thought that if he was not meeting Draco Malfoy, with specific plans, having Ron along might be fun. He was surprised to realize he was not sure of it.

"Not tonight, Ron," he said. His voice came out rather cool, he thought. Not icy, like Draco's would have, but cool — disinterested.

Ron looked stunned. Harry tried not to be pleased.

"Why not?" Ron sputtered. "What...?"

Harry shouldered the bag quickly. "I wouldn't want you to get in trouble," he said. He opened the door and started quickly down the stairs.

"You planning on getting in trouble?" Ron hissed after him, but Harry ignored him. He knew Ron wouldn't yell — Ron wasn't the sort to rat out a friend, even a sort of half-maybe-friend. You had to be Ron's enemy for that.

Harry loitered around the Quidditch field waiting for the Slytherin team to finish discussing their practice session and head back to the castle. Finally, they began to emerge.

"Coming, Draco?" Warrington called back as he left the changing rooms.

"I'll be up later," Draco responded. "I have some things to do outside."

"Don't get caught!" was the cheerful reply. Harry waited for the others to leave, then slipped into the room. Draco was combing something into his hair. Harry took off the cloak. Draco continued to arrange his hair.

"What does it look like without that?" Harry asked.

Draco looked overtly scandalized. "Almost as bad as yours," he confided.

"Your father's hair isn't messy."
Oh, mine will be fine when it's long."

"Are you growing it?" Harry asked, confused. Draco's hair looked about the same length as usual. Draco turned and stared. "Of course not! I'm not officially an adult until I graduate."

"You can't grow your hair until you're an adult?"

"Well it's not ..." Draco sniffed. "It's not done, that's all."

Harry thought about that. It fit well with wizards that he had met — traditional men grew their hair, but none of the boys did, even the boys from traditional families.

"Today's lesson in wizarding culture," he remarked.

Draco groaned. "You are such a Muggle, sometimes, Potter."

They flew around the edge of the forbidden forest for several minutes. Draco landed outside the trees.

"Let's go over the spell here," he said. "The shed is slightly inside the forest itself, but not so far that we are likely to have problems."

"I've been in the Forest a few times," Harry said.

"Were any uneventful?" Draco asked wryly.

Harry ducked his head. "No," he admitted.

Draco looked thoughtful. For a moment, he stared off into the trees and bit his lower lip. Finally, he seemed to come to a decision. "You know who's after you, right?" he said.

"You want the full list?" Harry asked, with exaggerated disbelief.

"Top two."

"Okay. Voldemort and Bellatrix Lestrange. Am I right?"

"Good. Here's another reason to be careful near the Forbidden Forest: I have heard it implied that there are places, deep in the forest, that are gateways to other places in Britain. I don't know where. My father won't tell me if it's even true, but he gives me the feeling it is. Goyle swears that his father says that one goes to a lady's clothing department in some big Muggle store in London, but I think he just misunderstood an off-color joke. I've also heard Fountains Abbey, which would be more useful. Anyway, some people, perhaps including Lestrange, may be able to get into Hogwarts via the Forest, rather than the gates, so be cautious here."

Harry was rather astounded Draco was telling him this, even this vaguely. He tried to think carefully about the repercussions, to keep himself from being frightened.

"Perhaps that's how Barty Crouch made it in," he said.

"Junior or Senior?"

"Senior."
"I don't see how he'd know," Draco said dismissively.

Harry shrugged. "Who says the Aurors don't know some of them, too? He could have learned that way."

"I suppose." It seemed to be a foreign concept to Draco that Aurors might know anything useful. His brow furrowed as he considered it.

"Well, be that as it may," he said finally, "the spell. The words are 'Umbram Jubo,' that's 'I order the shade,' followed by your command. The wand motion should be very direct, almost aggressive, and as you say the command, you should push it with your will along the line of the wand. Try just that."

Harry tried. He felt a little silly with the pose when he first took it, but at the end he just felt silly not to have a command.

"Good enough," Draco commented, getting back on his broom. They flew slowly into the trees, just few feet off the ground. "Have you decided on your trivial thing?"

"I don't know. I like the singing idea. How about Hal and Tow?"

"Entirely the wrong season. It's still January."

By the time they reached the shed, Harry had decided. The ghost came floating out to meet them, and recoiled slightly at the sight of Draco.

"You," it said disapprovingly.

The ghost had been a large and hale man (though nothing to compare with Hagrid). From the way he had his foot and a large ax tucked under his left arm, Harry suspected he had maimed himself chopping wood, then bled to death in this lonely place.

The ghost focused on Harry. "This is not a safe place," it warned. "No one will hear you hear if you scream; no one will find you if you are harmed."

"Therefore, he has me to take care of him," Draco said haughtily. "Just because you died here, old man, doesn't mean we will." The ghost drew himself up to answer, but Draco said quickly to Harry:

"Just cast. I want to get out of here."

Harry drew himself up and pointed at the scowling ghost. He tried to do as Draco had said, sending his will out from the wand like an invisible beam of command.

"Umbram Jubo to sing his favorite song, once through."

Harry felt a burst of something coming out of him, and was left gasping. The ghost looked momentarily taken aback, then launched cheerfully into one part of what Harry guessed to be a rather complicated madrigal. Even the single part was rather pretty. Before the third section had finished, Draco drew Harry to the door. Harry was reluctant to leave, but supposed perhaps they should before the spell wore off.

"You have a great voice," he called, before letting the door close.

Draco started flying slowly. Harry overtook him in a moment, and wove with reckless delight through the trees, Draco in pursuit. In the clear, he raced even faster, forcing Draco to a real effort to keep up. Draco overtook him as they left the edge of the forest, and beat him to the castle doors by
one or two seconds. Harry landed beside him and laughed.

"Moaning Myrtle, next?" he said eagerly.

Draco shrugged. "That was the point, wasn't it?"

"*Umbram Jubo* to say nothing to anyone of me or Draco." The command -- the thought of it -- shot out of Harry's wand like an arrow, piercing the shade of a particularly whiny ghost.

"I hate you!" she wailed, rising up towards the dingy ceiling. "You're *awful* to me!" With a lingering scream, she looped over and back, then shot down into her toilet. Water splashed into the sides of the stall and sloshed down on the floor. Burbling sobs rose up from the refilling bowl.

"Beat the flood down!" shouted Harry, and descended the pipe as he had the first time, sliding recklessly from bathroom to tunnel. He waited impatiently for Draco's slower descent, then walked before him to the Chamber.

Harry threw himself down in the chair so hard that it bounced. An empty bottle that had been resting against the base of it rolled a few inches, and Harry, laughing, reached down, scooped it up and hurled it against the far wall. The bottle shattered beautifully, spraying broken glass for yards out from the hard wall. Harry felt a fierce surge of delight.

"You need to learn to ground," Draco said harshly. He was leaning against the near wall, arms folded across his chest, looking deeply annoyed.

"I feel so ..." Harry frowned at Draco. "Okay, that was satisfying, but why do I feel like this?"

Draco shrugged, then suddenly smirked. "Welcome to Dark Arts."

Harry felt instantly furious. "Draco!" he roared.

Draco raised an eyebrow at him in a calmly inquiring look.

"Couldn't you tell me?! You knew I wouldn't if I'd known! I can't believe you would —"

"Oh, don't get tetchy with me, Harry! If you'd thought about it half a minute, you would have known."

"But, you—"

"But what?" Draco sneered. "You can't be bothered to think? It's not an ambiguous spell. Not some 'is it primarily intended to cause permanent bodily harm?' thing. This is under spells that 'compel a person to act contrary to his or her will.' Evaluative criterion one."

"She's a ghost!"

"A ghost of a person."

"You cast it on her," Harry argued.

"Yes," Draco said coldly. "I did. You know I practice Dark Arts. It may be unofficial, but it is hardly a secret. You've seen me! You also know how to evaluate whether or not a spell is Dark Arts.
Harry was so impressed by your essay on the Flesh Burning Curse that she made you read it aloud!” Draco looked intently at Harry. Slowly and distinctly, he said:

"You shouldn't do anything just because I do it."

"So what are you saying?" Harry said angrily. "That I shouldn't trust you?"

"Ten points to Gryffindor!" Draco stabbed upward at the air. His eyes burned maniacally in his pale face. "Brilliant, Potter — you shouldn't trust me! Very good."

"So should I go back to last minute schedule switches when we leave the castle?" Harry asked coldly. "Not come down here with you? How does this work, precisely?"

"Harry, it's fine now — I mean you can be alone with me; I don't have any orders about you, but..." Draco lost his fiery look in a strange desperation. "That won't last. I'm going to be a Death Eater. Then I will have orders."

"Why the bloody hell do you want to be a sodding Death Eater!" Harry bellowed. "The Death Eaters are nothing! They are slaves taking out their slavery on the victims approved by their master -- !"

"What I want has nothing to do with it!" Draco screamed. "What I want has nothing to with anything except stuff!"

With that, he turned and ran. Harry could hear him stumbling in the corridor they usually picked their way through, sending stones tumbling across the rough floor. Harry was too surprised to follow. He waited quite a while, occasionally querying for Draco in the Liber Geminus, but Draco did not return, and if he read any of the messages, he did not reply.
Harry had come in very late, and woke up feeling disconnected and grumpy. As he dragged himself out of bed, he remembered writing an apology to Draco in the Liber Geminus. Terrified that it would be horrible, he went straight to his bag and pulled the book out. He was glad his roommates had already gone to breakfast, and even more relieved to find the apology reasonable, although messily written. He threw on his school robes just in time to get to breakfast before it ended. Ron, who was leaving the Great Hall as Harry arrived, glared at him as he passed. Harry pretended not to notice.

Neville was still at the table.

"Better take something before it disappears, Harry!" he squeaked. Harry nodded. He grabbed a roll, split it, and quickly put two sausages inside it. He just had time to wipe his fingers on a clean napkin before napkin and dishes faded away.

Neville was standing, shifting uneasily on the balls of his feet. "Transfiguration?"

Harry nodded, his mouth too full for speech. They started up the stairs together. Halfway up, Neville asked, "Harry, pardon, but – Are you and Ron still friends?"

Harry shrugged and swallowed. He couldn't bring himself to say no. "I'm hoping it will come back," he said quietly, pausing on the landing. "I don't know."

"You don't seem to be trying very hard."

"And he's not trying at all."

Harry took a very large bite of the roll and sausage, so he could not be expected to say any more.

"Pig," someone whispered in passing, and Harry looked over just in time to catch a glimpse of Malfoy's smirk. Draco, himself, seemed to have forgone breakfast in favor of getting his hair and robes in order. He looked impeccable. Harry started climbing the stairs again. At least Draco didn't seem to be mad at him.

"I always thought that must be wonderful," Neville said. "You and Ron and Hermione. When you are friends, I mean."

Harry managed to swallow. He hurt his throat, slightly, but the food went down.

"It was," he said. "Maybe it will be again, when they're over each other – I don't mean 'over,' really," he corrected hastily. "I mean when they're not obsessed."

He stuffed the last of the food into his mouth before entering the classroom, and he and Neville snagged seats at the back of the class.

Harry resolved to make more of an effort with Ron. That night, he tried inviting Ron to play chess.

"I'm busy," Ron said shortly. He turned a page in his Potions text. Shrugging, Harry went up to the dormitory. He tried to read his Herbology homework, but kept wondering if Draco really had accepted his apology. In retrospect, he found it rather funny that a one-word insult had been so
Sighing, Harry packed up his homework, got out his cloak and map, and headed down to the Chamber of Secrets.

Draco was there, frowning at a length of parchment.

"Hi," Harry said.

"Hi." Draco actually smiled. "Wondered if you'd show up."

"You weren't in Transfiguration."

Draco shrugged. "I had a little accident in Care of Magical Creatures, and I needed to take the afternoon off."

"Right," Harry answered disbelievingly.

In answer, Draco smirked.

"You know," Harry volunteered, "I've been thinking I should rename this place."

"You should?"

"Well, I'm the resident Parselmouth. How about 'The Chamber of Hanging out with a Rather Fun Slytherin Who Wants Me to Trust Him Sometimes, But Not Others.' Do you think it's too long?"


"The UnCommon Room."

"Oh, good one!"

Harry sat down and took out his Herbology text. "Sorry about snapping at you, last night."

"I expected it, really. I just want you to understand that I do not consider your honor my responsibility, especially not on your terms."

"That makes sense," Harry admitted.

"It's like jumping out of your window. You need to have more sense."

"There was nothing wrong with jumping out my window," Harry argued. "I did think about what you said, and it was reasonable. I still think you should try it."

"Slytherins do not jump out of windows. Brainless Gryffindors jump out of windows."

"You could try it from the Astronomy Tower. That's even higher." Draco's scornful look changed to an angry scowl, and Harry tried to explain himself. "The higher the tower, the easier it should be, right?"

"Tasteless, Harry."

"What?" Harry looked at Draco's angry face and did his best to convey his confusion. "Shouldn't it
be? What's wrong?"

"The higher the tower, the easier the trial.' Do you know what that refers to?"

"Is it a saying? I've never heard..."

Draco sighed, but his anger faded. "No knowledge of wizarding traditions," he muttered. "Honestly!" He collected himself. "There was a test called Decernenti, the Sifting, which was once common among pureblood wizarding families. It's not now; it was outlawed in 1838. You know how wizard children will start to manifest Accidental Magic somewhere between eight and ten?"

Harry nodded. "I kept finding myself on the shed rood when Dudley and his friends were chasing me."

Draco raised a pale eyebrow. "The shed roof?"

"They were all a lot bigger than me."

"Ah. Well, anyway, there is a period directly after birth – within the first eight hours – in which a wizarding baby has some retained womb instinct for magic. During this time, if you take the baby and drop it off a tower, it may be able to save itself by levitating."

Harry felt rather sick. He must have looked it, because Draco shifted his attention to his essay.

"This practice had some problems," Draco said clinically, still looking at his parchment. "Obviously, Harry thought.

"As early as the beginning of the nineteenth century, statistical analysis of families holding to this practice and families eschewing it showed that the number of wizarding children unable to survive the fall was likely quite high, probably in the range of fifty percent. Furthermore, generations of this practice did not raise the survival rate, so it seemed likely that the practice did not significantly decrease squib births. From this tradition, we get the optimistic saying 'the higher the tower, the easier the trial.'" Draco looked up briefly.

"That's disgusting."

"It doesn't bother me much, as history." Draco was looking at his parchment again. "Sometimes, however..."

"People still do it," Harry guessed, horrified.

"I expect so, though you wouldn't catch anyone admitting to it." Draco shuddered. "I sometimes wonder if they put me through it," he added lightly. "I'm fine with heights on a broom or a flying horse, but I have a terror of high balconies and windows and the tops of towers. I'm reaching out to catch myself as soon as I see the air."

Harry didn't know what to say. Draco cleared his throat.

"Any idea what Horsyr is looking for when she asks about 'desired but unwilling behavior?'"

"Something you want to do, but would normally restrain yourself from doing," Harry asked.

"For example, I might momentarily want to turn Snape into a worm and toss him in the lake, but I never would, and if I somehow did, I'd feel really bad
afterwards."

"Ah. So something that represses your conscience, or other inhibitions."

"Exactly."

Harry finished his Herbology reading, then said goodnight and went back to Gryffindor tower. He continued to try to be friendlier to Ron, but with limited success. A few nights, they played games together, and Ron even came down to Quidditch practice, one evening, and borrowed Harry's broom for a bit, but he did not ask, again, to come along when Harry slipped out at night, and Harry never felt like skipping an evening with Draco to invite him.

By the beginning of February, Harry found his time more polarized than ever. He spent roughly half his evenings with Draco. Usually they would just do homework together, but occasionally they went flying around the countryside, and they generally spent at least one weekend night drinking. When he wasn't with Draco, Harry studied, usually alone, or sat in curiously strained conversation with Ron and Hermione. They never asked why Harry was away so often, and Harry found himself paralyzed by his inability to broach the subject. Seamus gave Harry grief any time he returned to the dormitory drunk, but no one else seemed to notice, though Seamus, always when no one else was near, would tell him how he smelled of it, when he returned, and in the morning.

Harry appreciated Neville's constancy. Neville continued to watch Harry with mild, non-intrusive admiration. He sat with Harry when Harry invited him, which Harry did, more and more frequently, as he tried to get up the nerve to ask Neville about his parents. Harry was surprised by the quiet boy's grasp of magical theory. He decided that if Neville could remember things and not get flustered, he would be a good student.

Returning from Herbology, one day, Harry found himself walking alone, a few paces behind Ron and Hermione, who were again noticing no one but each other. On the way back to the castle, they encountered the Slytherins, who were walking down to the greenhouses for the next period. Harry heard Ron make a loud comment about "poor Professor Sprout."

Harry looked up and met Draco's eyes. Draco winked at him.

"Hey Potter," he sneered. "Walking all by yourself, again? Can't even keep your Gryffindor friends?"

Harry had to restrain a smile, detecting the cut at Ron.

Neville, a few steps behind Harry, hurried up beside him. "Shut up, Malfoy!" he said fiercely. "Harry said he was thinking, and didn't want to talk."

Harry looked at Neville in surprise.

"Never mind," he said. "I think I've got it, now. What were you telling me about wormwood, Neville?"

Neville, compliantly, began chattering about the properties, uses, and dangers of wormwood. As often, Harry found himself reflecting that if they had a supportive Potions teacher, Neville would doubtless be as good at that as at Herbology.
Harry slowed a little, so that he and Neville lagged behind the others.

"Thanks, Neville."

"I hate it when he goes after you. There's no reason for it."

Harry shrugged. "It keeps us both entertained, I suppose." Harry hesitated. "There's ... there's something I want to ask you, and I'm not sure if it's polite...."

"Go on."

"Does anyone ever talk to you about your parents? I know about them," Harry said hesitantly, "what the Lestranges did to them. Now we hear about the Lestranges all the time, since she's after me, but no one ever mentions – People – teachers – tell me about my father, a lot. No one talks about my mother, much. Do they tell you about your parents, or is everyone too afraid to mention it?"

Neville looked down and whispered, "I think they think they're being polite."

"How old were you?"

"Not quite three. I remember a little. . . ." Neville trailed off.

"I don't know if that would be better or worse. Having them alive would be worse, I think." Harry caught himself. "I'm sorry – that was –"

"It's okay." Neville looked up at Harry with eyes bright with tears. "I never know if anyone knows or not. It's... I think it's easier. Can I talk to you? Sometime where everyone can't watch?"

"Anytime, Neville."

Thursday, Harry came into the Chamber late, after Quidditch practice. Draco looked up from a book.

"Butterbeer?"

"Is there cognac?"

"There wasn't much left." Draco smirked. "I didn't save you any."

"Of course not." Harry took the proffered butterbeer. "Cale," he said firmly, giving it his attention, this time.

"We need to get more cognac," Draco advanced.

"Er... I suppose," Harry said.

"Well, you drank most of it, didn't you?"

"I expect so."

"You want more, right?"

Harry, though apprehensive at the prospect of another of Draco's burglaries, had to concede the point. "Yeah."
"Good, then. How about Saturday?"

Harry was silent. Two day's delay gave Draco ample time to send word to his father, should he decide to give Harry to Bellatrix Lestrange.

"Trust me," Draco said lazily.

"Last week you were telling me not to!" Harry protested.

"Not with your honor, but you can with your life -- trust me on the excursions, until I get the Mark. If I wanted to betray you to my father, so his cronies could kill you for having the audacity to survive the Killing Curse, I'd have done it by now." Draco's eyes narrowed maliciously as he smiled. "Let them flush their own game."

After dinner on Saturday, Harry was alone in the dormitory, dithering over his preparations. Draco could get a lot out of having him killed – he wouldn't even need to stay and watch. Harry considered backing out. At the time he was supposed to be meeting Draco on the pitch, he finally made up his mind – he was going. Draco hadn't killed him yet.

Harry scooped up his things, and was halfway to the door when it opened with a bang. Ron froze a step inside. Harry watched his eyes scan the visible slice of Harry once down and up, taking in the Firebolt, and possibly noting his backpack. Ron gave him a twisted smile. He stepped to the side and bowed slightly.

"Don't let me stop you, Harry – I can see you're in a hurry."

"Yeah, thanks," Harry said, as he settled the hood over his head, drew the broom beneath his cloak, and pulled the cloak closed in front. He felt a stab of regret as he slipped down the stairs. If he wasn't already late, he would have stayed and asked what was wrong.

At breakfast the next morning, Ron was not talking to Harry. Ron didn't appear to be talking to Hermione, either. She was talking to Neville. Harry looked wistfully across the room at Draco Malfoy, who was sitting between Crabbe and Goyle, radiating bored indifference. Harry wondered if he could do that. He leaned back slightly, and tried to pretend he owned Gryffindor. He almost had the feeling for a moment, but then he looked back at Malfoy and saw his secret friend staring at him incredulously. Immediately, Harry burst out laughing.

"Harry?" Seamus asked.

Harry choked. "I couldn't possibly explain," he managed.

"Harry?" Seamus again, very quietly.

"What?"

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

Seamus nodded. Still speaking quietly, he said, "I'll believe you, because I think you're smart enough to know the difference. If you're ever not, though ... you know you can talk to me, right?"
Harry looked appraisingly at Seamus. Seamus had grown over the summer. He was now taller than any of roommates except Ron (and so broad through the shoulders that Ron's advantage there was often missed), but Seamus had kept his boyish face and demeanor. Harry was surprised to see him looking serious. He would not have thought of the outgoing Irish boy as a confidant.

"Thanks, Seamus," he said. "Really, I'm okay, though."

"Well, good, then," Seamus said. He returned his attention to his breakfast.
By the end of the Care of Magical Creatures on Monday morning, Ron and Hermione were holding hands. Harry scowled at their backs. He wished it was that simple for him to make up with Ron. He took the long way up to the school, so as not to overtake them.

Harry came in sight of the Potions dungeon just in time to see Snape's black cloak disappearing through the door. He sprinted forward and managed to get through the doorway just as Professor Snape pivoted towards the otherwise seated students.

"Once again, I see, class has only just made Mr. Potter's busy schedule," Snape commented. "Five points from Gryffindor. Sit down, Potter."

Harry thought he could probably squeeze in next to Neville. He started forward.

"You may sit with Malfoy, Potter." Snape indicated the empty space next to Draco. Harry felt immediately cheered, and tried not to show it.

"But —" he protested.

"It is not open to debate, Potter. Sit with Mr. Malfoy, and don't sabotage his work!"

Harry slipped in next to Draco.

"My favorite partner," Draco muttered sarcastically. Harry bit his lip, and pulled out his white notebook. Snape began to scratch out a title and ingredient list on the board, and Draco immediately began to write in his own, identical, notebook.

What was it, this time? Draco wrote.

Nothing. I was just annoyed at Ron. More than usual, because I feel like I may have deserved it, for once.

Want to talk, tonight? I can't stay out late, again, but we could meet during library hours. I could use some help on my Transfiguration homework, anyway.

Harry hesitated and looked at Ron and Hermione, seated halfway up the Gryffindor side of the room. Ron looked back at him and scowled.

Sure," Harry wrote. "But I can't sneak out, tonight. Meet me behind the stands, after dinner.

"Mr. Finnegan?" a cold voice said, penetrating Harry's thoughts. He was immediately relieved that it had not been his name — he didn't have the slightest idea what Professor Snape had been talking about.

Seamus's voice said hesitantly:

"By decreasing fear of other's opinions, yeah, but sir? How is that different from just getting drunk?"
"The *Facilis* potion does not damage either your mental faculties or physical coordination," Snape said. "Though it remains a worthwhile question. However, some in the healing community feel that it is better to keep some people continually altered than to force them to endure the basics of social interaction." Snape's scowl showed what he thought of this idea.

*Listen to that!* came the words from Draco. *He hates it enough to agree with a Gryffindor.*

"You will prepare the potion with your partners," Snape said. "At the end of class, we will test the potion on Mr. Longbottom, who seems our most likely candidate."

Several people gasped, and others, mostly Slytherins, snickered. Hermione raised her hand. After Snape had ignored it for several seconds, she finally said:

"You just said this was a regulated potion, professor. Shouldn't —"

"I did not ask your opinion, Miss Granger, and am not a student for you to oversee. Ten points from Gryffindor."

Snape turned and swept his black gaze once across the classroom.

"Least anyone else feel that I am exceeding my authority, let me make it clear that I have the requisite permission from Mr. Longbottom's legal guardian. Are there any further questions?" That sweep of eyes, again, daring anyone to comment, then Snape turned back to the board, his dark cloak swirling about him with the motion. "Good," he said.

Harry glanced over at Neville, who was looking at nothing but the top of his desk. The boy's hands were visibly shaking. Harry wondered just what a Neville who was not afraid of people's opinions would do. *Tell Snape he's a vicious, bullying arsehole, I expect*, he thought.

"You planning on doing any of the work, Potter?" Draco asked loudly. Harry jumped.

"Uh, sorry, D- Malfoy."

Harry reached over and pulled a pile of roots toward his side of the desk.

"Thin, even slices," Draco muttered surreptitiously. "Skin on."

Harry worked on that, using his the knuckle of his steadying hand to guide the knife. It occurred to him that if he got nothing else out of Potions, he would at least be useful helping in a kitchen. Eventually they were done with the preparations, and their potion was bubbling on the desk, ready for the last ingredient, a fine crumbling of chameleon skin.

Harry looked around. No one else seemed to be ready. Ron and Hermione were working unusually slowly. They were too far away to hear, but Harry could see they were exchanging comments while coordinating the preparation. Across the aisle, Dean and Seamus were whispering to each other as they worked. At the desk in front of their own, Pansy was openly chatting with her partner, in a way no Gryffindor would ever dare do in Snape's class. Harry looked wistfully at Draco. Draco caught the look and scowled warningly back at him.

"Ready for a show, Potter?" he asked softly.

"I'm afraid of what he'll do," Harry said, at a bare whisper. He was too worried to summon the sarcasm that he and Draco attempted to maintain in public.

"Say hi?" Draco prodded. He rubbed the already powdered lizard skin between his fingers and thumb. It drifted down on the grey glop, setting it glowing with specks of brilliant orange.
"Tell Snape he's a slimy, underhanded bully," Harry whispered, stirring the orange in swirls through the potion below.

Draco snickered. Harry looked away, failing to contain a smile. Across the room, he met Ron's eyes. The redhead was glaring at him. Harry grinned back and turned away.

The potion was hot. When something hit it, it came splattering up out of the caldron in huge, thick globs, and burned where it landed on his hands, throat, and face. Harry gasped.

"Weasley!" Snape was screaming. "Fifty points from Gryffindor! That potion is intended for the extremely shy —"

Harry turned to Draco. Draco had also been splattered with copious amounts of the thick orange goo. Surprisingly, it did not seem to be leaving burns on Draco's face, and Harry could feel the pain fading from his own.

"You look utterly absurd," Draco said.

Harry laughed. "So much for your perfect hair!" he retorted.

Snape had approached them. With tongs, he picked up the stone pestle that had skimmed the top of their potion, and glared, first at it, then at Harry.

"Mr. Malfoy, report to the hospital wing," he ordered, as turned away. He strode to the front of the room. "We will use Potter as a subject for observation, since Mr. Weasley has so kindly selected him for us."

Draco leaned back. "I'll stay, professor."

"Mr. Malfoy, this potion was not intended —"

"I refuse to miss this show, sir," Draco said firmly. He grinned. "Don't worry I'll say anything I shouldn't. It's not Veritaserum."

Snape scowled. "Very well. Be it on your head, then."

Under the table, Draco put his right hand in the outer pocket of his robe and drew out two of his usual vials. He passed these to Harry, then stretched and stood up. He dipped a spoon in their still bubbling potion and drew it out full. With a hand under the spoon's brimming bowl, Draco prowled slowly up the aisle.

"Here you go, Longbottom," he purred. "Give it a try. It's nice."

Everyone's attention was locked on Draco or Neville. Harry quickly filled the vials and slipped them into his own inner pocket. Once they were safely hidden, he stood.

"Leave off, Draco," he said. "Neville doesn't need to play guinea pig, today."

"But it would be such fun," Draco retorted. He had reached Neville's desk and his eyes were sparkling as he looked back at Harry. Harry found he was grinning in return. It seemed suddenly ridiculous that they had been carrying on with pretending to hate each other. Really, he thought, who would care?

"But he's my friend," he coaxed. "Come on, Dragon — you're not that bored."

"I am now," Draco insisted petulantly. Harry laughed outright, and Draco smiled at him. Everyone
was staring at them, which was very amusing. Still smiling, Draco dribbled the potion, in lazy swirls, on Neville's desk, and Neville pressed into his chair to get as far away from the streaks of orange as possible.

"Don't worry, Neville," Harry called. "I'll protect you!" He pointed his wand at the spilled liquid and yelled "Saltoate!" The strands of potion lifted up and began to sway gracefully, forming a circle around Neville's caldron.

"Point!" Harry said triumphantly to Draco.

"Circe!" Draco returned. "All right, so you managed to make it useful. But it would be easier to just —" He raised his wand. "Referte!" Obediently, the strands of potion flew back to back to his and Harry's caldron.

"That is quite enough!" Snape began, but, miraculously, the lunch bell rang. Snape growled, then quickly raised his voice to announce:

"Homework — research two earlier variants of the Facilis potion, and discuss the benefits of the ingredient changes that led to the current formulation. I want twenty inches, twenty-five if your writing is overly large" — here, he looked meaningfully at Ron — "with some indication that you attempted to think."

"I can't believe you made Saltoate useful," Draco fumed at Harry, as they stuffed their books back into their school bags. "That's three you've done." Walking companionably close, they left the room.

In the hallway, Ron blocked Harry's way.

"Get away from him," he ordered, with a curt, angry gesture indicating Draco Malfoy.

"It's your own fault, Weasley," Draco said. "You shouldn't throw things in Potions class."

"Move, Ron," Harry said quietly.

"You were laughing!" Ron accused Harry. "When Malfoy laughed. Whatever he said, you thought it was funny. And that was before I threw anything."

"It was what I said," Harry returned, "and it was funny, it was nothing for you to get upset about, and you've no reason to assume it was."

"You were talking about Neville."

"What's it to you, Weasel?" Draco challenged. Harry thought that was rather lame, considering Malfoy's usual wit.

"Neville!" Harry called.

Neville scuttled back. "Harry?"

Harry smiled coaxingly at Neville, which appeared to make Neville nervous. "Do you mind that that Draco laughed when I told him I was afraid the potion would make you tell Snape that he's a slimy, bullying git?"

Neville choked slightly. His face turned bright red. "No," he admitted.

Harry smiled. "Well, there you have it, Ron. Nothing for you to be indignant about."
Draco nudged Harry. "Lunch, Harry," he urged. They passed Ron and continued up to the Great Hall together.


"It's not as much fun when it's you and your friends being bullied."

"I expect so. You usually manage to hold your own though — and Granger! Typical idiot Gryffindor heroes!" Draco laughed. "That 'I'll protect you,' thing — that was brilliant — utterly Gryffindor."

"I liked the little dribbles you did," Harry admitted. "Very pretty."

"It's a pretty potion, isn't it? Like lava."

Harry was not unaware of people, both Gryffindors and Slytherins, muttering as they passed, but they didn't bother him. He thought it was rather funny that he and Draco could cause such a fuss just by chattering about a class as they walked. Draco appeared to have the same thought, and they both began to talk more loudly and more cheerfully as they started up the steps.

It wasn't until they reached the Great Hall that they realized they couldn't sit together. Draco stared at his house table. Harry followed the look for a moment, then surveyed his own.

As the Gryffindors looked at him, they bent their heads toward each other to whisper. Most looked away when he met their eyes. Hermione waved frantically and gestured for him to come sit with her.

Harry and Draco looked at each other.

"Shit," said Draco succinctly.

"Mm."

"We can't just grab food and take off. They'll allow that at breakfast sometimes, but not at lunch."

"Too many professors," Harry agreed. He brightened. "I know!"

"Shall we party, Lightning?" Draco enquired hopefully.

"Oh, give over! We have McGonagall, next period. But we can picnic. Follow me."

Harry led the way down to the kitchens. He rather expected Draco to know about the kitchens, but Draco seemed utterly confused when Harry began to tickle the pear, and astounded when it turned into a door handle.

"Welcome to the kitchens," Harry said. He had a brief impulse to usher Draco in, but then thought better of it and preceded him instead.

"Harry Potter! Harry Potter, sir!" came a familiar squeal, and a moment later, Harry was struck at the hip by an ecstatic house elf. (At the hip because he had learned, after his growth spurt the previous year, to turn slightly.)

"Hi Dobby!"

Dobby's clothes had, if possible, gotten even odder. In addition to his previous accoutrements, he now had socks dangling off each of his ears, and was wearing a large doily as a sort of poncho over
Ron's old jumper. Harry hoped Draco wouldn't snicker. He glanced at Draco and decided he was currently too astounded.

Dobby, however, had noticed Draco and was glaring past Harry at the young Malfoy.

"Draco and I wanted to eat outside," Harry said, as casually as possible. "Is there anything we could carry for lunch? Picnic foods?"

Dobby looked at Harry severely for an entire second, then reverted to a pleading look. "Harry Potter should not be about with a Malfoy, sir! The Malfoys are bad Dark wizards! You must not trust them, sir!"

Draco rolled his eyes. "Could I please be me, for a bit, rather than 'a Malfoy'? It's so tiresome being part of a set."

Dobby set his arms across his chest and glared directly at Draco. "You, Draco Malfoy," he said shrilly, "are cruel, spoiled, vindictive, and a bad Dark wizard!"

Other elves were running about the kitchen, gathering up food. Draco looked at Harry. "I am so evil," he drawled. "Aren't you afraid of me, Harry?"

"Now let's see," Harry began speculatively, but at that moment, a simply enormous picnic basket was shoved into his hand by one of the anonymous elves in Hogwarts tea towels.

"Harry Potter should leave now, sir!" the elf squeaked. "It is good picnic!"

"Thanks," Harry said. He looked at Dobby, who was regarding him with horrified dismay. "We can talk later, Dobby, okay? You can come up to my room, sometime."

Dobby's face brightened at this. "Harry Potter is very kind to Dobby sir! Dobby will come talk to Harry Potter!"

"Great!" said Harry. "See you later, Dobby. Come on, Draco."

Harry and Draco walked up to the Entrance Hall. It wasn't until they crossed into the sunlight that Draco spoke.

"When you talk to that — creature, please remind him I was all of twelve years old when last he saw me!"

It was cold outside. Harry led the way to Greenhouse One, which contained the most innocuous of Professor Sprout's plants.

"Did you ever torture him?" he asked.

Draco scowled, but considered the question. "Nothing so organized as torture," he said finally. "I kicked him about a bit, but ... He's a house elf, Harry! That's how everyone treats them."

"Everyone you knew, perhaps," Harry countered. "Honestly, I don't understand about wizards! You treat creatures that are smart enough to talk in ways I wouldn't treat a dog — in ways I could get arrested for treating a dog! You're not cruel to your owl, why to the elf?"

"Because he snivels. He snivels and he cowards, and I hate that. If something cowards to me, I give it a reason!"

Harry opened the door to the warm greenhouse. "I'm not afraid of you, Draco, but I have to mostly
agree with cruel, vindictive, and spoiled."

"Oh thanks. And here I've been being nice to your friends for you."

"And doing a very good job at it. You can learn. But your first impulse is still to be cruel, isn't it?"

Harry wondered if he would be saying these things without the potion. He suspected not, but perhaps it needed to be said, eventually. He set down the picnic basket, and looked steadily over it at Draco. Draco looked sullen.

"It works," he said.

"I'm sure," Harry said. "And I'm sure it's what you were brought up seeing and hearing. It's the way you know best how to handle things. And, honestly, you do it quite effectively. Look how long I hated you." Harry pulled out a chicken leg and handed it to Malfoy, who took it without comment. "I think evil is a bit much," Harry continued.

"And spoiled?" Draco questioned.

"Well, let's see ... who carried the basket all the way here? And who never offered to help? Would it be the same person who wouldn't carry the chairs I bought? Perhaps the one who thinks he shouldn't have to pay for anything, because other people's welfare doesn't matter? Who seems to believe he's entitled to anything he likes?"

"You never asked me to carry anything!"

"No, I didn't. But if I'd been walking with Ron, carrying something heavy, he'd eventually say, 'let me take that for a bit.' You don't — it doesn't occur to you to do your fair share of the work — you've never been expected to, outside of classes."

"Well, no. Someone has always done those things for me."

"That's what I mean by spoiled. It isn't that you're trying to impose on to me, it's just that you don't think about it. Work gets done. You don't do it. Things appear. You don't pay for them."

Harry was too hungry to continue lecturing Malfoy. He took some of the chicken, and some ham, and a crisp, speckled apple, and began to eat. After a while, Draco asked:

"Do you like me?"

"Of course!" Harry grinned at Draco. "I wouldn't be here, else, would I?"

"Well? After all that, why do you like me?"

Harry looked speculatively at Draco. "I don't know about all of it," he confessed. "But some is that you're smart, and witty, and fun. You have ideas, and you're not afraid of them. You can be nice, when it's what you're trying to do." He shivered. "Then ... You know what the Cruciatus Curse feels like. We can honestly talk about things most people just repeat rumors of...." He looked at Draco. "Do you like me?"

"Of course," Draco said, "but don't expect me to sing your virtues. I'm not in the mood. You're an irritating, lecturing, oh-so-honorable Gryffindor prig."

Harry glared. After a moment, this classification struck him as amusing. "And your accomplice?"

"Well, maybe I'm exaggerating a little." Draco smirked and poked around in the basket. "Eclair?" he
asked, offering one to Harry.

Harry bounced. "Thanks!"

"Don't mention it," Draco said airily. He smirked. "Especially as it's your food."

"Draco?"

"Hm?"

"May I keep one of the vials of potion?"

Draco shrugged. "You nicked them — you can keep both if you like."

"One will do, I think. I wouldn't want to compromise the integrity of your collection."

"Really, Potter, I didn't think you knew such fancy words."

The rest of their picnic passed more pleasantly. They arrived at Transfiguration precisely on time, and sat together. McGonagall looked surprised, and a little displeased, but she let them get away with the level of interaction she usually accepted among her students, which got them through the first half of the class. At that point, Harry got bored. He lost twenty points for Gryffindor by turning one of the leaves on his geranium into a flimsy spoon, and using it to pelt beetles (made from the flower's petals) at Lavender, Hermione, Ron, and Seamus. Draco lost fifteen points for Slytherin by unexpectedly shoving Harry off his seat. Two minutes later, Draco attempted the same trick, only to be grabbed and pulled over by Harry. Both of them sat on the floor laughing.

"Detention for both of you!" railed Professor McGonagall, "And thirty points each from Gryffindor and Slytherin! I have never seen such behavior in a sixth year class!"

Harry and Draco looked at each other. Harry stood up. "Professor?" he said politely. "Draco and I aren't really responsible for our behavior right now."

The class shrieked with laughter.

"And why would that be, Mr. Potter?"

"We had a contamination accident in Potions, Professor."

Professor McGonagall looked around the room. She apparently noticed that Harry's latter statement was not causing shrieks of laughter. "Finnegan?" she prompted. "Please tell me what happened in Potions?"

Seamus looked at Harry, then at Ron.

"I think you should ask Ron, professor," he said.

Ron looked at the top of his desk.

"Mr. Weasley?" Professor McGonagall prompted.

Ron blushed. "I threw something at Harry, and it landed in his cauldron, and Harry and Malfoy got
splashed with the potion, which is some orange goop that makes them not care what anyone thinks of them."

Professor McGonagall regarded Harry and Draco disapprovingly. "Well," she said, "it seems to be working." She turned back to Ron. "And why, Mr. Weasley, were you throwing things in Potions class?"

"Professor ... Look, I'm sorry, but Professor Snape already took fifty house points, and gave me two nights detention, and I've had to watch Harry chumming around with Malfoy. Haven't I been punished enough?"

"I am not adding to your punishments, Mr. Weasley — yet. I want to know why you were throwing things in a classroom replete with dangerous substances!"

Ron looked at his desk.

"Because I have Harry," Draco drawled. He smirked at Ron. "Didn't anyone ever warn you I steal anything that isn't nailed down?"

"You know, I've rather suspected that...." Blaise commented. People, especially the Slytherin students, sniggered.

Draco met Harry's eyes. "Oops," he said lightly.

Professor McGonagall rubbed her temples. "Mr. Malfoy, Mr. Potter, there is an empty classroom two doors down the hall. Please go there and wait for my arrival. Do not speak to anyone on the way. I will come at the end of class and decide whether you are competent to attend your next periods."

Harry and Draco went down the hall. They ran into Nearly Headless Nick on the way and had a fun ten-minute game of charades explaining that Professor McGonagall had told them not to speak to anyone. In the classroom, they lounged around and speculated on what they would regret when the potion wore off. By the end of the period they were feeling more in control, and assured McGonagall they were able to behave.

In History of Magic, his last class of the day, Harry arranged to sit next to Neville. This wasn't difficult, as no one else seemed eager to sit near him. At the end of the class, he held Neville's arm.

"Wait," Harry hissed, under the noise of students rising and shuffling books. "I need to talk to you."

Neville, round-eyed, nodded, and deliberately dawdled with packing up his books, while their classmates left. Finally, only Harry and Neville were in the room. Harry pulled the vial of potion from his pocket.

"I got some," he said.

Neville jerked back, then froze. He looked frightened.

Harry frowned. "I just thought you might want to try it," he said. "With people that you trust, not Snape and all the Slytherin sixth-years. You could have it up in the dorm."

Neville relaxed slightly, but still wouldn't meet Harry's eyes.

"I don't think — with you and Ron — it wouldn't be a good idea, Harry."
Harry considered that. "Well, you can arrange it," he said. "Who do you trust most? Of Gryffindor, I mean?"

"Hermione," Neville answered immediately.

Harry nodded. "Okay, so have Hermione there. That's a start. Do you not want me and Ron, or do you not want me at all?"

Neville bit his lip. "Harry ... If it wasn't for Ron, I'd be glad to have you there, but I think that if I leave you out, you'll still be okay to me, and if I leave Ron out...."

Harry shrugged. " Invite who you like. I'm not offended."

"Will..." Neville seemed unable to continue. "I'm not sure I want to, Harry. It was nice of you, but...."

"But what?" Harry asked. "It's not unpleasant. I doubt you'll act like I've been — you heard what Snape said. This isn't approved for people like me."

"Do you think I'll like whomever is there?" Neville asked. "Like... Like you and Malfoy?"

Harry laughed. "Draco and I have been friends for over a month, Neville — since Christmas break. We just haven't been letting on."

Neville's eyes widened. Harry looked away. Ah, he thought. I can be distantly embarrassed now. The Facilis must be starting to wear off. "Um, so..." he urged. "Take it?"

Neville blushed. "Could you give it to Hermione for me?" he asked. "And tell her to talk to me?"

"Sure. No problem."

"Harry?"

Harry stopped in the doorway. "What?"

"I think you're a really nice person, even if you do like Malfoy. You're my nicest roommate."

"Thanks, Neville." Harry grinned. "Let's dump our books before dinner, okay?"

At dinner, Harry slipped into a spot next to Hermione.

"Tired of Slytherin company, Potter?" Ron asked him, from Hermione's other side.

"Drop it, Ron," Hermione ordered. "You know he wasn't responsible for his actions. The Facilis potion is a very powerful drug —"

"Powerful enough to get us to admit we're friends," Harry interrupted.

Hermione blinked.

"Is that who you were with?" Ron asked angrily. "When I couldn't come? Malfoy?"

Harry sat back. "That's right."
Hermione stared. "Harry? You can't… Draco Malfoy is horrible. He's bigoted, arrogant, spoiled —"

"Intelligent, witty, fun, and as bored and lonely as I was." Harry scowled at Hermione's indignant look. "Did you expect me to just sit in the Common Room until you two had time for me, again?"

"You could have asked —"

"If I could've found you, right." Deliberately, Harry started ladling stew on his plate and eating it. Neither Ron nor Hermione said anything further. Harry scanned the Slytherin table for Draco. He saw him, sitting on the far side of Blaise from Crabbe and Goyle. Nobody seemed to be talking to him, either, but Draco had perfected the expression of utter disinterest, and was using it now.

Harry decided he was done eating. Deliberately, he stood up and walked over to the Slytherin table. The glares he got there were not actually as bad as the ones at his back. The Slytherins seemed to be reserving the worst of their disapproval for Draco.

"Draco." Draco looked up. Harry inclined his head to the door. "Grab your broom and meet me on the pitch."

"Expressed with your usual lack of charm," Draco sneered. His smile warmed slightly. "But a fine idea, nonetheless." He stood up. "Beat you there."

On the pitch, Harry's gloom was left behind in blinding speed and dizzying turns. He and Draco played with the Quaffle. Rather than throwing it towards each other, or towards the goals, one would throw it in a random direction, then the other would pursue it. Draco, Harry decided, would be a fair Chaser.

As the last light of sunset began to fade, Draco paused, some twenty feet above the pitch, and looked up.

"We should go in," Harry called.

"Bags I the bat!" Draco yelled back, and he was off.

There were actually several bats, Harry realized, once he figured out what Draco was chasing. They flipped and turned and swooped more dizzyly than the Golden Snitch. Harry took off after another one. He and Draco shouted to each other and twisted and chased, several times almost colliding, until the magically magnified voice of Professor McGonagall caused Harry to flinch so badly that he nearly fell.

"Harry James Potter, you get down on the ground this instant! That goes for you, as well, Mr. Malfoy."

Harry swooped down and dismounted so quickly that he staggered. Draco followed slowly, almost lazily, and smirked back at Professor McGonagall's glare.

"You are supposed to be in your Houses, by now."

"Sorry, Professor," Harry said quickly. "We were just practicing."

"Practicing what?"
"Quick moves," Draco volunteered. "We were chasing bats."

"Was that it?" she said sarcastically. "The both of you looked as if you were having some sort of aerial convulsions. Come with me."

She led them back to the school in silence. Inside the Entrance Hall, she shooed Draco off towards the dungeons, then began to escort Harry up to Gryffindor Tower. Harry did not dare to say anything, and McGonagall did not speak until they were at the top of the stairs.

"I suggest, Mr. Potter," she said, "that you do your practicing with your own teammates. I expect you to beat Slytherin in the spring."

While Harry was still wondering whether to argue or not, McGonagall turned and strode away. Sighing, Harry shouldered his broom and entered the Gryffindor Common Room.

Everyone fell momentarily silent when Harry entered. Conversations picked up again quickly, but no one greeted him. The atmosphere in the Common Room wasn't completely hostile, Harry decided, but it wasn't particularly friendly. He decided to go up to his dormitory.

While he was putting away his Firebolt, Harry heard the door behind him open. He took his time settling the broom securely and closing the trunk, then, apprehensively, he looked back. Ron was half-standing, leaning slightly back against his bed, and watching Harry. Harry stood up. For a minute, they looked at each other in silence.

"Malfoy's your mate, now, then," Ron said quietly.

Harry felt awful. He nodded. "Yeah," he said seriously. "Draco's my mate, now."

Ron's eyes flickered down, pale lashes briefly veiling blue eyes. "Draco."

"Yeah."

Ron looked hurt. It was much worse, Harry decided, then having him angry. Harry had a lot of practice in ignoring stupid insults and accusations. He wasn't as good with hurt.

"Since when?" Ron asked, his voice flat.

Harry shrugged.

"Christmas? It was leading up to that, before, in ways, but it was over the holidays that we started ... doing things together."

"You didn't tell me."

"Why would I tell you? You never asked."

"Asked what? Where you were sneaking off to?"

"What I'd done over the holidays. Not once did either of you ask! You didn't really start taking any interest in me again until two or three weeks ago."

Ron bit his lip. "I started noticing you were gone a lot."

"Yeah."
"So you wouldn't let me come with you because you were off with him."

"It doesn't seem like a pleasant combination. I'd spend all evening hauling the two of you off each other."

Ron flinched. "I wouldn't go anywhere with Malfoy along!"

"And I'd already made plans with him. I usually have done."

Ron looked down. "Harry... Hermione's really upset. You know what he calls her, how he acts. Could you please come downstairs and talk to her?"

"So everyone can gang up on me?" Harry retorted. "It's not appealing —"

"Hermione, Harry!" Ron growled. "I'll hold everyone else off, if that's what it takes."

Harry sighed.

"Okay. I'll talk to her."

Talking to Hermione could have been worse. Harry pointed out that Draco had been better over the last month, and that was partly his influence. He pointed out that Draco looked down on him, as well.

"He considers my family substantially degraded, Hermione. He says that if it weren't for Voldemort, I could still get invited to the best parties, though, on the strength of my father's name." Hermione looked incredulous. Harry grinned. "He says he wishes I would, so those parties wouldn't also be the most boring."

That had made her smile. Harry pressed his advantage, telling her stories that she could appreciate, like that night's adventure of chasing the bats and the battle of the icicles. They were almost the last people in the Common Room, but he left her not only still friends, but aware that his mother was Muggle-born, like her, and he remained uncomfortably vulnerable to capricious rejection or acceptance by the elements of society which rejected her.
In Potions, the next day, Snape seemed determined to exert complete control.

"Weasley, sit with Zabini. Perhaps he can force you to behave. Malfoy, I'm afraid I'm putting you with Longbottom. Good luck. Granger --" Snape smiled dangerously at Hermione — "you may sit with Mr. Goyle, today."


"Dean Thomas, Professor," Harry replied.

"Dean Thomas? Rather transparent, Potter, don't you think?"

"Normally, I'd say Crabbe, sir," Harry returned. "But the Slytherins are traditional enemies — I've grown rather comfortable with them hating me. Dean, on the other hand, is furious at me over Draco — more than the others, because he's Muggle-born -- and I'm not used to that from him."

Snape evaluated Harry for a long time before saying, "Sit with Crabbe, Potter. I'm not going to risk the chance you shamed your housemate into behaving."

Potions class was horrible.

After dinner, Harry met Draco in the Chamber of Secrets.

"Up for an expedition?" Harry asked.

Draco looked surprised. "Already? Whatever for?"

Harry looked off down the hall — not at anything, just away. "Remember, when we were flying by that loch, the sign that said, 'Caution -- Black Ice?'" He looked back at Draco, who nodded. Harry smiled slightly. "I want to take it and hang it on the door of Snape's potions lab. Tonight." He grinned at Draco, who was looking encouragingly stunned. "Up for it?"

Wednesday, Gryffindor and Slytherin had Potions first thing in the morning. Harry and Draco arrived early — early enough to sit together, and early enough to be certain they would see Snape arrive. The sign they had put on the door a few hours earlier was still there.

Snape's footsteps slowed considerably, but never quite stopped, as he approached the door. He strode to the front of the classroom, did one of his usual smart pivots, and surveyed the class. Harry thought he was actually smirking.

"Should any of you be responsible," Snape said, "thank you for the decoration. And should I discover who was responsible, I shall report you to the headmaster on suspicion of theft, interference with Muggles, and leaving Hogwarts without permission." He turned again, and began writing on the board, then, abruptly, swiveled back.
"Mr. Malfoy? Pray tell why you are with Potter, again."

Harry looked at Draco. Draco raised his eyebrows. Harry nodded slightly.

"Because we're friends, sir," Draco said clearly. "We have been since December."

Snape looked startled. His eyes darted quickly to Harry's, then back to Malfoy.

"I see. Perhaps this explains the sudden improvement in Mr. Potter's work?"

"I've been explaining things to him, sir. I haven't done any work for him."

"If you can get the boy to understand simple concepts, Mr. Malfoy, please feel free. He should keep in mind, however, that he will be sitting exams on his own."

With that, Snape turned back to the board, and began the ingredients list for that day's potion. Though he occasionally cast searching looks on Harry and Draco, who were collaborating with cautious cheer, he seemed to be in an unusually fine mood. By the end of class, Gryffindor had lost only five points.

As they were packing up their books, Draco caught Harry's arm.

"This weekend. . . ."

"What?"

"Since we're in for it anyway — want to meet me for the Hogsmeade visit?"

Harry grinned. "Absolutely!"
"I wanted to get you a present," Malfoy said, as Harry followed him curiously down the street. "Except it's alive, and I'm not sure you'll like it. So I had it sent out here, and you can refuse it, if you like. They'll just charge me for shipment — or, rather, charge Father."

"I'm sure your father will be delighted to be paying for presents for me."

Draco smirked. "He won't know the difference."

Harry looked at the other people on the street. Most were locals, and did not look at them long enough to recognize The-Boy-Who-Lived walking with Lucius Malfoy's heir. A small group of Ravenclaw students did, but looked uneasily away when Harry smiled at them.

"Don't take this wrong, Draco, but — why?"

"It's a pet," Draco replied. "Because we probably won't get to be friends for long, and I want you to have someone to talk to once I'm a Death Eater." His words came out evenly, but his voice was a little too firm to be casual. Harry flinched.

"Have you considered refusing?" he asked wryly.

"I am not a suicidal Gryffindor," Draco retorted, quickening his pace. "Odd as this may seem to you, I place great value on survival. That means I do not say 'no' to the Dark Lord."

Harry wanted to argue, but couldn't think of anything convincing. Certainly, he had survived refusing Voldemort, but he had been well protected, and his escape still a matter of considerable luck. Before he could get anything out, Draco had turned. He was walking toward a door painted like a large owl, with round windows for the eyes. Harry glanced up the shop sign before following. Cristata's Creatures, he read.

He followed Draco inside the shop. It was well-lit, and less smelly than the Magical Menagerie in Diagon Alley, though still decidedly musky. Harry glanced around, and quickly decided that the shop sold more supplies than actual animals. There were a few different owls, a cage of rats, various reptiles, and at least two free-roaming cats, but the groups of cages were separated by shelves of food, toys, books, and potions. Behind the counter, a pretty blond witch was playing with a two-tailed kitten. She looked up as Draco approached.

"Draco Malfoy," Draco said crisply. "You have a shipment for my evaluation?"

The witch made a soothing noise at the kitten and pushed it gently away.

"It arrived this morning. Let me get it."

The witch ducked through a velvet-curtained doorway. A minute later, she reappeared, holding a clear, seamless cube, which she put down on the counter. Harry looked inside and heard his breath leave him in a gasp of admiration.

It was a snake. He thought he ought to be annoyed by that. But it was a little, slender snake, and its scales shone like pure gold. As Harry watched, the snake uncurled slightly, then lifted its head to flick out a scarlet tongue. Harry could see it was annoyed not to get their scent.
"Perhaps you could open the enclosure?" Draco suggested sarcastically.

With a slight sigh, the witch pointed her wand at the tank, and the clear top faded away. Slowly, Harry reached out a hand toward the space.

"Now, as you requested, Mr. Malfoy, this snake is untrained," the witch warned. "It is naturally fond of human contact, but it does not know the standard positions, and is unlikely to lie still for more than half an hour at a time."

Harry's hand had passed through the space where the top of the tank had been. He stopped there a moment, letting the snake catch his scent on her scarlet tongue.

"Hello, beautiful," he murmured, just for her. He was dimly aware of the witch jerking back, and realized he had spoken in Parseltongue. Harry glanced at Draco just long enough to see the blond boy's satisfied smirk, then he turned his attention back to the snake.

"You speak," the golden snake answered, pleased. She reared up towards Harry's hand, and he brought it closer. ("Training won't be a problem," Draco was saying coolly.) The snake coiled around Harry's hand, then up his arm, turning over herself to settle with her head on his wrist. Harry stroked a single finger gently down her brilliant scales. Her pliant body felt soft and smooth.

"Beautiful," he said again, and the snake stretched out her head and closed her eyes.

"I like you," the snake hissed softly. Harry hardly dared breath. He looked at Draco, who seemed thoroughly pleased.

"I take it you will accept my gift?" he said.

Harry looked at the snake. He wanted to agree enthusiastically, but a twinge of caution stopped him. He met Draco's eyes.

"A few things first," he said firmly. Draco sighed and nodded. Harry resumed. "Remember, I was raised by Muggles, right? What, precisely, is this? What does it do? What can it do? What kind of care does it need?"

Draco deferred the questions to the shopwitch, who answered:

"This is a torclinde, young sir. They are ornamental only. They can be trained to lie still, about your neck, as they did for Viking and Celtic wizards of old, or about the arm, in a more classical fashion, for up to six hours at a time.

"They have no poison, nor magical powers." She dared a slightly irritated glance at Draco Malfoy. "If young Mr. Malfoy had informed me he would be bringing a Parselmouth, I could have had a more interesting assortment of serpents available. We have a runespoor at the main shop —"

"Harry has no use for a runespoor," Draco interrupted. "The torclinde, on the other hand," he inclined his head graciously at Harry, "is perfect for him. See, Harry," he continued eagerly, "she's a young one — she'll grow to about twenty inches, and not noticeably wider. They're very gentle with people, and — well, anything larger than a sizable beetle, really — and since she's not trained, she'll bond closely to you. When they only have one owner, they pick up a bit of that person's personality, so she'll probably be sweet and unruly —" Draco seemed to catch himself, and laughed. "They live on bugs, oh, and a galleon every now and then —"

"Every two weeks, at her size."
"—so she'll probably hunt on her own, though you may need to buy some in the winter —"

"It is advisable," the witch said firmly, "to keep a supply of nutritious insects available at all times. It can be very difficult to tell when a snake is underfed —"

Harry looked directly at the witch for the first time. "She'll tell me if she's hungry," he said.

The witch stared slightly above Harry's eyes. With an effort, Harry kept his hand away from his forehead. I wonder if she read enough of Rita Skeeter's articles to have known I'm a Parselmouth? he thought. Doesn't look like it. And here I am with a Malfoy. . . .

"Anything else to add to Draco's summary?" he asked.

Visibly recovering, the witch advised him to supply a warming device for the snake when it was not on his body, and sold him a magical one that responded to the snake's presence, along with a little informational booklet entitled Torclinde: Serpent of the Viking Lords. Draco was openly grinning by the time they left the shop.

"Stop looking so pleased," Harry grumbled. "It's scary."

"It's nothing, really. I was afraid you'd be offended. Here I am giving a Gryffindor — bloody Harry Potter, yet — a snake."

Harry raised his arm and saw the snake's red tongue flicker out briefly before the golden body turned to seek a warmer location further up his sleeve. "In Gryffindor colors, though," he said.

Draco laughed.

"Thank you," Harry said. "She's wonderful."
By the time they headed back to Hogwarts, Harry had named the snake Susara. She had slid up his shirt and settled around his upper arm. He was surprised to find that he liked the softness of her skin where she coiled around him. She didn't grip like a constrictor.

"Don't wear her around your neck," Draco warned, as they walked back, "just your arm."

Harry raised his eyebrows. He wasn't sure the snake was actually long enough to go around his neck.

"Properly," Draco elaborated. "it should just mean you're freeborn. Some wizards, however, associate it with pure blood, and you are not entitled, by that criterion. Don't do it, unless you mean to be pretentious. It will cause trouble. Wearing her around your arm is safe enough."

When they got back to the school, Draco went to the Great Hall for dinner. Between Honeydukes sweets and snacks at The Three Broomsticks, Harry felt that he'd eaten enough, so he went straight up to Gryffindor Tower. There was no one else in the Common Room. He showed the room, and the ways in and out of it, to Susara, then she settled back on his arm.

Harry sat down on a couch with his Divination homework, which required more thought than usual. Everyone had gotten back a copy of their holiday prediction, and had been asked to map it to the actual events of their holidays. Harry began a slightly censored timeline on scrap parchment. Trelawny had commented on his essay that Tarot, though rather simplistic, was a good way to confirm or refute unlikely predictions. Harry checked back through the meanings for his cards. The Sun was usually just read as happiness or achievement, but he saw that it could also represent "harmony of enemies." The Page of Cups, reversed was "a charming but idle youth who may manipulate with flattery. Self-centered behavior. Selfishness."

Harry laughed out loud. "Oh, this is too easy!" he exclaimed.

He had fourteen inches of parchment filled, and was starting to feel that the reading had been far too accurate for comfort, when the door opened. A large group of people entered. Most dispersed through the room. A few seconds later, Hermione sat down on the couch beside Harry, and Ron had sat in the chair at a corner to it.

"Er... hi?" Harry tried.

"You weren't at dinner," Ron said.

"I had enough to eat in Hogsmeade."

"Oh."

"Look —" Hermione began, then stopped.

Harry put down his essay and looked at Hermione. Her face was a little red. "What?" he prompted.
"We missed you," she blurted out. "I mean — Hogsmeade — it was fun by ourselves once, last December, but we went looking for you this morning, and you'd already gone, and then we thought we'd catch you up, but we only saw you twice —"

"And you were absolutely with him," Ron interrupted. "I don't think you even noticed us."

"Actually, no. I didn't."

Susara began moving down Harry's arm. It felt very odd. Instinctively, he brought a hand to the motion, then caught himself.

"What -- Is something wrong?" Hermione asked.

"No, it's —" Harry looked at her anxious expression and forced a smile. "It just feels funny. Susara!" He switched to Parseltongue. "Come out!"

He brought his right hand to his left sleeve to give the golden snake something to move onto, but she just coiled twice around his wrist and raised her head up. Hermione caught her breath and flinched back, then settled uneasily forward again. Susara flicked out her tongue.

"She's tasting your scent," Harry said eagerly to Hermione. "This is Susara, my new pet. She's a torclinde. Isn't she beautiful?"

"Do you want me to remember this woman?" Susara asked.

"Yes. She is a friend of mine."

Susara hissed a neutral acknowledgment. "I now know her."

"Clever pet," Harry praised her. Susara stretched out happily. He smiled and stroked the snake's back, then looked back at Hermione. She seemed disturbed. Harry noticed they had attracted a small audience. Seamus, Dean, Ginny, and Parvati had drawn near the couch. People less close were watching quietly.

"Harry ... You ... You probably shouldn't talk to her in front of people."

Harry scowled. "Why not? She likes me talking to her. The first thing she ever said to me was 'you speak!' She was so surprised. It was absolutely cute."

"You can't have a snake!" Ron protested.

"Why not?"

"You're a Gryffindor!"

Harry looked at Susara, who was starting to shift uneasily. "She's Gryffindor colors, though, isn't she?" he noted.

Seamus laughed. "Good enough, Harry, but she's still a slimy snake."

"She's not slimy! She's soft. Feel, Seamus." Harry extended his hand to Seamus, who first pulled back, then, laughing, touched Susara.

"Right, then," he amended. "A silky snake. Rather like that blond toff you like."

"Well, I think she's beautiful, Harry," said Ginny Weasley. "Where did you get her?"
"Draco bought her for me."

"Harry!" Hermione objected. "You can't accept a snake from Draco Malfoy. It's some sort of plot!"

Harry stroked the gold scales again. "You can go in, if you wish," he said to Susara. She coiled quickly up his arm, back into the cover of his sleeve. Harry looked at Hermione. "He said I should always have someone to talk to," he said, "whatever." Harry shrugged. "Besides, it entertains me to think Lucius Malfoy paid for a present for me."

Hermione looked around them at the other people in the Common Room. "Let's go in my room," she said. "It's too crowded here."

Harry gathered up his papers, Divination books, inkwell, and quills, and followed Hermione across the Common Room and up the half-flight of stairs to the prefect's single room. Ron came with them. Once the door was closed, Ron sat down on the bed and scowled at Harry.

"Must be fun, going about with someone who has as much money as you have."

"Oh don't start that again!" Harry snapped.

"Well? Don't tell me you don't like it, with your aristocrat's snake and your swish new clothes."

"It's bloody expensive, if you must know. I've spent more in the last six weeks than I spent for all my school things last fall. And mostly I pay for things for both of us."

"You pay for things?" Ron asked. "Why do that for a Malfoy?"

"Because if I didn't, he'd steal them. Draco has a hard time believing in other people's property." Harry rolled his eyes. "Look, I'm not complaining. It has been fun. But it could have been just as much fun with you, Ron, and much cheaper, if you'd just have let me pay for things, then forget about it."

Ron jumped to his feet. "I don't need you to buy me things!"

"How did this turn into an argument about money?" Hermione interrupted.

"Because Ron's here."

"You mentioned it first," Ron snarled.

"Just as an offense to Draco's father. And you were the one to make it an issue, like always!"

"Harry! Drop it!" Hermione snapped.

"Fine. I won't mention it again if he doesn't."

Ron was standing on the balls of his feet, his hands clenched tight at his sides and his face red, but he shook his head. "No," he said. "Hermione and I agreed this is the stupidest fight the three of us have ever had, and we hadn't even really had it. If this is part of the last month's fight, I want to have it, so we can get it done."

"We have not been having a fight!"

"Then why do we have to haul you in here to talk to you?"
"Because --" Harry tried to think of all the things that mattered, but gave up on expressing them. In a flash of malice, he decided on a simple answer. Coolly, he said:

"Because we're not friends, anymore." At the look on Ron's face, Harry realized that there was no more hurtful thing he could have said. He let the statement stand, and flushed with success and shame.

Ron stared at him.

"That's it?" he said finally. "We're best friends for five years, and I ignore you for a couple of months and it's over?"

"Look," said Harry, "you're not really interested. You're just still feeling proprietary enough to be jealous, because you don't like my taste in successors."

"Jealous?! If you're trailing around after that pinch-faced snake because you think it bothers me, you bloody well deserve whatever you get! You're ——"

"That's enough!" Hermione shouted. Ron stopped yelling. "Ron, you get out of here — now! I'll talk to him."

"Yeah, sure." Ron backed away, his eyes not leaving Harry until he turned to go through the door.

When the door shut behind Ron, Harry closed his eyes and let out a breath. When he opened them again, Hermione was leaning into her desk, staring down at the wide-grained wood.

"Hermione?" Harry tried. "I'm sorry. I don't know why he gets me so angry."

"Well maybe you should figure it out. He doesn't deserve this."

"But he's so --!" Harry growled. "I can't even — It isn't just that the two of you ignored me, because I don't mind you. When I was telling Draco he couldn't call you ... that word he uses, I told him that I love you." In response to Hermione's startled look, he hastily added, "not like that! Not in any way that would make this make sense. But I do."

"So, what else about him makes you angry?"

"This ... this money thing. That's a pain. And it's... No, I think I have it. Ron doesn't value anything he has — nothing — and he has a lot. If I got a choice of being in Ron's shoes or Draco's, I'd take Ron's, in a flash. He has four brothers and a sister, who all love him very much, and a wonderful, caring mother, who really isn't as fussy as he thinks, and a home where he's safe, and with all kinds of fun things to do, and until last spring, he had a father who was also kind and reasonable and loving."

"Losing his father was very hard on Ron, Harry. Losing Percy was too."

"I know! And you'd think that would make him appreciate Bill and Charlie and Fred and George and Ginny and his Mum more. But he still just complains! And it's hard to be sympathetic when I'd kill to be in his place."

Harry couldn't say anything else. Hermione came and put her arms around him, and he stayed very still, afraid he might cry if he relaxed against her. He was surprised to realize how envious he truly was.

When he thought he could speak steadily, he went on:
"That's a big difference between Ron and Draco. Ron acts like nothing he has is worthwhile, and puts himself down. Draco acts like only what he has is worthwhile, and scoffs at everything else, putting down people who aren't like him. It's just as untrue, and just as destructive, but I seem to be able to put up with it better, I suppose because I haven't had five and a half years to get bloody sick of it."

"So you're jealous of him."

"Ron? I've been jealous since I met him — especially since the first time I went to the Burrow. Draco's easier. He doesn't have anything I want. He's got money, but I've already got that. He's got social standing in pureblood circles, but I don't care about that. And for both, he has to be Lucius Malfoy's son, and I wouldn't be that for ..." Harry tried to think of something he truly wanted — "for Voldemort's head on a platter."

Hermione stepped back. "Is that what you want most in the world?"

Harry re-evaluated the choice. "Of things I could have? Yes." He could tell the answer upset her, but did not try to deny it. "I'm sorry, Hermione. It's kind of bloodthirsty, I suppose, but I can't think of anything else I want so much as to see him dead."

He paced to the window and stared out at the dark. "Yes, I'm jealous of Ron. It never helped that he was jealous of me, and now it makes things worse. He's such an idiot!" He glanced back at her. "Do you think it would have helped if I'd chosen him for the team?"

"Wilkens is a better player."

"Yes. And he's less likely to lose his temper and do something stupid. So what is the captain's sanity worth?"

"If you chose Ron over Wilkens, he'd know why you did it, and he'd be insulted. It would not have helped."

"Okay. Thanks."

Hermione walked over to Harry. She took his hand and held it in her own. He decided that was better than being hugged. Safer. He kind of liked it. He gave her hand a little squeeze.

"Would it have helped if you had come to the Burrow with us?" she asked tentatively.

"I don't know. It would at least have made me feel more connected to the rest of the family. I think it would have helped to get to the Burrow this summer. I understand why they didn't want me there, right after Mr. Weasley died, and I'm not blaming them — but it would have — it would make it less 'his thing that I can't have,' if you understand."

"I think so."

Harry felt a rush of gratitude. He might let his feelings about Ron's attitudes get in the way of his friendship with Ron, but he never should have let them get in the way of his friendship with Hermione.

"Hermione? Don't take this wrong ..."

Hermione turned to meet his searching gaze. Her brown eyes were wide with apprehension. "Yes?"

"I love you," Harry said quickly.
She hugged him again, and it was okay, this time. "I love you too, Harry." She pecked him on the cheek, like she did sometimes when saying goodbye, then they pulled back from each other. They had somehow, Harry noticed, ended up holding both of each other's hands.

"So ... Do you think I can make up with Ron? I mean, he is your boyfriend, at least."

"Hm ... I suggest you apologize, but don't push it. I'll talk to him later."

"Thanks."

"You're welcome."

"I'm sorry about getting on you about the prefect thing."

"No, you were right." Hermione looked uneasy. "Had there been someone in particular who wanted to talk to me? Or —"

"Me."

"Oh." Hermione laughed slightly. "Is it still relevant?"

Harry shook his head. "It's gotten too complicated to talk about."

"Harry," she said warningly.

"I needed to make a decision, and I did. The things that spiraled out of that are not all my secrets. I can't tell you, anymore, what the original problem was."

Hermione bit her lip. "If you say so. Is Draco giving you trouble?"

"He's fine." Harry let her hands drop. "I should get back to my Divination homework."

"All right, then. I can't interfere with that!"

"Absolutely not. I'm doing it for real, even."

"I'm a bit surprised."

Harry laughed appreciatively and went back to the Common Room. Ron was not there. Rather than resuming his essay, he went up to the dormitory. Seamus and Neville were studying, and Ron was lying on his back on his bed, staring up at the canopy.

"Ron?" Harry queried.

"Sod off."

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have gone after you like that."

"So?"

"So ..." Harry sighed and took a deep breath. "Do you want to try to be friends again?"

"I already told you to sod off," Ron growled.

Harry shrugged. "Okay. But next time it's your turn to apologize and my turn to give you some rude brush off."
Ron leapt up angrily, but Seamus was suddenly between them.

"Come on, lads," he said coaxingly, placing a large hand on a shoulder of each. "I say it is time you got something." Harry and Ron both turned towards Seamus, and with a sudden surprise move he shoved them together so their heads hit with a resounding crack. Ron shouted. Harry staggered back, gasping. Neville burst out laughing.

"Ow..." Harry put a hand to his head and it came away sticky. Ron was dripping blood over one eye.

"Sorry!" Neville gasped.

"Now, let's go to the hospital wing, shall we?" Seamus said cheerfully. "And don't be such blaring prats in front of me again."

Harry assumed that when Draco said wearing the snake around his neck would cause trouble, he had meant it would cause trouble with people like himself. Simply having a snake was enough to cause trouble with the Gryffindors. Talking to a snake — and Harry found it impossible not to talk to Susara — caused trouble with most people. Still, Susara said Harry was nicer than the warming device, and Harry took her pretty much everywhere.

The Slytherins seemed discomfited by the torclinde. This was Harry, and they knew they should disapprove of anything Harry Potter did, but how on earth were they to disapprove of a pet snake? Blaise, perhaps the most creative of the Slytherin sixth years after Malfoy, attempted to reconcile this with more specific insults. In the hall after dinner, on Sunday, he called out:

"Look at Potter's torclinde! Trust a Gryffindor to get a lady's snake!"

Draco Malfoy whirled so quickly that he caught everyone's attention.

"My father keeps two torclindes, for formal occasions. Unless you want that ridiculous statement repeated to him, I suggest you restrain your tongue, to keep from parading your pathetic lack of breeding."

That line of attack, therefore, was dropped, reducing the Slytherin arsenal to comments on how Potter couldn't get a decently dangerous snake. Harry couldn't manage to find this insulting.

Harry brought Susara to classes on Monday. In both Charms and Transfiguration, he was reprimanded for speaking to her. McGonagall, who seemed to consider the snake a personal insult, went so far as to insist Harry keep it out of sight. Draco did not help matters by sniggering.

In Potions class, Harry whispered to Susara that she could slip down to his wrist for a look around.

"No angry people?"

"This teacher should not mind."

Harry glanced up at Snape and saw the Potions master staring at him. Parseltongue was not
conducive to a genuinely private whisper.

"What did you say?" Draco whispered. They were sitting together, again. Snape had not prevented this since the class immediately after the Facilis potion.

"Just that the teacher shouldn't mind her, too much." Harry looked back up at Snape. Snape was watching the emerging torclinde with an odd, almost wistful, expression on his face.

"The fire is warm."

"Bask, if you like. Don't touch anything, though. Some of the components might hurt you."

"I will touch only the heat."

"Potter?" Snape's voice was oddly strained.

"Yes, Professor?"

"I have no objection to the ... serpent, but please confine your conversation to a minimum. This is, as you may recall, a class."

"Yes, sir."

"I don't believe you!" Ron fumed, as he sat next to Harry at lunch. "You've been showing off that snake in every class we've had, today. I thought McGonagall was going to give you detention!"

"She did seem rather unreasonable about it," Harry commented.

"Unreasonable? I think she's perfectly reasonable. I don't like watching you either. Gryffindors shouldn't have snakes."

Susara chose that moment to slide out of Harry's sleeve. Harry restrained himself from summarizing the conversation for her. He settled for stroking a finger lightly down her shining scales.

"I like this snake."

Hermione looked over. "I've thought of something. Maybe the snake is to listen to your secrets, and then You-Know-Who will take it and question it and learn everything."

"What 'everything?' She doesn't understand English, and I'm not talking to her about politics. Voldemort would have an easier time grabbing one of you for torture, and he'd get more out of it." Harry smirked. "Probably enjoy it more, too."

"Perhaps it's just to tarnish your reputation," suggested Seamus.

"That could be it!" Hermione exclaimed.

Harry rolled his eyes and took a slice of ham for his plate.

In Thursday's Potions class, they were making a Fur-Growing potion. This, if made correctly, was
supposed to cause fur to grow on any leather or skin, living or not, on which it was rubbed. A necessary ingredient was werewolf fur. Although Professor Snape had assured the class that this was not a contagion, several of the students were noticeably reluctant to handle it.

"Wonder if I know this wolf?" Harry commented, deliberately running his fingers through his and Draco's batch of fur. The hairs were very long and surprisingly soft.

Draco raised his eyebrows. "Can't see you petting that ... tramp, this way, Harry. But you liked him, didn't you?"

"Moony? Yeah. I still hear from him now and then."

Draco stifled a laugh. He reached out to the fur and stroked it evaluatingly. "Not bad. Pity it won't work on plastic chairs."

As they prepared their ingredients, Draco grew more and more absorbed. Harry wondered if he shouldn't have mentioned Moony, or if he should have at least stuck to Lupin's proper name.

"We need to steal some of this," Draco whispered. "More than usual." He passed Harry four vials under the table. "You get them."

"Er..."

"Do it. I've got an idea."

While Harry was worrying about Draco's idea, Draco bumped into their mortar, spilling thistle-seed all over the floor. He stood up immediately.

"I'm sorry sir," he said quickly, as Snape approached. "Shall I go get more?"

"Quickly," Snape snapped. "Potter, you can clean up this mess."

"Yes sir," Harry said. He hoped that Draco was getting something more interesting than thistle seed from Snape's storeroom.

Draco sauntered back as soon as Harry was done sweeping up the tiny seeds, and they finished combining the ingredients, which in this case, were mixed cold, except for the werewolf fur.

Susara ventured out once they lit their caldron.

"May I bask?"

"Yes. Stay away from the potion, though. It would make you grow fur."

Harry glanced at Snape. The professor was watching him. Harry stirred while Draco dribbled in the grey hairs, and the potion began to thicken, and form into strands. When Draco declared it ready, they ladled a generous amount out onto the cooling stone. Quick as a lightning flash, Susara flicked her tail over and into the potion, then brought it out again.

"Susara!" Harry scolded. "You did that deliberately!" he hissed.

Draco sighed and grabbed a second cooling stone from an unused table. He began ladling out more potion to replace that contaminated by the snake.

Susara looked admiringly at the golden tuft on her tail and said something to Harry. He burst out laughing, just as Professor Snape arrived at the table.
"Do you think it amusing to disfigure your snake, Potter?"

"She did it herself, sir!" Harry protested. "And you don't know what she said!"

"I do not, Mr. Potter." Snape snarled suddenly. "Tell me."

Harry reached out for Susara, who slid tentatively back around his wrist, but continued to flick and watch her little tuft. "She said if .. if she had a lion tail, maybe my housemates would like her better." Harry scanned over the staring Gryffindors, then looked back up at Snape. "I don't think it will work, though. Do you have an antidote?"

"I will have some available tomorrow. Presumably your serpent should be tired of playing lion by that time?"

Snape raised his eyebrows questioningly. He looked amused. Harry nodded in relief. "I expect so, sir."

Unfortunately, Snape's attention kept returning to Susara, preventing Harry from taking any of the potion. Guiltily, Harry hoped Neville would do something spectacularly stupid that would keep the Potions master's attention for a minute. It was actually Parvati, however, who did so. Due to her fear of handling the werewolf fur, she flicked it into the cauldron rather than placing it in gently, and managed to get her spatula in as well and splash herself with the hot mixture.

"Aaa!" she yelled. Snape was halfway across the room in a moment. Harry immediately turned his attention to filling the vials. Draco scooped up the first two as soon as they were capped. Harry glanced over to see that Snape was still scolding Parvati, who was already growing long hair from two spots on her hand. Other people in the class, even the Gryffindors, were snickering.

"... reputed to be brave, Miss Patil! But typical Gryffindor incompetence wins — Potter!"

Harry only just managed not to drop the fourth, full vial at Snape's angry shriek. The third was still in plain sight on the counter. Professor Snape abandoned the unfortunate Parvati and strode over to Harry.

"What are you doing, Mr. Potter?" he spat.

"I ... I ..." Harry looked at the full vial in his hands. What he was doing was really all too obvious. Abandoning all pretense, he stoppered the vial and laid it next to the previous one. "Taking a sample."

"You are stealing, Mr. Potter," Snape hissed, but before he could continue, Draco Malfoy, with an ingenuous smile, had removed one of the other vials from his pocket, and held it out towards Snape. The Potions Master fell silent.

"We had an idea for a project, sir," Draco said eagerly. "I wanted to do some tests, first, to make sure it was worth pursuing, and then we were going to ask you for extra lab time."

Harry kept his face impassive. He wasn't sure if extra lab time with Snape would really be any better than a few nights' detention, but he wasn't going to give Draco away.

"I ... see." Snape looked oddly at each of them in turn. Susara took this moment to poke her head out the neck of Harry's robe, slither once around his neck, then settle on his shoulder with most of her body inside the robe, but her tufted tail still visible. Somebody sniggered.

"Very well," Snape said coldly. "Both of you come to my office immediately after dinner, and we
will discuss this ... project.
After the last trip to the Muggle village, Draco had remarked, idly, that it might be pleasant to have more than an hour until the shops closed.

"And then, there's watching the Muggles," he commented. "They sort of do things. Other than run and scream, I mean. It's interesting. Like going to the zoo," he added hastily, at Harry's raised eyebrow.

Harry had therefore suggested a daytime expedition, which would be trickier, with a simple broom flight back after dark. They left right after Saturday's breakfast, with a packed lunch. First they walked to Hogsmeade via the tunnel, then slipped out into the countryside under Harry's cloak, then flew up the hill, zigzagging through the trees of a narrow wood. From there, Harry ventured out under the cloak, which was difficult to hold over himself while flying, until he found the closest bus stop on the road. He went back to Draco, and they walked there, which took over an hour. After that, they wrapped both brooms in the invisibility cloak (carrying them, they were aware, looked rather odd), took the bus into town, then set the compass to Harry's Firebolt, and tucked the bundle of brooms up on a ledge in an alley.

Draco had brought an Aging potion, this time, which brought both of them comfortably into their mid-twenties, and easily able to walk into an off-license and buy whatever they wanted. After a bit of browsing, Draco choose a bottle of Alsatian wine and another of pear brandy before picking out a cognac. Harry, as usual, had to pay for all of it, because Draco had forgotten to bring Muggle money. This time, however, Draco apologized nicely, and put the liquor in his own satchel. Harry dragged him into a another shop for chocolate-covered biscuits, pop, and crisps. Eventually, they returned to the alley and made the awkward and dangerous flight under the invisibility cloak up to an open church steeple. The floor was set less than a meter below the edges of the gothic openings, three on each side, that ringed the small floor, and the chains holding the bells above it looked rusty from disuse. Draco cleaned the floor with a quick spell and they settled down comfortably. Harry opened the crisps and pop.

"Think anyone spotted us?" Harry asked.

"Not for long enough to believe it," Draco replied confidently. He tasted the pop and took a second to stare at it, then shrugged and had more. "Still, I wouldn't want to do that again. Not sharing it. We're here until dark." He opened his bag. "Want anything?"

"After I'm done with this."

"Which do you want, after?"

"The cognac? If it's okay to open it."

"I don't mind. I don't have snifters, though."

For all that, Draco had brought along two elegant silver goblets. He poured some cognac into each, then resealed the bottle with a spell. He joined Harry at the openings on the west side of the steeple, and they looked out over a strip of shops two streets wide, a school, playing fields, and a narrow public green that ran along the edge of a flooded river.

For a long time, they watched the adults walking and children playing by the river, and the
occasional people leaving or entering the church, which seemed to be hosting a small event. Occasionally, Harry would look over at Draco to see if he had resumed his correct age, yet. Harry had almost finished his first glass of cognac when Draco nudged him.

"The aging potion has worn off."

"So it has!" Harry agreed. He was surprised at what a relief it was to see Draco his proper age.

"So, about these cards you use to prove your age..." Draco advanced.

"Yes?"

"What do they look like?"

"Well," Harry tried to think how to explain what he knew of Muggle identity cards. "There's not a standard one. Any place will accept a passport. Some schools have their own. Some stores might take a driving license, but some won't, because they don't have photographs on them, so you could have someone else's."

"Do you have any of those?"

"No," Harry shrugged. "I'm not really a good person to ask about Muggle things. I'm not allowed to do much." He laughed slightly. "They keep me locked up half the time."

"What!" Draco exclaimed. He brought his voice down. "You said — I mean, back when we were writing, you said there were locks, but I rather... Do they still?"

Harry smiled slightly. "There are five padlocks on the outside of the door to my room. They unlock them when they want me out to do something." He glanced down, then met Draco's eyes. "I'm dangerous, I am. One of those freaks." He said it to be funny, but his voice shook with tension, even now.

Draco sat back. He looked pensively at Harry. "Why don't you want to kill all of them? I would."

Harry shrugged. "It would be like killing all wizards because your father is horrid. I know better." Daringly, he added, "You know better."

"So you know enough Muggles you like that it's okay?"

"I don't know many Muggles, actually," Harry admitted. "I'm not allowed. But some people have been kind to me, when they could. And I watch people, when I have the chance. The majority of Muggles, like the majority of wizards, aren't wonderful or awful — they just kind of are."

"Huh." Draco leaned back against the wall between the open arches. "Well, back to identity documents. I have a challenge for you."

Harry shrugged, but could not repress a smile. "What?"

"I want you to fly down and get me something that is used for proof of age, so I can look at it."

"Draco..." Harry protested. "I'd have to steal it from someone."

Draco smirked. "Yes." He glanced down, pale eyelashes briefly obscuring his piercing gaze. "But you can return it, after I'm done." He turned around and looked out one of the windows. "How about that girl, there?" he asked, pointing to a young woman who was just settling down on the grass with some food and a book. Her rucksack sat near her on the grass. "Get her bag. I'd like to see what else
they carry, anyway. She'll be there for a bit, so you can bring it back before she leaves."

Harry considered this. The thought of going through someone's personal things made him uncomfortable, but a session of Muggle show-and-tell might improve Draco's opinion of Muggles. It certainly couldn't make it any worse. He looked back at the girl. She turned a page, and took a bite from a sandwich.

"Okay," he said. He put on the cloak, took up his broom, and stepped out on to the roof.

Taking the bag should have been easy. It was a stationary object, with handles, yet, tens of times the size of a Golden Snitch. On his first approach, Harry found he was wobbling slightly, and he passed by and returned more slowly.

*Not enough alcohol to affect how I walk, affects how I fly. I must remember that.*

On the second pass, he coasted down at a leisurely pace and was able to scoop the rucksack up and under his cloak. The girl, to his relief, didn't even notice. He hoped he could get it back before she did. He flew back up, and deposited the bag on the floor. He and Draco sat cross-legged on the floor, on opposite sides of it, and Draco began taking things out.

"A book," he said to the first, large item. "What's it about?"

Harry took the book and looked at it. "Er... it's a physics text. Muggle science. I never learned any of it, because I've been at Hogwarts, instead." Draco removed two more books, one that claimed to be Maths, but was full of symbols Harry had never seen, and one of Psychology. "That's the science of how people think," Harry explained.

"There is no science to how people think."

Harry grinned. "That's been argued, I believe."

"This?"

"A notebook."

"I can see that, but why do the pages have lines on them?"

"I don't know. So you can't cheat by writing large?"

Draco removed a rectangular object with numbers on the front. "This?"

"It's a calculator. It does math for you." Harry took the calculator, found the 'On' button and entered '2' '+ ' '2' '='. "See?" he said, as the display came back with '4'.

"Useful, I suppose." Draco pulled out another rectangular object. "This?"

"Cigarettes." Thinking back, Harry could not recall ever seeing cigarettes in the wizarding world. He was fairly sure he had seen pipes, though not frequently, at the Leaky Cauldron.

Draco peered at the package and sniffed it. "Are they for —" He pulled one out and recognized it. "Ah — these are those things they walk around with in their mouths."

Harry nodded. "Like a pipe, but without the pipe part."

"What are they like?"
Harry shrugged. "Don't know; never had one. They're horribly bad for you."

Draco peered into the bag, again. "Well, she's got three packets of them, and that's the end of the large stuff." He upended the rucksack and shook everything remaining out onto the floor. He questioned Harry about lipstick ("To put on your lips. No, for a girl to put on her lips! It's to make the color more intense.") various other makeup items, a small battery-powered torch, a packet of cat treats, pens, pencils, markers, rubbers, and (much to Harry's embarrassment) condoms. Draco's two favorite items were a folding mirror and a lighter. Harry found the lighter trickier to use than he expected. It took him a few tries to turn the wheel fast enough to show Draco how it worked.

"For light?" Draco asked, puzzled, as he played with starting and stopping the flame. "But she has that pointer thing."

"For starting the cigarettes," Harry explained. He looked out at the girl. She had finished the first half of her sandwich, and was still contentedly reading her book.

Draco took out a cigarette and held it out, then put the lighter to it. Harry burst out laughing. "What?" Draco asked.

"You need to inhale through it while you do that, I think."

"Oh." Draco thought. "Yes, I've seen that. The man outside the shop where you bought the crisps..." He tried again, properly, exhaled the smoke quickly and cleared his throat. "And the point to this is?" he asked wryly, making a face.

Harry shrugged. "It's a drug of sorts. Supposedly it feels nice. Some people find it calming. It's addictive, so if you do it enough, you won't care much that it's bad for you."

Draco took another mouthful of smoke and blew it out ostentatiously. "Fun for playing dragon with, I suppose." He held it out to Harry. "You try."

Harry, reluctantly, took the cigarette. He took a shallow mouthful, breathed it out, then tried a deeper breath. He wasn't getting the coughing fit people claimed one would, he realized. He handed the cigarette back to Draco.

"What do you think?" Draco asked.

Harry shrugged. "Not as bad as I expected, but not worth getting used to."

"Hm. Agreed." Draco pointed his wand at the end of the cigarette. "Exstinguere," he said, and it went neatly out. Draco tossed it into the corner and began to repack items, starting with the books. Harry thought with amusement that the girl was certain to notice that her bag was better organized than it had been.

"We didn't find any identity cards," Draco noted.

"Probably the front pocket. No, keep packing. I'll empty it." Harry opened the small pocket in the front of the rucksack. It had a wallet, more pens and pencils, and a few other small items.

"What's this?" Draco picked up one of several paper packets and ripped it open. It contained a narrow cardboard tube with a string hanging out of it.

"I haven't any idea," Harry admitted. Draco held up the object so that the string dangled. He swatted at it.
"Cat toy?" he guessed.

"Let's see." Harry put the object down on the floor and tapped it. It rolled in an interesting way. Sufficient pulling on the string separated a vaguely mouse-shaped thing from a cardboard telescope. "Could be," he said, "but why would she be carrying cat toys?"

"Why is she carrying cat treats?" Draco countered, shrugging.

Harry glanced out the nearest arch.

"Uh oh. She's just noticed." The girl was turning in place, looking around her spot. Harry opened the wallet and grabbed a student identity card and a driving license out of it. "Check these out, quick, so I can get this stuff back to her before she runs off to report it stolen."

Draco frowned at the cards, then picked up the mirror and held it so that he could see the cards in it. He pointed at the mirror with his wand. "Laquio," he said. As he snapped the mirror shut, Harry saw that it was still displaying the cards. "I'll need to keep this," Draco advanced.

"The mirror?"

"Yes. So I can check the cards later. Okay?"

"Fine. She can get another one." Harry held out his hand for the cards, and put them back in the wallet. The girl was standing up, now. Harry hurriedly shoveled items back into the pocket. He looked up to see Draco pointing his wand at one of the paper packets.

"What are you doing?"

"Improving it. It will wiggle, now, when it's hit."

Harry rolled his eyes, but let Draco put the charmed item back in the pocket. He took off with the rucksack, and flew in front of the girl. He dropped the rucksack one step down a short flight of stairs leading to the road, then hovered above to watch. The girl nearly tripped over it. Harry watched her snatch it up, then frantically begin to check its contents. He fled back to the steeple.

"Were you entertained?" Harry asked solicitously, as he dropped the cape.

Draco smiled. "Quite," he said. Harry poured himself more cognac and wondered why he was trembling now. It had worked out all right. Except....

"I ought to report you to the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts department," he teased.

Draco smirked. "It's just a cat toy, Potter. She may never even notice. And it's a weak charm — it will wear off in a day or two."

"Huh." Harry looked down at the girl. She had the rucksack swung over one shoulder, and was heading off towards the shops. So that's all right. He scanned along the grassy area by the river. The afternoon had worn on, and there were fewer people walking there, now. Harry saw three children and a dog on an island a short way out in the flooded waters. He suspected they were stuck.

"I have one for you," he said.

"One what?"
Harry pointed. "See those kids?"

"The ones that got stuck in the river?" Draco sounded amused.

"Yes." Harry looked haughtily at Draco. "You will go rescue them, and the dog."

"I will?!"

"You can use magic, but nothing they notice as such." Harry tried to smirk like Malfoy had. He thought he probably had done pretty well. "You have an hour."

"Harry!"

"Well?"

Draco bit his lip and looked away, up at the bright sky. Harry thought he was trying not to smile. "I suppose," he drawled, finally. "Lend me your cloak, then."

After Draco flew off, Harry knelt at one of the openings and watched for him to appear below. He briefly wished he had brought Susara — it seemed odd to be without her now, but he had been afraid the flying might get dangerous, if they were spotted. Draco emerged from the bushes near the church, and walked jauntily down to the river. He called over to the stranded children. Harry drank his cognac and watched.

After a bit, Draco continued upstream, walking slowly and occasionally stopping to examine trees, fallen trees, and pieces of debris. After about fifteen minutes, he stopped at a tree that had half-fallen, but survived, so that it was now growing almost horizontally out over the water. Harry watched him point his wand at the exposed roots of the tree. Afterwards, the tree came loose when he jumped on it. Draco managed to get back on the bank rather than falling with it, but he was splashed head to foot. He looked back up at the steeple and made an obscene gesture. Harry laughed.

The tree tumbled downstream. Harry thought Draco took control of its movement, although he could not see, from his angle, whether or not Draco drew his wand. The tree simply moved too perfectly to be at the mercy of the current. In a few minutes, the top was lodged against the little island, and the roots stuck in the shallows by the shore. Draco sauntered down and called over to the kids.

The oldest, a boy, was over in a minute. He was a head shorter than Draco. The next, whom Harry thought was a girl, followed quickly. Then the boy went back. Harry could see a very young girl still on the island. She was holding something that moved — perhaps the dog. Draco edged out onto the tree, until he was nearly to the island. For a while, he stood there, then he began to back up. He seemed to be helping the girl, who was still holding something, which kept her from steadying herself with the branches. The boy came behind her, holding onto her arm above the elbow. They were nearly to the shore when the girl's bundle squirmed loose and fell into the water. It got swept downstream, clear of the branches, enabling Harry to see it was, indeed, the small dog. The girl on the shore ran along beside it, but Harry did not follow her progress, because the girl on the tree either fell or jumped after the dog. Harry watched the thin branch she grabbed on to bobbing wildly up and down from her weight. Draco bent a second branch into her reach, and the girl slowly inched up the larger branch until she was close enough for the boy to grab.

After they made it to shore, Harry scanned for the other girl. She was quite a distance downstream, but had gotten the dog out, somehow. It was scampering merrily around her, as if the whole thing had been a smashing doggy adventure, while she strode grimly back to where they had started. Harry looked back there, and was shocked at what he saw.
Draco was down on one knee, one hand on the little girl's shoulder and the other holding one of her hands. She leaned into him for a moment. Harry watched, bemused as Draco folded over his cloak and draped it over the wet child. He took one of her hands, and the boy the other, and they led her downstream. She broke away from them when she saw the other girl and the dog. Draco strolled along, apparently in conversation with the boy, until they caught up. He then reclaimed his cloak, which the boy quickly replaced with his coat, and started back to the church.
Harry heard the thump of Draco landing before he had identified the slight swish of his winter cloak. Draco dropped the invisibility cloak all at once, and let his broom clatter to the floor.

"Are you satisfied with my performance?" Draco asked. There was an edge to the tone. Harry looked up at him, and was surprised to note that Draco's jaw was clenched. Harry hoped he didn't feel too humiliated by the exercise.

"Quite," Harry said, deliberately nudging himself back into the relaxation induced by the cognac. "You were clever, resourceful, and subtle. It's quite a twist, though, to see you play nice to a lost little girl."

Draco visibly flinched. "And what would you know about me and little girls, Potter?" he growled.

"Huh?"

"I have two cousins near that age. I like them. That is — they're witches, of course, but that young, it hardly matters."

Draco sat down and pulled his knees up to his chest. He suddenly looked utterly miserable.

"You all right?"

"No, I'm not!" Draco yelled. His eyes widened at the noise. "Sorry."

Harry put down his goblet and scooted over so he was sitting across from Draco. "Want to talk about it?"

Draco shook his head, then laid one cheek down on his knees, so Harry could no longer see his face. Harry carefully repressed the urge to touch Draco, or attempt to talk to him. Instead, he reached over to pick up his cognac and resumed drinking it. From where he sat, he could see a stretch of cerulean blue sky, and pieces of fluffy white clouds floating dizzily to the east. The sunlight slanted up now. He realized he was quite drunk, but he was still enjoying it. He decided he would stop drinking at sunset, so they could fly back not too far into full dark.

"Remember how I was gone, Halloween weekend?" Draco asked. Harry remembered. There had been a Death Eater attack on a small Welsh village Halloween night; he had wondered at the time if the missing Malfoy had participated. Over the last months, Draco had been so diffident about the Death Eaters that Harry had decided he had not.

"I was at the attack," Draco continued. "Not officially, but Father wanted me there. For training, he said. To see how I conducted myself in a 'more chaotic environment.'"

Harry swallowed. He found himself unable to move or speak. He'd heard some details from that
"It was fine, at first," Draco said. "We had this lot of fat shopkeepers who'd been at some sort of merchants' meeting, and we tormented them. They were shapeless men in shapeless grey clothes, and stout women in skirts too stiff to fall down, even if you spun them feet up. We made them do things, and hurt them and told them what we would burn — no burning, yet, as that would attract attention. Then their guards came with their silly uniforms and useless weapons, and they were great fun to humiliate, and their humiliation made it more exciting to hurt the others."

Draco was speaking very clearly and rapidly, now. He had raised his head, but was looking far beyond Harry. His cheeks were flushed pink, and his breathing quick and shallow. Harry was frozen in horrified fascination. How could something so terrible make Draco look so sparkling and perfect?

Draco shuddered. His eyes shut and tightened that way, and he turned his face down again.

"Father and I chased down a family. One of the merchant women had fled to a house, and tried to get her children into a car and away. He let them get out of the main fight, then stopped the car and took them out. Father killed her. He killed the two boys and gave me the girl to rape.

"I might have been able to, if she was older. She was a child, eleven at the most, with golden curls like cousin Marcella and crying so hard for her mother that she scarcely noticed what I was doing to her, except when it hurt. I was terrified Father would kill me — he'd gone quite blood-mad — so I was trying to do her, and all the time whispering that I was sorry. I've never apologized to a Muggle, before or since, but it was so awful. I couldn't get it up, and he would notice, and then he cast the Imperius Curse on me, and after that it was blissfully easy."

Harry remembered the Imperius Curse, and how it always seemed it would be so nice, if he ever gave in to it. Draco pressed his face into his knees and was silent for several minutes. Harry watched his shoulders rise and fall in forced deep breaths. Eventually, Draco turned his head to one side and spoke again, his voice unusually high and strained.

"When it was over, he snapped her neck. I don't know if he handed me the girl just because she was there, or because she looked like Marcella, and he suspected I might be swayed by that. I love Desiree and Marcella, and he knows I do." Draco said the last a bit defiantly, as if Harry might think less of him for loving his cousins. His eyes were pink when he looked up. "They are eight and ten, too young to be competitive with in any way, they follow me about and do everything I tell them, and think that I am perfect, and everything I do, or say, or like, is perfect." Draco practically spat the last word.

"What more could you ask for?" Harry said. He tried to speak lightly, but his voice squeaked like a child's. He swallowed the rest of his drink, forgetting it was alcohol until it hit his throat, then coughing embarrassingly.

"Well?" Draco said angrily, after Harry had finished choking. "Go on."

"With what?"

"Lay into me."

"Why?"

Draco stared unbelievingly at Harry. Harry shrugged.

"I wouldn't have cooperated. On the other hand, I wouldn't be expected to. And I don't see that there's much of a difference between being forced to rape someone and being raped. I mean,
"Don't make me an innocent, Potter. I knew perfectly well what can go on at these things. Torturing her some other way wouldn't have been any better, either. I just -- I didn't expect it to be like that. I thought there'd be a ... a bit of a fight. I'd have managed better if she'd been bigger than me — someone who'd bite and kick and think she ought to be able to get away."

"But they're Muggles," Harry said flatly. "You know they don't really have a chance."

Draco nodded. "I don't want anything more to do with it."

Harry, with a sense of relief, nodded in return. He still felt rather ill at the account, but it was reassuring to see that Draco seemed to, as well.

"It's been pleasant to let you convince me that's reasonable — from what you say, and how Father behaves now, I can say that I believe they will lose, rather than having to think about being revolted by it all. I mean, what purpose could it possible serve to torture them? And raping her? Normally, Father wouldn't want me to touch a Muggle girl, but it's okay if he kills her afterward? I don't think they're even terrorizing anyone as much as repelling them."

"You still say you'll be a Death Eater, though," Harry pointed out.

Draco, who had started to relax, pulled his knees in tighter. "I'm not likely to get out of it, am I?" he asked. Abruptly, he let his legs fall, and rubbed at his forehead. "Last summer, Desiree and Marcella stayed at Malfoy Manor for two weeks. I was showing off how grown up I am — posing for them, really. I have that marvelous precise pivot that I picked up from Snape — the one that will make a shoulder cape float like wings if you do it right — and Marcella picked it up from me. She had me transfigure half her clothing to black and silver — much to the displeasure of her nurse, who is trying to raise a dazzling little lady — and followed me about like the extra-junior Death Eater. It was cute. She's charming and sweet, and still cries if her toys break, and here she was in all this billowing black, trying to remember to stand with her arms across her chest, glaring at Desiree, then breaking out in giggles."

"Charming."

"Yeah," Draco went up on his knees to look over the short side wall. Golden light rested on his face and hair. "I'm starting to feel like I wreck everything I touch. Here I am with you, all brave and fierce and honorable, and the best I can think of is to get you drunk and try to talk you into stealing things."

Harry considered this. He did not, he decided, consider himself significantly corrupted by Draco.

"But we've done some marvelous exploring," he pointed out. "And we've both learned more from our schoolwork then we would have alone. And you've got me over being afraid to deal with snakes, which really is one of my more exclusive skills. And we're both better on the pitch — I've gotten vague invitations from recruiters already, and I suspect you have, as well — I recognized that blue envelope you got at breakfast, yesterday. I know more about my family, both good and bad, than before, and you know more about Muggles. You even acknowledge the usefulness of some Muggle ideas."

"Such as?"

"Inflatable chairs." Harry laughed. "Ah — and we've turned the dreaded secret lair of Salazar Slytherin into a clubhouse. I rather like that."

"You would," Draco said, rolling his eyes. "You admire impertinence."
"I've had idiots yelling about my impertinence for so long, I rather had to develop some and revel in it. It was really my only defense. Not being impertinent never helped in the slightest." Harry looked at Draco's cup. "You going to finish that?"

"No. I'd be sick if I tried to drink anything. You want it?"

"It looks like about the right amount." Harry picked up and eyeballed the liquid in the silver goblet, which was difficult to estimate from the top. He took a swallow from it, then looked again, Draco, Harry reckoned, had drunk about half a serving. Harry, thinking back, suspected this was also Draco's first glass. He thought it was his fourth.

Draco frowned at him. "Can you stand up?" he asked.

Harry got to his feet, bumped his head on one of the beams above them, and abruptly sat again. "Yes," he said. "Don't fuss, Draco — we can't leave for an hour, yet."

"Less. And you won't be in any shape to fly for at least two."

"So?" Harry forced himself to take another swallow, to show he didn't care what Draco thought. Draco looked away. His shoulders lifted in a shrug.

"I want to be back at school," he said.

Harry put down the goblet abruptly. "Oh," he said. "Sorry."

"It's all right. I don't have a good reason why — I think just talking about all this makes me feel ... something."

"I won't have any more."

"Thanks."

Harry looked at Draco. He wanted to say something reassuring, like "I still like you," or "that sucks," but he wasn't sure how it would sound. The whole story was horrible in more ways that he could catalog. Thinking aloud, he commented:

"I hope you'd had sex before."

"What!"

Harry blushed. "I mean — that'd be a horrid first time, wouldn't it?"

"Oh — yes, I suppose. I've had Pansy a few times — to see if I could stand her. It wasn't bad, but I don't think I can endure her as a wife. I sort of did it with Blaise, which was rather more fun, perhaps because no one is expecting me to marry him, but then he thought he could get familiar with me. I disabused him of that, well enough, but I haven't been able to go back to normal with him since. I suppose that's another reason I was lonely, last fall. Blaise is low class, but clever. He used to be my refuge when I needed intelligent conversation."

"Who expects you to marry Pansy?"

Draco rolled his eyes. "There are not many suitable pureblood girls available, Potter. I'd been thinking of telling father I won't have any I've met and asking him to send me to Durmstrang for my seventh year, so I can check out the possibilities there, but the Durmstrang students all seemed so impressed with the luxury of Hogwarts that I'm afraid I'd spend all year in some horrid, frigid hovel,
whining."

Harry thought about this. "I'd miss you," he said finally.

Draco turned away again. "You'll miss me anyway, Harry. Don't expect me to return, next fall, as someone with whom you can still associate in private."

Harry looked at the floor. He couldn't think of anything to say.

"Quiz me on Herbology," Draco asked suddenly, sounding oddly desperate.

Harry nodded. "Er.. what are the, er, principal uses of belladonna?"

Draco scowled. "Killing people, whatever the fucking textbook says."

Harry didn't say anything.

A half hour later, the sky was growing dark. Harry, carefully, stood up to look out to the west. Lines of gold still shown behind purple clouds.

"You still look pretty wobbly," Draco observed.

"Sorry."

"You stopped when I said I wanted to leave early."

Harry shrugged. "Still."

He watched the brilliant gold darken and fade. The town below him was all in shadow, now. "I need to pee."

Draco snickered. "Get it in the guttering, then."

The night was growing cold. Harry followed Draco's advice as quickly as possible.

"Feel any better?" Draco asked, when Harry sat again.

"A bit. Not flying anytime soon, though."

Draco started to chuckle. A familiar burn cut suddenly on Harry's forehead. He gasped in pain and pressed his hands to his scar.

"Aaaa!"

"Harry?" Draco questioned. "Harry!" He moved forward. As he did so, his eyes widened, focusing beyond Harry's shoulder. "Oh crap!"

One hand still pressed to the searing pain in his forehead, Harry twisted. In the sky over the town's centre, glowing with lurid malice, hung the Dark Mark.
Leaving the steeple was terrifying. Harry was certain he would crash, but somehow they made it down to the dark churchyard unharmed. Then Draco wanted Harry to ride behind him, but Harry's Firebolt insisted on remaining airborne, making it difficult to control. They hadn't passed the graves before it managed to pull Harry off Draco's broom.

"Let's try this," Draco said. "You get on the Firebolt, and try to just keep it level. Then grab on to the back of my broom, and I'll pull you."

This was awkward, but they made it through the residential area, that way, and out to the fields. Harry kept swaying to one side or the other, and was afraid he would pull Draco down. Draco seemed concerned as well, for he stayed low and did not move very fast. When they passed a pond, Harry could see green light reflected in it. He looked up over his shoulder. The hideous skull and snake was still hanging in the sky. Harry shuddered and unbalanced. He keeled to the left, and then, trying to correct himself, to the right. Draco swerved wildly. Determined not to take Draco down, Harry let go. He had a glimpse of Draco's broom shooting precipitously up, then he crashed.

"Harry!"

Harry decided he must have passed out, because Draco was right beside him.

"Sorry," he muttered.

Draco let out a gasp of relief. "Okay. Can you stand?"

Harry thought he was getting tired of that question. He rolled over, and realized he was covered with mud. Levering himself to hands and knees, he looked back. He'd plowed down a farmer's ditch, possibly widening it a bit. He stood. "Looks like," he commented.

Draco pulled him into the cover of a hedge. "We're not going to make it," he said. "We need to lie low, and go back later."

Harry remembered the fuss there had been after the last Death Eater attack.

"You need to get back," he insisted. He twisted out of the straps of his rucksack and threw it open."Take the cloak," he said. "Apparate to Hogsmeade, fly to school. I'll follow slowly and carefully, 'kay?"

"I can't leave you here!"

"Yeah, you can. You need to."

Draco looked with revulsion at the cloak Harry was pressing into his hands. "If they don't kill you, you'll kill yourself in a crash."

"Draco, listen. I'll get along better alone. And if they check — this is close to school, remember? — if they check, and I'm not there, I'm in trouble. If you are not there ..." Harry let the words hang in the air for a moment — "they'll assume you were involved. You need to get back to Slytherin, and you need to do it fast."
Draco looked slightly less dismayed. He took the cloak that Harry was pushing at him.

"I could take this and go back, you know. I could tell them where you are."

Harry nodded. "You could. Get on, now."

Draco sighed. "Be very careful."

"I will."

Draco nodded. "Thanks," he said. "For ... well...." He put on the cloak and drew it closed. "Disapparate!" said the empty air. There was a brief rush of power, and then Harry was alone.

Afterwards, Harry wasn't quite sure how he got back to Hogwarts. He flew low, as he had promised, and fairly slowly. He crashed two more times, but more slowly and not as badly, and he didn't pass out again, as far as he could tell. Eventually, he made it to the Hogwarts grounds, and then to the school itself.

By that time, he was feeling only slightly wobbly. He got back on his broom inside, and flew up the stairs and down the long corridors, all the while fearing that he would encounter Peeves, or worse, Snape. At Gryffindor Tower, he breathed a sigh of relief. Everyone would be at dinner now. He'd made it.

"Switchback," he said to the fat lady. She opened her eyes and yawned.

"Found a bit of mud, did you dearie?"

Harry chuckled. He was a complete mess, covered with mud, with the occasional strands of last year's dead grass, for good measure. The portrait swung in, and Harry began to step inside.

Standing by the hearth, looking directly at him, was Professor McGonagall.
Half-truths and Consequences

Professor McGonagall took his broom and marched him straight to Dumbledore's office. Harry concentrated on walking without stumbling. When they entered, Dumbledore was talking to Professor Snape. Harry hoped Draco had made it back in time.

"I have him, Albus," Professor McGonagall said.

Dumbledore and Snape both looked at Harry. Harry raised his head and stared back at them.

"Where were you, Harry?" Dumbledore asked.

"Hogsmeade," Harry answered defiantly.

Professor Dumbledore shook his head. "No. You don't need a broom to get to Hogsmeade."

"I wanted to fly."

Dumbledore's normally merry eyes flashed angrily. He reached over to Harry and plucked a clod of mud from his jumper. "Designatio!" he snapped, and threw it at his desk.

Harry stared. The top of the desk was currently a map, and the clod swerved to land near the western edge of it. Dumbledore took another scrap of mud from Harry and performed the spell again. He did this five times, marking three places.

"Would you care to revise that statement, Mr. Potter?"

Harry crossed his arms over his chest. He could speak clearly if he tried hard enough. "Doesn't look like you need me to."

Snape was watching Harry through narrowed eyes. He had leaned forward so that his hair fell down to either side of his face, making it look longer and more predatory. Slowly, he pulled out his wand, and began to move it very slightly, whispering to himself.

"May I suggest, Mr. Potter," Dumbledore snapped, "that this will be easier if you cooperate?"

Harry stared back at the headmaster with every ounce of insolence he could muster. He did not answer.

"May I suggest, headmaster," Snape said dryly, "that Potter might be more cooperative were he sober?"

Dumbledore twitched, then looked more carefully at Harry. Harry tried to step back, but Professor McGonagall was behind him. He teetered awkwardly as he attempted to shift forward again.

"Mr. Potter is a capable — in fact, exemplary — flier," Snape noted. "Either he has taken a liking to half-frozen natural mud baths, or something caused him to crash, not once, but three times," Snape, with a sneer, gestured at the map — "over a course of seven miles. Furthermore, while he is arrogant, he is not usually stupid, nor unsteady on his feet."

Dumbledore drew his wand. Harry, suddenly frightened, lurched to the side, but the spell hit him anyway. "Fi Sobrium!"
Harry's head cleared painfully. Everything looked so sharp that he felt he might be cut if he moved. Involuntarily, he let out an obscene, if imprecise, exclamation.

"It can be a bit shocking," Dumbledore said dryly. "One does not usually go from there to here all at one jump."

Harry let go of the bookcase he had grabbed when he lost his balance. Slowly, he turned. "Sorry, sir."

"If you are apologizing for your language, I accept the apology. Now then — where have you been?"

Harry swallowed. "In a Muggle town about fifteen minutes flight — usually — west of here. I don't know the name of it. It took me about an hour to get back, I think. Though it could have been more. Or less. I passed out one of the times I crashed."

"Why were you in this Muggle town?"

Harry evaluated how much truth to use. A good deal, he decided. No telling what else they could check.

"Draco and I wanted more cognac. He was going to come with me, but decided he was too worried about Herbology, so he stayed to study. We could have gone next week, but I decided to go alone."

"You have done this before, then?"

"Twice."

"Did you fly out there in the daylight?"

"No. I flew part of the way — near Hogsmeade — then walked to the road and took the bus. I decided that was too long to do twice, so I flew up into a church steeple, using the invisibility cloak, and was going to hang out there until dark, then fly back, but I lost track of time, and was still too drunk when it went dark. But then I saw the Dark Mark and knew I needed to fly back anyway."

"Whereupon you crashed several times," McGonagall observed. Harry nodded.

"You could have killed yourself, Potter!" she raged.

"I know. But if I'd stayed, I would have seen something, and then I would have gotten killed trying to help someone, and probably have failed to help them, anyway." Harry yawned. "I should learn that spell."

"You cannot cast that spell, drunk."

"Oh. Teach it to Draco, then. He's usually with me, and never gets really drunk. He hates losing control."

"Potter," Snape said, in his most condescending tone, "the utter stupidity of you, of all people, leaving the school to get drunk with Draco Malfoy astounds me."

"I didn't leave the school to get drunk with Draco. Draco wasn't even with me. I was just looking for a way to kill four or five hours, today, and he wasn't even there to talk to."

Dumbledore glared frighteningly at Harry, then turned to McGonagall. "Stay here with him a moment. I must go tell his godfather he's alive."
"Albus —"

"No, Minerva. I am too angry to continue with this, right now. I will be back in two or three minutes." Dumbledore looked at Snape. "And you may leave, Professor Snape. Thank you for your assistance. When I am finished here, I will come to your apartments for the rest of your report."

Snape nodded tightly, then, with an odd look at Harry, whirled and left the room. Dumbledore went the other way, further in from his office. Harry tried to decide what Snape's expression had been. He would have expected a satisfied sneer, but although the expression had been contemptuous, it had looked almost regretful. Harry wondered if Snape were starting to like him, just in time to finally see him expelled.

McGonagall fumed in silence. Several times she turned and looked as if she were about to speak, then did not. Harry was glad he had not brought Susara with him.

Much more than three minutes later, Professor Dumbledore returned. He walked directly over to Harry.

"First, Mr. Potter, let me say I am extremely disappointed in you. You have admitted to two things for which we usually expel students — leaving the grounds, especially beyond Hogsmeade, and flying drunk. Furthermore, it is obvious from other parts of your story — and I do not want details, please — that you have been interfering with these Muggles in some way.

"I will not permit Professor McGonagall to expel you, because I do not believe you would survive outside of this school. I am quite likely, however, to agree to any other punishment she devises. Is that clear?"

Harry nodded numbly. "Yes, sir."

He was wondering what else to say, when Sirius stumbled out of the fireplace. Harry started to move towards him, but the look on Sirius's face stopped him.

"You idiotic child!" Sirius roared, stalking towards Harry. "Could you devise a better plan to kill yourself?"

"I didn't know there'd be a Death Eater attack —"

"You know Lestrange is out to kill you!"

"Why would she notice I'm in —"

Sirius grabbed Harry under the chin. Harry froze automatically. Sirius glowered. "Remus has a message for you," he snarled.

Harry drew himself up and glared back at Sirius. The hold loosened. His godfather no longer towered over him, he noticed, though he still had considerably more bulk than Harry.

"Let me guess," Harry clipped. "I'm still a selfish, thoughtless child who would rather have a good time than live."

Sirius, with harsh satisfaction, let go of Harry and nodded. Harry felt a rush of anger sweep through him. "Well, you tell Remus —" he spoke his former professor's first name with relish — "this. I am never not going to have people seriously trying to kill me. I am not going to live as long as my ill-
fated father. If I'm good and cautious — "Harry spat the words — "I may make it to graduation, but then I leave here, and that will be it — no Dumbledore to protect me, and no amount of life is worth returning to the Dursleys. He may not like what I do with my life, but this is all I've got, and it's not much, and I don't care what he thinks of me."

Harry could tell he was going to start repeating himself, and made himself stop. Sirius was staring at him in wide-eyed shock. Harry realized that his anger had been replaced by trembling, and he was desperate to escape before Sirius started looking sorry for him.

"I'm going to bed. When you decide what you're doing to me, let me know."

To Harry's surprise, no one stopped him from leaving. He walked back to Gryffindor Tower. He ignored the people in the Common Room, and went directly up to the sixth-years' dormitory. The room was dark and empty. Harry stood by the window staring out at the night. Behind him, the door opened. A shape was silhouetted against the light from the stairs.

"You all right?" Ron asked.

"I'm not being expelled, if that's what you mean," Harry said coldly. He glared at Ron's dark form. "So did you rat me out, or was it Miss Prefect?"

Ron was silent for several seconds. When he spoke, his voice shook with anger. "Everybody was sent back to their Houses, and McGonagall came and counted us. You weren't here."

"Oh." Harry suddenly felt exhausted. "Sorry, then."

Ron didn't reply. He stepped back and closed the door. Harry took off his shoes, robe, and trousers, and crawled into bed without undressing further or finding pajamas. His dreams were haunted by the Dark Mark.

Harry woke up early, with his head itching from the dried mud in his hair. Quietly, he got up. After a shower, he put on some clean clothes and went and sat at the window. He heard some stirring behind him, but did not look. After a few minutes, Seamus tiptoed over, still in his pajamas, and sat next to him. Harry ignored him.

"So," Seamus said, after an awkward silence, "you finally got caught, did you?"

"Yeah. Couldn't have been a worse night, either."

"I heard McGonagall tell Hermione that you couldn't be in the castle, or Dumbledore would have been able to locate you. They were frantic."

"I was in a Muggle town."

"Not the one that got attacked?"

"Yeah."

"Did you see any of it?"

"No. I saw the Dark Mark and flew back."

Seamus was silent for a minute.
"I heard that the attack had been going on for a bit when they sent us to our Houses."

Harry shrugged. "I was drunk. I crashed a few times."

Seamus gave a low whistle. "Good Lord, Harry, it's a wonder they didn't expel you!"

"It's a wonder I didn't kill myself," Harry replied. "And Dumbledore said he would expel me if he thought I'd survive it." Harry chuckled. "There's something to make me look forward to leaving school."

"Maybe he's trying to manipulate you into staying to teach."

"Go on! What could I teach?"

Seamus's mouth quirked. "Why, Defense Against the Dark Arts, of course. You have practical qualifications."

Harry actually laughed. "But that only gains me a year."

Harry went down to breakfast as soon as the others began to stir. He had time to have a few bites of sausage and a slice of toast before Professor McGonagall entered. She glared at him, but sat down at her usual place at the staff table. Hermione and Ron entered together, a few minutes later, and McGonagall immediately walked down to the Gryffindor table.

"Mr. Potter," she said, "you are to come to my office. Miss Granger, I require you, as Gryffindor prefect, there as well. You may bring your plate."

Harry was certain the last remark was directed only to Hermione, so he left the rest of his breakfast. They followed McGonagall from the hall and up the stairs to her office. Once there, she motioned Harry to a chair in front of her desk, and Hermione to another by the wall.

"Mr. Potter," McGonagall said severely, "by all rights, you should be expelled. Much as it would pain me to do that, it also pains me to show you undue leniency. The following conditions, therefore, are intended to be severe, as well as to substitute for the good sense and responsibility you are apparently entirely lacking."

Harry didn't think he could reasonably argue with this. He looked down, and found he had to swallow; he seemed to have a rather large lump in his throat.

"First, since you will not restrict yourself to permissible uses of it, I am taking away your broom."

Harry looked up, shocked. "Quidditch!" he croaked. The sound of it vaguely reminded him of Oliver Wood, during Wood's last year.

"You may fly your broom — supervised — during scheduled practices and games. The rest of the time, it will be kept in the changing rooms at the pitch, very well secured."

"Second, since you do not respect school rules as to where you may go and not go, you may not leave Gryffindor tower unsupervised. Miss Granger, this is why you are here. I am afraid I require you to escort Mr. Potter to and from his classes and meals. You may defer this duty to any staff member, or any other prefect except Draco Malfoy. Mr. Potter, you may also go to the library, if Miss Granger agrees to take you, but she is not required to do so. Do you understand?"
Harry nodded. Since McGonagall continued to stare at him, he added, "Yes. I understand.'

"Third, I am told you have an invisibility cloak. You will give that to me for safekeeping, to ensure you do not use it to violate these restrictions."

Harry took a deep breath. "I can't," he confessed.

"You cannot?"

"I lost it."

McGonagall yelled "What?" and Hermione exclaimed "Harry!"

"One of the times I crashed," Harry said. It was easy to sound miserable about it, as he was genuinely unsure he would ever get the cloak back from Draco.

"You what?" Hermione interrupted.

"I don't know when. It wasn't until I got back to the school and went to settle it for going up to Gryffindor tower that I realized it was missing."

"Mr. Potter ..."

"Honestly, if I had my cloak, don't you think I'd have worn it?"

"What is going on?" Hermione exclaimed. She looked wildly at the two of them. "What did Harry do?"

Harry looked down.

"Harry?" Professor McGonagall prodded. "Please tell Miss Granger what you did."

Harry didn't look up. "I went into a Muggle town, alone, because Draco was busy, got cognac, drank three and a half — I think, maybe it was four and a half — largish glasses of it, and flew back here anyway, because I saw the Dark Mark."

"And you have done this before?" McGonagall prompted.

"Going into the town, yes. Twice. In neither case was I drunk."

"Harry!" Hermione exclaimed. "People are trying to kill you!"

"People are always trying to kill me," Harry said wearily. He looked up and focused on Professor McGonagall. He tried to keep his voice and expression neutral. "For how long?"

"We have not decided." Her voice caught, and she looked away to clear her throat. "It may be until the end of the year."

"That's nearly four months!"

"I can read a calendar, Mr. Potter." McGonagall stood. "You may leave, now. Miss Granger, please come see me this evening, after dinner."

Out in the hallway, Hermione exploded. "Harry, that was the stupidest thing I have ever heard!"
"I know."

"What were you doing in a Muggle town, anyway?"

"This time I was buying cognac —"

"You can't buy liquor. You're too young."

"Aging potion."

Hermione sighed loudly. "And the previous times?"

"I was with Draco. Once to ... buy some things, and once to steal the sign we put on Professor Snape's door."

"That was you?!” Hermione's mouth quirked, and for a moment, she looked less severe. "Buy what things?"

"Muggle stuff."

"Draco wanted Muggle stuff?"

"Well, it was my idea. So was the sign."

"It was still mad! And your cloak! Do you have any idea how rare and valuable invisibility cloaks are? That's irreplaceable!"

"I know. Draco wants one frightfully, now, and his father said, 'if I ever found an invisibility cloak available, I would have better things to do with it than give it to a spoiled little boy as a plaything.' Which I thought was a bit rich. I mean, on a list of people responsible for spoiling Draco, Lucius has to be tops." Harry sighed. "Dumbledore knows where I crashed. Maybe he'll find it, and give it back to me before I leave school."

It was a very long, very dull, Sunday. Throughout it, Harry worried about whether or not Dumbledore would speak to Draco about their previous activities. He hoped it would be left up to Snape, who might gloss over the matter. He spent the time alone. Hermione was avoiding him. Ron had left for the weekend to meet Charlie, who was staying with their mother during a Dragon Predation Conference in Glasgow. Harry couldn't decide if his presence would make things better or worse.

In Transfiguration, Monday, Harry sat down next to Draco.

"I'm in serious trouble," he said. "They —"

"Mr. Potter," Professor McGonagall said clearly. "I think it is high time you and Mr. Malfoy were separated. You will sit with Dean Thomas."

"But —"

"No buts, Mr. Potter. Now."

Next to Dean, who glowered at him, Harry took out his white notebook, and considered how best to convey the needed information to Draco. Since Dean might notice the entries and report him, he decided he should be circumspect. Whatever he wrote must not provide any more information than
was already known. Smiling slightly, Harry began to write.

He had gotten most of it down when he became aware of something next to his desk. He looked over and saw Professor McGonagall

"What is this?" To Harry's horror, she reached down and took the notebook.

"My notebook, Professor," Harry replied, glad that his instructions to Draco were finely couched.

McGonagall peered at him over her glasses and hrumphed. "How odd, Mr. Potter. Your notebook seems to contain two distinct types of handwriting." Harry did not respond. McGonagall looked back at the notebook. "This first one — very elegant, Potter, hardly like your chicken scratches — says 'What trouble?' Here's your writing: 'I got caught coming in. I flew back when I saw the Dark Mark, though I was far too drunk, and McG. caught me. I told them almost everything: that I was getting cognac, that you had been going to go with me, but had to revise for Herbology; and that we've done this before. Sorry to give so much away, but I was afraid you would say the wrong thing if I lied, and then we'd be in more trouble.'" Professor McGonagall looked suspiciously at Harry, who kept his face carefully blank. "Then there's this elegant writing again, on the other side. It reminds me rather of Mr. Malfoy's script. 'That's all right. What else could I expect of a Gryffindor? And you're right not to improvise when you couldn't get me word, but they haven't asked me yet. What did you tell them about last time?' Yours again: 'Just that we went to the same place twice before.'" McGonagall glared across the room at Draco, then down at Harry.

"This is a Liber Geminus, Mr. Potter. Twenty points each from Gryffindor and Slytherin for illicit communications in class." Professor McGonagall walked back behind her desk, still holding the notebook. Harry watched her nervously. Fulfilling his worst fears, she said:

"And what did happen 'last time'? Perhaps we can find the entry."

"Professor," Harry said urgently. "Please don't read that in class."

"It was written in my class, Mr. Potter."

"Only bits. And it has information not everyone should know."

Professor McGonagall, after a severe look at Harry, resumed flipping through the pages.

"Ah! 'The Dark Lord,'" she read. "Well, let's see what Mr. Malfoy has to say about You-Know-Who ..."

Harry glanced over at Draco. The blond had his copy of the book pushed forward on the desk, and he was unobtrusively, with his hand still flat on the desk, pointing his wand at it. Harry saw him mouth an incantation. Suddenly, both books burst into flame. With a startled shriek, Professor McGonagall dropped the one she held on the floor, then, recovering, reached for the glass of water she kept on her desk. Yelling, Harry rose from his chair and kicked the book clear of her, over towards Malfoy. Malfoy pointed his wand again, and the flames leapt higher, engulfing both books and singeing floor and desk.

"You utter idiot!" Harry screamed at McGonagall.

Everyone, including Harry, fell silent. Harry could hear the scritch of claws as someone's rat moved across a desk. He stared at the Transfiguration professor in horror, as what he had just said sunk in. McGonagall cleared her throat.

"Everyone is to stay here and practice their assignment. I am leaving Miss Granger in charge.
Anyone she informs me was uncooperative will come to regret it. Mr. Potter, Mr. Malfoy — with me, please."

She led them, as Harry had rather hoped she would, to Dumbledore's office. Furthermore, she did not attempt to speak. Her first words were "Canary Cream" and then they were riding the spiral staircase up into Dumbledore's office.

Professor Dumbledore looked unusually displeased to see them.

"So soon, Mr. Potter? I think you have broken the Weasley twins' record."

"Don't encourage him, Dumbledore. These children created a Liber Geminus and were using it to exchange messages in my class."

Dumbledore's eyebrows rose. "A Liber Geminus? Much as I hate to say it, Minerva, I am impressed."

"Impressed! When I attempted to read this book, Mr. Malfoy set it on fire, Mr. Potter kicked it away from me, and then he had the audacity to call me an idiot —"

"We let her read the bit we wrote in class, sir. She was recklessly endangering people reading something —"

"If they are going to —"

"— we'd written about Voldemort—"

"Enough!"

McGonagall, reluctantly, fell silent. Harry waited quietly. The headmaster looked anxiously at him. "What had you written about Voldemort, Harry?"

"That's not the point! Draco asked me a question about Voldemort. I answered it. Can you think of anything that fits that which doesn't lead to people trying to kill at least one of us, and maybe other students that they hadn't known were Death Eaters' children, or —" Harry broke off. He was shaking.

Professor Dumbledore looked at Draco, who seemed even paler than usual. "Mr. Malfoy?"

"Simply that I asked a question, sir, would be enough to endanger me. I am not supposed to ask questions about the Dark Lord. Fortunately, I managed to cast Incendio before Professor McGonagall did more than note that the entry concerned You-Know-Who."

Dumbledore looked disapprovingly at Professor McGonagall, whose eyes had widened in belated understanding of Harry and Draco's reaction. "And now we do not have this book," he observed.

"Which contained all our Transfiguration notes, and all our Potions notes," Draco complained. "And some of Charms. I'll never be able to pass them!"

The headmaster sighed. "Professor McGonagall," he said, "Please escort these boys back to class, then return to see me privately. And Mr. Malfoy, please come see me at lunchtime. I will try to brief enough that we can both get some food."
Rules and Perceptions

When Harry got to Potions, the Slytherins had already arrived, but Draco was still standing, speaking in a low voice to Pansy. When he saw Harry, he sat and motioned to Harry to sit next to him.

"It wasn't too bad," he whispered.

As everyone was settling, Professor Snape entered. He surveyed the class briefly before his gaze came to rest on Harry.

"Mr. Potter. Your Head of House has told me to keep you apart from Mr. Malfoy."

Harry looked back at the Potions master. He tried to sound politely curious. "Do you take orders from Professor McGonagall, sir?"

Snape smiled tightly. "As it happens, Mr. Potter, I do not." His gaze, again, swept the room. "Start fires, everyone. The first components of today's potion will be added dry, and must sear quickly."

At the end of class, Snape told Harry to stay. He did, as did Hermione.

"You may leave, Miss Granger."

"I have to escort him, sir."

"I will escort Mr. Potter to lunch. You will wait for him there."

Hermione nodded. "Yes, professor. Er ... Thank you."

Once Hermione left, Snape closed the door to the lab. He pointed his wand at it and muttered something.

"What was that, sir?" Harry asked.

"Silencing spell. Sit down, Mr. Potter."

Uneasily, Harry sat down. "What do you want?"

"I want to talk to you, Potter, about trusting Mr. Malfoy. I do not object to you sitting with him – the two of you do better work together than either of you does separately. I do not object to you enjoying it. However, you must not trust him."

"Draco has had plenty of opportunities to kill me –"

"'Draco' is, first and foremost, a Malfoy," Snape hissed. "He aspires to be a Death Eater. Whatever you tell him, he will tell his father, and his father will tell Lord Voldemort."

"I don't think that's true, but –"

Snape thumped the table with his fist. "Potter, for once in your life, try not to be an arrogant idiot! I
know that boy! He comes and talks to me. I know his father. Draco is playing you for a fool. He has some scheme to bring you down in some messy way, and last night was probably the first step."

"He knew where I was going. He could have just told them where to look."

"Maybe they didn't look soon enough."

"I doubt that. I wasn't very efficient."

"Potter, Draco has told me he is going to betray you! Told me, do you understand? He has been in this very room, boasting about it!"

Harry found he was trembling with anger. He had to tell himself that Snape's reaction was entirely reasonable.

"Of course he does."

"Excuse me, Potter? Of course?"

"He knows you're a Death Eater. He assumes anything he says to you, you tell his father. He's told me he's pretending to have some clever plan for me. Occasionally I help him with the details."

"He is lying to you. I know this game, Potter. He is lying to one of us, and I say it is you."

"He could be lying to both of us," Harry pointed out.

This seemed to calm Snape. He nodded. "Possibly. But I do not believe Draco would defy his father."

"In confidence, sir?"

"What?"

"Do you promise to tell no one? Not Lucius Malfoy, not Professor Dumbledore?"

Snape rolled his eyes. "And you would trust my word, Potter?"

Harry considered this. "Not completely," he said, after a moment. "But it would be sufficient."

Snape scowled. "Why thank you, my lord," he said in a voice as brittle as dried beetles.

Harry did not smile. "And?"

"Yes, yes, you have my word. I won't tell your ridiculous secrets."

"Draco has warned me about you."

"About me?" Snape was surprised.

"About trusting you. He has told me several times that you were a friend of his father's, and we must assume anything you saw or heard would be repeated to Lucius. He has also told me that you practice Dark Arts, and overlook such practices in your House."

"And so you trust him," Snape said in oily sarcasm.

"Not in everything, but I'm convinced he is lying more to you than to me." Harry hesitated. "When I didn't seem worried enough ... well, he said I was safe enough with you at school, but if I
saw you in Hogsmeade, I should stay away, or I would regret it."

"You are imaging things. He just meant I would ruin your fun."

"No." Harry lifted his head. "'Treat him as a Death Eater,' he said."

Snape twitched. "What?" he asked incredulously.

"Don't get him in trouble for it," Harry said. His voice came out hard with threat, and he lightened it to continue. "If you wish, devise some plan to test his loyalty, for your own satisfaction, but I'm trusting you to not betray him to his father."

"Of course, I would not do that." Snape already looked thoughtful. "Yes, I could come up with something." He straightened. "So, Potter, I have heard about your punishment." He sneered. "Almost satisfactory, I believe, and long past due."

Harry tried not to think about it.

"However," Snape continued, "it does not excuse you from work on your special project. We will start, this week, as scheduled. Hermione should come down to meet you at 9:30 on Tuesdays."

"Great!" Harry said. He caught himself. "Er, I mean...."

"You mean," Snape said dryly, "that you would like another two hours a week in the company of your untrustworthy companion. Despite my presence."

Harry decided Snape was amused. "Er... More or less, sir."

Snape laughed coldly. "I'll work on that plan, Potter. Then we'll see how enthusiastic you are."

Harry stood up. Halfway to the door, he turned. "Oh – Professor Snape?"

"What now?" Snape growled.

"Draco has requested that I be ... biddable, in your presence. Don't worry too much about how easily I take direction. It's part of the plot."

Snape pointed his wand at the door. "Finite Incantantum! Good day, Mr. Pott—" he growled. "I need to walk you to lunch, now, don't I?"

"Afraid so."

"Please don't worsen the waste by talking."

Fortunately, Harry and Ron were on better terms since what Ron referred to as "The Seamus Incident". Monday evening, Harry was unable to bring himself to even look at his homework. He was lying on his bed, contemplating the red canopy above him and softly stroking Susara's smooth scales, when Ron entered the dormitory.

"Hi," Ron said.

"Hi," Harry muttered.
"Doing anything?"

"Does it look like it?"

"You could be planning out an essay or something."

"No."

Ron shifted uneasily and cleared his throat. Before he could speak, Harry interrupted. "Look, let's just pretend we've already had the conversation about how stupid that was, okay? I've been through it with Dumbledore, McGonagall, Snuffles, Seamus, Hermione, and Snape, of the ones I can remember. I won't be able to endure another repeat."

Ron sat down on his bed, and leaned against the headboard. "Okay." He drew his knees up to his chest and locked his arms around them. "Are you all right, though?"

"Of course I'm not! I've been lying here contemplating the possibility of months of not getting a moment alone with Draco. I'll go mad! I'm used to having someone to talk to, now!"

"I'm someone!"

"You're ...." Harry sighed. "I'm sorry, Ron. I didn't mean ..." He looked desperately at Ron. "Listen, I like you, and I think you still basically like me, and yes, I think we can and should be friends again...."

"But?" Ron challenged angrily.

"But you don't --" Harry paused awkwardly. "There are things Draco understands --"

Ron sat upright and glowered at Harry. "Which I don't? What then? What sort of wine glasses to use when getting pissed?"

At Ron's angry tone, Susara flickered nervously down the neck of Harry's robes and into the cover of his sleeve. Harry sighed, and sat up. "We usually drink cognac, and he does have the perfect crystal snifters, but that's not at all what I mean."

"What, then?" Ron growled. "Name one thing Malfoy understands that I don't!"

Harry shivered. He remembered Draco lying on Ron's bed, talking about the Cruciatuus curse under the cover of darkness. Did you scream?

"Pain," he muttered.

"What?" Ron's eyes narrowed. "Like I've never been hurt?"


"Yes. Not as often as you, perhaps, but yes."

"Right. Sorry. Draco's different -- he's a Slytherin, so he doesn't go on that the same way I do. He values his life very highly, and I count my own as expendable for almost anything. I don't hold that against him, I suppose. Everybody needs to make that choice themselves."
Ron twisted at his bedspread with his hands. "Do you want to die, then?" he asked.

"Of course not! But I'm always willing to. I've made that choice so often it's become automatic."
Harry rolled onto his side to face Ron, but looked instead at the bedspread. He traced along the gold threads with one thumb.

"There are these things about being friends with a Slytherin," he said hesitantly, trying again.

"Like never knowing when you'll get stabbed in the back?"

Harry shrugged. "I don't know that anyway, do I? Actually, on average, the Slytherins may be more predictable. You have to look at it as a game – no one knows all the rules, because everyone makes up his own and tells only some of them to other people, but there are rules. For example, Draco thinks he knows Snape's rules, but he's wrong about a lot of them, and vice versa. I'm sure I know more of Snape's rules, and Draco's, than they know of each other's. I used to think Dumbledore knew all the rules, but he doesn't, just more than he ought. He's very good at this, for a Gryffindor."

"What are you on about?"

"None of them know all of my rules, either. I don't tell anyone everything. I don't completely trust anyone – Draco says that's my most Slytherin trait."

"Er...."

"Of course, it's obscured by my most Gryffindor trait – bravery. People don't notice when I don't trust them, because I make a choice and do something anyway, and sometimes it looks the same.

"We all do this, I think, but Slytherins accept it. With Slytherins, distrust can be formalized. There are rituals that assume no one trusts anyone, and they are considered polite, not offensive."

"What?"

"Do you know it's actually expected, in Draco's circles, to cast an Identification Charm on any drink for which you did not watch your host unseal the bottle?"

"Charming."

"Convenient, I think. Imagine not having to pretend you believe it's pure."

"Now you are sounding like a Slytherin," Ron said. "And that whole -- I don't understand you at all."

"That's my point, isn't it? Draco would understand all that. And laugh."

Harry wanted – not to drive Ron away, he thought, but to know if Ron would leave. He looked up, at last, and met Ron's eyes. "Want to know a secret?" he offered, feeling a trembling of fear in his body, and hoping it did not show. "Something I told Draco, but never told anyone else but Dumbledore?"

Ron looked tense, but he nodded. "If you want to tell me, Harry."

"I nearly did, our second year. I was so frightened by how people reacted to me as a Parselmouth, and people saying I was the heir of Slytherin..." Harry realized he was stalling. "I should have been in Slytherin," he said firmly.

"Don't be ridiculous! The Sorting Hat put you in Gryffindor."
"Because I begged it not to put me in Slytherin. It said Slytherin was the best place for me – my 'path to greatness.' I'd already met Malfoy, and knew what you and Hagrid said, and I sat there, whispering 'Not Slytherin, not Slytherin, not Slytherin,' until the Hat relented and put me in Gryffindor."

Ron stared. "It... I didn't know that could happen!"

"Maybe it happens a lot. Maybe all the people who it takes time to Sort have some sort of input. Maybe Slytherin has people who should have been in Gryffindor, but who had family expectations to satisfy, or had been told that Gryffindors are dangerous, loud, and foolish.

"My second year, it frightened me. I felt like I was an impostor, here, that probably I was secretly evil. At the end of that, I talked to Dumbledore – not just about that, in retrospect, but about a conversation I had with Tom Riddle – and he said we are defined by our choices, by what we do, not by our abilities. I continued with that, for a while, as if I had somehow redeemed myself by choosing Gryffindor.

"After Cedric died, I felt enveloped in Darkness. My fifth year, I realized that choosing Gryffindor was not a redemption in itself, and it didn't need to be. It was a choice of influences. Here I was surrounded by people who expected me to be brave and protective and honorable, people who would praise me for daring, scold me for selfishness and blind rage, and be horrified if I began to dabble in the Dark Arts. That has made a tremendous difference in who I am. Socializing with Draco has made me see how much.

"Had I gone into Slytherin, my influences would have been quite different. I can see the Hat's point – certainly, I would be more powerful. My tendency to want things to be fair would certainly have been teased and bullied out of me within the first year, and my more ... sneaky ideas lauded. I might be more creative, for that. My desire for power would have been encouraged, and my rages tolerated, as long as they produced results. I would have been trained out of seeking unproductive danger. I would have learned to use my name, as well as my wand. I would have fewer contradictory requirements pulling at me, so my decisions would be faster and more focused."

"In other words, you'd be a right bastard."

"A right dangerous bastard."

Ron let out a shaky breath. "Is that what you want to be?"

"No." Harry smiled wistfully at Ron. He really was still rather innocent. "But I could use a dusting of it. I don't want to be self-centered, but it would probably be a good thing if I thought my life was worth more than ... something. I don't want to be cold-hearted, but at some point, I'm going to need to save someone and let someone else die, and I need to have enough practice appraising people so that I don't dither and let them both die."

"Have you ever wanted to 'dabble in the Dark Arts' as you put it?"

Harry shuddered. "Not dabble."

"Sorry?"

"Ron." Harry looked at Ron with all the sincerity and closeness he could. "You need to know this. At some point, I will cast the Killing Curse." He kept himself from apologizing, or babbling on about why. Let Ron ask, if he cared, or let him leave.

"No." Ron scarcely breathed the denial. "Harry."
Harry didn't say anything. Ron finally swallowed and asked, "Why?"

"I believe it is the only way to destroy him," Harry said flatly. "The Killing Curse. From me."

Ron stared. He didn't leave. Eventually, he looked down and said:

"Crap job, that."

"Yeah."

For the first time since December, Harry really felt like Ron was his friend again.
It was clear to Harry that Potions classes and Tuesday labs were to be his only contact with Draco. He was surprised, therefore, to arrive at Potions class to find that Draco was sitting with Crabbe and Goyle. Harry settled at the back of the room, with Seamus, and regarded the trio thoughtfully.

"Gone a bit off you?" Seamus suggested.

"Dunno," Harry muttered. "He got a letter from his father, this morning — I recognize the owl — so he may have orders."

"Malfoy senior wouldn't want his boy chumming round with you, I'm sure. You might give him a conscience, or somesuch."

That evening, however, Snape was fairly lax about supervising them in the lab. He took Draco's bag and set it up by his desk, to minimize the chance of Draco stealing anything, but he graded papers while they were working, out of the range of quiet conversation.

"Did your father find out you knew where I was?" Harry whispered as they worked on an experimental variation on the fur-growing potion that Draco hoped to make work on plastic. Currently, they were trying additions of petroleum jelly and shale to the base. Neither seemed to be producing anything more than a smelly mess.

"Yes. If he didn't need to be discreet, it would have been a Howler. He's furious at me! Not only did I deprive him of an opportunity to kill you, but I apparently have done so before. I have as many restrictions as you, now, I think." Draco swallowed. "Originally — first year, I mean — Father had wanted me to befriend you. He felt that if we could bring you into hm... polite society? ...you would be politically defused. Of course, that won't do now. His master wants you dead."

"So what are you going to do?"

"Well, Father — in one of the few areas in which he has been displaying some remnants of sense, mind — has been saying that it would be better for wizarding society, on the whole, if you were not made a martyr. So I sent him a reply reminding him of this, and implying that I intended to arrange for you to die ignominiously."

"Hmm." Harry grinned. "Yeah. Think about it. If you'd been with me, you could have probably have arranged for me to die in a drunken crash."

Draco grinned. "Terrible pity I'd stayed at school," he commented. He ducked his head apologetically. "I also... You're going to hate this, but I told him I'd taught you some Dark Arts, and implied that was recent, and ongoing."

"That's —" Harry had been going to say that was fine. He stopped. "Won't he tell Snape?"

"Snape won't care," Draco scoffed. "He'll probably be impressed. He's already almost treating you like a Slytherin."

Snape, Harry thought, was certain to tell Dumbledore. He was doomed.
When Harry and Hermione returned to Gryffindor, Ron motioned them over to seats near the fire.

"I was going to go to bed," Harry said. He wanted terribly to burrow under the covers and hide.

'Oh, no you don't," said Ron. "You're always running off on your own, or running off with Malfoy. You need to spend some time with us, some time with ..." he flailed for a moment. "Your teammates. Other Gryffindors."

Harry made a face at him. "Nice people?" he suggested wryly.

"Yes, honestly." Ron nudged him. "Come on, now. After an evening of Snape and Malfoy you must need a change."

"It was fine. I had fun."

Hermione frowned. "You look ill."

"It's not —" Harry sighed. "Draco got in trouble with his father for not betraying me —"

"What, so he was mad at you for it?"

"No, but he's been forbidden to associate with me, so he can't where anyone in his house sees."

Harry thought about the implications of discussing this. There really wasn't any reason he couldn't, he decided, as long as he didn't mention Umbram Jubo. "So he was arguing why he should. Among other things, Draco decided to tell his father that he's instructing me in Dark Arts."

Hermione and Ron both stared. Harry sank lower into the couch.

"Well, he's not, is he?" Hermione demanded.

"No, of course not, but his father will tell Snape. And Snape will tell Dumbledore. And Draco doesn't think he's caused any trouble. Draco knows Snape —" Harry glanced around, and lowered his voice slightly so they would not be overheard — "as his father's friend, and a Death Eater, right?"

Ron and Hermione both nodded.

"So of course he believes Snape will cover for us, if he believes it, and he wants me to make Snape believe it." Harry growled. "This is what I meant, Ron, about Draco and Snape not knowing each other's rules."

Ron bit his lip and nodded. "Not so much fun, now?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "No. Funny, I suppose ... if I wasn't in the middle of it. I don't think either has expressed an honest opinion to the other in years. Draco puts quite a lot of effort into convincing Snape, as well as his father, that he will betray me, and he has some subtle plan—"

"Perhaps he does," Hermione suggested.

"He's not that patient! This is politics, not Art!" Harry brought his voice back down. "Though he's approaching it. What do I do?"

"If it's not true, what's the problem?" Hermione said pointedly.

"It's..." Harry sunk lower. He was almost lying on the chair. "I don't want Professor Dumbledore
looking too closely at what I've done with Malfoy. We haven't done any real harm — I'm rather careful, actually, as he'd never notice — but we've done lots of things we shouldn't."

"Such as?"

"Breaking into places, flying around...." Despite himself, Harry grinned. "It's a dangerous combination, I suppose — he has no morals and I have no fear." Harry laughed at the horrified expression on Hermione's face, and forced himself to sit up, again. Ron, for once, looked amused. "And he will dare me ...."

Hermione rubbed her forehead. Ron winked at Harry.

"You're shocking our prefect, you know." His voice shifted to coaxing. "I think it's time you had some fun you could admit to. We should hang out together, this weekend. How long since you've seen Hagrid?"

"God, no," Harry muttered. Hermione glared at him.

"It's not that I don't like Hagrid," Harry said defensively. "It's that I haven't talked to him since before Saturday. He's going to give me the same bloody lecture everyone else —"

"I'll tell him to keep it short," Ron promised. "But you can't go avoiding people just because of that, and he'll need to say something."

"You didn't."

"Yeah, well ... I'm your friend, Harry; I'm not a teacher."

The next afternoon, Harry found himself being escorted to Dumbledore's office by Professor McGonagall. The summons had taken him entirely by surprise. Earlier in the day, Snape had kept Harry after class and told him that Draco had claimed he was teaching Harry Dark Arts. Harry had shrugged. When Snape had asked him directly whether or not this was true, Harry had said it was not, and Snape had sat back, looking relieved, and dismissed him. The professor had so readily accepted Harry's answer that Harry had believed that to be the end of the inquiry, and had spent the next two hours giddy with relief at having got off so lightly.

It seemed he had been wrong, Harry thought, as McGonagall left Dumbledore's office, closing the door behind her. Harry waited alone in the room, forcing himself not to poke through the intriguing piles on Dumbledore's desk. Not even Fawkes was present. Harry warned Susara to stay out of sight, and, for once, he found the slight pressure of her smooth skin against his arm to be another worry, rather than a reassurance.

He wondered if he should confess about Moaning Myrtle, or just insist that Draco was making things up to get out of trouble. He suspected Dumbledore knew when he was lying, but he also thought Dumbledore might feel obliged to expel him if he actually admitted to having used Dark Arts, so possibly he would rather not know. Perhaps he would even carefully phrase his questions to allow for some leeway. Harry had made and changed his decision several times before the door finally opened.

Dumbledore entered, accompanied by Professor Horsyr, this year's Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. Before Harry could quite panic, his attention was captured by the creature that accompanied them.
It looked more like a large monkey than anything else, but it had the triangular ears and stiff whiskers of a cat. A white mane surrounded its otherwise monkey-like face. The fur on its face was very short and pale gold, while that of its body was fluffy and a darker gold. The long tail ended in a lion-like white tuft. The ears were also tufted in white, and the eyes were dark and large. Harry immediately longed to coax it over and pet it.

"Harry," Professor Dumbledore said, "do you know what this is?"

The headmaster did not look angry, today, just unspeakably weary and sad. Harry started to say he didn't know, but once he met Dumbledore's eyes, could not manage to form any words. He shook his head.

Professor Horsyr stepped forward. The creature had climbed up one of her arms, and was now sitting on her shoulder, stroking her golden hair, which matched its own so perfectly. She clicked to it, and it swung down, tumbling gracefully heels over head to land on the carpet. The professor looked encouragingly at Harry.

"This is a Quiri," she said.

"Oh!" Harry was delighted. "They were bred by an ancestor of mine. At least that's what my family book claims. I thought there were no more in captivity."

"She is not captive," Horsyr chided. "It took me the better part of a decade to befriend a colony, but several of them now travel with me. I must protect them carefully, of course. They may still be enslaved."

Harry had already tumbled to his knees. "Here, darling," he cooed, holding a hand out to the creature. "Come say hi." He looked at Horsyr. "How much do they understand?"

"A little English, now, but I found them in Senegal, so not much. I don't suppose you know any Wolof or French?"

Harry didn't bother answering. The Quiri had come within reach and, after sniffing at him curiously, consented to be touched. It was just as delightfully soft as it looked. Harry felt radiantly happy when it rubbed its head, just like an affectionate cat might, against his hand.

"It's so soft!" he exclaimed.

Susara, perhaps jealous, poked her head out of Harry's robe, but after one look at the attentive face of the Quiri, turned and fled back inside. The Quiri, after a sniff and little sneeze, butted Harry's hand for more petting.

The interruption distracted Harry from his absorbed enjoyment of the Quiri. He looked up at Dumbledore, who was settling wearily into his chair, but looking considerably less anxious. Dumbledore, he realized, had brought in the Quiri as a test. Harry was surprised at how painful the thought was. Certainly, while he was deceiving Dumbledore, he had no right to be hurt that the headmaster did not trust him. Still, he would have liked to have been asked. Being presented with a Quiri was rather like being given a truth serum. He felt oddly betrayed.

Lifting the Quiri in his arms, Harry stood. "Was this a test, sir?" he asked.

Dumbledore nodded. "I heard from someone," he said, with a slight note of apology, "who heard from someone, that a particular friend of yours claims to be instructing you in Dark Arts."

"He has to claim to be doing something," Harry pointed out. "His father is very angry at him."
"I see."

The Quiri was moving restlessly. Harry looked down at it, and it yawned, showing surprisingly feline, sharp teeth in its almost human mouth. It scrambled onto his shoulder and began to stroke his hair. Professor Horsyr laughed.

"Well, he certainly seems happy enough with you," she said.

Harry smiled. "That tells you that I've done nothing with Dark Arts for at least five or six weeks, correct?"

"Essentially, yes," Dumbledore agreed. "The Quiri's understanding of "Dark Arts" does not completely map to that used by the Ministry of Magic, of course. There are some legal spells that will trigger a bad reaction and some horrible ones that will not."

"I expect the Quiri's understanding is purer," Horsyr put in, "as it is based on the energies themselves."

"Well, I'm glad to see one," Harry said. "My family book didn't mention that they're adorable." He moved over to Professor Horsyr and held out his arm to her. The Quiri, understanding, moved over to the Defense against the Dark Arts teacher's shoulder. Harry felt slightly sad when it left. He found he wanted terribly to tell Professor Dumbledore about casting Umbram Jubo, but he was too afraid that Draco would get in trouble for it, or that he and Draco would get in more trouble over the Chamber of Secrets when Dumbledore spoke to Moaning Myrtle.

"Thank you, Frieda, and thank the Quiri for me," Dumbledore said. Horsyr nodded. "I'll walk you down to dinner," Dumbledore said to Harry.

It was slightly too early to be going to dinner. The corridors were empty, as was the Great Hall. Dumbledore sat with Harry at the top of the Gryffindor table.

"Is there anything you wish to tell me, Harry?" he asked.

This is the place where I always say no, Harry thought, and I'm going to do it again. The thought was painful. He sighed.

"There are things I'd like to talk about," he conceded, "but I can't, right now. My secrets are one thing. Other people's are something else."

Dumbledore looked disappointed, but he nodded. "I understand, Harry. However, you can hurt your friends with loyalty as easily as help them. Please consider the consequences of your actions .. and inactions."

"Yes sir," Harry whispered. "Believe it or not, I usually do." He looked up, giving way to a flash of annoyance. "One thing that bothers me ...."

"Yes?"

"Professor Snape asked me, and I said no. I thought he'd believed me."

Dumbledore considered this. After a few minutes, he sighed. "He did. He made it quite clear he did not believe what he relayed; he just thought I should know it was being said. He was not so much reporting it, as asking for advice on how to reply."

Harry looked down at the wide grain of the old table top. He felt a little sick, and he still wanted to
tell Dumbledore about *Umbram Jubo*, as if it would make the queasy feeling go away. He pushed the impulse back. "So Snape trusts me more than you do," he said resentfully.

"Professor Snape often fixates on a particular aspect of a situation. In this case, he was angry you were being slandered and did not seem to care. I was not confident he had considered anything beyond that."

"I ... I understand, sir." Harry regarded Dumbledore appraisingly. "Did you advise him on how to reply?"

"I suggested he smile and nod, or, at least, nod, as one cannot expect Severus to truly smile."

Harry chuckled. "Good."

The first group of students entered the hall. "Any time you wish to talk Harry...." Dumbledore offered. Harry wondered guiltily why he still bothered. Dumbledore patted Harry's hand kindly, and left for the head table.
True to his word, Ron began to spend more time with Harry. He even came down to Wednesday night's practice and watched, then dragged Harry into a post-practice conversation with Jason Wilkens, the newest Chaser, about the upcoming game with Ravenclaw. Between his company and Hermione's, he next few days were not as horrible as Harry had anticipated.

On Thursday morning, Harry got the letter he had been dreading from Sirius. To his surprise, it came with a messily wrapped, almost globular package. Ron leaned over.

"Think it will explode?"

"Thanks, Ron."

"Try the letter, Harry," Hermione suggested.

Harry took a deep breath. It wasn't red, anyway. He opened it.

Harry,

I've calmed down, mostly, so I'm going to try this again.

I can't claim that I didn't get drunk a few times at your age, or that I never did dangerous things. I expect you know better. But the times I did manage to come by a bottle of something strong, I shared it with James, or Remus, or James and Remus and Peter, and we did not go beyond walking distance of the school. And for that, none of us -- back then -- were the personal targets of megalomaniacal Dark Wizards. You're the perfect age for recklessness, and I don't expect sense from you, but what you did was beyond idiotic.

Don't let Dumbledore convince you that you can't survive what you need to do. I'll see to it that you do, even if you I have to take a curse for you. The world owes you a few normal years when this is all over.

Snuffles

P.S.: I've heard about your punishment. You must be bored out of your mind. Here's something to amuse you. It can be keyed to up to five players or teams and won't break anything if you use it indoors.

Harry unwrapped the package in the Gryffindor Common Room after lunch. The enclosed ball hovered four feet off the ground when Harry released it. When he reached over to grab it, it shot several feet higher.

"Hey!"
A seventh-year jumped up and knocked it past him.

"Keep it away from the windows!"

In response to Hermione's shrill command, the seventh-year laughed. "Battle balls almost always have anti-breakage charms. Shall we have a game?"

They went down to Care of Magical Creatures in high spirits. Hagrid brought the class a short way into the Forbidden Forest to introduce them to a Bowtruckle and acquaint them with the basics of asking it for a small amount of wood from its protected tree.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione entered Potions class together, laughing about the way the diminutive creature had leapt fiercely at Lavender when she had told it she needed the wood "to get out of this stupid class, you idiotic twig!"

"Harry!"

At the hail, Harry stopped in the aisle, causing Ron to bump into him. Draco was beckoning him over. "Saved you a seat," he called.

Harry was very aware of Ron, standing motionless by his side. Hermione touched his arm briefly.

"See you two later," Harry said, making it as much of a promise as he casually could. He left them and walked over to Draco.

When Harry had sat down, Draco leaned close. "It's all set," he whispered. "Snape's convinced Father to give me more of a go at you."

Harry dared a look at Ron and Hermione. Hermione was staring at her notebook, her lower lip pulled tight by her teeth. Ron was watching Harry, with undisguised dismay. Harry smiled at him briefly. "It's okay," he mouthed silently.

Snape entered. From the front of the room, he turned to survey the class. Harry watched the Potions master's attention settle on him and Draco. Snape held the focus for several seconds, the look intent, but his expression unreadable. When he turned away, Harry felt like he had just been released from a pin.

"Snape is okay, sometimes," he commented. "In a weird way."

Draco snorted. "Right. Convince him your intentions are bad, and he'll let you do anything."

In Transfiguration, McGonagall was handing back papers. When she came to the desk Harry was sharing with Neville, she did not have a paper for Harry.

"See me after class for your essay, Mr. Potter," she said, as she moved on to Seamus and Dean.

After class, Harry went to the McGonagall's desk. He was uncomfortably aware of Hermione, waiting for him at the back of the room.

"You wanted to see me, Professor?"
McGonagall nodded. "This paper, Harry — it is adequate."

"Okay."

"Over the last few months, I have become accustomed to your papers being much more than adequate." McGonagall peered over her glasses at him. "You are restricted in your movements, and wasting much less time on extracurricular activities. Would you kindly explain to me why the quality of your work has declined?"

"Because I'm too bored to think?" Harry shot back.

"You mean you are not trying."

"No — yes!." Harry forced himself to take a breath and put his thoughts in order. He started over. "Transfiguration is fairly easy for me."

McGonagall nodded acceptingly.

"I've never had to work too hard at it to do well enough."

"Well enough for what?" McGonagall asked sharply.

Harry shrugged. "To pass. To not get yelled at. To have a reasonable chance of changing things when I need to."

"But you were doing more than that, this winter."

"I was helping Draco. Draco's very... He needs to understand the theory behind things. Honestly, he'd make a good Muggle scientist, though I never dared say that to him. To explain things to Draco, I needed to understand them better than I need to understand to just do them. I had to look at some of the optional recommended readings, and figure out how the theories related to what I did when things worked." Harry hesitated. "If your class was more detailed, he'd do better at it," he added.

"I see." McGonagall flipped over the paper on her desk, and scribbled a mark on it. It was lower than Harry expected.

"I do not tolerate laziness, Mr. Potter. I shall expect you to live up to your abilities in the future."

"That was with extra work!" Harry pointed at the paper. "This is how well I do with what you require."

"And that effort will get you the mark you require to pass. Just."

She offered Harry the paper. He grabbed it and stormed out, scarcely noticing Hermione trotting along beside him.

All evening, Harry sulked about McGonagall's unfairness. He was torn between trying to excel in the subject and not putting any effort into it at all. After some thought, he began to wonder if he could do exactly as well as he had done while tutoring Draco.

"If I show I can do better, she will expect that, next," he explained to Susara, as he started up the stairs to his dormitory.

Susara hissed in wordless agreement.
"I do not know how to do just that well. Tutoring someone else might make it easier. Perhaps Neville would like some help. But he is so different from Draco, I would end up studying different things."

Harry settled down at the desk. He took his books from his bag, but did not open any of them. Susara spiraled down his arm, curled up on the pile of books, and raised her head. Harry smiled at the tableau.

"Serpent as the symbol of wisdom," he remarked.

Susara was puzzled.

"It is not important. You are doing the pose perfectly."

"Teach me the name, then," Susara insisted. Harry nearly laughed at her earnestness.

"Symbol of wisdom," he said. "But it is not a standard pose for a torclinde."

"Like this?"

"Yes. On the pile of books."

Susara flicked her tongue down along the spines of the books. "May I eat this gold, Master?" she asked formally.

"No." Harry smiled. "That is the title. If you want gold, I will get you a galleon."

Harry brought the gold coin back and held it out to his golden snake. She reached her head out for it, and spent a moment savoring the air around it with her flickering scarlet tongue. Harry smiled with enjoyment at her pleasure. She was just stretching her mouth for the coin when the door opened. Harry ignored it.

"What are you doing?" Ron asked, scandalized.

"I'm feeding my snake."

"Your snake eats money?"

"Torclindes were created from gold. They need gold to live."

"Your snake eats money," Ron said, stunned.

"Not much," Harry said with deliberate, cruel nonchalance. "Just a galleon every week or two."

"Oh," Ron said weakly.

With a flush of shame, Harry realized he had just baited Ron about money. Apologetically, he looked over his shoulder. "I'm in a very bad mood, Ron. You might want to clear out."

Ron shrugged. He crossed the room and sat on the edge of Harry's bed. "How about you tell me about it, instead?"

Harry froze, then turned his chair slightly. "Let me start," he said, "by saying McGonagall is a nasty, interfering, cold-hearted, unfair ..."

"I've heard all that before," Ron agreed, "except 'unfair.' What did she do to you this time?"
Talking with Ron actually helped. He listened to Harry rant, and sympathized, and told him it wasn't worth fighting. Reluctantly, Harry agreed. Ron pointed out that he'd never understood Transfiguration theory, either, and suggested Harry go through the optional readings and explain them to him, later. Harry agreed, and Ron, kindly, made a show of gloating about getting help with his homework.

Harry was just getting into his pajamas when the voice of Professor McGonagall summoned them to the Common Room. Harry threw his school robe over his nightclothes and went downstairs.

McGonagall arrived five minutes later. She started by taking roll call. Two of the seventh years were missing. The deputy headmistress pointed her wand at her throat, then whispered something, then announced that all students should report to their Common Rooms immediately. Her voice came normally out of her mouth, but reverberated through the air around them. Harry thought it rather interesting to see both ends of the process at once.

Before the return of the errant seventh years, someone knocked. Gareth Reddington, the Head Boy, poked his head inside. "Dean Thomas and Simon Lloyd," he informed McGonagall. The head of house cleared her throat.

"Dean Thomas and Simon Lloyd," she said, "please accompany Mr. Reddington."

The two boys, with many nervous glances at friends, left. Harry noticed they were both black, and, he thought, both Muggle born. He wondered if either was significant.

"I regret to inform you," Professor McGonagall said formally, when the selected students had left, "that there has been another, major, attack by the followers of You-Know-Who, in London. There were a large number of casualties. We believe that families of students may be involved."

Harry laughed out loud. To McGonagall's look of reprimand, he said mockingly:

"What, Death Eaters' children at Hogwarts? Do you really think so?"

"It is not my concern who may be related to the attackers, Mr. Potter," McGonagall said tightly, over the sniggers and disapproving looks Harry's remark garnered. "It is relationships to the victims that concern us."

Harry froze in shock. He wanted to sink into the floor. "Dean?" he managed.

"We do not know, Mr. Potter. We only know his family resides in the neighborhood which was attacked. He is being provided with the means to contact his family, if they are available."

The portrait hole opened, and Pleasance Randall and Adam Hall entered, looking very embarrassed and frightened. McGonagall repeated her information, then sent all the students, excepting only Miss Randall and Mr. Hall, to bed.

Harry, Ron, Seamus, and Neville lay awake awaiting Dean's return. None of them had much to say. Dean came back very late.

"My family is fine," he said immediately, but he had obviously been crying. "Gemma, a girl a used to play with, is dead." He shuddered. "They said it was bad, and wouldn't give me details. I wish they would tell me. I'm sure I can think up worse things than the truth."

Harry was not as certain. Tactfully, he restrained himself from saying so.
Harry did not sleep well, that night. He went down to breakfast early on Friday, with Hermione and a number of other Gryffindors. Lavender informed them that only Darren Johnson, a Hufflepuff, had lost family in the attack, but three of the students had lost childhood friends or neighbors. Johnson’s mother and his younger brother and sister had been killed. His father was fine, and his older sister injured.

They were all seated and poking uncomfortably at breakfast items, when the first Slytherin contingent arrived. Draco was first, impeccable, as always, with a vivid green shirt flashing out at the collar of his robes. With him were Crabbe and Goyle, in their old positions on either side of him. Draco was saying something that made the others laugh. Victoria Nott, a fourth year, was receiving an unusual amount of attention from some of the older students, including Pansy Parkinson. Their chatter, throughout the meal, was broken by occasional bursts of laughter.

A second group arrived later and sat very quietly at the other end of the long table. The Slytherins who trickled in thereafter sat in between, as neutrally as possible, and spoke to each other infrequently and quietly.

Harry timed leaving breakfast to encounter Draco near the door.

"Draco?" he tried.

Harry had wanted to say something cutting, or demanding, but all he managed was to sound hurt. It was embarrassing. The anger he had felt watching the Slytherins laugh revived again at the snickers that came from Parkinson, Zabini, and Vere.

"You had something to say, Potter?" Draco asked mockingly.

Harry felt like he’d been thrown back into last fall – possibly the day after Halloween weekend.

"I think you could be more respectful," he forced himself to say. "Forty-seven people died."

"No, Harry," Draco said, almost gently. "No people died. Only Muggles."

"Muggles are people!" Harry shouted angrily. "What is wrong with you? You know better, Dragon!"

Draco sneered. "How can anything that cannot do magic be considered a person?" he asked haughtily. "We are not people without language, and we are not people without wizardry."

Draco's coldness gave Harry some control over his anger. He glared. "Do you know how they are portraying this in the Muggle press?" he asked.

"Last night's little soiree? I could not care less."

"Last night's attack was in a largely black neighborhood. The one last week hit an Asian area especially hard. They are saying it was white supremacists."

"White what?"

"People who think that people with skin like Dean's, or even Padma's, are not real people like you
"That's purity of blood. That's what it means to me, and to any Muggle-born. I think it an apt translation, myself."

Draco flushed, but began to look genuinely involved in the conversation.

"I am not talking about someone's appearance, Harry. I am talking about their abilities. The ability to do magic is what differentiates us from lesser creatures."

"Hermione can do magic. You still treat her like crap."

"Her children may not be able to."

"Squibs can show up in any family."

Draco smiled tightly. "Yes," he said, "but a Mudblood is twelve times as likely to have one as a pureblood." He looked oddly reasonable as he added: "This weakens the entire Wizarding population."

Harry goggled at him. "You mean you'd be all right with Hermione if she didn't have any kids?" he asked. He was aware Hermione was waiting by the staircase, possibly close enough to hear him.

Draco rolled his eyes. "Really, Harry, what good is a woman who doesn't breed? It's like an owl that won't carry letters!"

Harry turned on his heel and left.

"Harry!" Draco called angrily after him. "Harry Potter, you come back here! Now!"

Harry, desperately, walked over to Darren Johnson.

"Johnson," he tried, "I'm sorry to hear about your –"

He was grabbed at the shoulder and swung round.

"Mind your manners, Harry," Draco Malfoy snarled. "You know the rules. This shouldn't surprise you."

"At the moment, I don't care bugger all for your rules," Harry snarled back. He found himself hoping Draco would punch him, or at least hex him. He was in the mood for a fight.

Instead, Draco went cold. "Very well, Potter," he said. "Console the talking monkey, then." He pivoted neatly, like Snape at the end of a lecture. He managed to take only a step before Harry grabbed him.

"Call anyone that again, Malfoy, and I'll kick your pureblood arse from here to Hogsmeade!"

Draco stepped back. In a second, his wand was out. "Not if I've got my wand, you won't!" His voice lowered. "I can hex you to ash, Harry, remember that."

"No fighting in the halls!" The familiar voice rang through the corridor. Harry and Draco both turned to see McGonagall bearing down on them. She stopped a few steps away. "Mr. Malfoy, put away your wand."
"Potter was threatening me, professor!"

"Now, Mr. Malfoy."

Reluctantly, Draco put away his wand. McGonagall turned her attention to Harry.

"Well," she said. "Good to see that someone has come to his senses. Nonetheless, Harry, you may not threaten or harm another student while at Hogwarts. Is that clear?"

Harry glowered. He managed to find his voice, and to say, "Yes, professor."

"Since we have thirty minutes until classes, I suggest both of you return to your houses, which are, fortunately, in opposite directions." For a minute, Harry just stared at her, as did Draco. Finally, she made a shooing motion at them. "Up, Mr. Potter. Mr. Malfoy, down."

Draco turned on his heel and strode to the stairs. Harry watched him descend. His stomach lurched.

"Gryffindor, Mr. Potter. Hermione? Please escort him."

At lunch, Harry found himself watching Draco. Malfoy was not cheerful now, but disdainfully aloof. When the blond left the Great Hall, Harry sighed.

"He's still Malfoy, Harry," Ron said. "You get it, now?"

"I just don't believe him," Hermione added furiously. "He doesn't need to gloat about it."

"Actually, he probably does," Harry contributed spontaneously. He was almost as surprised as his friends to hear it.

"No he doesn't," Hermione countered automatically.

"Of course he does," Harry said. "He'd be in trouble with his father if he looked less than pleased, right?"

Harry spent much of the afternoon mulling over his own words. The more he thought about it, the more he thought that Draco had little choice but to appear pleased, and that "you know the rules" and perhaps even the initial use of his last name, had been intended to remind him of this fact. By the end of classes, he regretted his belligerence, but saw little chance to make amends, at least before Potions on Monday. It would not be advisable to try to speak to Draco at dinner, with most of the school watching.

Harry lay back on the bed. "I can hardly see him," he explained to Susara. "It doesn't make the least bit of practical difference that I fought with him. I do not know why it makes me miserable. Part of it is that I thought he was improving, but that may still be true. I cannot tell anything from how Draco acts in public, which is why it is so horrible to see him only in public."

"Can he tell anything from how you act in public?"

"Everything," Harry sighed. The loose exhalation felt odd after he had been speaking in Parseltongue. "He could think I was just playing my part, as well, but I am afraid he knows me too well for that. I was just being a stupid Gryffindor. Maybe that will be enough excuse."
“You are clever, Master,” Susara protested.

"About some things, but not this. He will know I took it all seriously."

"You are afraid he is angry at you?" Susara asked.

"Or hurt. Or just insulted."

Harry walked down to dinner in the company of Hermione and Ron, that night. The attack had affected Ron more than he would admit. He had scarcely let Hermione out of his sight since he woke.

While they were descending the stairs into the Entrance Hall, a group from Slytherin was coming up from the dungeons. Harry saw Draco with them. When the blond noticed Harry, a flash of pained anger broke his cool disdain. Impulsively, Harry broke away from the others and crossed the brief gap to the Slytherin group.

"Harry!" Hermione scolded, trailing after him. "No fighting."

Harry stopped in front of Draco, and Draco glared at him.

"What now, Potter?" he asked coldly. Harry watched him clenching and unclenching his fists. This wasn't the game now; it was real.

People nearby snickered. Parkinson murmured something to one of her friends. Harry took a deep breath.

"I apologize for my behavior this morning," he said firmly. "I was up all night with Dean, and I was upset, but there was no reason to take it out on you. Don't get me wrong – I meant what I said about Muggles being people and all – but my hostility was inappropriate. I'm sorry."

Nearby Slytherins gawked.

"What?" Hermione was outraged.

"Harry!" Ron snapped, moving closer. Zabini and Bulstrode stepped forward to block his approach.

Draco evaluated Harry for a moment.

"Apology accepted," he said formally, and held out his hand.

A group of Hufflepuffs was now coming down the hall, towards the crowd, expanding the size and scope of their audience considerably. Harry knew the handshake would be seen as a betrayal by most of those watching. However, to back down now would saying he hadn't meant it. With a feeling of doom, he reached out and shook Draco's hand firmly.

"Still friends?" Draco asked quietly.

"Still friends," Harry allowed.

"Pity you can't take off," Draco said quietly. "I'm sure we would both appreciate time someplace where we could really scream."

Harry nodded. "See you in Potions," he said. He got some interesting looks from the Slytherins as he left. Blaise Zabini even winked at him. Harry decided he didn't want to know what private understanding he was supposed to have with Zabini.
"What was that for?" Hermione raged at Harry, as they walked to the Gryffindor table.

"I should not have gone after him this morning," Harry said tightly. "It was nothing to do with him."

"It was to do with him," Ron said grimly. "You'd better get that through your head now."

"You don't know anything," Harry replied viciously. He spent the rest of dinner fantasizing about destroying Voldemort, and Lucius Malfoy with him. Hermione and Ron made no further attempt to talk to him.

The atmosphere in the Gryffindor Common Room was tense, that night. With the Gryffindor-Ravenclaw match scheduled for the next day, talk would normally have centered around that, and Harry would normally have been wished luck by at least half the House. Instead, talk was about Voldemort and the Death Eaters, and Harry was not sure how much of the decrease in good wishes was due to people being preoccupied, and how much was due to him shaking hands with Malfoy in the hall. Dean and Simon had gone home to see their families and attend funerals.

After reading the same paragraph in his Transfiguration text three times, Harry gave up on homework and went to see Hermione, who had retreated to her room.

"Hermione?"

"I'm busy."

Harry shivered at the ice in Hermione's voice. "House business?" he tried.

"Come in and be quick."

Harry slipped nervously into Hermione's room, and shut the door behind him.

"This better not be Quidditch," Hermione said.

"No." Harry looked down at the worn floor in front of the doorway. He wondered how many people came only this far into the prefect's room. "I've been thinking," he said, "that we ought to do something for Dean and Simon's families."

"Such as?"

"I don't know! Flowers or something. A card. You know, some sympathy thing. From Gryffindor."

"What a kind thought, Harry," Hermione said, with saccharine sarcasm. Harry tried not to roll his eyes.

"Well, just keep me out of it."

"What, the rest of us should send flowers?"

"No, I mean, of course I'll pitch in, but it should be your idea." Hermione looked startled, so Harry added: "Because if Dean knows I thought of it, he won't believe it's sincere ... He'll think I'm trying to shore up my reputation, or some such idiocy. And then it won't do any good."

"Any good?"
"In making them feel supported, you know. All right?"

"All right," Hermione said more gently. "I'd been thinking about it anyway."

"Good, then." Harry turned to leave, but stopped at the sound of his name. "Yeah?"

"Good luck in the game tomorrow."

"Thanks."
Games and Strategies

Harry woke early on Saturday morning. After the second time Neville started snoring, Harry gave up on getting back to sleep. He dressed and went down to Common Room, then realized he couldn't leave on his own. When he thought it was late enough, he knocked on Hermione's door.

"Hermione?"

To his surprise, the door opened.

"You're up?"

"Yes, I was just studying. What do you want?"

Harry ducked his head. "Um... breakfast?"

They walked down to breakfast together, and sat at a nearly empty table. Jason Wilkens, one of the Gryffindor Chasers, was there, as was Zoe Grey, another Chaser. Harry recognized three members of the Ravenclaw team at the Ravenclaw table. Cho, the Ravenclaw Seeker and captain, who had been Harry's girlfriend briefly, the previous spring, was not with them. Harry and Hermione sat by themselves, near the end of the table. Hermione took toast and spread a bit of jam on it. She watched Harry load up his plate with food, then stare at it.

"You need food to fly well," she said.

"Everyone always says that, but I can never eat, and I still win most of our games."

"If you ate, you might win all of them."

Harry let out a strangled burst of laughter. He took a bite of sausage and regretted it almost immediately. After what seemed like an eternity of chewing, he managed to swallow it.

"I still don't understand...." Hermione began, then trailed off.

"What?" Harry demanded.

"Why you apologized to Malfoy." At Harry's sigh, Hermione pushed. "He's a smug, malicious bigot."

"I had no right to treat him like a murderer just because his father is one."

"It's just a matter of time, you know."

"So he keeps telling me." He poked at a rubbery egg. "He never sounds happy about it, though. Flippant, sometimes, but not happy."

"He was happy enough when Voldemort returned."

"Oh, I expect it seemed like a victory. But then his father wasn't running his schemes, anymore — he was a servant. A servant of someone who actually has quite different priorities. He's had almost two
years, now, to understand...."

Harry stopped. Draco Malfoy had just entered the room. Rather than sitting down immediately, he crossed to the Gryffindor table.

"Good morning, Harry," he said politely.

"Good morning, Draco," Harry answered in kind.

Draco looked amused. "I came to wish you good luck," he said.

"Really?"

"Really. You, personally. I hope you catch the Snitch — preferably right away, so you win with a low score."

Harry grinned. "That I'll believe."

"See you later, then."

Draco went back to the Slytherin table. Harry looked up and saw Zoe was glaring at him. He looked back at his plate. Nothing on it seemed remotely appetizing.

"I shouldn't have brought you down here," he said to Hermione.

"Well, I'm here now, and you are staying until I have eaten my breakfast. Try to eat something yourself, please, Harry?"

Hermione, Harry realized, was not glaring. Slightly encouraged, he attempted a piece of toast, and actually managed two of them.

"And they're up! Jason and Randall, racing for the Quaffle — Ravenclaw in possession!"

After Lee Jordan had graduated, the previous year, Ernie Macmillan had succeeded to the position of match announcer. He was noticeably calmer and less biased than Jordan had been -- though, Harry thought, as he scanned the pitch for a flash of gold, that wasn't saying much. He smiled slightly at the memory of Jordan screaming at the Slytherin team for cheating.

"Ravenclaw scores! Ten to naught, Ravenclaw. Gryffindor in possession — look at Jason go! OUCH! That must have hurt! Ravenclaw in possession — Gryffindor beaters seem a bit preoccupied, this match..."

Preoccupied, Harry thought, was not the word. Damian was almost as high above the pitch as Harry, but seemed to be ignoring the game entirely, while Ryan moved ineffectually among the remaining players. Harry watched a Ravenclaw Chaser speed for the Gryffindor goals, while the Ravenclaw beaters hit a Bludger back and forth, down the field. They were going to send the Bludger at the Gryffindor Keeper at the same time as the Quaffle, Harry was certain.

"Damian!" Harry yelled, pointing. "Guard Cornelia!"

Damian ignored him, spiraling idly down. Just as Harry accelerated down the pitch, the other Bludger came at him from the side. Damian continued his spiral. Harry went sharply up and down, effectively hopping the murderous ball. An appreciative gasp came from the stands.
"Did you see that?! Just when you think Potter can't get any better — Ravenclaw scores! Ravenclaw in possession." Ernie went back to the subject of Harry's dodge. "Of course, rumor has it that the Gryffindor Seeker was caught out one night chasing bats with the Slytherin Seeker, which may explain those incredible turns. The Slytherin/Gryffindor game should be even madder than usual, this -- Sorry professor. No more gossip. Gryffindor, no, Ravenclaw...."

The third Gryffindor chaser, Lindsey, was tailing the Ravenclaw Chaser in possession closely, hoping for a chance at the Quaffle. She dodged the Bludger sent her way by a Ravenclaw Beater. A scarlet shape flashed to a halt beside Harry.

"Is that true?" Ryan demanded.

Harry spluttered and pointed to the cloud of players below. "Get down there!" he bellowed, pointing. "Lindsey!"

Ryan shot down, but too late, Ravenclaw had scored a third time. They scored another four times before Harry spotted and caught the Golden Snitch. The cheers he got for his impressive dive were not sufficient to improve his mood.

The Gryffindor team, excepting Harry, landed in a happy cluster in the middle of the field. They looked excited enough to default to the traditional victory hugs and shouts, but Harry was in no mood to receive them. He remained on his broom, swooping around the cluster like an irritated sheepdog, until they fell still. In front of the quiet group, he landed, fixing each in turn with a baleful glare.

"That," he snarled, "was pathetic."

His teammates looked nervously among themselves.

"It's true that the game is often won on the Snitch, but we are supposed to be a team! At this rate, I could win us every game, and we could still lose the cup for lack of points! Zoe, why weren't you watching Jason? Ryan, why were you questioning me on commentator's gossip during a game? Wouldn't later make more sense? Damian, if you have a problem with me, take it up with me — don't jeopardize the standing of your House to display it in front of the school! ARE YOU ALL CLEAR ON THAT?" By now, Harry was yelling loudly enough that some people in the stands could probably hear him, and Zoe and Ryan were cringing. Damian looked angry. Harry took a deep breath. "Jason, you did great. Lindsey, that was well played — we'd have a closer score if you'd had any backup from our Beaters. Cornelia, good blocking.

Harry looked at them all and shook his head. "Don't party too hard," he said curtly. "We have practice time tomorrow, and we will use it." And I'll have Damian and Ryan alternate sending Bludgers at me. They need this out of their systems. They were all still staring at him, looking rather stunned. Harry inclined his head. "Dismissed," he said impatiently.

His teammates left. Harry loitered on the field a minute longer, to give them a head start, then went to the changing rooms to exchange his brilliant Quidditch robes for his usual ones of anonymous black.

When Harry told Hermione that he wasn't interested in the victory celebration, she willingly took him to the library, instead. Ginny and Ron, who had stayed to congratulate Harry, agreed that Ron would get Harry's school bag from his dormitory, and Ginny would run it to Harry in the library. Ron
offered to, but Harry could tell he was anxious to be back in the Common Room.

"Go have fun, Ron. You could certainly use it."

"So could you, mate."

"Yeah, but it's not going to happen. Not there, at any rate."

"I understand." Ron nodded grimly. "You know how I feel about Malfoy — but I'm likely to take a swing at Damian, myself, if he keeps this up."

Harry pulled at his hair. He could feel sparks of hatred coursing through him, focused one moment on the Death Eaters, who had killed so many innocents, and the next on Damian, who had been petty about a teammate in a Quidditch game. They burned at his soul with ridiculously equal ferocity. "This is what Voldemort wants!" he growled. "For us to bicker and distrust and spend our anger on each other — on the people we can reach — instead of on fighting him."

He felt his seething hatred crystallize and purify into a single intent: Voldemort would be destroyed, if he had to do it himself.

In the library, Harry stared unseeing at *Practical Applications of Simile in Transfiguration*. Perhaps he did need to destroy Voldemort himself. *Everyone thinks I can do this*, he said to himself. *They have since I was a child and it was ridiculous. But what if they're right? What if it's up to me?* Harry tried to think. He made a mental review of each time he had encountered Voldemort, in any of his forms, and what had worked and what had not.

*I've never been prepared, but I've survived. I need to stop reacting. I need to have a strategy.* Harry closed his eyes. He still felt all the anger, but it wasn't burning him now. It was lifting him up above the deep sorrow of the school and the petty attacks that hid it, into someplace pure and black as a winter night. He could think, here. *I need to know everything he can do. Everything I can do.* Harry drew over a parchment and began to write.

Sunday night, Harry was still working on his private research. Susara spiraled down his arm and out of his sleeve. She arranged herself in a coil on his pile of library books and raised her head up.

"Symbol of wisdom?"

"Beautiful, Susara. It is perfect."

"You are not happy?"

"I am trying to figure something out." Guiltily, Harry reached over and stroked her gently. He'd paid her hardly any attention since the attack.

"Tell me?"

Harry sighed. "I have this enemy...."

"I will bite him."

Harry had to smile at her ready answer.
"Pardon, Susara, but I do not think it would help."

"I am a vector torclinde. The people who sold me did not know. We hide it when we can."

"Vector?"

"If you give me poison, I can send it out in my bite."

Harry remembered reading about that. A few torclindes, approximately one in a thousand, had the ability to retain poisons or potions and inject them with a bite. Snakes of this sort were usually kept for medical use, or torture, or a number of other things that were probably not a pleasant life for a snake, especially one designed to enjoy companionship.

"That could be useful," he said, "but Voldemort, my enemy, is also a Parselmouth, and a powerful wizard. He has a snake that is many times as big as me, and poisonous. I wouldn't want to send you up against him." Harry felt Susara's disappointment. "Perhaps against some of his servants, however. I will put you on my list."

"What is this list?"

"It is a lot of lists, actually." Harry looked down at his papers, spread in piles on the desk. "Things to research, Voldemort's talents, Voldemort's limitations, my talents, my limitations ... A sheet of talents and limitations for each Death Eater — Pity I can't ask Snape about them...."

"What eats death?"

"'Death Eater' is what my enemy calls his servants. Voldemort hopes to be immortal. He has done a lot to make himself hard to destroy. Impossible, he says, but everyone makes mistakes."

"Yesss." Susara's agreement extended in emphasis. "Nothing is perfect." She slithered forward and looked at Harry's paper. "Silly lines. What do they mean?"

"Well, these are my enemy's advantages. This one says 'unicorn blood.' That's under his disadvantages too, though. Maintaining your life with unicorn blood curses you in some way. I've found a bunch of sources that tell me that much, but none that give specifics. I need to get into the Restricted Section, I think. Underneath, it says 'Parselmouth.' Of course, I'm one too, but that doesn't help. His snake won't do what I tell it to, just because it can understand me."

"If you told me 'do this now' I would want to do as you said, even if you were not my master. Your voice is strong."

"Yes, but if someone else came and said 'no, do that,' you would find the stranger easier to disobey than me, wouldn't you?"

"Ah. I see. She is his."

"Yes. Which is a pity, because if I could make her attack the Death Eaters...." Harry suddenly imagined himself surrounded by a ring of Death Eater, and Nagini mowing down some with her tail as she bit others. Voldemort would need to stop her....

"Yes?"

"Well, it would be easier." Harry suddenly realized his heart was hammering in his chest. Perhaps he should investigate ways to affect Nagini.
"Professor?" Harry asked tentatively, at Tuesday evening's potions lab. Snape responded merely by fixing his gaze on Harry. Harry forced himself to continue, trying his best to sound casually curious. "Could one use the Imperius Curse on a snake, sir?"

Snape stared. Draco became very focused on his work. Harry shifted one of his glass bowls, and the slight "tingk" of glass on stone resounded in the silence.

Snape's eyes narrowed. "One can use the Imperius Curse on anything, Mr. Potter."

"How well would it work on a snake, though? If someone cast Imperius on it, then I gave it another order, what would happen?"

"Ah," Snape said, rather lightly, "you mean that if one happened to be a Parselmouth, could one overcome the Imperius Curse on a snake?" He shifted as he spoke, his stance and expression growing less severe, to better match his unconcerned tone. "Quite honestly, Mr. Potter, I have no idea. Parselmouths are rare, and, as a Hogwarts graduate, I do not have a solid theoretical understanding of the Dark Arts."

Harry restrained himself from inquiring about Snape's practical understanding of the Dark Arts. He was not supposed to know about that. Instead, he nodded. "I understand, sir." He returned to teasing individual hairs out of his mat of fur. "Would it be illegal for me to test it?" he continued. "I can usually find adders. Would practicing an Unforgivable Curse on an animal count? We were shown it on a spider." Harry could not help thinking that it was a very dark wizard who had shown them that curse on a spider.

Snape's eyes narrowed again.

"It would not be illegal to practice the Imperius Curse on an animal," he conceded. His voice grew much harsher. "However, it would be practicing Dark Arts, which Hogwarts in general, and Professor Dumbledore in particular, do not regard with favor."

Harry looked down at his work and nodded. "Yes sir," he whispered. He waited for Draco's usual comment about his face going "Gryffindor red", but Draco did not say anything until much later, when they needed to discuss ingredient additions.

At 9:20, Snape told them to start cleaning, and ten minutes later, he was pushing Draco Malfoy out the door. Draco passed Hermione in the hall outside. His back was to them, and if he said anything, it was not audible, but Harry could clearly see Hermione's glare.

"Ah, Miss Granger," Professor Snape said silkily, before Hermione had quite reached the door. Snape stepped to block the doorway and placed a hand on Harry's shoulder. His fingers dug in slightly. "Mr. Potter and I have an urgent matter to discuss. Return to your dormitory. I will escort him back myself, after our conference."

Hermione looked questioningly at Harry. Harry did his best to keep his terror from his face. He nodded subtly.
"I could wait. . . ." Hermione offered hesitantly.

"That will not be necessary, Miss Granger."

Ice, Harry thought. Black ice. He nodded again, more obviously, at Hermione and mouthed "go". She looked unhappy.

"Yes, Professor," she said, and walked back the way she had come. Quickly, Snape pulled Harry inside and shut the door.

"This way," he said. He strode to the front of the lab, and sat behind his desk. In a moment his wand was out and pointed at the door, on which he performed both a locking and a silencing charm. That done, he settled into his chair and steepled his fingers on the desk before him. He watched Harry in silence for a moment. Harry waited.

"Tell me, Mr. Potter," Snape asked. "What would be the purpose of casting the Imperius Curse upon a snake? Your own snake is not dangerous, and I cannot imagine you are afraid someone will force it to attack you."

"That's true, sir. However, if another Parselmouth is present, I cannot be sure of a snake obeying me."

"Popular knowledge is that the only other currently living Parselmouth in Britain is the Dark Lord."

"Exactly," Harry replied. "When Tom Riddle — Voldemort — and I were in the Chamber of Secrets, the basilisk obeyed him, because he was the heir of Slytherin."

"And?"

"Nagini, also, obeys Voldemort."

Snape looked puzzled. "Do you think Lord Voldemort uses the Imperius Curse on her?" he asked.

"No," Harry answered. "But perhaps I could."

Snape's eyes widened. "On...." he twitched slightly. "You do not think you could make her turn on ... her master?"

"No," Harry shook his head firmly. "At least, I wouldn't chance it. If I tried, she might resist. However, she would probably not resist being turned on the Death Eaters, whom she terrorizes. If the Imperius Curse can wrest control of her from Voldemort, even briefly, it could significantly sway the odds in that sort of situation, more so if he needs to focus significant attention on her to regain control."

Snape sat back, his mouth slightly open. "I see." He looked at Harry appraisingly, as if seeing him for the first time. "Draco said you should have been in Slytherin." He straightened then, and gave Harry a thin, tight-lipped smile. "Yes, that could be very effective." Snape stood and began to pace, his robes swirling about him at each turn. "Understand, Mr. Potter, that you are in disgrace. Your traditional protectors are angry with you. Should you choose to attempt this experiment, you must not be caught."

"I understand, sir."

"Good." Snape stopped and leaned sideways in the doorway to his storeroom. His free hand came up to his hip. It was an oddly casual pose that made him look years younger and much less
threatening than usual.

"That said, Potter," he added, almost idly, "is there any way in which I might assist you?"

Harry let out a breath he hadn't known he was holding in. He smiled tentatively. "Any chance you could catch a snake or two for me, and have them down here, next time? I could stay late, again."

Snape nodded. "I can do that," he said. He smiled thinly. "I will."

"Shall I say you'll escort me back? Or should I just tell Hermione that sessions will be ending at ten, from now on?"

"The latter would be better. As far as young Malfoy is concerned, the session ends at 9:30, and Hermione is always a bit late to fetch you, understood?"

Harry nodded. He could tell Snape did not trust Draco not to pass this idea on to his father, and he wasn't certain he trusted Draco with this, himself. "Completely, Professor," he said. He looked down, then, with a soft smile, up again. "Hermione gets very engrossed in her studies."

All week, Harry fretted about the scheduled meeting with Professor Snape. He woke during the middle of the night, the first night, realizing he had just arranged to experiment with an Unforgivable curse, and lay awake, disgusted, guilt-stricken, and terrified. He eventually decided he would just tell Snape he had thought better of it, and fell back into a restful slumber.

In the morning, he tried to remember exactly what he had said to Snape. Perhaps he could just try overcoming the Imperius Curse in a snake. After all, he reasoned, Dumbledore had Quiris. Snape could not be expected to be able to approach them, as he was summoned as a Death Eater too frequently to not reek of Dark Arts, but Harry was expected to be able to approach them. If he explained that to Snape, the Potions master would probably agree that Harry should not cast the curse himself. Harry tried to put the matter out of his mind, and for a few days, he nearly managed to do so.

On Saturday, Harry, Ron, and Hermione finally paid a visit to Hagrid. Harry had to remind Hermione to get permission from McGonagall — Hagrid's was not on the list of places he was allowed to go. She granted it readily enough, and Harry found himself down in the familiar room, endangering his teeth by attempting to nibble on some of Hagrid's baking.

"Saw yer last practice, Harry," Hagrid said. "Team seems to have settled out some, since the game."

"Some," Harry agreed. He had again assigned Damian to trying to take him out, but Ryan to protecting the Chasers. Damian, encouragingly, seemed to be getting bored with doing nothing but slamming Bludgers at Harry, even though they occasionally hit.

"Never seen Gryffindor play so poorly. Yeh were fine, Harry, but -"

"They were angry at me." At Hagrid's puzzled look, Harry rolled his eyes. "About Draco."

Since the Gryffindor/Ravenclaw match, the other Gryffindors had mostly returned to treating Harry as they normally did. Harry thought it had helped that when Dean returned, he and Harry had gotten into a long talk about life with Muggles. Dean thought of his Muggle life as the "Real World." Harry explained that he thought of his wizarding life as the "Real World." It had been a long and
meandering conversation, which left them closer than they had been before Draco, never mind over February.

Hagrid's brows came down. "Can't say yeh haven't improved him," he commented. "Bin acting like a civilized bein', this last month. Yeh bin goin' cold, though — don' think no one's noticed! If it's got t'come out of yeh to him, I'd rather yeh both stayed as yeh were."

"I am not cold!" Harry snapped. In truth, he felt as if he were burning.

"No?" Hagrid shrugged and poked the fire. "Go' a problem with yer glasses then?" He turned and looked at Harry. "In my experience, if a person don' see me, it means he don' want ter see me."

Harry half-covered his face with his hands. "Sorry," he said. He looked desperately at Hagrid. "It was only the once, wasn't it? I didn't want to fight, that's all."

"An' yeh were wi' him?"

"No! Or just — that was why I was afraid we'd fight. He knows you're my friend, Hagrid. I told him you were the first person I ever remember being nice to me, really, and he promised to not be so awful to you."

Hagrid looked a long while at Harry, then nodded. "Well, he's bin keepin' tha' promise, more or less. But if yeh treat all your friends tha' way, when you're with him, it's no wonder people are angry at yeh."

Harry looked desperately at Hermione. "I don't, do I?"

"What, ignore everyone when Draco's with you? You absolutely do, Harry."

Harry stared at the fire. "Oh," he said. He looked up. "But I can see you any time. I can see you in Gryffindor, in all my classes...."

"That's true," Hermione said neutrally.

"I can't imagine a conversation with both of you."

Hagrid laughed. "Yeh can run with the fox or hunt with the hounds, Harry, but not together."

Sunday night, Harry dreamed he was in the tunnel before the Chamber of Secrets, casting *Osum Crema* after Draco. Red fire jetted from his wand and flared to blue on contact with the scattered bones. A matching flare of power shot through Harry's soul, and Draco laughed with Harry's delight.

"You're brilliant!" he exclaimed. His face was flushed and beautiful, then he looked over Harry's shoulder and went deathly pale. Harry turned and saw the Death Eaters, again standing in ranks in the narrow tunnel. An elegant, blond man strode to the front, his wand drawn.

"*Avada Kadavra,*" he commanded, and green light shot from his wand to envelope the white dragon by Harry's side. The dragon fell, and Lord Voldemort rose like a puppeteer behind his legion of followers. Harry's vision blurred. He realized his own wand was of little use against Voldemort's, and seized from the ashy ground the one Draco had dropped. It felt stiff and unfamiliar in his hand, but the hot power from his previous casting was still coursing through him.

"*Avada Kadavra,*" Harry said, almost teasingly, and Voldemort fell in a blast of green light. A
second *Osum Crema* set the Death Eaters before him burning from the inside out.

Harry woke feeling cheerful. A minute later, he was shaking. He could not get back to sleep.

Draco put the scrubbed cauldron upside-down to dry. "That's it, then," he said.

"You should get going," Harry urged. "Hermione's probably deep in some book, and will run down when she finishes the chapter."

Draco glared at Harry, then briefly indicated Snape with a movement of his eyes. "I hate to leave you alone."

"He will not be alone, Mr. Malfoy," Snape said dryly. "He will be with me. I am a teacher, as you may recall. I will see that he safely meets his house prefect."

Draco smiled disarmingly at Snape. "But I'm really not in any hurry --" he began.

"You," Snape retorted, "are supposed to be back in Slytherin, at this time. As your head of house, I require you to leave, immediately."

Draco, looking rather sullen, left.

As soon as Draco had turned the corner, Snape eased the door shut and locked it with a spell. Gesturing for Harry to follow, he strode to the front of the room, sat at his desk, and summoned another chair up from the floor, for Harry. He motioned for Harry to sit, then cast a silencing charm on the locked door. He sneered at Harry, who was still standing.

"Well, Potter?"

"I've been having second thoughts, sir," Harry blurted out.

"Yes, of course you have. I would worry if you had not." Distractedly, Snape motioned to the chair. "Come now -- sit. We must discuss this."

Harry sat. "Well, first," he said awkwardly, thinking that while sincere talks with Snape were no longer a ludicrous concept, they didn't exactly feel natural, either, "there's just the 'no, no, no, you mustn't,' screaming at the back of my mind." Snape looked amused, so Harry pressed on. "Then there are practical matters, such as the Quiris."

"The Quiris?"

"You do know about them?"

"Yes, yes. Horsyr has three in her quarters. Revolting creatures. She, of course, says I only think that because I am steeped in Dark magic...." Snape frowned at Harry. "How did you know about the Quiris?"

Harry looked down briefly. "You told Dumbledore what Draco had said. He decided to test me, rather than asking."

Snape's eyes flashed dangerously. "I was quite clear —"
"He told me. You were quite sure Draco was lying. He wasn't. He had to see me hold the Quirini."

"Fool."

"Not entirely."


"Well, I'm considering doing this, right? And Draco did get me to do one bit of Dark magic — in January. I didn't actually realize it was ... but just because I wasn't thinking, really. It wasn't a spell I'd heard of."

"Then he is not as stupid as he seems."

"Sorry?"

"It's not an outright lie to say he is teaching you Dark Arts." Snape looked pleased. "That will enable him to stand up to a cursory interrogation by his father — one using minor truth magic...."

"I suppose."

"Reassuring. I'd thought Draco was risking too much on a blatant invention." Snape leaned back and looked searchingly at Harry. "So, how did it feel?"

"Um..." After a moment of frantic confusion, Harry realized what Snape must mean. "The actual casting?"

Snape nodded. Harry shivered.

"I wasn't ready for that ... that feeling," he tried. Snape raised an eyebrow, daring him to continue. "The power, just.... It was fantastic. I was breaking glass just to see it shatter.... I wanted everything exploding, breaking, burning...." Harry stopped, frightened by the wonder in his own voice.

Snape's mouth quirked, and he looked almost demurely down.

"The Imperius Curse," he said, his voice touched with something like reverence. "It will be much, much more. Do you think you can handle it, Mr. Potter?"

"I was thinking," Harry said, embarrassed, "perhaps we could start with you casting, and me trying to regain control. That is the first relevant part. We can't fully do it the other way, in any case, because you are not a Parselmouth."

"And you want to be alone with me, when I am drunk on power?" Snape asked, already with a threatening delight.

Harry shook his head. "Honestly, no, but I don't know anyone else who would do this whom I wouldn't trust less."

At that, Snape laughed outright. "Little Gryffindor," he sneered, "merely thinking like a Slytherin helps you not at all."

"I know," Harry agreed, with a weak smile. "I jump into it, anyway."

Snape nodded, a faint smile still on his lips. "Let us begin, then. Accio Serpent!"
Snape had brought three wild snakes. He held up the first, gripping it firmly right behind its open mouth. Harry could feel that it was angry and frightened. He started to speak to it, but Snape gestured him to silence.

"You should know, Mr. Potter, that we have various spells which provide control over animals. The permissible one in general use, the Domitus Charm, works well on mammals of low intelligence, such as goats and horses — even magical ones, such as flying horses — but has a much more limited effect on reptiles or birds. There are specific spells for some birds and amphibians — for example, there is a charm to control eagles, and one to summon frogs. However, the Imperius Curse is the only control spell to have a significant effect on snakes, dragons, and most terrestrial lizards."

Harry nodded. He had determined most of that during his own library research on controlling snakes.

"As a first experiment, I shall put this snake under the Imperius Curse, and you will attempted to gain control of it. If that fails, we will try with the second, but you will establish a rapport with it before I cast the Imperius. If that fails, you will command the third snake, then I will counter-command it with Imperius."

In no case were Harry's attempts to gain or keep control of the snakes successful. Snape seemed pleased, but did not agree when Harry suggested the experiment was concluded.

"Hardly, Mr. Potter," Snape said sarcastically. His tone was almost normal, but he shifted restlessly as he spoke. A smile flickered briefly across his face, then was gone. Harry thought how odd it was to see a trace of color in Snape's cheeks when he was less than furious. "Nagini is well bonded to her master. I suggest we try on your own snake, before jumping to any conclusions."

Harry looked uneasily at his sleeve. The wild snakes did not seem to be suffering any ill effects from the Imperius Curse, and Harry had been through it himself, but he still did not like the idea.

Snape slipped around behind Harry, who was seated, and bent so close that Harry could feel the Potions master's breath on his neck. "You have been through this, Potter," Snape sneered, at a whisper that was overwhelming, as the only sound in the large room. "All of your classmates have been through this. You seem no worse than before."

Harry willed himself to make a sound. "Susara?" he called. The snake spiraled out at his collar and hissed at Snape. To Harry's relief, Snape shifted back, giving him a little space. The Potions master chuckled.

"What a brave little serpent."

"Does he hurt you?" Susara asked.

"No." Harry swallowed. "We are trying to do something, seeing if my voice can counter a magical command. It does not work on snakes that do not know me. Would you be willing to be let him — my teacher — cast a curse on you, so we can see if I can counter it? He will release you as soon as we are finished."

Snape had moved back to his side of the table, but he was leaning over it, the glittering blackness of his eyes locked on Harry.

"I am willing," Susara said simply. Harry wondered guiltily if that counted.

"She consents, sir," he said.

At Harry's words, Snape relaxed. He shook his hair back over his shoulders, in a gesture Harry had
never seen before. "Good," he said. He took the small wooden cooling block they had been using in
the previous experiments, and set it on the long edge. "You tell her to stay away from this. When you
are ready, I will tell her to knock it down."

"Sir?"

"What now, child?"

"A positive command is easier than a negative one." Harry gestured over at one of the equipment
racks. "Perhaps I could bring that over and tell her to climb up and down it?"

Snape raised his eyebrows. "A good thought, Potter. Five points to Gryffindor." He smirked. "Better
hope nobody asks how you earned them."

At Harry's command, Susara began cheerfully spiraling up, across, and down the rack. Once she had
set up a neat little circuit, Snape drew his wand.

"Imperio," Snape whispered silkily. Susara paused.

"Keep going, beautiful," Harry urged. "Up, now."

Susara went up, jerkily, then stopped again. She looked over at the block. Her upper body stretched
out and wavered like a reed in the wind. Harry glanced over at Snape. He had never seen Snape look
so pleased. He was leaning back in his chair, smiling at nothing and twirling his wand end over end
in his fingers.

"Up, Susara," Harry hissed. "Climb. That lovely feeling he gives you is false." Susara went up two
more turns, then paused again.

"You will do as I command," Harry hissed forcefully. "Up! Climb!"

Susara went all the way to the top of the rack. Snape let out a shaky laugh.

"Finite Incantantum."

Released, Susara panicked. Harry reached out, and she let him pick her off the rack, but the tail she
wrapped around his wrist was only for balance.

"Little one? You did beautifully. I did not mean to frighten you."

"Master?" Susara asked uncertainly.

"I am sorry, beautiful. You are my dear pet. It is over, now."

"You see? Your own snake, you could control."

"Yes." Harry stroked Susara comfortingly. She lashed anxiously back and forth. "But it was an
effort. And I frightened her."

Snape laughed. "I doubt Nagini is so sensitive to harsh words." His eyes glittered. "That is all for
tonight, I think."

"Do we have more to do?" Harry asked, with a twinge of apprehension.
"That is up to you," Snape responded, "but in this plan of yours, you will be casting the Imperius Curse, not countering it. I would suggest that you do not want to be doing so for the first time when trapped before your enemy, with all my dubious associates around you. It is not a simple spell. Furthermore, one who has cast the Imperius Curse may be better at countering it. I am not asking you to do that now, but please consider the exercise, over the next week."

Harry shivered. "I'll think about it."

"Do that." Snape stood and began to pace restlessly. "We have five minutes before your escort arrives. Have you any questions?"

Why am I doing this? Harry thought, rather desperately. *Oh, right. I need a strategy.* He felt the lists in his pocket.

"It's a bit tangential, professor...."


"I... I've been making lists, of people's strengths and weaknesses — I was wondering if you could help me with some of the Death Eaters."

Snape froze. After a moment, he said:

"I cannot give you names. Tell me who you know, and I will tell you what I can about each."

They had just started on Avery when a knock came at the door. Immediately, Snape took down the silencing and locking charms.

"Very well, Potter. We will continue this at a later time. Come in, Miss Granger."

Harry stood and nodded.

"Thank you for your time, sir."

Snape gave a slight nod of acknowledgment. "Good night, Mr. Potter."
Harry was rather preoccupied when he entered the next day's Potions class. That morning, he had received an owl from Snape. The letter, tersely, had said:

Provide me with a list of those persons we discussed last night, and I will prepare information for you.

Harry had made a list of Death Eaters known to him during Divination, while Trelawny hinted sadly at his imminent demise. (Ron had actually gotten a laugh out of him by teasingly predicting that he would get into a fight with a dragon.) Harry hoped to have a chance to pass the list to Snape during or after Potions class. He had wondered if he should risk asking Draco for additions to the list, but had decided not to do so. When Draco leaned close, Harry found himself hoping he had not appeared nervous.

"In your house," Draco whispered, "whom do you trust?"

"For what?"

"I need to get the cloak back to you."

Harry tried to restrain a delighted smile as he thought. Not Ron, he decided. The thought hurt. He should be able to trust Ron with anything. His other roommates — perhaps, perhaps not. Neville wouldn't willingly give him away, but might mess up out of nerves. Seamus? Unknown. Perhaps one of the girls? Ginny? Perhaps. Or perhaps Ron had been filling her head with thoughts of how Harry needed to be protected from himself. Finally, reluctantly, he said:

"Hermione."

"What?"

"I know it doesn't make sense. Hermione. She's stopped thinking punishing me is doing any good —"

"Mr. Potter?"

Harry froze at the sound of Snape's voice. He had no idea what the professor had been saying.

"Sorry, professor?"

"The question, Mr. Potter, was 'why is the unicorn horn crushed, while the wormwood merely coarsely chopped'?"

Harry relaxed. "For two reasons, sir. First, the unicorn horn, because of its physical integrity, releases its essence to the mixture less readily than the more degradable wormwood, so if they were evenly broken, the wormwood would have greater power in the mixture. More importantly, we want purity as a dominant element over farseeing, to counteract the hallucinatory effects of the wormwood, so the division must be weighted towards the unicorn horn."

Snape looked at him intently. Finally, he said, "An acceptable analysis, Mr. Potter. Had you not
needed the question repeated, I might have considered awarding points to Gryffindor."

In the Gryffindor Common Room, that night, Harry was attempting, not very successfully, to do Transfiguration homework, when Hermione entered.

"Harry," she said, not pausing as she passed him, "my room, now."

Harry followed Hermione to her small, but private, prefect's room. As soon as he was in, Hermione closed the door and cast a silencing spell on it. Then, she opened her bag.

"Malfoy," she said, "pulled me into a classroom for a little talk, today."

"I hope he wasn't rude —"

"He was polite," Hermione growled, almost as if this was an offense in itself. "He called me 'Miss Granger', and asked me please to return this to you." She pulled Harry's invisibility cloak out of her bag and put it on the edge of her desk. Her hand stayed on the shimmering garment. "He said to thank you for the loan."

She nearly spat out the work "loan". Harry felt his stomach plummet as if filled with lead.

"Oh," he said.

"When, Harry," Hermione asked, "and why, did you loan Draco Malfoy your invisibility cloak? The truth, now."

Harry shuddered. From the look on Hermione's face, he thought he had better comply.

"Draco was with me when I saw the Dark Mark," he admitted.

"And you loaned him this?" Hermione shrieked. Harry was glad she had cast the silencing charm on the door. Everyone in the Common Room would have heard her, without that.

"We started back. I was drunk, he wasn't — he hates being out of control — so he was trying to kind of pull me. Except it wasn't working very well, because being towed really wasn't much easier than flying. We crashed in a ditch at the edge of some sheep pasture, and I realized it would take us too long to get back. I knew if I got caught I'd be in trouble, but if he got caught, people would think he'd been in on the attack. I gave him the cloak and told him to Apparate to Hogsmeade and fly in from there, and I'd work my way back slowly and carefully."

"And you don't think he flew back and joined the party?!"

"I know he didn't. He was back here, cleaned up, less than half an hour later, when Snape checked."

"Snape was lying."

"He was not!" Harry looked pleadingly at Hermione. "Hermione, please believe me. I know him better than you do. A year ago... yeah. He'd have been dying to prove himself. This spring... he just wanted to get away."

"You trust Malfoy?"

"Not for everything — but yeah, I trust him. We'd done this before. Three times, he could have just called his father and said where to ambush me. I've been passed out drunk in his room, Hermione!"
What would Voldemort give him for my head on a platter, you think? But he's never betrayed me. He's sick of it all."


"He wants you to meet him. 'In the usual place' he said. Tonight." She put a hand on the cloak. "Very melodramatic. He said it was a matter of life and death."

Harry hissed out a breath and moved forward. Hermione stepped in front of the cloak.

"No, Harry."

"Hermione, please!"

"No."

"I know what that means. We've discussed it. I need to see him."

"I'm not supposed to let you out."

"And what good is that doing?"

"I can't let you go into danger."

"I won't leave the castle, Hermione. I promise. And I'll be back by midnight." Harry looked pleadingly at her. "It's desperately important, Hermione!"

Hermione hesitated. "Whose life?" she asked suddenly.

"What? Oh, his first — then mine."

"Literally?"

"Literally."

"I suppose you can't tell me. . . ."

"His secret."

Hermione took a very deep breath. Quite suddenly, she picked up the cloak and thrust it at him. "Here. When you come back, you come up here, and you hand that cloak back over to me. Before midnight, or I go straight to McGonagall." Harry nodded his consent. "Put it on, now," Hermione said. "I'll go out for a walk and be slow closing the portrait hole."

When Harry got down to the Chamber of Secrets, Draco Malfoy was already there. He had transfigured the two inflatable chairs into a bi-colored couch, and was sitting at the green end of it, with a snifter of cognac. Despite the prop, his sullen pout made him look like a young child. Harry stopped in the door and took off his cloak.

"Hi."

Draco looked up, and an expression of relief passed across his features and was gone. Afterwards, though still glum, he looked closer to his age.
"She did it." He sounded reverential. Harry smiled.

"With a little persuading. I've promised to be home by midnight."

"We could do that." Draco managed the wavering ghost of a smile in return. "Drink?"

"Please."

It wasn't until Harry was settled on the couch with his own glass that Draco raised the issue of the night. "I've been ordered to come home for Easter," he said grimly.

"And you don't think it's for an egg hunt?"

Draco didn't even smile. "This is it, Harry. I'm sure of it." He took a deep breath. "After Easter ... you can't trust me anymore. Don't speak to me. Forget it."

"You're not just going to do it!" Harry burst out.

"Harry," Draco's jaw clenched. "We've talked about this before. I live. Period."

"You could ask Dumbledore for protection."

"Dumbledore can't protect me from my father! Not when he hasn't done anything. How long would this school last if Lucius Malfoy came and demanded his son, and the headmaster refused to release him?! It would be shut down by morning, and I would die for the attempt."

"You could escape Voldemort."

"How?"

"I don't know — it's not impossible, though. I've done it."

"You've done a lot of things, Potter," Draco said bitterly.

Harry trembled. "What if I can think of a way?" he coaxed.

"For me to escape?" The words started out scornful, but despite his intent, a note of hope crept into Draco's voice. He looked imploringly at Harry. "Do you actually think ... could you?"

"Probably. I might need Hermione to help."

"Please, not the Mudblood."

"Hermione's good at this sort of thing. Anyway, with or without her — if I come up with a plan, would you try it?"

Draco looked at his drink. He swirled the amber liquid pensively.

"If you come up with a plan," he said, "and if I think it has a reasonable chance of working — it doesn't need to be foolproof, but say at least an even chance — I'll do it." He shivered. "Once Father has offered me to Lord Voldemort — then I think Dumbledore has some leverage to keep me here. Saying it did happen is very different from saying I believe it will."

At eleven-thirty, Harry headed back to Gryffindor tower. He got there in plenty of time, cut through
the empty Common Room, and crossed to the short staircase up to the door of the prefect's single. He whispered the password, and Hermione looked up when the door opened. He closed it before taking off his cloak.

"Before midnight," she observed. "Barely."

"Sorry. He needed company."

"Malfoy doesn't need anything besides a swift kick." She stalked over to him and bent close. For a confused moment, Harry thought she was going to kiss him.

"You were drinking."

"Just a bit." Harry looked at her in surprise. "I'm not drunk, Hermione, really."

"You said he needed to talk to you!"

"He did. And it was bad enough that he handed me a glass first." Harry sighed. "Look, Hermione, I need to go to the library tomorrow. And I need to talk to Draco again, the night after."

"I'm not allowing this again."

"If you don't want me to drink, I won't. I didn't realize that would be a problem for you."

"Do you realize how much trouble I could get into for this?"

"It's important."

"No. It's you and Malfoy partying in the dungeons."

"Dungeons?"

"You smell like that, too. Damp places."

"Hermione, forget that. He really is in trouble, I really need to help him, and if you understood the problem, you'd want me to help him."

"Fine." Hermione crossed her arms over her chest. "Then make me understand it. Out with it. No 'life or death,' no 'really important.' Tell me exactly what's wrong and what he needs."

"I can't."

"Then you can't go."

"He doesn't want me telling anyone."

"Then he will need to get through it on his own."

"Please, Hermione! Trust me."

Hermione closed her eyes for a moment. An expression of pain crossed her face. "No," she whispered.

Harry sighed explosively, and sat down on her bed hard enough to bounce the books that were on the covers. "Let me think," he said. Then, because she was looking angry again, he continued, aloud, "I can't bring you with me, because he'll panic. He'll attack you before he's realized what's going on.
Maybe if I warned him first — you could give him a note, for me, perhaps. I had talked about bringing you in, but he wanted to try without it." Harry looked at Hermione. "How about it? He and I have one exchange of messages, through you — or, well, you can read mine — and if he approves, you and I can both go, and he can explain it to you."

Hermione considered this. "You're both more powerful than I am, I think," she said timidly.

"Hermione!" Harry was shocked. "I would never hurt you! I wouldn't let him, either!"

"How about a Memory Charm?" she asked wryly, her nose wrinkling.

"No." Harry shivered. "How could you think that of me?"

"I don't know what to think of you!"

Harry patted the bed beside him, and Hermione came and sat down. He took both her hands in his own, and kissed her cheek, then each of her hands. "Hermione," he soothed, "sweet, clever witch, my dear friend, I would never, ever harm you, nor let any friend of mine harm you, in any way, physical or otherwise. I will swear this under Testamonio, if you wish."

Hermione leaned against his chest, hiding her face from him. "I'm sorry, Harry. I hate doing things I'm not supposed to do. I get so frightened and guilty, I can barely think."

"Mmm." Harry nuzzled her hair. He wondered if he'd be interested in Hermione, if not for Ron. He didn't think so, but she felt warm and comfy in his arms. "I love it," he confessed. "It makes me feel giddy and special and clever."

She pulled away, laughing. "Well, that explains a lot."

"Will you agree, though? One exchange of messages, and the decision is his?"

"He gets both of us, or neither," she clarified.

"Agreed."

"Deal," she said, sticking out her hand. They shook on it, and Harry got up to leave.

"Library, tomorrow?" he asked.

"How about the message?"

"The message will depend on what I find in the library."

They spent hours in the library the next day. Hermione could tell Harry was researching portkeys and told him Hogwarts had been blocked to portkeys after the Triwizard tournament. Restricted floo was now the only magical way in or out. Harry already knew that, and told her so, but would not tell her what he was looking for. He could tell Hermione found it immensely frustrating not to be able to advise him.

When they got back to Gryffindor, they went directly to Hermione's room. Harry asked for parchment and quill, and wrote his message there, so she could read it.

D.,
The girl will not permit another private meeting, but is willing to accompany me. Will you agree? After tonight, I suspect we need her, as I said before — me for what and her for how. Be civil, and I think she'll go along.

-- L.

"What's 'L' for?" Hermione asked.

"'Lightning.' It's his pet name for me."

Hermione shot him an odd look, then checked the letter against a previous draft.

"Could you have made it any more obtuse?" she asked. "'I've only done one evening of research,' has become 'after tonight.' I was 'Hermione,' then 'H,' then 'the girl.' Will he understand this?"

"We don't want you associated with it," Harry noted. "He's already in trouble with his father, and you can't be caught doing this. This way, I could mean someone I'm seeing, or he's seeing, or someone we're doing business with."

"Will he understand it?" Hermione asked again.

"Yes."

"I'll go along with what?"

"My plan, when I have one. What I can't tell you about."

"Oh, right."

Hermione went up to the Owlry before breakfast, and sent the letter by a school owl. Draco slipped it into Harry's bag during Potions. On the back, he had written simply "Volo."
During dinner, Hermione complained of a headache. After a short while in the Common Room, she left for her bedroom, saying she wanted to go to bed. Harry went in after her.

"Where will you pick me up?" he asked.

"What?"

"We can't leave from here. A dozen people just saw me go into your room — I have to come out, again. Put on the cloak, and come up to the first landing of the boy's staircase. I'll be there."

"Then how do we get out?"

Harry thought.

"Okay, how's this? I leave here with the cloak, and put it on where no one can see, then wait for you. You come out, and if anyone asks, you're going to the Hospital wing for a Headache Draught. I'll follow you out, then we share the cloak."

"Meaning I trust you with it."

"Yes."

"I suppose."

"Give me time to get the Marauder's Map."

At the door to Moaning Myrtle's bathroom, Harry checked the map. No one was near. He slipped out from under the cloak.

"Keep that on, so Myrtle doesn't see you, and follow me."

Hermione giggled. "You meet in our old bathroom?"

Harry held a finger to his lips, shook his head, and went inside. He crossed immediately to the non-existent sink, and sat down beside it to cast the Ladder Charm. He swung his legs over the edge. "Down we go!" he exclaimed cheerily to the empty room, then stepped in and down onto one of the springy rungs.

In a moment, he heard Hermione, above him, feeling around.

"There's a ladder," he whispered. He reached up to try to guide her and heard a little yelp. He wasn't quite sure where he had touched her, but suspected it was some place he should not have. "Pull up the hem," he whispered. She did, making her feet and ankles visible. Harry guided her left foot to a rung, and she edged over. As she came down, he slid his hands carefully up her legs till he could grasp the vines on either side of her thighs.
"What are you doing?" she hissed down.

"You don't like heights, right?"

"Having you fondling me does not help."

Insulted, Harry went a few rungs further down, and they descended in silence.

In the tunnel, Hermione took off the cloak, then turned slowly to look around. "This," she said incredulously, "is the way to the Chamber of Secrets."

"Right."

"You've been hanging about in Salazar Slytherin's personal hidey-hole? Are you mad?"

"Wait till you see the decor," Harry teased.

"Honestly, Harry. You are mad." Hermione looked down the dark tunnel and sighed. "Let's go, then."

They walked down the tunnel together. At the narrow spot, where the rockslide had happened, Harry moved in front. When they got to the chamber itself, the first thing he noticed was Draco, pacing back and forth in the band of torchlight like a tiger in a cage. Hermione, behind him, let out a whoop of amusement.

Draco whirled.

"There you are!" he growled.

Harry hurried forward, Hermione right beside him. "Hermione had some house business," he apologized.

"You are mad!" Hermione exclaimed, this time sounding rather more amused than critical. "Look at this!" She turned slowly in the circle of light, taking in the plastic couch, the narrow table Draco had spun from the floor, the school cushions and blankets, in Gryffindor and Slytherin colors, the extra quills and inkwells, and Draco's piled books. On the floor by the couch was the stiff plastic storage bag for one of the chairs. It currently contained assorted empty bottles, crumpled lengths of parchment, and various candy wrappers. She noticed the writing on the wall, and began to read it, a frown spreading across her features, but Harry tugged on her arm.

"The original decor is that way," he said, pointing. Draco began to pace, again. Hermione looked at the huge statue of Salazar Slytherin and shuddered.

"The basilisk came out of that thing's mouth?" she said.

"Mmm. And I've been inside there, as well as through all the corridors. I've spoken to every snake decoration I could find. There doesn't seem to be anything else dangerous here." Harry plopped down on the couch.

"Still! This was frightfully reckless."

Draco stopped in his circuit. "But it is exclusively ours," he sneered. "Or, at least, it had been."

"I wasn't going to send him off to another private piss-up with you," Hermione snapped. "I'm not
Draco whirled on Harry. "Why her?!" he screamed. "Of all the sodding swots it could have been, why the frig- -- Why her?"

"Because she's my friend," Harry said mildly, "because she's my house prefect, and thus guard, and because she is the cleverest witch — or wizard — at Hogwarts."

"And perfectly willing to walk out and take Harry with me," Hermione said boldly. Her hands went to her hips as she glared at Draco. "What have I ever done to you, Malfoy?"

"Done to me? Just made my life a living hell, that's all! Do you know what you've cost me?" Draco raged. "It was bad enough fourth year, when Father wouldn't buy me a new broom because your marks were better than mine, but last year we took O.W.L.s. I got eleven, which is very good, but Father had to check yours. Thirteen! No one else had gotten thirteen in the last forty-six years, but he hit me with the Cruciatuas, just the same, once for each of the two I lagged you." Draco paused, panting with anger and frustration, his hands balled into tight fists at his sides. Hermione stared.

"Well, if your father is a brute who can't bear to have his precious illusions shattered, I'm sure that's not my fault —"

"You don't have any right to be smarter than me!" Draco shrieked. "I hate you!"

He stopped, his breath still fast, his normally colorless face a hot pink that showed through his pale hair. Hermione stood frozen in astonishment. Draco turned away from her.

"Are you done?" Harry asked — lightly, as if he hardly cared.

"Yes," Draco muttered.

"Bit strung-up tonight, aren't you? Wouldn't have anything to do with that letter from your father, now would it?"

"Fuck, yes." Draco frowned at Harry. "How did you know I got a letter from Father?"

"I recognize his owl, Dragon, same as everyone." Harry tapped the couch next to him. "Come over and show me it."

Draco moaned and pulled a folded piece of parchment from his robes. "Restricted," he said warningly, holding it high aloft.

"Got it." Harry looked over at Hermione to explain. "Letters from Draco's father tend to have a lot of protective magic —"

"Just the incriminating ones," Draco interrupted.

"So you mustn't touch this, among other things," Harry completed. "Bad things will happen."

Draco sat down next to Harry, which made the couch shift back slightly, pulled out the letter, and began to read:

(My dear Draco,

The Easter holidays are fast approaching, and we have little time to catch up on your sorely neglected training. Had I realized you would squander your Christmas Holidays on shopping, flying, and that pathetic Potter boy, I would have insisted you come home.}
As I will have little time to waste on review, and you will, quite soon, need to be presentable before our illustrious master —"  

Draco growled. "Fricing Mudblood madman," he muttered. He looked up, recalling himself, and said, with more self-possession than he had shown since Harry and Hermione arrived, "Your pardon, Miss Granger. And you, Harry — I know you dislike that word." He looked back at the letter.

"So he goes on 'it would behoove you to ensure that review is needless' followed by a list of spells he expects me to be adept at by the holidays, and he's quite right I've been 'neglecting' them." He showed the list to Harry, whose eyes widened.

"You could just hand that over to Professor Horsyr as a reference," he commented. "Oh, wait — there's one she missed."

"Where?"

"Sixth down."

"Oh, that. It's rather specific. It will turn a person's dog on them. It's cumbersome and not generally useful, but Father likes the agony factor."

Hermione actually approached, at that, and walked around the couch to look at the letter over Draco's shoulder. Draco flinched.

"No touching," he reminded her, but let her read.

"Your father wants you to learn all these? And in two weeks?"

"No," Draco said dryly. "Father has already taught me all of these. He is reminding me that I ought to have been practicing them and have less than two weeks to make it look good."

"You know these curses?" Hermione sounded horrified. Harry checked the list, again.

"Well, you've got no problem with Osum Crema," Harry noted. "Or Umbram Jub."

Draco pressed his fingertips to his forehead. "Harry," he asked, "do you really want to hear about it?"

"Er... I suppose not."

"Right, then." Draco refolded the letter. "Let's put this away. And expect me to be 'strung-up' as you say. Did you find anything, or have you given up?"

"No and no," Harry countered. "Draco, I think you better let Hermione in on the problem. We've got a bit less than two weeks, as you pointed out."

Reluctantly, Draco looked at Hermione, who stared back. Harry could tell Hermione was frightened, as well as shocked, by the list. He was a bit, himself. He had known that Draco knew Dark magic, but there was no harmless way to practice destroying someone's eyes. Even on an animal, Harry would find it unacceptable.

"Well," said Draco, in a crisp, aloof manner that Harry had come to recognize as nervousness. "The problem."

"Any time, Malfoy."
Draco rolled his eyes. "Simply put, Granger, I do not wish to become a Death Eater."

Hermione froze with her mouth half open.

"And no, I'm not, yet. I was at the Halloween 'party', which is what convinced me I didn't want to do it."

"So, er ... don't?" Hermione suggested.

"Ah. But you see, not being a Gryffindor, I don't want to die, either."

"We're not all as reckless as Harry."

"So you understand."

"No."

Draco pulled the still-folded list back out of his pocket and turned it over and over in elegant, long-fingered hands. "Do you suppose," he said, "that this man will permit me to refuse? Will his master?"

"Oh!" Hermione squeaked.

"Yes," Draco said. "Which is where my desire to survive the refusal creates a little problem. Father, by Wednesday's owl, instructed me to come home for the holidays. This is unusual. Combined with other messages, it leads me to believe I will be presented to Lord Voldemort, for the Mark, during that time." His eyes lifted from the folded paper to meet her horrified stare. "Harry thought he might be able to devise a way for me to escape the Dark Lord and all his Death Eaters. I consider this unlikely, but I will willingly try any scheme with an even chance of survival."

"And if we can't find one?" Hermione asked.

"Then I will take the Mark." Draco held a cool, aloof look for several silent seconds before curling down over one arm of the couch. "I'll learn to enjoy it, in time, I suppose," he said moodily.

"Hermione?" Harry asked. "Will you help with research?"

"Two weeks isn't much. Have you any ideas?"

"Well, Draco knows how to apparate, even though he's not licensed, but that can be traced too easily — too quickly, that is. I was trying to figure out if a portkey would give him more time. If so, we need to figure out if we can do a portkey from an unknown point of origin —"

"I thought they needed to be place-to-place, on a schedule."

"They can be place-to-place on some sort of trigger — the one that took me to Voldemort's ambush worked when I touched it. Draco thinks he heard of one that worked from any location, but he's not sure. In any case, he needs time to get from Hogsmeade to here, so if it can't give him a bit of lead time, it's not worth researching further, so trace time is the first thing to determine."

"From Hogsmeade, then what?"

"We can have it go to somewhere in Hogsmeade and leave his broom there, and he can fly to school pretty quickly."

"What if they follow me?" Draco asked.
"Will anyone have a broom?"

"My father often uses a contraction charm to carry one, when he goes out. I think many of them do when summoned."

"Well, that goes back to the lead time. Do you think they'd follow you on to the Hogwarts grounds?"

"Depends on how angry they are, doesn't it?"

"Then it's just get to Dumbledore as fast as possible," Hermione contributed. "If you have a minute or two of lead time, you should be able to make it. Harry, I think you're correct about that being the crucial point." She paused. "Is there a reason not to go to Dumbledore now?"

"Take about two minutes to consider the political ramifications," Draco drawled. "You're supposed to be a clever girl — I'm sure you can figure it out."

Hermione hesitated. "I suppose he couldn't really keep your father from taking you home."

"Correct. And no, I wouldn't award points to Gryffindor for that."

Hermione sighed. "Well, fortunately tomorrow is Saturday. We have all day to spend in the library."

"You do."

"What — Harry and I are supposed to do this for you? Too good to do your own research?"

"Hermione!" Harry reproached her. "Tomorrow is the Slytherin-Hufflepuff match. Draco won't be available most of the day."

"I'll show up when I can," Draco promised.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "I am so sick of Quidditch!"
Draco was looking more aloof than ever at breakfast. Hermione leaned close to Harry to whisper:

"Butter wouldn't melt in his mouth, would it? But he's not eating."

"Tell you a secret," Harry replied. "That look? He's nervous, or preoccupied."

Hermione pulled away and shot Harry an incredulous look. "Honestly, Harry!" she said.

"I'm serious!"

Harry helped Hermione find likely books, but insisted on going to the Quidditch match. He said even if he didn't want to, which he did, it was his duty, as Gryffindor captain, to observe how the teams played. He did, however, wait until right before the game to leave, and said he would come back right after it.

"How did it go?" she asked, when he returned.

"A bit long. Slytherin won, 180 to 50. Draco was brilliant. I'm starting to see McGonagall's point, though — I think he has gotten better, flying with me." Harry scanned the pile of books Hermione had chosen and selected one titled *Magical Law Enforcement*. Susara slipped down to his wrist to investigate the musty pages. "The Slytherin-Gryffindor game is going to be interesting."

Draco showed up two hours later, which was much earlier than Harry was expecting. All of Slytherin must certainly adore him, at the moment, and Draco enjoyed being fussed over.

Harry glanced over. "Don't tell me Slytherin can't party more than two hours?" he teased, mostly to let Draco know he appreciated it, and partly to remind Hermione, who had looked annoyed at Draco's tardiness, what he was sacrificing.

"I wouldn't expect you to understand, Potter," Draco sneered, "but I have more important things to do then be fawned over by a lot of idiots who can barely stay on a broomstick." He strolled over. "What are you reading?" He read off titles from their pile. "Magical Law Enforcement. A History of Transportation in Europe. From Place to Place." His eyes flicked over Hermione as if she was a piece of furniture. "How enthralling."

Draco disappeared into the stacks and came back half an hour later with his own pile of books. He settled down at a table in sight of Harry and Hermione. Harry wished he could compare notes with Draco, who was leafing through *Sneaking in (and out) of the Most Interesting Places*.

After dinner, they returned to their tables in the library. Harry, having given up on Hermione's selections, ventured into the stacks and came back with *Memoirs of an Auror*. He tried to scan it purposefully, but kept getting distracted by the accounts of exciting chases, horrible attacks, and high-power magic.

"Harry?" Hermione interrupted him, just as he was finishing a description of a massacre the author
had been called in to investigate. "I think you should switch to something else."

"This could have it, though. It's got incredible detail."

"You're wasting too much time."

"Yes, but ... I'll try to just scan the places where the investigations start, all right?"

Hermione looked at her watch. "Fifteen minutes," she said. "Then you move on to something else."

Harry nodded and looked frantically back at the book.

_Hodgson found only one Apparation signature, but there had clearly been many attackers. While she traced the Apparator, Lu and I searched for other traces. We found a Portkey trace, but it was at least five minutes old, and beyond tracing._

"This isn't directly helpful, but ..." Harry read the passage aloud to Hermione.

"Thirteen minutes," she replied. Harry resumed scanning through the book, looking for the places which recounted arriving on a scene.

Nine minutes later, Harry gave a shout.

"Here!" he exclaimed. "Listen:

"I believe they chose a Portkey because it takes longer to trace than Apparating. Even if I have seen the wizard or witch vanish, it will take me at least a minute to follow the trail, and can take up to three if my first directional guess is incorrect. However, a Portkey trail remains traceable for several minutes, while an Apparation trail is traceable for two, at most."

"Great!" Hermione cheered. Draco, from behind the cover of _Muggle Meets Magic — Amusing Accidents in Twentieth Century Britain_, winked encouragingly at Harry.

Harry and Draco exchanged their books for other ones with titles such as _Make Your Own Way, Creating Magical Items for Fun and Profit_, and _Twenty Ways to Get from Here to There_. They continued to search until Madame Pince announced Library closing.

"Will you bring me here again tomorrow?" Harry asked, as if talking to Hermione.

"Directly after breakfast," she said.

Draco sauntered over. "You should sit with me, Harry," he coaxed, ignoring Hermione. "You know how well we study together."

"We're closing, now," Madame Pince repeated, as she passed their tables. Hermione sighed and led Harry back to Gryffindor.

The next morning, Hermione took Harry to the library, but let him sit with Draco. Harry occasionally went over to consult with her. This was less suspicious than the three of them sitting together, but he thought it must still look pretty odd. The third time, he found they had been looking through different copies of the same book.
"All right," he whispered, "That settles it. We need to talk. You and I are going to leave here for a few minutes. I'll tell Draco to follow."

They met in an empty classroom halfway down the second floor corridor.

"We could," Hermione said pointedly, "just sit together."

"No," Draco said.

"You don't need to like it —"

"What I like is not the problem," Draco interrupted sharply. "If I am seen with a M—Muggle-born student, it will be gossip. If Crabbe or Goyle or Nott hears, or Snape, even, my father will be told. That will make him suspicious, and everything much more difficult."

"We could take books down to the Chamber," Harry suggested.

"I can't disappear for the whole day!" Hermione objected.

"Why not? You used to."

"And you pointed out that I should not."

"Hermione..."

Hermione took a deep breath and squared her shoulders. "My room," she said.

"I can't go into Gryffindor!" Draco objected.

"You can wear the cloak, and follow us in. Gryffindor tower is just a few flights of stairs from the library — You or I can run back for more books, if needed."

Draco stared. "You're serious."

"It will work better than this morning!"

Draco nodded. "Yes." He looked uncomfortable. With a stiff nod, he said, "Thank you, Miss Granger."

Hermione's jaw dropped. "Um... You're welcome."

Accordingly, they moved up to Hermione's room. Harry explained to Draco that Hermione had set the first step on the stair to temporarily douse the lights in her room, to give her a few seconds to prepare for visitors, so if the room went momentarily dark, he should hide immediately.


"I like to be decent when I answer the door. Besides, I developed a secret vice over the summer," Hermione confessed, with mock shame. "Music. And if I'm reading, losing my light is about the only thing I notice."

Hermione claimed the desk, so Harry settled on the floor where it had a rug, and he could lean back against the bed. Draco lay on his stomach on the rug, with his current book laid out in front of him. For the most part, they scanned books in silence, though occasionally one of them would read a
passage aloud. When they realized they had missed lunch, Hermione went down the kitchens and fetched back food.

Just when Harry was wondering if they should put in an appearance at dinner, Draco let out a whoop.

"Found it?"

"Well, no, but this explains how to modify a portkey so that it works on a touch, rather than on a schedule. It has the procedure for creating a shielding cover, as well, as well."

"Wonderful!" Hermione stood and stretched. "I hate to say this, but I do need to do homework. Is this a good place to stop for the day?"

Draco looked taken aback. "Of course. I ... I need to do homework, too, of course."

"Great," Harry said, to stop Draco from babbling. "Let's meet right after dinner, tomorrow. Draco can follow us up, right Draco?"

Draco nodded. "That's fine," he said quietly.

After nearly two hours of research the next evening, Harry said:

"It exists."

"Details, Harry," Draco urged.

"This doesn't have directions, but it says 'Portable portkeys, sometimes called 'person-to-place' portkeys, require a more complex anchor potion.' It's just a parenthetical statement in the —"

"But it means that what we're looking for exists, and it's given us two names to look for!" Hermione exclaimed happily. "That's wonderful, Harry!"

For the next twenty minutes, they scanned back though their books for "portable" and "person-to-place" portkeys.

"We need to go to the library again," Draco said, letting his last book fall onto the previous four with a thump.

Harry checked the time. He saw Hermione doing the same.

"Tomorrow, I think," he said.

Draco nodded. He looked discouraged. "Tomorrow, then. We have eight days." He growled. "We'll find this thing and it will rely on a potion that takes two weeks to brew, or something."

"Let's assume not," Hermione said firmly. "Actually, assume we can find the instructions, brew the 'more complex' anchor potion, and create a portable portkey. What is the rest of the plan?"

"I need my broom in Hogsmeade, or at the gates, hidden somehow."

"I've been thinking about that," Harry said. "The Shrieking Shack. It's perfect."

"The what!?" Draco yelped. "I'm supposed to live through this, remember?"
"It's not haunted," Hermione told him. "It's where Professor Lupin was confined, during the full moon, when he was a Hogwarts student."

"There's a secret passage to get there from Hogwarts," Harry added.

"And it's very private," Hermione said. "No one would take your broom, and we could do any necessary casting there." She frowned. "There's no way out of it into Hogsmeade, though. It's boarded up."

"We could bring down an axe."

"Once he's there, he can't afford delay."

"I can apparate," Draco contributed.

"But that's —"

"Look, I know I'm too young to be licensed, but I know how. And short distances are easy. I'll portkey to the Shrieking Shack, pick up the broom, and apparate to the Hogwarts gates, then fly from there."

"Then we need to get you to Dumbledore," Harry said.

"I hope no one will follow me into the building."

"If they do," Hermione warned, "they'll get a good line of sight on you, at the stairs, and in the last hall. You'll be hexed."

"He shouldn't come inside," Harry said.

"No?"

"It would be faster if you fly straight to his office window."

Draco shrugged. "I suppose. Do you know how to find his office from outside?"

Harry shook his head. "I'll try to figure it out next time I'm there."

Draco smirked. "Your turn to get food from the house elves, tomorrow, then. No cloak."

"I don't need to get in trouble, Draco," Harry protested.

"No?"

"I could just say I wanted to talk to him." Harry felt uneasy. If he did that, he would need something to say, or he might find himself talking about something he didn't intend to reveal.

Hermione, significantly, picked up her library books and put them in a pile by the door. Draco stood and gathered up his own.

"Tomorrow?" Draco asked.

Hermione thought.

"Not after lab," Harry protested. He could imagine the interrogations he'd get if Draco and Hermione realized they had different times for the end of the Potions special study lab.
"No..." Hermione agreed, "that's too late to start, but we could work from the end of classes to the start of lab, if you don't mind missing dinner."

Harry nodded. "Your turn to get food from the house elves, Draco," he said flippantly.

"Would ... Do you think that's safe?" Draco asked uneasily. "Will they...?"

"Draco, they're house elves. They will give you food, whether they like you or not." Harry was surprised, but pleased, that Draco had taken him seriously. Draco willingly fetching anything for people with no authority over him was quite impressive. "Be polite, and stay away from Dobby, and you should be fine."

"And what do I do if Dobby doesn't stay away from me?" Draco protested.

Harry grinned. "Tell him you're under my protection."

Draco snorted. "I'd rather be attacked by a mad house elf."

"Malfoy, wait," Hermione said, as Draco began to settle Harry's cloak into place.

"What now, Granger?"

"We haven't discussed books. I think we should all visit the library during the day, tomorrow —"

"Obviously."

"but I'm wondering if we should check the restricted section, tonight."

"Tonight?" Draco asked. "The library's been closed for an hour."

"So, before you leave with the cloak, of course!"

Draco stared at her. "Wouldn't you rather get permission from someone, Granger?"

"We already look suspicious!" Hermione protested. "Madame Pince commented on my sudden interest in transportation, this afternoon. I made a joke about how obsessed I get when I can't find an answer, and she let it drop, but she must have noticed you are studying the same thing. If I come in with a note for the restricted section, then you come in with a note for the restricted section, and we both leave with transportation books...."

Draco nodded, but he looked very thoughtful.

"All right," Harry said decisively. "Hermione, you're taking me to the hospital wing, should anyone ask. For 'pain' — anyone who cares will assume my scar is hurting, but I don't want to admit it. Draco, follow us out — we'll get under the cloak near the library." Harry looked between the two of them. "I'll be in the middle. It's my cloak."

"Will it fit over all of us?"

Hermione giggled. "It was easier when we were smaller — Harry and Ron and me."

"Just stay close and shuffle," Harry said. "It should do. It went over you and me and those enormous sacks, Draco, remember?"

"I'd never forget that."
Fifteen minutes later, they were in the restricted section of the library. In the cover of the stacks, Draco and Hermione left the cloak to search independently, and Draco showed Harry and Hermione a special variation on Lumos that produced an especially dim light that went only in one direction.

After they had been hunting a while, Hermione triumphantly held an open book aloft. "This one," she whispered. "Everything but the trigger."

"If we don't find better, we can probably modify it," Draco whispered back.

"Probably. Search another five minutes, I think."

Harry and Hermione stopped by the library at the end of their lunch time and checked the regular section, but did not find anything better than the two books they had brought home the night before. Hermione, who had studied the procedure before going to bed, summarized it for Harry and Draco as soon as they were all together.

"The Anchor potion can be brewed anywhere — and it only takes twenty-eight hours, D- Malfoy, but it must be moved to the Anchor position soon after it is completed. The potion then needs to sit, undisturbed, in the target location of the portkey, for twenty-four hours. It's not actually much more complicated then the normal anchor potion, but the person who will be using the portkey needs to participate in the brewing of it, either actively, or by contributing blood — I think that's why this book is in the restricted section — it has a lot of spells and potions that require or suggest human blood as an ingredient. After the Anchor potion has settled at that location, we need to take an item — and we'll need the shielding cover ready for it, Malfoy — dip it in the Anchor potion, and cast a Portal Charm on it, encase it in the cover, then pour the Anchor potion out onto the floor, slowly enough that it is absorbed, rather than dripping though —"

"As I don't want to end up on two floors of the Shrieking Shack."

"But you could fulfill its reputation, Dragon," Harry teased.

"I'll cede that honorable privilege to another, I think."

"It shouldn't be that difficult. We can use a place with a rug." Hermione looked anxiously at the potion directions, again. "We do have time, but only just. Getting the ingredients won't be easy. I think we should use the modification Draco found with this, rather than waste any more time looking for the exact procedure to do it with a trigger. Draco, that was a modified Portal Charm followed by a Latency Charm?"

"Something like that. I still have the book. Should I go get it?"

After Draco returned with the book, he and Hermione began to analyze the necessary modifications to the procedure Hermione found. They went so far as to argue (civilly, to Harry's surprise) about a single ingredient modification to the Anchor potion. Harry, who had no opinion as to the relative merits of spider silk versus silkworm silk, stayed silent until Hermione started to look frustrated.

"Draco?" he asked.
"Don't tell me you care!"

"No, but ... can we get silkworm cocoons? By Sunday, which is the absolute latest we can start this?"

That settled that.

While they ate the food Draco had brought from the kitchens (beef and horseradish roulades, carrot and cucumber sticks with a sour cream sauce for dipping, and a pork terrine and cheese for the two kinds of bread), they discussed the problem of getting Draco to Dumbledore's office.

"What if he's not there?" Draco protested.

"He just is," Harry said. "Professor Dumbledore is always in the right place when you need him. It's like someone is always trying to kill me."

"What if he isn't for me? Or what if he won't open the window for me? Dumbledore has guarding spells on you, Harry — Father has mentioned it — so it's not surprising he's around when you need him to be."

"Maybe Harry could meet you," Hermione suggested.

"Fly ahead and get him to let me in," Harry agreed. "Is there some way you could signal me?"

They all thought. Draco pressed a slice of the terrine onto the white bread. He frowned at the dish. "May I have the extra aspic?"

"Ick!" Hermione exclaimed.

"That's a yes," Harry agreed. "All yours."

Draco rolled his eyes. "No appreciation for good food." He scooped out the remaining gelatin and piled it on top of his smooshed meat. After he had finished a bite, he said:

"I could create an insignius."

"Like the Dark Mark?!" Hermione gasped.

"They're permitted for emergency use in areas without too many Muggles. I think this qualifies. It's only because of the Dark Mark that they cause alarm," Draco smirked. "A good thing, in this case. Even if you're not looking, Harry, you should hear almost immediately if a glowing shape appears in the sky." Draco took another bite of his bread.

"I don't like it," Hermione stated.

"But just because of the Dark Mark," Harry protested. "Draco's right — there's nothing inherently wrong with making a shape with sparks in the sky."

"I don't know what shape, though," Draco said.

Harry stared at him. "You don't?"

"You have an idea?"
"A silver dragon, of course." Harry grinned. "That's what you are in my dreams, half the time."

"You dream about me?" Draco looked intrigued. "Do tell."

"The last one was a nightmare, actually. We were..." Harry concentrated. "It was when you cast Osum Crema —" Harry ignored Hermione's shocked exclamation — "but I cast it after you. You told me I was brilliant, but then Death Eaters came out of the Chamber, and you turned to a dragon, and your father killed you. Then I picked up your wand and ... er ... fought with that."

"Wonderful," Draco said dryly. "I hope your dreams are not usually prophetic."

"Only when my scar hurts, and it didn't that time. It reminded me of a dream I had in November, though. I hadn't thought of that dragon as you, at the time, of course. I looked into the Chamber and saw Death Eaters. A silver dragon flew out of the circle of them and passed me, and the Death Eaters chased us. We were trapped by a landslide, but Voldemort wasn't with them, so I sealed the Chamber by speaking Parseltongue, and they were all trapped inside."

Hermione was looking at Harry with a very odd expression on her face. "My scar didn't hurt that time, either," he assured her. "It was just a dream."

She didn't seem to hear him. "Does the Chamber of Secrets show on the Marauder's map?" she asked.

"I wouldn't think so. Fred and George would have looked, don't you think? I mean, especially once Ginny was taken."

"Maybe it's outside the Apparation guards."

Harry stared at her. "But it's part of the school."

"Sort of. It's deeper than the rest of the school."

"We better check," Harry said, jumping to his feet. "If people can apparate into there, I need to seal it."

"You have to have been to a place to apparate to it," Draco protested.

"And Voldemort's been in the chamber, back when he was a student. He opened it."

"Voldemort went to Hogwarts?" Draco was astounded. Harry was astounded that Draco had used Voldemort's name.

"He was called 'Tom Riddle' then. 'Tom Marvolo Riddle'"

"Get the map, Harry, and come back here," Hermione said authoritatively. "We'll check it together."

It was early enough that they didn't need the cloak. They checked the map before ducking into Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. To Harry's relief, Draco could not apparate from the Chamber. The dangerous aspects of that far outweighed the benefits, in Harry's mind.

"So now we're back to flying to Dumbledore's office," Draco said, frowning absently at the dim bulk of Salazar Slytherin's statue. He sighed and leaned over the table to pour a drink. "Cognac, Miss Granger?"
"No, thank you," said Hermione, but she smiled.

"We have butterbeer if you'd rather."

Draco handed the cognac to Harry and a butterbeer to Hermione, then poured another cognac for himself. Harry saw Hermione consider saying something, but Draco was speaking, again.

"The problem is," he said, "Harry does not have access to his broom. Therefore, he cannot precede me."

"Problem," Harry agreed, taking a seat on the couch. Draco motioned Hermione to sit also. He paced. Harry took Hermione's butterbeer, opened it, warmed it, and handed it back to her. Hermione felt the sides of the bottle and stared at it.

"Perhaps we could liberate it at the start of the holiday?" Draco suggested.

"Someone will notice."

Hermione stopped examining the warmed butterbeer. "Perhaps," she said, "I could talk McGonagall into lifting that restriction, at least for the holidays."

Draco snorted. "Maybe if Harry has another public fight with me."

"You might get further talking to Dumbledore," Harry suggested.
The Imperius Curse

At Potions lab, Draco leaned closer than usual and whispered more quietly than usual to ask:

"Why is Hermione helping me?"

"It's a Gryffindor thing," Harry whispered back. "You need help to do something she believes you should do. She can help you, therefore, she will."

"But I've always been horrible to her. She's heard me wishing she would be killed!" Draco realized his voice had risen and brought it down again. "She should at least force some concessions out of me."

"Gryffindors don't do that. If we think we should help you, we do it for free."

Draco left the Potions lab when explicitly dismissed. Professor Snape locked and guarded the door as soon as he was gone. Harry met him up at the front of the room.

"Well?" Snape asked.

Harry's heart was beating wildly, but he responded with a casual shrug of his shoulders. "You're right. I'd feel a bit of an idiot if I discovered I couldn't actually do it."

"Agreed. Accio Serpent. Accio Block." An immature adder and a small wooden block flew to Snape's hands. Snape put the snake in a box on the table, and set the block on its long edge. "The same procedure as before. The motion for Imperio is a direct point, usually with the wrist tilted slightly down, but that is just a mental aid." He demonstrated. "Concentrate on being undeniable."

Harry nodded and took out his wand. He turned his attention to the table. Snape tipped the box, and the snake slithered out. It began frantically searching for a way off the table. Harry felt rather sorry for it.

"Any time, Mr. Potter," Snape said dryly.

Harry pointed his wand at the snake. His mouth felt dry. He had to wet his lips to manage the incantation. "Imperio." The word came out shakily, and he could immediately tell nothing had happened. "Sorry." He concentrated on the memory of casting Umbram Jubo. His will was like a missile from the wand.... "Imperio!" A flicker of feeling, then nothing.

"Try again."

Harry tried a third time, then a fourth. Nothing. "I can't —" He bit back his frustration. "What am I missing, sir? This is... Nothing's happening."

Snape dropped the snake back in the box, and pushed it to the side. "You say you have done one bit of Dark Arts before." The professor steepled his fingers and leaned forward. "What, Mr. Potter?"

"Umbr-- Command Spirit, sir."

A flicker of surprise on Snape's face was quickly replaced by a frown. "Hm... Not helpful, in this
"I'd think it would be similar."

Snape shook his head.

"The Command Spirit Curse is very concise, and aggressively direct. It is piercing, but not maintainable. The Imperius Curse is more subtle and overwhelming ... You have been on the receiving end of it several times, have you not, Potter?"

"Yes, but ... but I've always overcome it, sir."

"Nonetheless. How did it feel?"

Harry remembered the false Moody, telling him to jump on the table, Voldemort attempting to make him bow. He couldn't repress a thought of Draco and the Muggle child. He shivered.

"As if I could relax, professor. It would be ... pleasant, to do as I was told."

"Precisely." Snape toyed with his wand as he regarded Harry thoughtfully over it. "It surprises me you have trouble. All that is needed for Imperius is to believe that you are right in all things, and the world would be better if you ran it. With your natural arrogance —"

"I am not arrogant!" Harry snapped. The amused rise of Snape's eyebrows angered him yet further, and he shouted:

"I don't believe the world would be better if I ran it — the world would be an utter mess, if I ran it, just a different one! I'm not brilliant, or powerful, like anyone thinks, I'm just lucky enough and protected enough, and stubborn enough to live! The only thing I get credit for that's actually me is Quidditch."

Snape continued to look amused. "That is not quite how I see it, Mr. Potter," he said.

"Yes, well I know about you! You seem to think I have some sort of life outside of Hogwarts. You expect me to act like a wizarding child —"

"You are a wizarding child. You are a Potter, and your mother was the same sort of Muggle-born genius as that Granger girl, but with a modicum of grace."

"But I was raised by Muggles. Muggles who hate wizards and despise me, and treated me as badly as they legally could." Harry stopped. He doubted it was actually legal to lock a child in an unlit cupboard on a regular basis. Quietly, he amended. "Worse, actually. But they not so they'd get in trouble, unless I say something."

"Then why don't you?" Snape inquired.

Harry looked down. "Because that would be worse," he whispered.

For a minute, Snape was silent. Harry could not bring himself to look up. He almost wanted the Potions master to start sneering at him. It would be familiar. After a time, Snape asked:

"Did Draco show you anything else?"

Harry looked up and nodded. They were to pretend he hadn't said anything personal then. That was fine. "The Bone Burning Curse," he answered.
Snape's eyes widened. "And you are still speaking to him? On what, Potter?"

"Oh — just bones. We found an abandoned lair of some predator and were cleaning it up. He burned all the old bones."

"Ah." Snape relaxed. "How ... oddly harmless." He stood, and went to the small fireplace behind his desk. Snape tossed a bit of powder onto the low flames. "Kitchens."

The head of a house elf appeared in the flames.

"Yes, Professor Snape, sir?"

"I would like a whole chicken. It does not matter whether or not it is cooked, or even edible, but it should be dead and plucked."

If the house elf thought this was a strange request, he did not say so. He bobbed up and down and said "Yes, sir! Right away, sir!"

Snape extinguished the fire.

"A warning, Potter, while we are waiting. Tomorrow, in class, I will give you a detention. Don't make it difficult. I will keep you after class to tell you when and what. You may tell anybody when you are serving your detention. Tell Draco, and only Draco, that you will be spending it with me, in the Forbidden Forest, gathering a potions component which grows there."

"This is your test?"

"Yes."

"Will we spend my detention in the Forbidden Forest?"

"No. The headmaster will, of course, forbid it, much to Lucius's disappointment."

"You're getting ahead of yourself, professor."

"And you are displaying that arrogance you deny."

Harry shrugged. He was spared from the necessity of any further reply by the appearance of a covered silver tray on Professor Snape's desk.

"Absurd," Snape muttered. He lifted the lid. A raw, trussed chicken was arranged on the tray beneath. With a dry chuckle, Snape picked up one of the leaves arrayed artfully around the bird.

"Sir?"

"Hazelwort leaves, Potter. A dangerous emetic. Apparently, some house elf has both intelligence and a sense of humor. Astonishing." With a quick "Leviosa," Snape moved the chicken to the first lab table. He gestured to it. "The Bone Burning Curse, Mr. Potter."

"Er ... why?"

"It is simpler than the Imperius Curse, and I would like to see if you can do it."

Harry felt like this situation was rapidly spiraling out of control. "Is it relevant?" he demanded.

"Quite."
Harry bit his lip and studied the dead chicken. Honestly, it was just a dead chicken, and it would not actually do any harm to burn it, whereas coercing some kidnapped snake was unkind, at least. He looked back at Professor Snape, who was regarding him with amused disdain, and shrugged. He pointed his wand at the chicken, and tried to recall Draco’s gesture and manner as best he could. He filled his mind with fire, momentarily blocking out all doubt.

"Osum Crema!"

Red fire shot from him to the bird in a palpable release. The chicken swelled, then ruptured in several places, blue flames bursting from the tears. Harry laughed.

"Good," Snape said softly. "Now, cast Imperius on that dull little snake."

He spilled the snake back out of the box, and it began to writhe in foolish panic about the narrow table, searching for a way down or up. Harry fixed his wand on it.

"Imperio."

Instantly, the snake's mind was under his, accessible, malleable ... it was a cool, simple mind. Controlling it was like caressing a smooth stone. Pleased, Harry slowed the snake to a graceful, back and forth slide, then suddenly sent it racing from one end of the table to another. He had it stop, then spiral in on itself, until it could move no further.

"The block, Potter."

Harry had forgotten about the block — indeed, about Professor Snape. He re-orientated himself, located the object on the table, and sent the snake over to it. Having the snake knock over the block with its tail took a few seconds — the movement was not natural to the snake, and Harry had to think about the specifics of it more than he had for the other motions.

"Good. Now release it."

Harry found the professor and blinked at him. Release?

"Harry. 'Finite Incantantum.'"

Oh. Harry pointed his wand at the immobile snake. "Finite Incantantum."

The smooth thing that was the snake's mind was gone. Harry could feel its frustration, slightly, in its wordless hiss, but the feeling was distant — no more than he usually got from snakes. Harry stared at it. He couldn't seem to think beyond the memory of its mind.

"Good god," he whispered.

"Are you back, Potter?" asked an amused voice.

Harry followed the voice back. Snape. He focused quickly. "What do other things feel like?" he asked. The question suddenly raced through him like a flame through paper. The snake's mind was cool and smooth. What do other things feel like? He desperately wanted to know. What does a mouse feel like? A cat? A hippogriff? A person?

"Other things?"

"Other than snakes. It was cool. Uncluttered. Would a mammal feel different?"

"Ah. I'm afraid I can't say, in general. Until the snake last week, I had cast the Imperius Curse only
on people. They are far more complex."

Harry badly wanted to try the Imperius Curse on Snape, just to find out what he felt like. He gripped his wand tightly in an effort to keep it still.

"Do not attempt it, Mr. Potter. You would not like the result."

Harry managed a nod.

"Currently, while you have done things you may be punished for, you have done nothing that mandates punishment. I suggest we keep it that way."

Harry nodded again. "Yes," he said quickly. He found he couldn't manage a "sir," with that. The mere thought was absurd.

"We have fifteen minutes. I suggest a short break before you attempt to counter again." Snape looked disdainfully at him. "As a first step, attempt to speak in actual sentences."

Harry restrained a nod. He tried to think of something to say. "You are not interested in corrupting me." Heard, the statement sounded absurd. He laughed.

"Excuse me?"

"You could have let me do it," Harry explained. Let me cast it on you.

"Ah. Yes. I am not interested in corrupting you, in itself."

The words were connecting him back to the outer world. Harry searched for another subject. "I need to do that again."

"Why?"

Harry thought of the delay of getting the snake to use its tail as a weapon. "It was clumsy," he explained. "Too slow."

Snape nodded. "Again," he agreed. "But not tonight. Tonight, you will attempt more countering, and see if it is any more effective." For a moment, he closed his eyes and rubbed at his forehead with his fingertips. He sighed and looked up. "That feeling," he said. "That power. Remember that. You should not require a sacrificial chicken."

It took a moment for Harry to make the connection, but when he did, he laughed.

"That was why!"

"It seemed the quickest way to induce the necessary arrogance." Snape smirked. Without preamble, he asked:

"What have your guardians done to you that was illegal?"

Harry hesitated. He did not answer questions of that sort. He knew that, though he couldn't really feel it, at the moment.

"Just curious," Snape said idly. "Anything creative?"

Harry laughed. "Not really. They locked me in a storage cupboard under the stairs, every night and sometimes during the day, until my Hogwarts letter came addressed to 'the cupboard under the stairs.'"
That frightened them enough that I'm in a bedroom now, but it has padlocks on the door, and one
year they had bars on the windows, which must be illegal, because I couldn't have got out if there
was a fire. Except I probably could. I'd do that panic magic thing, like I did as a child, and apparate
into the tree outside, or something. So it's just a nuisance."

"Are you harmed?"

"Not really. Uncle Vernon has hit me occasionally, but nothing serious. Usually, if they want to hurt
me they will arrange for it to happen indirectly — Aunt Petunia *is* creative, I suppose. She'll give me
jobs that keep me in the sun until I'm burned, then make me work in the heat the next day, or in long
sleeves. And they won't feed me much. Or buy me clothes that fit — I get Dudley's, though they
don't." Harry laughed again, more harshly now. "I'm not worth wasting food on."

Professor Snape's voice was soft and expressionless. "Are you not?"

Harry shrugged. "That's what they say. Of course, I don't think much of things they think are
worthwhile, so that's all right." He felt a twitch of curiosity and looked at the Portions master. "Why
do you ask? You don't care."

"I," Snape answered distantly, "am supposed to be an effective schemer, someone who has things
under control. Most of the students can be ignored, but I knew you should not be. Therefore, I
should have collected accurate information on you, but instead I took an emotional response as
intuition." He scowled. "I dislike stupidity in anyone. I detest it in myself." He drummed his fingers
on the desktop. "I want you to be unimportant, Potter. Unfortunately, that doesn't make you
unimportant."

Harry smiled dreamily. "Wish it did."
The next day, Harry decided he needed to do some work on his Transfiguration reading between last class and dinner. Research with Hermione and Draco was taking up most of his evening time. The Common Room was too noisy and distracting, so he soon went up to the dormitory. A minute after he settled down, Seamus entered the room.

Harry sighed. He never seemed to be alone any more. He turned the thought over in his mind. For several minutes, he tried to remember a recent time he had been up in the dormitory without one of his roommates present. He could not.

Harry tried to concentrate on his Transfiguration homework, but every time Seamus shifted or sighed, his attention was drawn back to his year-mate. Finally, he put down his book and looked pointedly at Seamus. It took Seamus a few minutes to notice.

"Harry?" Seamus asked.

"Why are you here?" Harry demanded bluntly.

"I'm studying for —" Seamus stopped in mid-sentence. He looked searchingly at Harry, then sighed.

"All right, then. McGonagall has requested someone stay with you. I know Neville gets irritating, and Dean is restless, and you and Ron.... Well, it seems to me the least intrusive is myself."

"McGonagall wants someone with me why?" Harry demanded. "I don't have my cloak, so I can't sneak out through the Common Room, and I'm not about to jump out the window without my broom."

Seamus chuckled. "Well, I didn't think so," he said.

"So?"

"McGonagall is worried that you're suicidal. Bollocks, I think, but Ron and Neville are taking it seriously."

"What?! I am not suicidal, Seamus."

"She said you said it didn't matter whether you lived or not."

"Even if I did, that's not the same thing. And I just said it didn't matter too much, because the chances of me living past leaving school are minuscule."

"Oh, that!" Seamus grinned. "Don't let them get to you, Harry. You're better at taking care of
"Then I'll just die killing Voldemort."

Seamus bit his lip.

"Of course," Harry continued, "that's at least useful. And it means they don't have to decide whether or not to imprison me forever for the Killing Curse. It's not dying that worries me."

Seamus twitched. "How did Unforgiveables get into this?"

"I think that's what it will take to kill him. That from me."

Seamus's eyes widened. "Better not die before, then," he said, and looked shocked at his own words. Harry froze. He turned the thought over in his mind. If he really was the only one who could destroy Voldemort, then he had to live to do it.

"Harry, t'is a bit dramatic, don't you think so?" Seamus coaxed belatedly. "I don't see why it would need to be that, or you."

But if it does, Harry thought, not really seeing Seamus, and I die doing some stupid thing....

Harry managed to extract himself from the conversation with Seamus and go down to the Common Room, where he could be alone in the crowd. At dinner, he kept an eye on Dumbledore, ready to jump up if the headmaster left early. Dumbledore stayed. When he appeared to be finished with his fruit and custard, Harry stood and walked to the staff table. He stopped in front of Dumbledore.

"Professor Dumbledore?"

"Good evening, Harry. What is it?"

"I'd like to discuss something with you, sir. Do you have time after dinner?"

"This is not a conversation for the table, I presume?"

"No. Not at all."

Dumbledore rose in a susurrance of settling robes and smiled brightly at Harry. "As it happens, Mr. Potter, I was about to return to my rooms, anyway. I would be most pleased to have you accompany me."

As they walked, Dumbledore asked Harry light questions about his classes, and Harry replied in kind. They continued this all the way into Dumbledore's office. It was not until Dumbledore had sat behind his desk that a silence fell between them.

Harry shifted nervously. The headmaster raised his eyebrows. "Well?" he asked. "I believe you have something to tell me?"

Harry felt himself blushing at the arrogance of what he was about to say.
"I’ve figured something out, sir," he began hesitantly. "It is important I not die until I have destroyed Voldemort — that's right, isn't it?" He grew more sure of himself at the sorrowful acceptance on Dumbledore's face. "I'm your secret weapon."

"Not terribly secret, Harry. Rather well-known, I would say. But yes."

"I am the only one that you are sure can kill him."

Dumbledore shook his head. "No," he said sadly. "I am not sure. You are the only one I think might be able to kill him."

"Because of what you have done," Harry pushed, suddenly angry. "You made me your weapon."

"Not just I. Your parents started it, before you were even conceived, I believe. It wasn't until you were born, and they held you, that they realized what they had done. Well, Lily, perhaps, a bit before. But that is when they came to me and said you were just a baby, and they — they had not thought on what they were doing to a person. Lily cried whenever she spoke, whenever she looked down at you.

"It was Lily's only brush with Dark Arts, I believe — and though that spell was of their own devising, done with the best of intentions, I classify it Dark without reservation. I worked what protections around you I could, but I could not undo what they had done. All James's faint chance of killing Voldemort, all Lily's, all Sirius's, all Remus's, all Peter's, and those of many others were channeled into you. In Lily's womb you were fashioned a receptor for Voldemort's power, so when he first moved against you, you could draw his essence into yourself and wield it against him. They intended to train you for that, when you were old enough. They intended it to happen when you were an adult, adept at the manipulation of energies. Instead, it struck you when you had yet to gain the concept of self."

Harry wanted to scream. He had not expected this — a betrayal from his parents, so far in the past. He pushed his anger into familiar enmity for Voldemort. "There is nothing I want so much as to see him dead."

"That frightens me, Harry."

"It should." Harry shrugged and tried to make his voice less grim. "At least I know it."

"Know which?"

"That it should be frightening."

Dumbledore nodded. "The desire, also, may be strengthened by the spell. A weapon should want to be used, should it not?" The headmaster looked frail and weary as he settled back down into his chair. "Now, tell me, Harry..."

Harry looked at him questioningly. Dumbledore looked at him with a mild teacher's mien. "Tell me our greatest danger."

Harry sighed. He thought he knew what was meant, but would feel a bit stupid saying it in front of Albus Dumbledore.

"That you loose control of your weapon?" he answered lightly.

Dumbledore's mild look hardened. "Harry..." he warned.
Harry sighed again, then glared back. "Your greatest danger, sir," he spat, "is that I am the next Dark Lord."

Dumbledore nodded, but looked slightly dismayed. "Very good, Harry. I prefer that you had said 'our,' rather than 'your,' but no matter. What would you call yourself?" he continued lightly. "'Lord Harry' doesn't really seem properly intimidating."

Harry laughed. "I haven't given it any thought, sir." He sobered and looked down. "It's a thing to know, that's all. I can't avoid it if I don't know it."

"Which is why I asked. Very good, Harry. Do you think you can find your own way back to Gryffindor tower without encountering any trouble?"

Harry's head shot up. "Um... if you wish, sir."

"I think an exception would not harm you. If anyone asks, I approved it."

"Thanks!"

Amusement drove the weariness from Dumbledore's eyes. "It is strange what we enjoy when we haven't had it in too long, isn't it? Run along, now."

When Harry returned to Gryffindor tower, he went directly to Hermione's room. Hermione was sitting at her desk, weighting down the ends of a scroll of parchment.

"It's Harry!" she called.

Draco Malfoy squirmed out from under the bed, brushed non-existent dust from his robes, and settled himself complacently on Hermione's bed, in between two wobbly piles of books.

"Who brought you back?" Hermione asked Harry.

"No one. Dumbledore said I could come back on my own."

"Oh Harry!" Hermione sounded delighted. "Are they lifting the punishment?"

"It sounded like more of an exception."

Hermione shook her head. "We'll all need to be in the Shrieking Shack once the potion's ready."

Harry shrugged. "Oh well." He looked at her indignant expression, and held up his hands in a warding gesture. "It's not that I don't care, Hermione, or that I think I can't get caught. It's just that I've made my decision, and there's no point wasting more time on it. How are we doing on ingredients?"

"Not good," Draco said. "Snape has been watching me like a hawk ever since that incident with the fur-growing potion. I'm not sure I could steal an ingredient we're working with, now, never mind one we're not. And it's been worse the last couple of weeks — you've seen how he makes me leave my bag at his desk when we're working, Harry."

"We could go down at night with the invisibility cloak and the Marauder's Map —"

"He's got it warded."
"It's not the best way," Hermione reproved him. She sighed. "It will need to be me, again."

Draco blinked. "Again? You've stolen things from Snape before this?"

"Well of course!" Hermione rolled her eyes. "No one ever suspects me."

"In fact, last time you stole potion ingredients, I got blamed for it," Harry noted. "Snape said he couldn't prove it, but he knew it was me. Come to think of it, when Barty Crouch stole potion ingredients, Snape also 'knew' it was me."

"This is Snape," Hermione observed. "The source of all annoyance is Harry Potter." She and Harry laughed, but Draco did not.

"You two could take it a bit more seriously," he snapped. "He's not safe, Harry, I've told you that. Every time I leave you down there alone with him, I keep wondering if we'll be called to the Great Hall to hear about your untimely demise."

"Then don't —" Hermione began, but Harry, sensing approaching disaster, cut her off.

"This is Hogwarts, Draco. Snape is not going to harm me here, especially at a time I am scheduled to be in his care." He glanced over at Draco. "Er... I should tell you about tomorrow's detention, later. Remind me before you leave."

"Will you be safe then?" Draco asked fiercely.

Harry smiled, trying not to look too sincere. "I'll be fine. Maybe I can get some of the components, which is what we should be talking about now. What are we missing?"

"Most of it we can get from the student cupboard — iron filings, leeches, and such," Hermione said, ticking off items on her fingers. "We still need quicksilver, diricawl feathers —"

"I've got a few vials of quicksilver in my room." Draco grinned at Hermione's bewildered look. "It's fun."

"It's carcinogenic!"

"What?"

"It makes your body grow bad tissue," Harry explained. "Eventually. I think it also causes liver failure, or kidney failure, or something."

Draco dismissed this with a wave of one hand. "So I go see Pomfrey. Honestly, Muggles worry about that?"

"Okay, so you've got mercury," Harry said, preventing Hermione from quizzing Draco on the wizarding world's treatment of cancer. "Diricawl feathers?"

"Snape has diricawl feathers," Draco contributed. "They're in a small, charmed, iron case on the lowest shelf on the right-hand side of his closet. I don't know how to open that silently, so you'll need to take the entire case, and we should open it in a classroom, or something, in case he can trace it."

"It couldn't be easy, of course," Hermione complained. "Oh, and the sucker of a ramora. That's not controlled or expensive, but so few potions call for it that it's not in the student cupboard." She looked expectantly at Draco.

Draco closed his eyes, turned, and slowly raised one arm. "Middle of the third shelf up, on the left,"
he said absently, letting the arm fall back again. "Is that all, then?"

"That's all." Hermione looked directly at Draco. "You'll need to cause the distraction," she said firmly. "Harry can't risk getting in any more trouble."

Draco sighed. "Really, Granger. I have noticed. We're doing this during class?"

"Well, I'm not breaking into the lab later, as you pointed out earlier."

"I'll see what I can come up with." Draco smirked. "If something explodes, don't stay and watch."

Draco's potion did, indeed, explode spectacularly in Thursday's Potions class. At the end of class, Snape told Harry to stay.

"This won't take long, Miss Granger. Please wait in the hallway."

As soon as Hermione had stepped through the doorway, Snape whirled to stare threateningly at Harry. Harry wondered if he was to be somehow accused of causing Draco to ruin his potion.

"Did you tell anyone besides Draco about your detention, Potter?" Snape asked in a harsh whisper.

"The Forbidden Forest bit?" Harry asked. "Of course not. What use would that be?"

"None. Could anyone have overheard you?"

"No." Harry realized what must have happened and grinned. "Dumbledore found out about it, didn't he?"

"Yes." Professor Snape's face was sour. "However, he said he had this information from Seamus Finnegan."

"I'll ask Seamus how he heard about it."

"Please do. Oh, Potter?"

Harry, who had started to leave, looked back. Snape gave him a satisfied smirk. "Detention tomorrow night will be in my office, starting at 8:00. Please have the gossip trail tracked by then."

The trail was short and direct. Seamus told Harry he had been working on his Transfiguration homework in the Common Room on Wednesday night. When he had rolled up the parchment he had been writing on, he had found a folded note, with his name on the outside, underneath his essay.

"Impressive that someone managed to put it there without my noticing. I don't recognize the hand, but at least we know it's a Gryffindor. It was odd — here."

Seamus pulled the note from his bag and handed it to Harry.

*Professor Snape plans to take Harry Potter into the Forbidden Forest for his Friday night detention. Harry will be in terrible danger if this happens. Please tell the headmaster; I cannot. Do not tell him where you got this information.*

Seamus looked apologetically at Harry. "It seemed like it was probably a prank, but I couldn't be
"No, that's fine. Thank you for looking out for me." Harry looked over the elegant script, which he easily recognized as Draco's hand. Snape would as well, he was sure. "May I have the note, though?"

"Of course." Seamus closed his bag. "Everything all right, Harry? You seem more awake, this week."

"I swear, it's pure stress," Harry said, but he smiled. "I'm doing better, I suppose."

"Spending a lot of time with Hermione," Seamus remarked reluctantly.

"We're researching something."

"Oh!" Seamus smiled knowingly. "Well, that's nothing new. All right, then."

On Friday, Harry, Hermione, and Draco met after classes, to be sure they had all the ingredients needed for the anchor potion. They still needed to open the box of Diricawl feathers, but otherwise everything was in order. "When's your detention?" Draco asked. His voice was quite casual, but Harry could see that he was clenching his jaw as he waited for information.

"Eight o'clock." Harry took pity on Draco's tense look and added:

"In Snape's office. Apparently Dumbledore nixed taking me out into the Forbidden Forest."

"Good."

"We better work through dinner, then," Hermione said nervously. "We should finish the shielding potion tonight. It's quick."

"Maybe you'll get to spend some time with Ron, then," Harry suggested. "He's been looking put out."

"Pity that doesn't translate to saying he misses me," Hermione said acidly.

"Oh, you know how Ron is."

"Yes -- If I'm not snogging him now, I don't exist." Hermione sighed. "I'm sorry — that was rude."

They made the shielding potion from edelweiss, chameleon skin, and lead, and soaked a tiny black silk bag in it. Hermione, who hated working with lead, magically cleared the air in her room as soon as they were finished. On the walk down to Snape's office, Harry ate some of the Chocolate Frogs that Draco had given him, as a substitute for dinner.

Harry hated Snape's office. It was smelly, dark, and lined with shelves of jars filled with unidentifiable (at least at the glance Harry could tolerate) things suspended in various liquids. He walked in reluctantly, and stood in front of Professor Snape's desk, trying desperately not to focus on any of the jars.

"Have you determined where Finnegan got his information?"
Harry nodded. "Here." He pulled Draco's note from his bag and handed it to Snape. "He said he found that in his Transfiguration homework."

Snape looked at the note, and his eyes widened in surprise. Frowning, he tapped it with his wand and muttered something. He did this a few times.

"Written by Draco definitely," he said. "Approximately two days ago, which would have been Wednesday evening."

Harry kept his eyes on the desk and waited.

"What is your problem, Potter?!" Snape snarled.

"What?"

"Why are you looking guilty? Did you tell him?"

"Looking guilty, sir?" Harry met Snape's eyes in his most guileless fashion.

"Don't try that innocent act on me, Potter! You were staring down."

"Oh! I ... er..." Harry shrugged. "I hate this place." He motioned quickly at the shelves behind Snape. "Sorry, sir."

Snape snorted. "You are intended to hate this place, Potter. That's what it's for."

"Excuse me?"

To Harry's horror, Snape grabbed one of the jars — a particular large one with a human-like shape dimly visible through murky greenish liquid -- and thumped it down on the desk.

"This," he said, with evident relish, "is a fetal Kappa in embalming fluid. There is no earthly use for such a thing, other than to terrify the ill-behaved, yet impressionable, young brats who trail reluctantly through here." He looked thoughtful for a moment. "There are uses for parts of the fetal Kappa, but this one spoiled in transit."

Snape turned and selected a smaller jar, in which slimy grey orbs sat in a rust-colored liquid. He placed this on the desk beside the first.

"These, on the other hand, are peeled plums in cask-strength brandy." Snape unscrewed the top from the jar, pulled a narrow dagger from somewhere about his person (from the angle, Harry was guessing a boot sheath), stabbed one of the orbs and drew it out. He took a bite from it, dripping liquid down his chin and onto the desktop. "Would you like one?"

The plums and brandy smelled very good, but even if he hadn't been nauseated by the fetal Kappa, Harry didn't think he could stomach anything from a jar that had had Snape's boot knife in it, however briefly. He didn't even want to think about where else Snape's knife may have been.

"No, thank you," he managed.

"As you wish," Snape finished his plum and put both jars back on the shelf behind him. He glanced down at the note, but said nothing further about it. Harry was slightly irritated — it would have been nice to hear Snape say Harry had been right — but he hadn't really expected it, so he was not disappointed.

"I planned to have you attempt the Imperius Curse again, tonight," Snape said. "Before you get into
"Yes." Harry had been thinking about his lists. At Snape's slight shift in attention, Harry continued. "You know about my wand and Voldemort's wand, right?"

"They are brothers. This made it possible for you to escape him."

"Yes. Because the wands connect when used against each other, I was able to drive back the Killing Curse from him. But by the same token, he might be able to drive back the Killing Curse from me."

Snape frowned. "That curse would not affect him anyway —"

"It wouldn't!" Harry burst out indignantly. "How am I supposed to kill him?"

Snape peered at Harry. "You had intended to use the Killing Curse on Voldemort?"

"I... I thought it would need to be that. I'm not sure why. It seemed ... proper, somehow."

Snape's lip quirked upward so briefly that Harry was not quite sure he had really seen it.

"The ancient Greeks were wrong, Potter. The universe does not tend to symmetry, except at the microscopic level. Voldemort has made himself invulnerable to a great many things — I will tell you the ones I know, but they will not be close to all — he does not trust anyone with that knowledge. However, he has undoubtedly forgotten something. To destroy him, you must find his mistletoe, his Achilles heel." Snape picked up his knife from the desk and began to turn it idly. He seemed to be watching the flames from the fireplace reflected in the blade. "Now. The wand."

Harry tried to focus his thoughts back on his original question. "Yes. Would it be possible for me to get a second wand, for use against Voldemort?"

Snape stared at the narrow knife blade for long enough that Harry began to wonder if he had heard the question. Suddenly, however, the Potions Master returned the knife to wherever it had come from and leaned forward, his hair dangling to either side of his sallow face.

"Were you to break or loose your wand," he said, "you could choose another. You might find it different to work with, and, if your first wand was truly the best for you, perhaps slightly less effective — or, if you had changed greatly in the meantime, perhaps more so. However, when you still have a wand, taking up another is more problematic. The energies interfere, or some such idiocy, and neither wand will work for you as well as if you had only one."

"But I have used other people's wands."

"Yes." Snape gave a tight, unpleasant grimace that might charitably been described as a smile. "Mine, perhaps? And it caused no problem with your own, because you did not ... bond," Snape's mouth curled with distaste at the word, "with the second wand." He shook his head.

"I do not deal in these sort of things, Potter — interfering energies, bonds with inanimate objects — I know the theory works in practice, but it all sounds rather ... fuzzy. If you want a detailed explanation, ask Professor Dumbledore -- or Olivander, next time you are in Diagon Alley. Either will happily babble at you for hours."

They set up the block on Professor Snape's desk, and the professor brought out a new snake. Harry managed to cast the Imperius Curse on it in two tries, and he did not feel as disoriented afterwards,
though he was aware of a restless undercurrent of power lingering from the spell.

"I think this may work, Potter," Snape remarked.

"Did you doubt it?" Harry demanded, fixing his gaze on the Potions Master. Snape, to his displeasure, did not look discomfited.

"Your lack of experience seemed somewhat of a drawback. You still must be able to cast the spell on first attempt." He leaned back. "Should you be successful in taking down a few Death Eaters -- sparing me, of course -- with Nagini, that gives us another wand option."

"Well?" Harry snarled, after waiting a few seconds for Snape to continue. He was startled by the harshness of his voice. Perhaps he was not as unaffected as he had thought.

"If I can seize someone else's wand, I could throw you my own."

"Why not throw me the other wand? That way at least one of us would have a familiar weapon."

"But, loathe as I am to admit it, you should have a familiar weapon. And you can practice with my wand in advance."

Snape pulled out his wand. Formally, he offered it to Harry. "We have half an hour — plenty of time to get the feel of it. Try some standard dueling spells on the snake first — Engorgement, Impedimente — then give your wand to me, and we will have a little duel. Nothing dangerous and no Dark curses — this is just to get acclimated to my wand."
Brewing and Dancing

Saturday, Hermione, Harry, and Draco set up Hermione's cauldron in her emptied wardrobe, then spent several hours in the Chamber of Secrets, trying to open the box of Diricawls feathers. It was Harry who finally pointed his wand at the box and said "dodo." He was as surprised as the others when this caused the box to open.

Draco, though he claimed it was actually quite unusual for Diricawls to home in on their missing feathers, quickly caught them in a magical net of his own.

"That will both bind them and obscure them." He picked up the box. "And I'll leave this somewhere Snape will find it. Shall we start after dinner?"

Hermione shook her head. "The Anchor potion takes twenty-eight hours to brew, and then it can be moved to the Anchor position. It must be moved to the Anchor position before thirty-five hours, from start of brewing, have elapsed. I can't move the potion tomorrow evening, because I have a prefects meeting, as do you, Malfoy. We should start it tomorrow, by two o' clock at the latest, so we're moving it the next day, after classes."

Harry tried to remember the brewing instructions. Draco beat him to it.

"We need to actively attend it for seven hours, right?"

"Yes. We need to add the ingredients in concert, and then it must be stirred exactly three times, once by each of us, exactly once an hour, for seven hours."

"Then it sits warm for seven hours, then frozen for seven hours, then thawing at room temperature for seven hours." Draco completed.

"Right!" Hermione smiled happily at Draco's knowledge of the lesson. Harry tried not to roll his eyes.

"So we should finish it no later than nine o'clock at night, and no earlier than two in the afternoon, if we're to move it by six the next day."

"Yes. Would you rather miss lunch or dinner?"

"Lunch, definitely."

"Let's meet to prepare ingredients at ten and start at eleven," Harry suggested. "We'll finish at six, and have some leeway as to when we move it on Monday."

Accordingly, Harry, Hermione, and Draco met in Hermione's room after breakfast on Sunday, and sequestered themselves there, with a silencing charm on the door. Hermione set the password lock she usually used for privacy, and they started brewing the potion. Adding the ingredients took only a few minutes, but they decided not to leave until the stirring portion was complete. After all, as Hermione pointed out, "one can be delayed."

For the first two hours, they mainly discussed the potion and did homework. A few minutes into the
third hour, Hermione stood, stretched, and yawned.

"Do you mind Muggle music, Malfoy?" she asked.

Draco shrugged. "I really wouldn't know, Granger," he drawled. After a moment of silence, he looked up and flashed a quick smile at her uncertainty. "Really, I wouldn't. It is your room, you know."

Draco didn't seem to mind the music. Harry was rather intrigued that Hermione had a CD player — he wondered if it ran off batteries, or if Hermione had found some way to power it with a charm. She put on something Harry found vaguely familiar, and thought was rather old. After a few minutes of discreet bouncing, Hermione looked down at Harry.

"Dance?" she asked, blushing.

"I'm awful," Harry confessed, blushing as well, but scrambling to his feet. "Ron won't mind?"

"Ron won't dance with me, so he's no right to complain," Hermione said firmly.

The music was fun. Harry bounced and moved to it, and thought he might figure out a way to really dance to it, if it was just him and Hermione. However, there was Draco, lying on his stomach across Hermione's bed, his head propped up on his hands, watching them with open amusement.

"Didn't anyone teach you how to dance, Harry?" Draco drawled, with something like his old smirk. He sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed. "Doesn't look like you know much better, Granger. You're letting down the reputation of your house, you know."

"What?" Harry, glad of a chance to stop, did so. "Are Gryffindors supposed to be good dancers?"

"You know, like in the rhyme by Hillaria of Kent," Draco said. He rolled his eyes at their blank expressions. "Honestly! You're both practically Muggles! You do know who Hillaria of Kent was, at least?"

"She was a 12th and 13th century British witch, famous for her work in charms of illusion, and pioneering integration of Roman technique with Celtic and Saxon materials," Hermione answered promptly.

Draco chuckled. "Well, that's not all she was famous for! She also went through lovers at an alarming rate. She's been romantically connected with most of the intellectually influential wizards of her time, and a few of the other witches. I once saw a treatise advancing that Gregory the Hunter was homosexual — they didn't record that sort of thing, then, it was apparently too scandalous — which listed as an argument that no contemporary account romantically linked him with Hilaria of Kent. She also conceived a plot that was intended to cripple the Muggle Church in Europe. It didn't — but it did have a huge affect on the nature of the church — well, so I've read. I don't know much about Muggle religious history."

"What did she do?" Hermione asked, frowning.

"Gave someone a 'vision.' Some Italian kid she found passed out drunk. I don't remember his name — I've just read her account of what went wrong."

"Anyway, Hilaria went to Hogwarts, and she wrote a little poem about the Houses, for her daughter, when her daughter was in school. I've read the original, which is in Latin, but I don't remember all of it. The common modern, unattributed, translation, is this:
Hogwarts girls are sane enough,  
but sadly Hogwarts men  
Uphold the nature of their House  
to Hell and back again.

So my daughter, thus I teach --  
choose not less than one of each:

For ballroom, joust, and fields of war  
bold and courtly Gryffindor,  
but for the cradle and the hearth,  
true Hufflepuff instead.

Ravenclaw may bring home gold and  
parlor discourse well uphold,  
Each of these, my darling girl,  
but Slytherin to bed.

Harry burst out laughing. Hermione blushed and giggled slightly.

"That is the best your house gets?" Harry teased. "You're a good tumble?"

"You'd rather do a gavotte, then be slaughtered?" Draco countered cheerfully.

"I don't even know what a gavotte is."

"It's a bit old. You should at least learn some basic ballroom steps, though. That will stand you in good stead for most of the last three centuries, including a fair bit of current music, once you isolate the beat."

Draco stood up, walked over to them, and surveyed them critically.

"You first, I think," he said to Hermione. "You know more, and you don't need to know as much, so I think I can manage." With that, he bowed politely. "May I have this dance, Miss Granger?"

The hand he held out to Hermione trembled slightly, but his face was politely blank. Hermione nodded very slightly, and extended her own hand to meet his. Harry watched, astonished, as Draco took Hermione's hand in his own, and slipped one arm around her waist. Draco was touching Hermione, and rather closely, with no outward show of disgust.

"Let's try something that doesn't require too much precision," he said, in a voice slightly higher than his usual tone. "Mirror me. Side, side, back, forward."

"Side, side, back, forward," Hermione muttered, as she attempted to match the motions to the beat. "Is that it?"

"Do that until it's smooth, then just let me move you a bit more."

"But I won't know what to do!"

"Trust me." Draco almost managed a smirk.
Harry backed up to the bed and leaned against it, watching. The dance style was straight out of a black-and-white movie, but did work to the music, which might have been popular when his parents were dating. Suddenly, Hermione spun and burst into delighted laughter.

"There!" Draco grinned. "Didn't you know what to do, then?"

"Oh yes!"

Draco moved Hermione in and out of spins and turns. They tangled and needed to stop for explicit instruction when he attempted to do something complicated that involved looping arms over each other's shoulders. For a moment, he had her nested in front of him in a cross-armed embrace that Harry was certain would have had Ron in a rage, then he spun her quickly out of it. At the end of the song, she collapsed beside Harry, laughing giddily, and Draco stood, flushed and proud, in the center of the room.

Draco looked at Harry. "You next," he said, with a trace of challenge in his voice.

"Me?"

"Well, you won't learn from watching, will you? And she can't teach you." Draco stepped forward, held out a hand to Harry and bowed. "May I have this dance, Mr. Potter?"

Hermione, Harry thought, had gone quite giggly. Blushing, Harry took Draco's hand, and stood awkwardly, waiting for Draco to do something else.

"Right arm around my waist," Draco instructed.

Harry managed to do this. He had an panicked impulse to twist away, but managed to remain as he was positioned. Draco, he suspected, would tease him for acting like a Muggle. Harry wasn't quite sure what the wizarding world thought of boys dancing together, but he remembered two of the seventh year boys dancing together at the Halloween Ball. When he pointed the couple out to Hermione, she had slapped his hand down and told him to act like a civilized adult. As Hermione tended to have a better grasp of wizarding mores and culture than Harry did, he assumed it was not considered unacceptable.

With Draco, Harry managed the basic step that Draco had done with Hermione, but after that were quite a few more complicated instructions which Harry couldn't figure out at all. Finally, he balked.

"Why is this so complicated? You just did things with her!"

"But I was leading. Now I'm trying to teach you to lead. You do want to be able to dance with girls, don't you?"

"I suppose, but I don't have any idea what it is I'm trying to do!"

Draco scowled. "Oh, look! Here, I'll lead for a bit, to demonstrate. Don't get too used to it, though, or the two of you will trip over each other. Switch arms. No, not around my waist. Up at my shoulder." He smirked. "Like a good girl, Potter. Now, I'm leading, so you start stepping the other way. Let's do that until it's comfortable."

A minute later, Harry found himself spinning as Hermione had done, and barely bit back the same sort of laugh. It reminded him of nothing so much as dizzying games he had played in primary school.

"Did you catch how I did that?" Draco asked.
"I have no idea," Harry confessed.

"I brought this hand up —" Draco squeezed Harry's right hand — "and pushed slightly with the other. A reasonably sensitive partner, even if untaught, will react appropriately, just as well-bred green horse will respond to pressure on a bit. I'm going to do it again. Note my hands, this time."

The rest of the hour was spent in dancing lessons — Draco with Hermione, Draco with Harry, then a rather awkward Harry and Hermione. The awkwardness was silly, now, rather than embarrassing. Harry didn't even mind that Draco laughed when he and Hermione lost hold of each other and both went staggering back. Hermione, after a few tracks, found an album that she and Harry felt better matched the dance style, and replaced the newer one with that.

While Harry was attempting to dance with Hermione, the lights flashed. Draco lost no time in diving under the bed. Harry and Hermione continued to dance. They were kind of getting the rhythm, Harry thought, and besides, the lights had flashed when the visitor was at the first stair. He or she still needed to knock.

The door opened. Harry completed taking Hermione through a spin before looking over. Ron was standing in the doorway. Of course, Ron knew Hermione's password, Harry thought, so he didn't need to knock.

"Hi Ron," Hermione called breathlessly.


"What's up?" Harry asked, managing a two handed spin that caused Hermione to laugh breathlessly. They lost a couple of steps and had to jump back in at the start of the next pattern.

"Just ... wondering what you two were up to."

"Just dancing," Harry answered. The music came to a wavering close. He kept Hermione spinning until the last note, then gathered her triumphantly in his arms.

"Beautiful Hermione," he whispered into her ear, though he was aware of Ron's annoyance. The last note quavered to a close. Hermione dove for the CD player and shut it off.

"Sorry, Ron," she said. "What did you want?"

"Just ... I... You weren't at lunch. Wondered if you wanted to take a break?"

"Can't," Hermione answered. A flash of displeasure crossed Ron's features. "Sorry, but we're busy."

"I can see that." Ron looked coldly at them. "You've been busy a lot, lately."

"We're working on a potion," Hermione said defensively. "It needs to be tended by the original brewers, rather frequently. We can't leave for a few hours, yet."

Harry sighed. "Sorry, Ron. It's my fault." He continued, as if oblivious to Ron's jealousy. "These kids asked me for help — because I'm Harry Potter you know, and of course it was Hermione who could actually help — so we're brewing this thing for them, and it's kind of complicated. Don't worry about it. We'll be done by Wednesday."

"I'm gone Thursday," Ron answered.
"Me too," Hermione said. "But I'm coming back on the first train, on Tuesday."

"I was thinking of returning then, too," Ron said. Harry couldn't help but notice that Ron looked at him while he said it.

After the potion had been stirred for the last time, Draco put on Harry's cloak and left, accompanied by Hermione, who said she would open the portrait hole for him on her way down to dinner. Harry said he would meet her in the Great Hall, but wanted to go up to his room, first.

When Harry entered the sixth-year boys' dormitory, he found Ron lying on his bed. To his relief, no one else was present.

"Hi," Harry said.

"Hi." Ron continued to stare at the canopy above his bed. Harry stepped inside and closed the door softly behind him.

"Er... Ron?"

"What?"

"There are two things I think I ought to tell you."

"Tell away, then."

Ron still hadn't looked at him. Sighing, Harry crossed to his own bed and sat on the edge of it.

"First," he said, "I am not moving in on your girlfriend."

"Oh really? What do you call it then?"

"We were dancing. We were enjoying it. That's all."

"Whatever."

"Second, I think you should know..." Harry took a deep breath and let it out, surprised by how shaky he sounded. He forced himself to stretch out, as if he was relaxed, and was pleased to feel the lie grow real. He allowed a bit of his annoyance to turn to malice as he smiled. "If I wanted to steal your girlfriend," he said softly, "I know just what I'd do. I doubt it would take more than a week."

Ron looked up at that. Harry smirked at him.

"Since when are you a lady's man, Harry?" Ron growled.

"I'm not. But she's bored, and you don't pay any attention to what she wants. It wouldn't take much of someone who does — who tells her she's beautiful, and asks her to dance, and notices the sparkle of her hair in the firelight." Harry pushed against the bed to stand, and shrugged. "Just a warning. I won't, but someone else might. If I were you, I'd start dancing with her."

"Thanks for the advice," Ron said sarcastically.

"That's what friends are for, right?" Harry commented. "Coming to dinner?"

Ron sat up and looked at Harry. "Are you serious?" he asked.
"Completely. I am not interested in Hermione — not like that — but if I was, I believe I could take her from you. If you don't work at being a better boyfriend, someone will. In case you haven't noticed, she's beautiful, talented, and sensible, and I'm sure plenty of our fellows would consider her a fine catch."

"Actually, most people find her too intimidating."

"She's gotten more discreet, Ron, even if you haven't noticed. She doesn't bludgeon people over the head with her cleverness, anymore. Draco was saying half of their Arithmancy class would be after her if she was a pureblood. That she's not dissuades the three Slytherin boys, and one of the Ravenclaws. He says all the other boys, and one of the girls, have been falling over each other to show her how smart they are."

"Get out of here," Ron snarled.

Perversely, Harry flashed him a cheery smile. "I'm on my way."

Harry headed down to dinner. Hermione, despite several minutes lead, was not there. He watched the door anxiously until she entered, a few minutes later, accompanied by Dumbledore. The headmaster sat at the staff table, and Hermione came over to Harry.

"I talked to him," she whispered, as she scooped beef and vegetables onto her plate. "I said I don't think it's doing any good to continue punishing you, and he told me he had already decided that it has accomplished as much as it will. I think you're going to get a reprieve, soon." Under the table, she removed the magical compass from her pocket, and passed it to Harry. "And I set this at the door to his office. Draco should be able to use it to find the right set of windows."

"Thanks, Hermione. You're amazing."

Hermione blushed and busied herself with dinner.

Harry did not need to wait long. After dinner, he was summoned to Dumbledore's office. The headmaster told him, in front of a disapproving Professor McGonagall, that his punishment was lifted.

"Please try to remember," he added, "that this does not exempt you from the normal Hogwarts rules. You are still expected to stay on the grounds, to stay out of the Forbidden Forest, and to be in your dormitory at night. Do you understand?"

"Completely, sir."

Harry could not help thinking that he was already committed to breaking those rules the next evening, and the one after that. He, Hermione, and Draco needed to bring the Anchor potion to the Shrieking Shack to sit for a day, and then return to create the Portkey there.
When the Gryffindors arrived at Potions, their last class, on Monday, they found most of the Slytherins already there, copying information from a piece of parchment hanging on the door. It was a note from Professor Snape stating that he had canceled class due to urgent business, and assigning extra homework that would more than consume the extra time.

Ron grinned at Hermione. "All right!" he exclaimed. "Let's go down to the lake."

Hermione shook her head. "Sorry." She glanced at Harry, then looked apologetically at Ron. "I have something else to do first."

Ron looked pointedly at Harry, then back at Hermione. "Yeah, I bet you do," he said.

Harry snorted. "Come on, Draco," he said. "Let's go for a walk."

Draco burst out laughing.

"What?" Harry asked.

"Never mind," Draco choked out. "Yes, let's. Shall we go down to the Forest?"

Harry grinned. "Right. Like we planned, just earlier. Let me talk to Hermione first, though."

Ron turned on his heel and left. Harry stared after him.

"I'm sorry, Hermione," he said. "I was trying to hold that off."

"Not your problem," Hermione assured him. "Come over here." She led him down the cross corridor, out of earshot of their few lingering classmates.

"Can you handle the cauldron by yourself?" Harry asked. "With it still light outside, it might be best for us to meet you at the Whomping Willow. Three people sharing the cloak was hard enough in the dark...."

Hermione grinned. "It certainly was! We're not little kids, anymore. Don't worry about the cauldron. I'll levitate it."

"Right, then. Starting now will make tomorrow easier."

Harry had been dreading trying to spell-cast after potions lab. Not only would he be tired, but Draco and Hermione would discover they knew different times for the end of the session. Doing it before would be much easier, though they might miss dinner. Harry wondered if anyone had noticed how many dinners the three of them were skipping. Ron, he realized, as he headed left the stairs to cross the Entrance Hall. Ron had noticed how many dinners he and Hermione had missed, even if he hadn't noticed Draco was missing them too.

"Cat got your tongue?" Draco asked, as they walked down the steps in the warm afternoon sunlight.

"Thinking about Ron."

"He thinks you're stealing his girl."
"Yeah."

"You want to? I could help."

"No."

"You sure?" Draco urged. "You're comfortable with her. The two of you mesh — the way you talk, the play of ideas. And it wouldn't be a bad blood match, either. Crossing with another mixed blood will show up whether the two of you are harboring latent non-magical —" Draco broke off suddenly. "Well, whatever you like."

"The thing is, I don't want to. If we hadn't been friends since we were eleven, I think I would, but as it is, I already love her, but in entirely the wrong way. I can't just change that," Harry explained. "Besides, I want Ron to be happy."

"Hermione's not going to be happy with Ron. She needs more than that."

"More what?"


"He's really quite smart, you know."

"Is he?" Draco drawled. "He had me fooled." He kicked at a small fallen branch, and it tumbled in front of them. "So, about marrying...."

"What?" Harry was vaguely confused at how this conversation had jumped to marriage.

"You're a half-blood, but from a good family, and with money. I think your best match would be a pureblood with no money. That way, you'd both improve each other's and your children's standing."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Er, Draco..."

"I thought of a few Hufflepuffs who would do, but I can't really see you with a Hufflepuff. Then it occurred to me — What about Ginny Weasley?"

"Draco!"

"Well, she's cute, her family likes you —"

"I am sixteen! I am too young to worry about marriage!"

"What?" Draco stared at Harry a moment, then rolled his eyes. "If you say so, but wait too long after graduation, and all the good ones will be gone. You'll end up with someone ugly, or willful..."

"I don't mind willful," Harry growled. "I think it's rather a requirement, in fact."

"Oh, definitely Ginny, then."

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At the Whomping Willow, Harry immobilized the tree, and Draco went into the tunnel. Harry then waited for Hermione. She was walking along the edge of the forest, reading a book which she was apparently levitating before her. There was no sign of the cauldron.
Before she went inside, she lowered the book to a foot above the ground. It wasn't until Harry saw that she had let her wand fall to her side that he figured out what she was doing — the book was on top of the covered cauldron, which was draped in the invisibility cloak.

Walking in the low-ceilinged tunnel was even more annoying than Harry had remembered. He supposed he was bigger, now. They were all relieved to reach the Shrieking Shack.

"Let's rest a bit before returning," Draco said. "My back hurts from walking like that."

"Funny," said Harry, stretching backwards. "It wasn't so bad when we were thirteen."

Hermione laughed. "No. Not as much of a difference for me, though. I think I was taller than you, then."

Harry looked longingly at the boarded-up windows.

"Just think — we're only a short walk from the sweet shop."

"No good way out, though," Draco noted.

"Harry, this is your first day off punishment," Hermione warned. "You are not going to risk getting caught in Hogsmeade."


"I'll get you some later," Draco volunteered. "Promise." He looked unhappy. "Actually, we should start right back. Not getting caught is important."

Harry nodded reluctantly, and got to his feet. "What will we do till potions lab, then?" he asked.

"I might try to find Ron," Hermione said. She snorted. "Or maybe I won't."

"You sound like me, last December," Harry observed.

"We could have another dance lesson," Draco suggested.

Hermione bounced. "Lovely! Teach me to waltz?"

"Do you have any waltz music?"

"Oh. No."

"Probably no, then. I'm really no good without music."

Hermione smiled. "I'll buy some over the holidays." She stopped suddenly. Her hands flew to her mouth. "I mean —" She looked down, flustered. "Sorry. It's not that I expect...."

Draco whirled on her, scowling. "Expect what?"

"I mean," Hermione said uncomfortably, stepping back from him, "I don't expect you to —"

"To associate with a Gryffindor Mudblood?" Draco sneered.

"Draco!" Harry snapped.

"That," Hermione agreed at a whisper. She was blushing hot, and she had ducked her head forward so her hair half-hid her face.
Draco’s face reddened with fury. "What is wrong with you, girl?!" he snarled, advancing on her. Hermione backed away, again. "Don't retreat like that! What happened to the girl who frigging slapped my face?"

Hermione looked beseechingly past Draco to Harry. Draco stepped closer, backing her into the wall and blocking half of her face from Harry's view. "Look at me when I'm talking to you!" he bellowed.

That was too much like Uncle Vernon. Harry, who had started to step forward, found he was frozen by it. Like Lucius, too, he thought, except Lucius would whisper, with that subtlety of menace Draco could never quite master. Hermione started to laugh, a tight, choking sound, but a laugh nonetheless, and Harry desperately willed her to shut up, to be quiet, to look neutral.

"Think that's funny, do you?" Draco spat.

"Dragon?" Harry tried shakily.

"You stay out of this, Potter!"

While Draco was still screaming, Hermione leaned forward and kissed him on the nose. Draco jerked back, then his hand came up in a strike for her head. Harry, too far away, finally lunged forward, but Draco had stopped, his fist midway between his face and Hermione's. He was breathing very hard.

"Don't touch me again, Granger."

"Draco, will you make up your mind?" Harry snapped.

Draco took a deep breath and let it out shakily.

"If I come back unbound," he said, "I will continue to associate with you, Hermione. But do not, ever, do that to me again."

"I was just trying to startle you," Hermione said. "You were so...." She swallowed. "Just as well, I suppose. You've been so nice you were starting to seem like a complete stranger. Comforting to have you explode about nothing."

"It wasn't nothing!" Draco screamed.

For a moment, they all stood still.

"Look," Draco said finally, speaking only to Hermione. "It's one thing for me to say I'm better than you. But you can't believe it. Bloody Hermione Granger doesn't believe some dilettante pureblood is better than her."

Harry thought about Marcella, in Death Eater robes, then about Dobby, and what Draco had said about things that cowered. Hermione just stared.

"If I come back," Draco said, "and I'm a Death Eater, I won't associate with you. It won't be possible. But if I'm not, and I won't talk to you..." he scowled — "just bash me. Don't put up with that crap. You don't do that! Something in the world should be constant."

"S'okay, Dragon," Harry said, soothingly. "She was just off-balance, and you were just channeling your father. Let's go."
Harry dropped down into the hole. Hermione came next, then Draco. Both, Harry noticed, were shaking. He thought he might be as well. He hoped nobody in Hogsmeade had heard Draco screaming. It was dinnertime, so they probably hadn't, at least not clearly enough to not ascribe it to ghosts. Together, the three proceeded, hunched, through the low-ceilinged tunnel, until tension defused into boredom. Two thirds of the way back, they paused to rest and, sitting, stretch their necks.

"You know what really scares me?" Draco asked idly.

"What?" Harry prompted.

"That I'll get home, and Father will start drilling me, and I'll be so wired on Dark magic that it will all just seem reasonable."

"That's ridiculous!" Hermione exclaimed.

"Haven't done any Dark Arts, have you?" Draco sneered.

"Of course not!"

"It's not ridiculous," Harry said. Hermione studied him for a moment and frowned.

"Well, write yourself a note, then," she said, quietly.

Draco, to Harry's surprise, nodded. "That could help. It would need to be cryptic, of course."

"Marcella," said Harry, without thinking.

Draco stood up, hitting his head on the ceiling. "Ow. Fuck! Let's go."

They resumed walking. Harry wondered if he could give Draco anything that would remind Draco of him, in some useful way.

Harry, wearing the cloak, stole out after everyone was asleep and met Draco in the Owlry. They flew out the window and into the night. It smelled of waking earth and new things growing; frogs sang from the wet places in the forest and the shallows by the lake.

"It would have to be a full moon," Draco complained.

"And so beautiful anyone might be out," Harry added.

Draco grinned. "And we'll waste it on trying not to be caught," he agreed. "Wouldn't you love to just fly?"

Harry swooped through the mild spring air, trying to draw all its hope into his lungs, to let it soak into his blood. Reluctantly, he turned into the shadow of a tower.

"I can't afford a perfect moment now, and another month like last one. Let's get this done."

They found the windows for Dumbledore's office. All were closed, but the room itself was brightly lit, and they did not go too close. Harry was not surprised that one of the windows had a direct view of the distant gates, and another looked towards the Forbidden Forest. From the dark night, they
could easily see the backlit designs of the windows. Each window was done in a mixture of colored and textured glass. Four depicted the animal symbols of the houses, but the fifth, the one that looked to the gates, showed a rising phoenix, which glittered as if on fire from the shifting light behind it.

"He likes them, doesn't he?" Draco asked.

Harry laughed. "Even me," he said teasingly.

"Are you a phoenix?"

"Aren't I? Didn't I rise from the flames?"

"Huh. Just what the world needs. A green phoenix."

Harry laughed. Despite their resolve, neither could resist a few unnecessary turns about the towers, but they stuck to the shadows.
Strange Reversals

After classes the next day, they met outside, near the Whomping Willow, and once again made the backbreaking walk out to the Shrieking Shack. Harry, who was the tallest, groaned as he tried to stretch out.

"Sit down a moment," Hermione coaxed.

Harry sat. To his surprise, Hermione moved behind him and pressed her fists into the small of his back, on either side of his spine. "Bend forward," she ordered. She moved her touch up, and pushed her weight into his upper back, stretching him further forward. "Let me know if it hurts."

"Mmm. Only in a good way."

Hermione eased off Harry. "Stand up and twist a bit," she said.

"Thanks. That helped."

"I learned that one over summer."

"Looks nice," Draco remarked. "I don't suppose you'd do the same to me?" He sniffed at Hermione's startled look. "You can just say no, Hermione. You've been friends with him forever, and you've no reason to be comfortable with me."

"That's the third time you've called me Hermione."

Draco shrugged. "You can call me Draco, if you want. Just not in public."

They had several spells to cast on Draco's item, which was a silver pendant in the shape of a soaring dragon. They finished them all in time for Harry and Draco to get to Potions lab, but Harry felt very tired. He hoped he recovered before Draco left.

Harry pointed at the little adder with Snape's wand. It felt strange and cold in his hand.

"Imperio," he said firmly. He willed the snake to coil in a circle, then slowly in, in a tight spiral, until it could go no further and lay with its head at the center of solid coil of scales. Snape set a small wooden stand on the desk. Harry, familiar with this from the exercises he had done the week before, had the snake uncoil, then knock down the stand with a crack of his tail.

"Finite Incantantum," Harry said. He felt dizzy, not just with holding the power, but from the added effort of channeling his will through another's wand. The snake twisted uneasily on the table.

"Soon," Harry hissed.

"This feeling," the snake returned, "like I was warm, but then I am not..." Frustration intensified his lashing.

"Sorry. You will be home tomorrow, I promise."
"Apologizing to your victim, Potter?" Snape asked, with some amusement. Harry whirled to snarl at him, but was interrupted by a rattling of the door.

Snape reached over and plucked his wand from Harry's suddenly stiff hand. The Potions master kept his eyes locked on Harry's as he pointed his wand at the door and whispered "Finite Incantantum" to remove the wards. "What is it?" he called idly.

Harry shivered. His heart was hammering, and he was hot with fury. A single sly poke from Snape should not have him in such a state.

"Is Harry there?" Hermione called.

"Fuck," Harry cursed, at a whisper.

"Language, Potter," Snape reproved quietly. He raised his voice. "Come back at ten, Miss Granger." Snape toyed with the wooden stand, setting it upright, then knocking it down again.

"I can return by myself," Harry called out.

"Draco was telling someone the lab ends at nine-thirty, and I'm always late," Hermione replied.

Now, they both looked at the door. Beneath his panic, Harry sincerely hoped Snape had not noticed that Hermione had referred to Draco Malfoy as 'Draco.'

Snape's lip curled in an angry sneer. "Attentive, as always, Miss Granger," he growled. "Draco's lab ends at nine-thirty. Harry stays until ten." With a flick of his wand, he banished the two wild snakes to the storeroom. Susara disappeared rapidly into Harry's shirt.

"But Professor ...."

"Are we finished?" Snape whispered to Harry. Harry nodded. He was starting to feel almost normal, he told himself. He would not act guilty in front of Hermione.

"Alohamora." Snape flicked his wand at the door, and it flew open. Hermione was standing outside, looking terrified. Harry turned his head to look at her. Whatever she saw in his face made her take a quick step back. Snape rose and approached her.

"Harry has informed me he has no further questions about today's procedure," Snape sneered. "I will not guess whether this sudden understanding is genuine or a sop to you." Harry walked uneasily to stand behind the Potions master. "Take him and go, then," Snape said abruptly, turning his back on Hermione. He focused for a moment on Harry and gave a slight nod before stepping aside. Harry nodded back, and went through the door. He hoped he looked more confident than he felt.

Recognizing the thought, he thought also to create his own confidence. He let it spring forth in his head and drop down through his body. He moved up the hall, trusting Hermione to accompany him. She had been left standing, and had to hurry to catch up.

"Harry..."

Harry restrained himself from responding angrily. Couldn't she have waited ten minutes? "Yes?" he said, as neutrally as possible. He slowed to look at her.

"Nice swagger, Potter," Draco sneered. "Is that what you're learning in your private lessons?"

"Draco!" Harry snapped. He glared at Draco's floating head. With an attempt to collect himself, he answered. "If my private lessons were any of your business, I would have told you about them."
Draco's sneer vanished into a searching look which Harry found far more frightening.

"Whatever Snape is teaching you," Draco said hotly, "I can teach you. *Whatever.* Why do you insist on risking your life, this way?"

"Draco," Hermione objected, "Snape is a highly respected Potions master. He has frequent publications in major professional journals. I think it is rather naive to say that you can —"

"Harry wouldn't understand anything above my level," Draco snapped.

"Gee, thanks," Harry said sarcastically.

"Besides," Draco said coolly, "I hardly think it likely that he is studying Potions. Certainly I could stay for that."

"Nice evil purr, Draco. You sound almost like your father."

Draco pivoted ninety degrees. The hem of the cloak swung about his feet, temporarily revealing polished shoes and the hem of his school robe.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

"Your pathetic attempt to distract me has not succeeded."

"Too bad. I'm still not telling you anything." Harry gritted his teeth. "Look, what was the point of this?"

"Hermione was late," Draco said. "Again. I went to fetch her so we could return certain library books to the restricted section under the same conditions under which we removed them."

"I was rather surprised to be told I was late to fetch you, ten minutes before I planned to start down," Hermione added.

"Well, you were both right," Harry said, "and I'm fine."

"So why have you been lying to your two best friends?" Draco challenged.

"I never lied to either of you," Harry said angrily.

"Oh, so sorry, Potter. I didn't mean to besmirch your Gryffindor honor. What is it you do, now?" Draco made a show of thinking. "Ah, I recall. You 'forget to tell.'" He scowled. "It amazes me how greatly Gryffindor honor resembles Slytherin guile."

"Oh, fuck you, Draco. You know I could have been Slytherin. Don't insult Hermione over this."

Draco laughed with a sincerity that cut through his prior malice.

"What?" Harry asked.

"Such a Gryffindor move — protecting your friend's reputation; such a Slytherin ... attitude? Pose?" He grinned. "I like it. Don't think you're off the hook, though —"

From ahead, they heard footsteps. Draco went quiet, and raised the hood back over his head. Harry moved closer to Hermione. Around the corner, they encountered Professor Flitwick.
"Out late!" he exclaimed.

"Harry has a special project lab with Professor Snape on Tuesdays," Hermione explained. "I'm required to escort him back to Gryffindor."

"Actually, you're not," Harry pointed out. "Since I'm out of the restrictions, I could have returned on my own, just like we do from detentions."

Hermione looked startled. "Oh," she said. "I suppose."

They continued up, to the level of the library. Draco's head reappeared at the landing, then he scooped them under the cloak.

"I should go in the center," Harry said.

"It's your cloak," Draco noted agreeably. He and Harry switched places. Under the cover of the cloak, they stole into the library and returned the two books to the restricted section.

They had just left the library, when they again heard footsteps. They were different, this time. An even stride was overlaid with a light, shuffling sound. The three retreated into a protected alcove near the library entrance.

Figures came into view in the main corridor. Harry shrank back. It was Professor Horsyr, and with her was a lanky, fanged creature that paced her with a loose, hunch-backed lope. The two paused at the end of the library corridor and glanced first towards the library, then up and down the stairs. Harry's eyes traveled twice down the strange monster, from the long-fingered hands and feet to the tufted tail and ears, before realizing it was a Quiri. He shrank back against Draco. He couldn't afford to have that thing smell him now!

"What is it?" Draco breathed in his ear. "It's lovely! I want one!"

Harry remembered feeling like that, the first time he had seen a Quiri. He wondered if the repulsion of the Quiri for Dark energy was mutual. If so, his reaction was scary, but Draco's was ....

"You haven't been practicing," he guessed.

"What?"

"That's a Quiri. If you've been doing any Dark Arts in the last month or two, it should repulse you, and you it." Harry felt a little numb when he heard his own words, but Draco made an involuntary strangled sound that reminded Harry of a puppy whining. Fortunately, Professor Horsyr had started down the stairs. Harry saw the Quiri's ears flick back before it followed, but the professor did not seem to have heard.

"I'm going to see it," Draco whispered, wriggling out from under the cloak.

"Draco — " Hermione urged, at a whisper.

"I'm a prefect. I can be out if I have a reason. You two wait here."

With that, Draco ran for the steps and turned out of sight. Harry and Hermione looked at each other, and began to tread quietly to the top of the stairs.

"Professor!" Draco called.
Harry and Hermione were not yet close enough to distinguish the words of Horsyr's reply, but it was politely inquiring.

"...returning a book I found in one of the Slytherin dormitories," they heard as they crept closer. Draco's tone was confiding and slightly apologetic. "I wanted to keep it unofficial."

Harry was glad Horsyr did not focus on rules the way Snape or McGonagall did. He thought that excuse would have Draco in trouble with most other faculty members, but Horsyr was likely to merely nod and remember it. Harry and Hermione were right at the top of the stairs, now. They moved slightly along the balcony to the best listening point. From here, they could see the tops of the three heads, and some of the Quiri's back and tail.

"I saw ... that's so beautiful, I had to see it up close. What is it? May I touch it?"

"It is a Quiri." Professor Horsyr sounded amused. "You may touch it if it allows."

Draco, as Harry remembered doing, dropped to his knees and held out a hand to the Quiri. Harry found it horrible to watch. Hermione, beside him, was making soft cooing sounds, but to Harry, it was as if his friend was holding out his hand to a crocodile. He could barely restrain himself from screaming out a warning, and his heart was pounding with adrenaline.

Then the Quiri was in Draco's lap, and Draco was rubbing his face in its fur. Harry closed his eyes (vicious creature in grabbing, biting, throttling distance of Draco) and felt a little better.

"So soft!" Draco was exclaiming. Harry remembered the soft, silky fur of the Quiri, and the velvet pads of its hands. "A wonder no one's tried to make a coat out of you, little darling. So pretty, too!"

Harry concentrated on wondering if a Quiri pelt would retain some of the Quiri's repulsion for Dark energy. Would it be protective, or just a badge of righteousness? Perhaps a judge's mantle?

"Quiris are very rare," Professor Horsyr was explaining, "and of almost human intelligence. They were never officially classed as beings, but I believe they should have been." She was silent for a minute, then, almost too quietly for Harry to hear, she said. "They are sensitive to the residue of Dark Arts. You have not done any Dark magic in at least a month."

Draco laughed nervously. "Oh, not since early February, I think." Beside Harry, Hermione twitched. "And it was really quite harmless. Harry and I found a smashing hidey-hole, but it was full of little animal bones. So I used the Bone Burning Curse to clean it out."

"It does not matter to the Quiri if it is harmless in intent. It is still Dark magic. The energy is different."

"Oh yes." Draco laughed again, shakily. "Quite the rush. I tried to get Harry to do the second round, but he wouldn't. Said if he wanted a rush, he'd jump out his dormitory window, again."

"Shut up!" Hermione hissed.

Harry opened his eyes. Professor Horsyr was squatting beside Draco. The blond had his face buried in the Quiri's fur. He muttered something. Harry had to close his eyes, again.

"The Quiri seems to prompt some people to unburden themselves. It doesn't work that way for everyone." Horsyr's voice was warm with sympathy. "Don't worry. I won't use it against you — or him." Harry wondered if she were touching Draco. He couldn't look.

"Oh." Draco sounded small and frightened. "Well, thank you for letting me meet it. I'm not likely
ever to get the chance, again." There was moment of silence, then a sharp sound, then Draco, again, childish and near hysterical: "Don't look at me like that! You can't do anything for me!"

Harry opened his eyes at the sound of footsteps. Draco was fleeing up the stairs. Horsyr took a few steps after him, then stopped. Harry and Hermione watched Horsyr until she resumed moving away, then went to meet Draco.

Draco was wandering, arms outstretched, whispering for them. They scooped him under the cloak. Even in the dim light, Harry could see Draco's eyes were wet.

"Horrible creature," he hissed. "How dare it make me feel ... make me want to ..." He groaned. "Not its fault, I suppose."

"Here," Harry said encouragingly, "slap me for it, if you like."

"Why?"

"My great-grandfather created them."

"Oh, wouldn't he just!" Draco rubbed at his eyes. "It was beautiful, and felt lovely, and I'm glad I got to meet it now, when I really could. Still, babbling about Osum Crema was just horrible. I couldn't stop myself."

"How odd."

"Why?"

"I was able not to tell Dumbledore about the -- anything. I wanted to, though, so it may be just my usual damn fool stubbornness."

Draco twitched. "You've met one before?"

"When you claimed you were teaching me Dark Arts, it got back to the headmaster. I was summoned to his office and presented to a Quiri."

"Crap! No wonder he's been glaring at me all the time." Draco frowned. "And the Quiri obviously didn't ...." His eyes flicked ever so briefly in Hermione's direction. "We'll discuss this later," he threatened.

Harry stayed carefully with Hermione all the way back to Gryffindor. He woke the next morning understanding that he needed to talk to Draco, but unwilling to do so. When he went to get Susara, she did not want to come with him. This was uncharacteristic of her, and she could not explain it.

"Twitchy," she said, lashing her slender body. "Hunt, perhaps. Want gold."

Harry worried that it was some effect from the previous night's experiments. Although he wanted her in contact, reluctantly agreed to let her stay, and he laid a galleon beside her where she lay about her warming device.

Harry stayed in a crowd of Gryffindors going to and from breakfast, although he saw Draco trying to get his attention. It wasn't until they were leaving Potions that Draco managed to get him alone. He grabbed Harry's arm and pulled him into a side corridor.
"We need to talk."

A minute later, Harry found himself in a narrow dungeon room, empty except for some piled and dusty furniture. Draco lost no time in locking the door.

"What," he hissed, "what the fuck have you been doing?"

"What?"

"Don't think I didn't notice. You were afraid of the Quiri."

Harry took a shaky breath. "Draco, look, it wasn't really ... It was just an experiment."

"You bloody fucking hypocrite!"

Harry wanted to scream in anger or beg for forgiveness. Instead forced his voice to a neutral tone. "You always tell me not to trust you," he said reasonably. "So this time, I'm not trusting you. There was something specific I needed to figure out, and I can't risk it getting back to Voldemort."

"You think Snape won't tell Voldemort? Is that what you think?! Do you think?!"

"Who said Snape knows?" Harry retorted.

"You were with him. You were with him, and hiding it from me and Hermione. I know what Severus Snape can teach, and 'defense' has nothing to do with it."

"Snape has been helping me. He doesn't know with what," Harry lied, to avoid the secondary argument that giving Snape information would cause. "Unfortunately, I had to do more than I intended, to keep the significant things obscured."

"And you think it won't change you," Draco sneered.

"Oh, but it has, hasn't it?" Harry let his fear show through. "The Quiri was repulsive," he confessed. "Terrifying. I couldn't bear to watch you in reach of it. And I'd thought it was so beautiful, before."

He bit his lip and shuddered.

"Look, I'm sorry," he said sincerely. "It's over now — we finished last night. Come back, and I'll tell you exactly what I did, and why."

Draco surveyed him with angry scorn.

"The first of June, I will take you to Professor Horsyr. If you cannot abide the Quiris, whether I can or not, I will kill you."

"Yes, Dragon." Harry did not point out that this was easier said then done. Draco looked petulant.

"Then I kill Snape," he added.

Harry laughed, despite himself. "Oh, good luck!" he exclaimed.

Draco's expression softened slightly, but only with desperation. "Promise me you're done with it."

"I'm done. I learned what I need to know, and I'm done."

Draco shook his head. "If you need to know it, you're not done."
"I can't give you details, Dragon. You need to trust me on this one."

Without reply, Draco unlocked the door. They walked up the empty corridors and staircase to the Great Hall. Just outside the entrance, Draco caught at Harry's shoulder.

"What?"

Draco looked at Harry searchingly. He was standing far too close for Harry's comfort.

"Potter..." The address was at odds with his intimate distance. A mocking smile spread across his face.

"What?" Harry snapped.

"Go jump out your dormitory window."

Draco turned, and walked away, picking up a swagger halfway over to the Slytherin table. Harry did not enter the hall until Draco had sat down.
Repercussions

Harry spent most of lunch worrying about Draco. The Slytherin obviously felt betrayed by Harry's actions. Would he go join the Death Eaters, after all, just out of spite? Should Harry tell him exactly what he had done? Should he tell Hermione what she had missed, so she could talk to him? The mere thought made him cringe.

To his surprise, Draco slipped in the seat next to his in Transfiguration. McGonagall's face soured as she saw them, and Harry expected Draco to be told to move to the defacto Slytherin side of the room, but her lips stayed closed in a thin grimace of disapproval. Draco took out his notebook.

"I'm sorry I yelled," he whispered. "Tell me about it in April."

"I'm sorry, too. I get too reckless, sometimes."

Draco's eyes opened. "Really?" he choked.

"Are we ready to start?" Professor McGonagall said crisply, silencing their conversation and a number of others. "I realize this is the last class before the holiday, and a lecture is of little interest at the time. To try to make this class a bit more engaging, I would like to have a full class discussion. Please move your desks to the wall — without injuring your classmates, Mr. Zabini — and arrange the benches in a circle."

When they were all thus arranged, McGonagall proceeded to launch a discussion of theory that relied entirely on material in the optional readings. Two thirds of the class was utterly lost, while the remaining third, including, to Harry's pleasure, himself, talked over each other in the hurry to get out pet theories before anyone else stated them. When the discussion worked back to material from a month earlier, Draco jumped in, sending a nervous smile at Harry as he talked about the individuality of elemental evocative correspondence. Professor McGonagall looked at him as if he had grown a second head, then, with a tight smile, asked him to explain the theory, which Draco did quite admirably, then to demonstrate it with two ways of transfiguring a dove into a toy boat, which he did with more effort.

"Very good, Mr. Malfoy," Professor McGonagall said. "Five points to Slytherin for your explanation, and five apiece for each of the transfiguration paths." She smiled around at the class. "I see this format causes some changes in class participation. Perhaps we shall make these discussions a regular feature."

A smart double knock sounded at the door. Professor McGonagall pointed her wand, and the door swung open. A second-year Slytherin stepped over the threshold and stood still.

"Yes, Bennegan?"

"Professor Snape sent me with a message for Draco Malfoy, sir."

"Deliver it quickly, then."

The boy came over. Leaning between Draco and Harry, he whispered to Draco. "Snape wants you in his office half an hour after the end of lessons. He sounded annoyed."

"Like that tells me anything," Draco snorted, but Harry could see he was worried. "All right.
After class, Harry raced up to Gryffindor tower and got his cloak. He needed to know what Draco and Snape said to each other. *It will be all lies, of course, he thought, but I need to know which ones.*

He lingered, invisible, by Snape's door, waiting for Draco to arrive. Snape arrived first, and Harry followed him inside. Snape procured a letter from his files and laid it out on his desk. He sat there, rubbing his temples and occasionally muttering things like "idiot brat". Two minutes before the appointed time, a knock sounded at the door.

"Enter," Snape said commandingly.

Draco entered. He looked as haughty as anyone in school robes could. "You wished to see me, Professor?"

"Sit down," Snape growled. Back straight, Draco sat. "Professor Horsyr came to talk to me after lunch," Snape said. "She informs me that you cuddled one of her Quiris."

Draco nodded slightly. "I don't expect I'll get another chance, sir," he said coolly.

"You should not have the chance now!" Professor Snape exploded, jumping to his feet and leaning over his desk. "What are you playing at, you foolish boy? I know the list your father sent you! You have assured him — and me — that you are practicing. Clearly, you are not!"

"I know all those spells."

Snape's eyes narrowed. His lip curled up, baring stained teeth. "You better know them well, boy. Lucius is not forgiving of imperfection."

"I'll do fine."

"You'll get yourself killed!" Snape sat back and rubbed at his temples again. "Draco, I don't know whether you're making some idiot attempt to impress Potter, or just being arrogant, but this is foolish. Your father will not accept excuses. For your own protection, you need to do all those curses well, and if you haven't done any of them in over six weeks, you will make a mistake."

Draco's shoulders curled in. "I have been reviewing the theory of each, sir," he said. "I've studied every one, just not ... the practical ..."

"Practice," Snape completed, succinctly.

"Yes."

"Why, Draco? I've never seen you be reluctant, and while you are occasionally lazy, this is beyond casual idleness."

Draco swallowed. Suddenly, he blurted out:

"Harry told me about the Quiris, sir."

Harry expected Snape to look enraged, but he just looked like he wanted a headache draught. "Mr. Malfoy, if you think for an instant that I believe Harry Potter would provide you with politically sensitive information, just because he finds you fun, you are sadly mistaken."
"He did."

"He would not! No more than he would study Dark Arts with you."

"No, he does that with you, doesn't he?"

Snape's mouth fell open.

"He tells me everything," Draco purred. He stopped, shuddering. "No, that's not true. But I can drag quite a lot out of him."

"Not about Quiris," Snape said coldly. "I have personally discussed this with Mr. Potter, and I do not believe he would go back on his word."

Draco twisted in his chair, looking down. "Not usually," he said uneasily.

"But?" Snape prompted.

"He told me ... when he saw the list."

"List?"

"I showed him the letter."

"You what?!"

"He saw me get it, and wanted to know what my father had said."

"You utter, immature, self-centered, idiotic, little brat!" Snape was half-way across the desk, again, practically spitting in Draco's face. Harry didn't think he had seen Snape so angry since Sirius's escape. "How do you expect —" With a soundless snarl, the Potions Master forced himself back. He steepled his hands before him, and the rage on his face drained to scorn.

"Draco Alphaeus Zenodore Emmerich Archelaus Malfoy," he said, spitting out each word. Harry had to bite his tongue not to laugh, not just at the name, but at the expression of horror on Draco's face as the whole thing was pronounced. "After dinner, you will come to my quarters. There, we will review each item on your list. This is for your own welfare, and I expect you to be properly grateful for my guidance. Is that clear?"

Draco Alphaeus-whatever Malfoy looked straight into Snape's eyes. "Perfectly, sir," he said tonelessly.

"Good. Now get out of my sight." Snape pointed his wand at the door and whispered an opening charm. The door swung ajar. Harry slipped out several steps before Malfoy, then went flat against the wall.

"Frigging evil old vulture," Draco muttered, as he passed. He headed up the stairs. Harry followed at a distance, planning to continue on to Gryffindor tower and dump the cloak. His plans changed when Draco went, not outside or to the library, but up to the second floor, then down the corridor that lead past the Transfiguration classroom, and to Dumbledore's office. At a discreet distance, perhaps more discreet than necessary, considering the forcefulness of Draco's stride, Harry followed.

He watched from the corner as Draco gave the password to the stone gargoyle, then disappeared from view. Harry walked slowly down to the gargoyle to give Draco time to get inside the office. He
was fairly sure Dumbledore could see through invisibility cloaks, so he had no desire to be right behind Malfoy in a cloak he was no longer supposed to possess. After that, he had to wait longer to let an early dinner crowd pass in the hallway. When no one was in sight, Harry spoke to the gargoyle.

"Tease toffees," he said. He wondered if it was significant that his new favorite sweet was Dumbledore's current password. The gargoyle opened, and Harry walked onto the stone stairs. The gargoyle slid shut, and the stairs lifted Harry in a dizzying spiral to the landing outside Dumbledore's office door.

The door was shut, and on the other side, Draco was in a full-volume rant.

"...a Dark wizard on staff, but how can you put him in charge of a house? You might as well just announce you give up on all Slytherins as soon as we are sorted. There are perfectly decent kids in my house, as good as some of your Gryffindors, but you don't care! You don't care what we do, or might have done, and you don't care what happens to us, you just want well-trained foxes for your Gryffindor hounds!"

There was a long period of silence, that Harry assumed indicated shock. Certainly, in Dumbledore's shoes, he would not know how to respond to someone screaming such a thing at him.

"Draco," Dumbledore said soothingly, "I assure you I have known Severus Snape for longer than you have been alive —"

"Well I know him better!" Draco shouted. "I've seen him with Father, and I've been under his control for nearly six years. Do you know who he's after now? Your precious Harry. They told me our practice ended at nine-thirty and Hermione it ended at ten. What do you suppose he's been doing with that half an hour?" Draco's voice lightened and took on a silky tone that reminded Harry uncomfortably of Lucius. "It could just be Fucking, Level 1, but I can't see that of Harry."

Another, shorter silence.

"Draco," Dumbledore said firmly, "do you have any substantial accusations to make against your Head of House? I am not interested in innuendo."

There was a long silence. Harry could imagine Draco weighing and discarding things he might say.

"No," Draco said finally, almost too quietly for Harry to hear.

"Then we have no basis for this conversation. Rest assured, I will repeat none of this to Professor Snape, and I am willing to listen to anything -- of substance -- that you may report in the future."

"Thank you, sir," said Draco tonelessly.

"Draco ... is there anything you wish to tell me? About anything?"

Harry got back on the stairs, and hurried out to the corridor. He was quite sure Draco would say no.

However, when Harry reached the stairs, Draco still had not emerged. Harry ended up ducking into an alcove to remove and stash his cloak. Still no Draco. He waited ten minutes, then headed down to the Great Hall. Draco entered soon after Harry sat down. His demeanor was enough to keep even Pansy at bay, and Crabbe and Goyle silent. He took food, but ate almost none of it.

Harry found himself doing much the same. At the end of dinner, his potatoes were smeared over most of his plate, his fish shredded, and his peas an even green mush, but the volume of food was
much as it had been. Hermione shot him sympathetic looks. When the puddings were served and Harry likewise flattened and ignored them, she reached over and clasped his hand. Harry squeezed it in return.

Ron cleared his throat. "Hermione?"

"Forget it," Harry said, flatly. "I'm leaving, see?" He got up and walked away. Behind him, he could hear Hermione and Ron speaking angrily to each other. He hoped he hadn't caused Hermione too much trouble.

Draco met him at the door.

"Tonight," he said.

"Thank you." As the words came out, Harry realized what an odd response it was. He hoped his desperate relief was not as apparent to Draco as it sounded to him.

"Late though. Let's meet down there, at midnight."

"Midnight?" Belatedly, Harry realized that Draco had to run through twenty Dark curses with Snape.

"I can sleep on the train. You can sleep all week if you like."

"All right, then. Midnight."

Draco nodded smartly, then headed down to the dungeons. Harry climbed up to the tower.
Gold and Honor

When he got back to Gryffindor, Harry went straight to his dormitory to check on Susara. The first thing he noticed was that the warming device had gone cold. In an untidy squiggle beside it lay what seemed to be a snake made of gold. For a terrible instant, Harry was afraid Susara had died, but when he touched the motionless snake form, he discovered it was just a thin skin of soft gold, which crumpled under the slight pressure of his fingers. Harry recalled that his torclinde book said that a torclinde's shed skin was purified gold from its early meals. Harry looked wildly about the room, and spotted Susara sleeping in the west window, which had probably been sunny, a short while earlier.

"Susara?"

"Tired."

Harry scooped Susara up and tucked her into his shirt to warm up. "I will get you more gold," he promised.

Susara seemed to feel better after swallowing a Galleon. She curled around Harry's neck and went back to sleep. Harry settled himself in the window to examine the shed skin.

As he fingered the soft gold, he developed a desire to do something with it. This merged with his earlier thought of giving Draco a token. Certainly, he could make something from the gold for Draco. Now what, he thought, would represent me to Draco? Not a lightning bolt. I couldn't. I can stand being called that, now, but it's still death, in a way. It's the Killing Curse. I need something more ... fun. Harry rolled the gold between his fingers, and thought.

At eleven o'clock, Harry went to bed and drew his curtains. He already had his cloak hidden under the covers, and his present for Draco was clutched in his hand. At midnight, Harry slipped out of the room, and then the tower, and made his way down to the Chamber of Secrets.

Draco was already there. He looked unusually rumpled, but very awake. He pulled out his wand when he spun to face the sound of Harry's approaching footsteps, and for a moment, his eyes were as bright and dangerous as when he was casting the Bone Burning Curse.

"Easy," Harry soothed. His voice came out slightly shaky.

"Sorry." Draco put away his wand, closed his eyes, and took a deep breath. "I went through the entire list, this evening."

Harry nodded. "I have a confession."

Draco scowled. "This might not be the time."

"I'll risk it." Harry looked submissively down. "I spied on your meeting with Snape, this afternoon."

Draco looked annoyed, but not furious. Harry tried a slight smile. "You must be exhausted."

"It's starting. As soon as I'm not twitching from the power, I'll be sleepy. I'm not going to sleep,
though."

"Why not?"

"Because this might be our last visit."

Harry sighed. He took the token from his pocket, but kept it wrapped in his hand. "Susara shed her skin, today," he said.

"Oh. Pretty, isn't it?"

"I decided to make something from it."

Harry held out his hand to Draco. He could tell from the heat in his face that he was blushing. "This is for you."

Draco looked at him curiously. After a moment, he held out his hand, and Harry dropped the token in it. A smile grew on Draco's face as he looked at the bit of shining gold. It was formed into a broomstick, about an inch and a half long, with the shapes of the twigs scratched into its tail, and a small "L" pressed into the underside of the stick. Harry had asked around the Common Room for a pin back, and Lavender had given him one from a lapel pin of which she had lost the front. Harry had fused the pin to the midsection of the broom, then magically hardened the result.

"So you can remember me," Harry said, "and the bats, and the icicles — whatever happens."

Draco nodded, the smile fading from his face in the same slow way it had started. He ran his fingers across the broom, then pinned it to his robe.

"Could you kill me?" he asked. "If you had to?"

"I don't know," Harry answered hesitantly.

"I don't know that I could kill you, either."

Draco looked so intense that Harry found himself smiling.

"What?" Draco demanded.

"We have a really strange way of ...." Harry couldn't bring himself to say "being sappy," and he didn't know what else to say. "You saying you're not sure you could kill me," he tried; "it comes across like Hermione saying she will always be there for me, or Ron saying I'm family, except it's just so...."

"Malfoys are not known for their affectionate natures," Draco replied loftily, but with a hint of a smile.

Harry thought. "I suspect I have an affectionate nature, restrained by acquired paranoia and a complete lack of childhood socialization."

"Analyze me that deeply, and I'll start practicing curses on you."

"Yes, Draco."

Draco snorted. "A suitable tactic." He sat down, leaned back, and stretched his legs out in front of him, kicking away his crumpled school robe to make room. His face was expressionless as he studied Harry.
"What are you looking for?" Harry asked, folding his arms across his chest to stare back.

"Nothing. I was thinking I don't feel righteous any more, and it's rather a relief. I never knew it was that horrible. Do you all run about in that state frequently?"

Harry snorted. "Not really. It is horrible, and it's important to not ... to learn to be honorable without it, I suppose. I seem to have the knack. Hermione needs to work much harder at it, but she is learning."

"Perhaps you are less honorable."

Harry shrugged.

"Huhn." Draco straightened and stopped taking up so much of the couch. He looked evaluatively at Harry, and the look turned to a sneer. "It was the Imperius Curse, wasn't it? You asked about it, and he kept you for a lesson."


Harry reddened. "I wanted to know...."

"If you could overcome it in a snake, I know. But if that was all you had done, that would not be Dark Arts."

"Snape thought I should try the other side of it. To understand what I was fighting."

"Was it helpful?" Draco asked solicitously.

"I hate to say so, but yes. It was very helpful. The view you get from casting it is quite different from what you get having it cast on you."

"And who did you cast it on?" Draco asked lazily. "Snape?"

"Just on the snakes."

Draco looked genuinely angry. "You did that to Susara?"

"What would that prove? I needed snakes I hadn't met, before."

"Ah." Slowly, Draco relaxed back, again. "I think I'll forgive you," he said. His smile broadened. "But you must pay me a penalty."

"A penalty," Harry repeated incredulously.

"Yes. Take off your shirt."

"What?" Is he going to hit me?

"Take off your shirt, and hand it to me." Draco smirked. "Don't look so alarmed, Potter. I won't do anything to you — just to the shirt."

Hesitantly, Harry took off his robe. He always wore additional clothing underneath it for the Chamber, which was rather cold. For some reason, perhaps a sense of occasion, he had worn the good black trousers, and the red and gold silk shirt. He fumbled with the buttons on the cuffs, then the two nearest the neck, and pulled it off, realizing as he did so that Susara was still around his neck, as Draco had forbidden him to wear her. He tried to pretend he had been doing yard work, and was
just incidentally shirtless, but the snake, and Draco's deliberate, unreadable look, once down and up
his body, made that difficult. Draco held out his hand.

"Give it to me."

Harry handed him the shirt and crossed his arms over his chest. "It's cold down here," he
complained, "in case you hadn't noticed."

"You'll have it back in a minute." Draco laid out the shirt on the table, aligning it carefully. "Fetch us
both a drink, while you're waiting."

Harry, unwilling to turn his back on what Draco was doing, fetched the liquor with Accio, then
poured it into the snifters that had been stashed beneath the table.

"Come here," Draco said suddenly. He had drawn out his wand. "Across from me, so I can see your
face."

Harry moved to the far side of the table and went down to one knee facing Draco, so their eyes were
at about the same level. Draco stared intently into his face for what seemed to Harry like a very long
time.

"Draco..."

"Shhh."

Draco's gaze dropped to the shirt. He touched it with his wand. The bright red shifted to emerald
green. He touched it again, at cuffs and collar, turning those sections to black, but leaving the
metallic pattern in gold.

Draco held the shirt up to check his work and smiled in satisfaction. "There," he said mockingly,
handing it to Harry. "I get to see you in green — a perfect match for your eyes, yet, as I made it so
myself. And it stays that way — at least until I return — so everyone can see you are a Slytherin
boy."

Harry lost no time in getting the shirt back on. He still felt cold, and the silk was cold from lying on
the stone table.

"All right," he said, in a flash of annoyance. "Yours, then."

"Excuse me?"

"Give me your shirt. And you're getting back something that's not that damned black."

Draco removed his robes, then his shirt — actually more of a belted long tunic — gracefully, and
stood in perfect ease without it. Harry changed the tunic itself to a soft grey-blue, but wasn't as
certain what to do for an accent. Remembering how Draco had looked less pale in Gryffindor, he
started by changing the collar to crimson, but it overwhelmed the subtle blue tones. He changed it to
maroon, then to a dusty rose. Settling on the rose, he made the cuffs match.

"There," he said brightly, handing it back. "Oh, and the belt." He took the belt and changed it to a
dark bronze. "Much better."

Draco frowned at the garment before putting it on. "Pink?" he questioned incredulously.

"It brings out what little color you have. A lot of red does, too — I noticed when you were in my
dormitory – but *pink* suits your *delicacy* better."

Draco managed to scowl for several seconds before bursting out laughing. "You know you've chosen a color — that blue — my father wears often."

Harry shrugged. "I expect it goes as well with his eyes and hair as with yours."

"I suppose," Draco conceded. He stifled a yawn, sat down on the couch and rubbed his eyes. "Bleh." He motioned to the cognac. "Drink up. I want to finish the bottle, tonight."

Harry eyed the half-full bottle. "Are you mad?"

"Of course." Draco smiled. "Really, we have hours."

"You want me pissed."

Draco raised his pale eyebrows questioningly. "Do I? Perhaps I don't want you drinking while I'm gone."

"Oh?" Harry picked up a glass.

Draco shrugged. "No, really I do want you pissed. Perhaps because it was so awful, last time, and this is safe." He yawned. "But I can't have much, or I'll fall asleep. Damn Snape."

"Don't suppose you'll be in any Muggle towns over vacation..." Harry said wistfully.

Draco snorted. "If I am, I won't be bringing you back treats."

"Not even mild poisons?" Harry teased.

Draco sat bolt upright. "Take this seriously!" he shouted.

"I was joking."

"This isn't a joke!" Draco snarled.

"Sorry, I —"

"Harry, listen to me," Draco said earnestly. "Take this seriously. When I come back, you ask to see my arm. No matter how good an entrance I make, or what I say, you do not trust me until then."

"And what does that —"

"See this?" Draco held up the bottle. "'Poison', you said. Yes. I could change this only slightly and it would kill you."

Harry rolled his eyes. "I don't think Voldemort would like that. He wants to kill me himself."

"Don't count on it," Draco growled. "Anyone can lose patience. Now, promise me."

"I promise I won't trust you until I see your arm."

"I promise I won't trust you until I see your arm." Harry said solemnly. He chuckled. "Though I think tonight is the first time I ever have. You could have taken the Mark last fall, as far as I knew."

"Why won't you be serious?!!"

"Dragon, best case I don't see you for a week and a half. Worst case, like you said, this is the end. Why do you want me to be serious?"
"Oh." Draco sat back and took a sip of the cognac. He frowned. "Good point."

"Pity we can't go flying."

"Mn." Draco leaned over and topped off Harry's drink. Harry noticed, with amusement, that Draco did not top off his own. "Just as well, perhaps." Draco leaned back. "If I get through this..."

"Yes?"

"Perhaps we should think of something more constructive to do with our time."

"Probably," Harry agreed. "Though we've both done some good transfiguration work, tonight."

"That accounts for a few minutes."

"A few minutes more than I would normally do. And it took more than a few minutes to make that pin." Harry was silent for a minute. "I've been thinking ...."

"Really? Whatever caused that?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "About this Potions project — Don't look annoyed, I just meant the Potions project, not what I did afterwards..."

"And?"

"Well, maybe we could do other things like that. I mean, you don't think you're good at Transfiguration, but you merged the chairs, and altered my shirt —"

"That's just changing a single aspect of something, not turning it into something else. I'm good at that."

"And I'm just learning it. And we did the Liber Geminus which is pretty complicated combined charms and potions. And the portkey."

"I'll admit, we've done some constructive things —"

"No, listen! We lost all those Charms and Transfiguration notes, why not ask if we can do some sort of project to make it up? Or better yet, a demonstration of what we've already done? The teachers like that! Professor Snape has been considerably more friendly to me, the last month, and it's partly because of you and Susara, but also because I've been displaying an interest in Potions."

"Let's talk about it when I get back," Draco said.

"Maybe we could even get to fly at night, if we're doing something with Hagrid."

The Morning After

Afterwards, Harry did not remember much of the rest of the night. He remembered Draco making him promise — several times, he thought — not to come down to the train in the morning. He remembered Draco commanding "kill it," when Harry evaluated what was left in the bottle of cognac. He had an isolated image of lying on his back with his head in Draco's lap, ranting about something while Draco smiled absentely down at him. He remembered standing, realizing he could barely walk, and crashing into something when he tried to leave the Chamber. Mostly he remembered the horribly queasy feeling from Draco levitating him through the corridors. After that, he spent a long time throwing up in the Gryffindor boys' bathroom, and some time sleeping on the soothingly cool floor between bouts. Most of that was mercifully dim.

The first other person into the bathroom slammed the door loudly, causing Harry to lurch from a semi-stupor to full waking. His stomach lurched also, and yet more thin liquid came up. Harry choked. "Hell."

"Harry?" the new arrival questioned from near the sinks. It was Ron.

"Sod off," Harry called, and threw up again. He thought that might be the last of it. He was beginning to feel almost sober, he thought.

"Are you okay? Should I get Pomfrey?"

"No!" Harry shouted. He tried to get his mouth to form precise words. "I'm bloody pissed," he said, almost distinctly. Close enough. "I don' wanna spend all holiday stuck in Gryffidor," he added, less clearly.

Ron was quiet for a moment. "Are you okay?" he asked again.

"Fine. Go 'way and lemme be sick in peace."

"I need to use the toilet and wash my face," Ron said apologetically. He did it quickly, and was out.

A few minutes later, Harry decided he was ready to wash up as well. He slunk upstairs, glad to discover it was early enough that most people were still asleep. Of his roommates, only Ron was awake. Harry dropped his fine clothes on the floor and crawled into bed without attempting pajamas.

"You over it, mate?" Ron asked.

"A day's sleep, and I'll be fine," Harry mumbled. "Happy bunnies an' all." He fell asleep before Ron could reply.

Harry was woken, far too soon, by Seamus whacking him over the head with a pillow.

"Wha?"

"Stop that snoring, you lout!" Seamus ordered. "We're trying to pack!"

Harry grabbed his robe and returned to the toilets. After several handfuls of water, using the toilet, and washing his face twice, he felt a bit better. He decided he was smelly, but not alert enough to
shower. He went back to the room, announced he was never, ever going to do this again, and got back into bed.

"Get up, Harry!" Ron insisted, with a token tug on Harry's bedspread. "The train leaves in half an hour."

"I'm not on it."

"Hermione will expect a goodbye."

Harry held tightly to the covers. "I promised Draco I wouldn't be there. I'll see Hermione next week. She'll understand."

"Come down to the Common Room and say goodbye, then."

"Ron," Harry growled, "I do not need to say goodbye to Hermione. Honestly, I would rather she could continue to consider 'Harry was stinking drunk' an expression. Now shut up and let me sleep before I hex you into oblivion."
For this chapter, I'm violating POV. This is all stuff Harry doesn't see, hear, or even dream. It's an indulgence.

"Hermione?" Ron advanced tentatively, from the door of Hermione's compartment on the Hogwarts Express. Hermione glared at him briefly, then went back to her book.

"Could we talk?" he tried.

"No. Find another compartment."

Ron drew his shoulders in. "Look," he tried, "I know Harry wasn't with you."

"Yes, Einstein? And when did this brilliant insight occur to you? Sometime after you were looking under my bed, obviously."

Ron stepped into the compartment and shut the door behind him.

"After I left your room, I went down to the bathroom," he said. "Harry was there, puking."

Hermione's lip curled in distaste. "I told you he'd been with Draco."

"That he was puking confirms he was with Draco?"

"I've seen their bar." Hermione couldn't repress a quirk of her lip at the thought of the bottles cooling in the water. She snorted. "This would be a lot less painful if Draco had a modicum of nerve."

"What?"

"As everyone but Harry knows, Draco is smitten with Harry —"

"What?!! You have got to be having me on! Malfoy?"

Hermione looked irritated. "As everyone but Harry and a few of the more clueless boys know, Draco is smitten with Harry, but he has never bothered to say so. And Harry is practically in your class when it comes to ignoring hints."

"Oh." Ron sat nervously down on the edge of the seat across from Hermione. "So, you think Malfoy is getting him drunk to ... um ... take advantage of him, or something?"

"Ron!" Hermione sounded shocked. "No, Draco is just ... Draco is pushing everything except what he wants." She shrugged. "And Harry ... Harry just does it. Anything that doesn't hurt someone else."

"What's this 'Draco' stuff?"
Hermione clapped a hand over her mouth. "Oh my god! I'm so — I'm just spending too much time with Harry, that's all."

"Well, shouldn't someone tell him? I mean, he shouldn't have that whining ferret drooling after him —"

"I'll tell him at the end of vacation, when Draco is back. They can settle it then." Hermione looked searchingly at Ron. "Don't assume Harry will be displeased."

"Look, he fancies girls —"

"He has fancied at least one girl, possibly two. I make no assumptions as to the global applicability of that interest. Harry is rather restrained." Hermione's mouth quirked into a momentary smile. "And Dr- Malfoy can be quite charming."

Ron scowled. For a while, he looked out the window.

"Hermione?" he said finally. She looked up from her book immediately. He thought that was a bad sign. She could not actually have been reading it. "You and Harry...."

"He's my best friend, Ron. Deal with it."

"You said. And as I said, if I ever leave you for someone else, you'll be the first to know."

"Thanks." Ron reached out for Hermione's hand. "I'll trust you," he whispered. "I promise." After an uneasy minute, she returned the gesture. They held hands across the aisle of the compartment.

"He was wearing something new, this morning," Ron said, lightly. "Malfoy must have bought it for him. Green silk, trimmed in black. Looked like a bloody Slytherin." He grinned. "Green in the face, too."

"Was he okay when you left? Neville said he was sleeping."

"He wanted to sleep. I woke him, but he said he'd promised Malfoy not to show up at the train."

Hermione frowned. "I don't like that."

"Why not?"

"They were fighting, yesterday."

"And that's bad? Hermione, this is Malfoy we're talking about."

Hermione dropped her gaze. "I know," she whispered. "Ron, wait here for me, a minute. I need to go ask Seamus a favor..."

"You want me to what?" Seamus asked in an outraged whisper.

"Just ask him, okay?" Hermione pleaded, equally quietly. "You can let him know that I'm fretting about it, if you want, but I can't ask him, and if I did, he couldn't answer me, even if he wanted to."

"So I'm to coddle to Malfoy's bloody prejudices because you are worried that he may have fought
with Harry?"
"Please."

"Shouldn't you be happy if he fought with Harry?"

"Seamus, Harry is essentially alone. None of us stayed this year. I need to know if he just overdid it, last night, or if he's in some new depression."

Seamus sighed. "He didn't seem anything but hungover and grumpy for it, to me, but then I wasn't looking for more." He sighed again. "All right. I'll ask." He thrust a finger at Hermione's chest. "But you'll owe me, girl."

Draco turned at the sound of the compartment door opening. He had found a place by himself and had hoped it would stay that way.

"This space free?" Blaise Zabini asked, his face in a rueful half-smile.

"Sod off, Zabini."

"Come on, Malfoy," Blaise said pleadingly. "I'm willing to forget all of October, if you just would as well. I swear I'll never cross that line with you again."

"And what line would that be?" Draco asked coldly.

Blaise thought. "The one between what you have approved and what you have not," he said carefully.

Draco sighed. "Sit." With that, he went back to staring out the window.

Blaise sat. Draco was aware that Blaise was watching him, but pretended to be absorbed in watching the scenery. Eventually, Blaise pulled out a textbook and began to read.

The door opened again. This time, Draco looked for the faint reflection in the window, rather than turning. What he saw of the reflection was enough to make him turn.

"Finnegan?!"

Draco was too surprised to manage to get the right amount of outrage into his tone. Gryffindors didn't come looking for him — well, only certain Gryffindors did. To have a lone Gryffindor enter his compartment was unprecedented.

"Believe me, I'm no more pleased than yourself," the Irish boy answered, but his eyes twinkled. "One Miss Hermione Granger has got it into her head that you may have fought with Harry, and is, for some reason that escapes us all, distressed. Since she knows you won't speak to her, she's sent me on to ask."

Draco fixed Finnegan with an even stare. After a long silence he asked:

"Well?"

"What well?"

"Are you going to ask?"
Finnegan rolled his eyes. "Oh, honestly, Malfoy! Did you fight with our Harry?" he asked.

"Your Harry?" Draco laughed. "Oh no, Finnegan. Not yours, nor mine. Bloody idiot." He scowled. "Tell the Mudblood that I like lightning, even when I can't control it. Now get out of here, before we need to fumigate."

A confusion of emotions crossed Hermione's face as she listened to Seamus's account.

"'I like Lightning' would seem to indicate that they're okay," she muttered, "but he did something Draco didn't like, but 'Mudblood' — Harry doesn't let him call me that — could mean that they're still fighting, or that Harry's lost some control, so that Draco ... er, Malfoy, thinks he can...." She rubbed her forehead and frowned at Seamus. "Who was with him?"

"Zabini."

"Oh." Hermione frowned. "I don't know his family. How tight are they with the Malfoys?"

"Can't be much. He's a working class sort."

Hermione threw her hands up in despair.

"I'll just have to wait until Tuesday, I suppose. I hope he's okay."

"Hermione," Seamus said patiently, "this is Harry. If he's not okay, he'll be getting in trouble, at worst."

Chapter End Notes

(My Blaise, if you're curious, was based on the "skinny, dark-haired" Slytherin boy that Rowling later identified as Nott.)
The Dragon In The Sky

As the Easter holidays progressed, Harry grew increasingly anxious. He did most of his homework up in the dormitory, where he would sit in the window seat, facing the Hogwarts gates. It was not an ergonomic position for writing, and his back ached by Monday. By the Saturday before the end of the holidays, he had not slept a full night in a week and could scarcely bring himself to eat. Even Dean, in the two days he had been back, had noticed there was something wrong.

"I don't want to talk about it," was what Harry answered whenever anyone asked him what he was upset about. He'd started the week saying "I'm fine," but by now that was so clearly untrue as to be absurd. Seamus Finnegan, who had been returned by his parents on Wednesday night, had not pressed the point, but had resumed working up in the room with Harry. Harry didn't know whether he was more irritated that he was being watched, or touched that Seamus cared.

Harry sat at the window, looking out towards the gates, trying to pretend he was working on his Defense Against the Dark Arts essay. It was the last night of the holiday; the last night something could happen. Harry thought that Draco could have been wrong — perhaps Lucius merely wanted him home to keep an eye on him. Of course, he couldn't keep down the thought that perhaps their plan had failed — or perhaps Draco had decided, after some time at home with his parents, that he was willing to become a Death Eater, after all.

In some ways, Harry thought, that would be worse than the plan failing and Draco getting killed. Draco would be here, his enemy again, and Harry would see him the day after Death Eater raids, and wonder whether or not he had been there, and if he had killed anyone, and if he had enjoyed it.

Harry shuddered, and Susara shifted on his arm.

"Sorry," he said.

To the side, Seamus twitched.

"You do that too much, now," Susara scolded. "Are you sick?"

"Worried," Harry said. "Draco is in danger." He stroked her golden scales gently. "You were for me to talk to when he was gone, he said."

"Is he gone forever?"

"I do not know, beautiful."

"Harry," Seamus said weakly. "Do you have any idea how creepy that sounds?"

"Sorry," Harry looked over at Seamus, who actually left the desk and came over to sit, facing Harry, on the window seat. Seamus looked searchingly at Harry.

"If you were to tell me now," he said, "that you were fine, I would not believe you."

"I haven't tried," Harry pointed out.

"I'd noticed," Seamus looked down at the dark wood, then up again. "Harry," he said kindly, "don't fret over Malfoy."
Harry stared. "How do you know it's Malfoy?" he asked, astonished.

"Well, you've been like this since he left, haven't you? And you're wasting away like a man that's lain with a Sidhe."

"A what?"

Seamus waved his arms vaguely in front of him. "A ... a sort of fairy. Not the real kind, the kind in folk tales, before they became harmless, wee things. The Sidhe, the Fair Folk, the Gentry — beautiful creatures, pale as moonlight, cold and soulless. . . ."

Harry had to smile. "First," he said, "Draco is not soulless. Second, I haven't 'lain with' him."

"Really?" Seamus's eyes widened in astonishment. "A blow to what everybody knows then."

"What!" Harry yelped. "People think I'm ... er ... bedding Draco?"

"What else would we think?" Seamus asked reasonably. "The only good thing to say about him is he's pretty." He looked curiously at Harry. "Do you mean it?"

"Yes."

Seamus, to Harry's surprise, frowned at Harry's reply.

"Might be you should, then," he said.

"What? Why?"

"Get it out of your system," Seamus advised, nodding. "Bugger the git a few times, and you'll realize he's nothing but a sweet bit of arse."


"What?" Seamus asked innocently. "Was that too vulgar?"

"Yes! Besides, I like Draco."

Seamus twitched. "Well," he said carefully, "that's what worries us. If you just wanted to screw him, that would be fine. Half the sixth years would, provided they could get him kissed by a Dementor first. That you might like him — that's frightening, Harry. If you like him, we start thinking it may be it's time to stop trusting you. The last few years may have gotten to you."

"He's better than you think," Harry protested.

"Harry. Don't you know what Draco's father is?"

"I know," Harry growled. "I've watched him crawl to kiss the hem of his master's robe. But that's not Draco. Draco's all right, really."

"I see." Seamus was smiling again. "He's playing an act for everyone but you?"

"Pretty much."

Seamus laughed. "Ah, just bed him, Harry. You'll be over it soonest that way."

"I don't want to bed him!" Harry insisted.
Seamus rolled his eyes. "Well, how about bedding yourself, then," he suggested lightly. "You look like death warmed over."

"I'm waiting."

"For the train tomorrow?"

"For sunrise."


Harry was too tired to argue. He decided he'd just get up once the others were in bed and asleep. Still dressed, he lay down on his side, keeping his face towards the window. He could see what he thought was the right section of sky. . . .

The small clearing was ringed with figures in black -- hooded, masked, and cloaked. In the middle, a tall, thin figure stood, his misshapen face gleaming white as bone. Two others stepped forward, into the ring. One, like the those in the ring, was hooded, masked, and cloaked. The second was a bareheaded youth. His fair hair gleamed silver in the moonlight, and his pale eyes glittered like stars. The hooded figure stepped back to leave him alone in front of the master.

"Draco Malfoy," Lord Voldemort said, his voice high and cold.

The youth inclined his head. "My lord," he said respectfully, his clear words ringing through the night. "I am honored by your summons. How may I serve you?"

"With all your life, your soul, your will," the dark lord hissed. The youth raised his head still higher.

"All at your command, my lord," he said.

"You will take the Mark."

"Gladly my lord," the youth said. He glanced down. "However, there is a complication."

Voldemort's red eyes closed to slits at this oddly conversational pronouncement. "Complication?" he repeated coldly.

"You have certainly heard of my companion at school, my lord," the youth said.

The snake-faced man hissed wordlessly.

"He has given me a token, my lord, to protect me from you."

Tight laughter rose from the ringing figures. The youth reached under his collar and pulled forth a cord.

"I may need your help to free myself of this, my lord." The youth loosened the binding about the object on the cord. Voldemort bent closer. Draco slid his fingers down the cord and to the uncovered object. "Idiot Mudblood," he spat. He vanished.

Harry woke gasping with pain. His scar burned like a fresh brand. Stumbling, he rose from the bed and staggered to the window. A spray of silver sparks rose beyond the gate and shaped itself into a
rearing dragon. Harry fell to his knees before his trunk and threw it open. The Firebolt was on top, as it had been all week. He took it and climbed up onto the window seat. The pain was fading, now, and his movements were surer.

"Harry?" An urgent whisper cut through the dark as Harry stepped up into the window embrasure, his broom held out before him. He recognized Seamus's voice.

"Go to sleep," he urged. "I'm fine."

"Get down!"

"I've got to go. Don't worry. Done it before." Harry heard Seamus stumble out of bed. Frantically, Harry threw himself clear of the window and onto the Firebolt. As he plunged downward, trying to find the union with his mount, he heard Seamus's scream fading behind him.

Harry didn't have time to worry about Seamus, and what he may have thought. He caught the broom and brought it back up, angling around the castle. He found the windows he had determined belonged to Dumbledore's office. They were dark. Harry tried not to think about the things that could go wrong — Dumbledore's sleeping quarters might not be near the office, Fawkes might not be willing to fetch the headmaster, the windows might be proofed against sound from outside....

He reached the phoenix window and banged on it. A few seconds later, he banged on it again. A light flickered behind the thick, textured glass, enabling him to see vaguely though it. Something red moved towards the window — Harry could not tell if it was Fawkes, or a part of Dumbledore's robes. He hammered a third time. Glancing behind him, he could see figures approaching rapidly through the air, several of them, with one smaller and out in front, looking smaller still for how flat he lay to his broom.

Something on the far side of the window clicked. The glass-paned panel rotated in. Harry shot through the embrasure, relieved to find he fit easily.

"Harry?" a mild voice queried.

Harry stumbled from his broom. He could hear the rush of air behind him. "Down!" he yelled, as he tackled Dumbledore. A spell crackled outside the window, and Draco, screaming and convulsing with pain, shot through the space and crashed into the chair by Dumbledore's desk.

"What!" Dumbledore cried, but Harry was on his feet, slamming the window shut. Not waiting for an explanation, Professor Dumbledore pulled out his wand and, pointing it at the window, muttered a quick charm. A light flared around the frame.

Draco groaned.

"Mr. Malfoy, Mr. Potter, if you would —"

"Death Eaters, sir," Draco said suddenly, twisting to his knees. "At least five of them. They followed me on to the grounds —"

Dumbledore rose. He looked down at Draco, his brows drawn in puzzlement. "Your arm, Mr. Malfoy."

Harry would have misunderstood, he thought, but Draco quickly pulled up his left sleeve and showed his arm to Dumbledore. The headmaster bent to run his hand along it, his eyes closed in concentration. Abruptly, he straightened.
"Neither of you are to leave this room, do you understand?"

"Yes sir," Harry said. Draco nodded.

"Good."

Dumbledore murmured something to Fawkes, who promptly vanished. Then, moving unusual quickly, he left the room. The door clicked shut behind him. A few minutes later, they heard McGonagall's voice announcing that all students should report to their Common Rooms and stay there until contacted by their head of house.

Harry sank to the floor and leaned back against the desk. Draco was still on his knees, trembling.

"Cruciatus?" Harry asked.

Draco nodded mutely.

"Here," Harry motioned him over, and Draco crawled close enough to reach. "You're safe," Harry murmured. "It's all right, now." Draco leaned against him and wept.

It was a few minutes before Draco's breath steadied. Despite worries about what was happening outside, Harry couldn't help but think about his conversation with Seamus. He looked down at Draco's bent head, and breathed slightly on Draco's pale hair, making it shift and glimmer in the lantern light. Draco was dressed in voluminous black clothes that showed nothing of his body, but Harry could feel it, currently pressed rather warmly against his side.

He twitched.

"I know what you're thinking," Draco said, lifting his head and shifting slightly, so that his upper body was no longer against Harry's.

"Oh?" Harry did his best to sound confused.

"We really should look. I just don't want to."

Harry redirected his attention toward the window. There was a suddenly flash from outside, then a series of crashing, scraping noises that sounded distant, but loud. Pushing Draco from him, Harry ran to the window. He couldn't see through the uneven glass. He put a hand on the latch, but Draco stopped him.

"Something —"

"No, Harry." Draco pulled out his wand. "Claritas," he said, and the glass grew so clear as to be invisible. Harry rolled down the wick on the lantern and turned it to face away from them. They looked outside.

One of the greenhouses had collapsed. Around it, people on broomsticks swooped and dove, sparks flew from wands, and several long-armed creatures leapt and clutched. Harry saw one of the fliers become entangled in vines from another's wand, and plummet from his broomstick to the Quiris below.

After that, the battle changed to a rout. Two of the three remaining Death Eaters, distinguishable by their loose black robes, turned to flee, and two of the staff turned to pursue them. It wasn't until the
pursuers returned, perhaps summoned back, that Harry realized the remaining Death Eater, who was standing in conference with the school's defenders, must be Snape. The fight was over. A number of people were still standing, and he could see shapes that might be bodies on the ground. As he watched, someone set one of the shapes, now clearly a body, floating in the air, and began to walk it towards the castle.

"I'm safe, then," Draco said flatly. "Nothing to do but wait for the bill." He slid down the wall to sit on the floor, and leaned his head back, his eyes closed. Harry studied him.

Yes, he is beautiful, Harry thought. But I've always known that. It doesn't matter, does it?

"I just hope none of the staff were killed," Draco said tonelessly, after several minutes of silence. "Dumbledore will hate me."

Harry laughed.

Draco's eyes flew open. "Is that funny?" he growled.

"I was just thinking I must be the most shallow person in the world, the way my own thoughts were going, but you may have beat me out for it."

"I wasn't expecting them to chase me all the way to here!" Draco protested. "They were supposed to give up and leave!"

"Maybe the Quiris wouldn't let them."

"Those ... things were Quiris?!" Draco shuddered. "No wonder you were pulling back!" He let out a long breath. "Could be. I never told Father about them. What were you thinking, then?"

Harry shook his head. "Not now."

"Tell me."

"No."

"Come on, Harry. I want to know!"

"Later, Draco. I mean it. This is not the time."

Draco scowled. At that moment, however, they heard the whisper of voices on the spiral stair. Draco stumbled to his feet. Dumbledore opened the door and stepped inside, and Professor Horsyr followed, her fair hair and gold robes streaked with black ash and her wand emitting an unusual golden light. Draco pressed back against the wall.

Dumbledore passed Harry and Draco and took a seat behind his desk. He gave the lantern more wick, lit the fire in the grate with a quick wave of his wand, and settled back.

"Perhaps, Mr. Malfoy," he said wearily, "we should start with your account. Please excuse me, but you are not a person I expect to see fleeing Death Eaters." His eyes traveled once down Draco's Death Eater robes. "Especially dressed in that manner."

Draco nodded nervously and stepped forward. He opened his mouth, but didn't seem able to say anything. After a moment, Dumbledore turned his attention to Harry.

"Mr. Potter?" he asked.
Harry moved forward and tentatively rested a hand on Draco's back. "Draco?" he whispered. "It's your story. Go ahead."

Draco nodded wordlessly, and shifted closer to Harry. Dumbledore's eyes flicked briefly between them. Harry wondered if Dumbledore was part of the "everyone" who assumed that Draco was his lover. It seemed unlikely that the old wizard would be that easily mislead.

"I —" Draco started. He swallowed. "My father, sir . . ."

"I know many things about your father," Dumbledore said mildly, "including that he pursued you onto the Hogwarts grounds tonight. Please continue."

Draco nodded. A portion of his usual poise seemed to return to him. Harry wondered how deeply Draco was conditioned against betraying his father's secrets.

"When my father ordered me to come home for the holidays, Professor," Draco said, "I was certain he intended to present me to the Dark Lord. I ... I had decided I didn't want to do it, sir. I don't want to be ... one of them. Not really."

"I am a bit surprised," Professor Dumbledore said mildly, his eyes again moving to Harry, "but pleased. However, escaping from Voldemort is not an easy task."

"Harry helped me, sir. And ... and Hermione Granger." Dumbledore's eyes widened noticeably at that, but he did not comment. "We made a portkey that brought me to the Shrieking Shack, where I'd left my broom. Then I apparated to the gates, signaled Harry, and flew here. I was afraid he wouldn't see..."

"I had a vision," Harry contributed. "As I often do when they meet. I saw Draco being presented — very deferential, Draco; it felt like a nightmare — then he touched the portkey, and I woke with my scar burning, and I saw the dragon in the sky. So I took my broom and jumped out the window — I'm afraid Seamus woke everyone, sir; he saw me and screamed — and flew here to try to get you to open the window before Draco arrived."

"I see. What happened as you entered, Mr. Malfoy?" Dumbledore asked.


"You were fortunate not to fall."

"If I hadn't been on my way through the window, I would have died. You know that. So do I. I'm sure he did, too."

"Perhaps he realized you would make it through the window."

A high-pitched bark of laughter greeted that idea. Draco stopped himself, and coughed. "Perhaps. Not likely, but perhaps."

"Well." Dumbledore leaned forward. "Draco, I have both good and bad news for you, and I do not believe the two can be separated. All at once, then: One of the Death Eaters who pursued you, Mr. Goyle, died." Draco whimpered, then caught himself. His face went expressionless. "Two others were captured — Mr. Nott, and your father."

Draco made no sound this time. He nodded comprehension, but his pallid face stayed blank.

"You have my protection from Voldemort for as long as you wish it," Dumbledore concluded.
"Draco," he said gently, "I must ask you: will you testify against your father?"

Draco went completely stiff. For a long time, the room was silent. Harry didn't think anyone breathed. His own chest ached by the time Draco whispered, "Yes."

Dumbledore inclined his head. "Thank you, Draco. I know it is not easy for a Malfoy to publicly oppose another Malfoy, but Lucius must be stopped."

Draco's pale eyes flashed upwards. "He is mad!" he spat suddenly. "He has always been ruthless — always taken what he wanted, damn everyone else, but since his lord has returned, he has gone completely mad. He'll torture anyone, for nothing but to prove he has no mercy. He cares for nothing but the Dark Lord's will —"

Draco broke off, shuddering. Professor Horsyr crossed to one of Dumbledore's cabinets and took a large bar of chocolate from it. She gave half of it to Draco.

"Draco," she asked gently, "have you received the Cruciatus Curse before now?"

"Yes," Draco whispered. Harry saw Dumbledore's jaw momentarily clench with anger. A second later, the headmaster looked quietly concerned.

Professor Horsyr merely nodded. "I thought you were recovering rather quickly." She gave a single square of the chocolate to Harry and another to Dumbledore, then took one herself, and nibbled at the edge of it. Absently, she ran her free hand through the air a few inches from Draco.

"I don't expect you can pet a Quiri, now," she commented, frowning.

"No," Draco admitted. He looked anxiously at her. "Father's been catching up on my training, this week."

"Oh," she said. "Dear." She looked at Harry. "Harry, sweetie, cuddle him a bit more, will you? He needs that as much as the chocolate."

Which, Harry thought, was a true Professor Horsyr solution. He wondered, once more, if her regard for physical contact was innate, or acquired during her travels. Feeling rather awkward, he moved his arm from Draco's back to his side. Draco stiffened briefly.

"Sorry," he whispered.

"For what?" Harry whispered back, tugging slightly. "Relax, now."

Draco relaxed against him. Harry thought how seldom he noticed Draco was smaller than he was. Pushing the thought away, he looked up and met Dumbledore's gaze. For the first time this evening, a flicker of the headmaster's usual merriment twinkled in his eyes.

"What now?" Harry asked.

The twinkle died. Dumbledore surveyed Draco. "He can't go back to the Slytherin dormitories," he stated. "Even I could not keep him safe, there." Dumbledore sighed. "Take him back to Gryffindor, tonight, Harry, and tell anyone who objects that these were my orders. I trust our house not to do him permanent harm. Tomorrow, when we have sorted out the damage, I will devise a more acceptable long-term solution."
In the corridor, Harry put his arm back around Draco, who accepted the touch without comment, or indeed, any apparent notice. In his other arm, Harry carried both their brooms and Draco's cloak.

"Come on, now," Harry said. "I'll protect you." Draco nodded. Harry wished he'd say something about ridiculous Gryffindor heroes, but the Slytherin said nothing at all as they climbed the deserted stairs up to Gryffindor tower. Finally, they reached the portrait of the fat lady.

"Higgledy Piggledy," Harry said firmly. Draco snickered, which Harry found immensely cheering.

"And your friend, dear?" the fat lady asked, swinging open. Harry didn't answer her. The two-thirds of Gryffindor that was not away for the holidays were all gathered in the Common Room, and had all turned to look at the opening. Harry climbed through and pulled his charge after him.

For a split second, Harry was aware of everyone staring at him, some angry, some merely shocked, then ....

"Draco!" Hermione Granger dashed across the room, and grabbed Draco Malfoy into a hug. "I've been so worried!"

Hesitantly, Draco brought his arms up around her, then pulled her fiercely tight against him. "They chased me," he whispered, his face hidden in her unruly mass of hair. "Mr. Goyle died, and Father was captured, and I'll have to testify against him ..."

She held him.

Harry snuck a glance around the room and decided this might have been the best entrance they could have made. Everyone was too astonished to maintain any hostility. Even Ron hadn't managed to make it out of shock to jealousy.

Draco rubbed his face against Hermione's shoulder and stepped back. She stepped back as well, leaving a conventional social space between them. She turned to Harry.

"He can't stay here --" she began.

"Dumbledore's orders," Harry said, in a voice intended to carry. "He can't go back to Slytherin. It's only for one night — Dumbledore says he'll make other arrangements in the morning."

Hermione sighed and rubbed her forehead. "Very well." She smiled at Draco. "Come have a seat, then."

Ron had started to recover. "Why can't he go to Slytherin?" he demanded. "That's where he belongs."

Draco, halfway across the room, stopped and sighed. "Because," he said clearly. "I refused the Mark."

A little buzz of whispering met this statement. Draco ignored it, except to raise his voice slightly. "I could have survived that," he said, "but these idiot Death Eaters decided to chase me all the way to Dumbledore's study. Goyle's father died, so he'll be out to kill me for personal reasons, and Nott's uncle was captured. I might be able to manage that, as well, but Father was captured, so any Slytherin who supports the Dark Lord — and I'd put that at least half of my House — will be out to kill me."

"Why kill you?" asked Ron. "I mean —"
"So I can't testify." Draco looked steadily at Ron. "I'm the best witness the prosecution will get. I can
tell them what he's taught me, what he's shown me, what he's done to me.... the Dark Lord will be
weakened if my father is convicted. Lucius Malfoy's name and money and pedigree have an
influence far beyond the reach of the Imperius Curse. There are people who will do whatever Father
says is best for the wizarding world — no fuss, no Unforgivables."

"Cornelius Fudge," Harry said.

Draco nodded. "He was one. There are still others." He shuddered and stepped closer to Harry. "So I
must dishonor my name to destroy his power," he muttered.

"If your name is dishonored by you saying what he did, it is not you that dishonored it," Hermione
said sharply.

Draco looked at her, his head high, with almost his old arrogance. "A Malfoy does not criticize
another Malfoy in public," he said. "It is not done."


Hermione was moving all her books off a section of couch, creating sufficient room for Harry and
Draco to sit on one side of her. Ron settled warily back in an adjoining chair.

"I know I've heard your father take you to task in public," Harry said mildly. He tried settling an arm
around Draco's shoulders, again, and Draco shifted compliantly back against him.

"It's not the same, Harry. You know that."

"I know. But what's your alternative?"

Draco snorted. "Let him off, and wait for him to kill me. No, Lightning, I'll testify, thank you." He
looked over at Hermione, who had resumed reading. "Incidentally, Granger?"

Hermione didn't look up. "Hmm?"

"Thank you for your help, Hermione. If you wish, I'll stand up at dinner tomorrow and say you're the
cleverest pupil at Hogwarts."

Hermione giggled. "That's sweet, but aren't you in enough trouble?"

"I suppose. Perhaps I should wait until I find out where I'm sleeping."

A few minutes later, the portrait hole swung open. Draco straightened, and Harry moved fractionally
away from him, so they were not quite touching. Professor McGonagall entered the Common Room.
Dirt smudged her cheek, and strands of hair had escaped from her bun, but she wore a clean robe
and pointed hat.

"Good evening," she said. "Sorry to have everyone out of their beds. As you may know, the school
was attacked, tonight."

There were murmurs, but no exclamations. McGonagall looked around the room, and spotted Draco.

"Yes, then," she said. "I'm sure our Slytherin guest has told you how it happened. Rest assured, none
of the Hogwarts staff were critically injured. However, both Professor Sprout and Professor Flitwick
will be in the hospital wing for a few days, and Greenhouse Two was destroyed. After breakfast
tomorrow, and for any Herbology and Charms classes you have scheduled on Monday or Tuesday, please report to Greenhouse One for salvage and rebuilding assignments.

"For now, you should all go to bed, so you are well rested for the work tomorrow. Mr. Malfoy, you will find your trunk and a sleeping bag up in the sixth year boys dormitory. Please behave yourself while in Gryffindor Tower."

She peered curiously at Draco for a moment, then started to turn away. Draco stood up.

"Professor McGonagall?"

She regarded him over the tops of her glasses. "Yes, Mr. Malfoy?"

"I ... I wanted to apologize about the notebook, Professor. I... It was my carelessness to let politically fatal information get into something I was using in public, not yours. But if you'd read anything I wrote about ... about him, I wouldn't have had a chance."

Professor McGonagall looked almost sympathetic. She nodded. "I understand, Mr. Malfoy. And I apologize for assuming otherwise."

McGonagall left. Hermione immediately gathered her books, and began the thankless task of herding all the students back to bed.
Draco settled in a sleeping bag between Harry's bed and the window, and immediately closed his eyes. He showed no other sign of being asleep. Harry watched him as Neville got ready to go back to bed. Seamus, Dean, and Ron were already in theirs. Harry hoped that Draco was comfortable enough. He had a sudden impulse to call down that his bed was more comfortable than the floor, and he grinned, imagining what Seamus would think.

On the other hand, he wondered, what had Draco intended? If it was a sexual invitation, it was badly timed, he decided. At that point, he barely would have noticed if Draco had come down and kissed him.

"Shall I douse the light?" Neville asked. Harry took one final look, and saw Draco's eyes squeeze tight.

"Go ahead," Seamus called out. Neville extinguished the lamp, and the room went from dim to dark. Harry settled down and, for the first time in ten days, fell immediately asleep.

He was woken by Draco screaming. Harry tumbled out of bed, barely managing not to land on his friend. Draco was calling either at or for his father. Harry could not distinguish most of the words, which were indistinct, but he thought he recognized "Marcella," said angrily. He laid a hand on Draco's shoulder, and Draco thrashed violently. Harry got an arm up in time to protect his face. The impact woke Draco, and he moved in the dark. Harry felt the point of something pressing into his chest less than a second later. Draco was panting audibly.

"It was a nightmare," Harry soothed. "Calm down, now. It's just me. Just Harry." Draco moved again, and the pressure lightened.

"Lumos," Draco whispered. The air between them filled with wand light. After the pressing darkness, it seemed much brighter than usual. Harry could see, now, that Draco's weapon was his wand. Slowly, Draco let his wand hand sink until it rested against the floor. His breathing steadied. "Sorry," he said.

"'S'alright. You were dreaming." Harry tugged slightly at Draco's shoulder. "Come on. My bed is more comfortable than the floor."

Draco hesitated a moment, then nodded. He climbed into Harry's bed and settled on his side, his knees tucked up as far as his waist. His wand was still out and alight. Harry climbed in and drew the curtains, totally enclosing the bed. He reached out to get his wand from the bedside table, then drew it once along the curtains and once across the canopy, whispering "Tace" for each.

Draco had twisted to look back at him.

"What?" he mouthed.

"A silencing spell," said Harry. "It makes the things touched impervious to sound. Neville taught it to me. We both use it when we're having bad dreams. If you really shriek, a little sound will get out through the gaps, but not enough to wake someone."
"Oh." Finally, Draco put his wand light out. The enclosed bed was totally black. Harry lay down facing Draco's back. Draco was taking shallow, quiet breaths. They lay still for several minutes, at the end of which Harry was no closer to sleeping and judged that Draco wasn't either.

"Lumos," he said quietly.

Draco twitched at the flood of light. "What?"

"Could I ... May I ask you something irrelevant? Or would you rather I waited a day or two?"

"You can ask me anything that isn't about my dreams, my family, or You-Know-Who and his supporters."

"That's about what I meant by 'irrelevant'," Harry agreed. He shifted up to lean his upper back against the headboard, so he was high enough to see the side of Draco's face.

"While you were gone ... Seamus said everyone thinks you're my boyfriend, or something." Harry wasn't sure how best to continue. He was fairly certain this did not upset him, beyond the usual irritation at other people's fascination with his personal life, but unsure he had any interest. He knew that he wanted to know what Draco felt. He saw Draco's jaw tighten.

"It's not my fault," Draco said defensively, still speaking to the windows. "I deny it when anyone asks, and if I did more than that it would only have people more convinced. It's nowhere near 'everyone,' anyway."

"That's all right, but ... Thinking back on it, there were times when.... Are you interested in me? Like that?"

"You didn't notice?" Draco actually rolled onto his back. "I mean, honestly, Potter, was inviting you into my bed too subtle?" He looked up at Harry and sighed. "Look, don't worry about it, please? I gave up at the end of January. I'm perfectly content to be friends. Really."

"Er...." Harry looked down at Draco, who looked back at him rather desperately. Harry suddenly realized that Draco was afraid. If Harry rejected him, he would be cut off from everybody on which he had any social claim.

"Harry? Please?"

"I don't mind," Harry said reassuringly. "I was just .... Are you over it?" He was afraid he sounded as if he required that, and added: "I mean, if I decided I wanted to get you to reconsider, could I?"

"What?" Draco angled his head back to stare at Harry. Harry pushed away from the headboard and slid down to his side, so he was not quite so far above Draco, but stayed propped up on one elbow. Draco flinched. "Do you want to?" he asked.

Harry shrugged. "I don't know. Really, I've no idea. It didn't cross my mind before tonight."

Draco bit his lip. He looked down, hiding his eyes from Harry. "So what do you want?" he asked.

"Draco!" Harry stared in surprise at Draco's resigned tone. "Well, I was going to ask for a kiss, just to see what it was like, but not if you don't want to."

Draco stared at him for a moment, then, his movement uncharacteristically jerky, raised a hand to the side of Harry's face. He slid his fingers into Harry's hair, and pulled him closer.
Draco's lips were soft, and he kept them slightly open. At first, he tasted faintly of fear and sleep, but both faded quickly under Harry's mouth. After the first, hesitant contact, he kissed with a leisurely indulgence, exploring Harry's mouth first with his lips, then with both lips and tongue. Now and then his hand slid through Harry's hair, or up the nape of his neck. Harry was too absorbed in what he could do with his mouth to attempt any other touch.

Several times, they started to pull apart, then one or the other would stretch to resume the kiss. When they finally did stop, Harry's heart was hammering as if he had just won a Quidditch game. He stared down at Draco for a bit. Draco's half-closed eyes and dreamy smile looked utterly lovely, and completely different from any expression Harry had ever seen on him before. Harry settled down next to him.

"Draco?"

"Mmm?"

"I liked that."

Draco's eyes opened. "And?" he asked wryly.

"Well it wasn't like kissing Cho, or Melinda. Of course, they weren't anything like each other either."

"Who is Melinda?"

"A Ravenclaw girl." Harry laughed slightly. "Another one. I went with her to the Halloween Dance. It ... by the end of the evening, I knew I wasn't really interested, and decided not to keep her hanging on as long as Cho had kept me...."

"So what about me?"

"I don't know."

Draco sighed. "Look," he said. "No is okay. Yes is okay. I can't take much of 'I don't know.' I managed not to fall in love with you once. I'm not sure I can do it again, if I start hoping."

"Sorry. I'll try to work out what I can on my own, but —"

"If you are going to ask if you can fuck me, no!"

Harry blinked. "Er...."

Draco let out a ragged breath. "Not only am I not in the mood, but the last time I had sex with a friend, I ruined a perfectly good friendship. I'm not doing anything of the sort with you until I'm certain it won't be a disaster."

"That's fine," Harry looked away. "I hadn't ... thought that far. I ... If you ... I suspect getting me to that would be a project." Cautiously, Harry settled an arm over Draco. "I'm not very used to physical contact," he confessed.

"You're faking it pretty well."

"I don't want to let go of you," Harry said. "I was so afraid you wouldn't come back."

"That's another thing," said Draco firmly. "I am traumatized, right now, and you are obviously not all here, either. Nothing about what we feel now is reliable. I'm in worse shape than you, but ...."
Harry nodded acknowledgment. He felt slightly guilty about even bringing it up, under the circumstances.

"So, what do you want?" Draco asked. "Right now."

Harry tightened his arm around Draco. "I want you here," he said, "where I can feel you are here if I wake in a panic. I want you to promise you will return in September as someone I can still associate with in private. That's it, for now."

Draco nodded grimly. "I don't think that's a problem," he said. "Presuming I manage to live through the summer. Now stop the light, would you? We need to sleep."

"Yeah," Harry agreed. "Nox," he said, and tucked his wand under his pillow.

"So," he said into the darkness, "shall we talk again tomorrow?"

Draco rolled back onto his side and cuddled back against Harry. "If you still want to discuss it after we've recovered a bit, I'm amenable."

"Oh, good." Harry nuzzled the side of Draco's head. That stuff in his hair, he decided, was gross, but the edge of Draco's ear was delightfully soft. He found himself considering another kiss. "Sweet Dragon."

"Mmm," Draco murmured.
Flight and Fight

Harry woke in a panic. He had a sense he had slept for only a few minutes, and he was certain a teacher had just spoken angrily to him, but when he cast *Lumos* and looked wildly around, the bed curtains were still drawn.

Draco whined in incoherent, sleepy annoyance.

"Again," came McGonagall's voice, "all students, get out of bed and into your clothes. Please stay in your dormitories until further word, but remain alert and ready to move. Keep your wand at hand."

By the end of the announcement, Harry could hear Dean attempting to wake Neville. Ron cursed.

"Malfoy's missing!"

"Imagine that," Seamus said drolly.

"Probably gone and let them in!" Ron said hysterically.

"He's with me," Harry called.

"Harry!" Ron called.

"Silencing charm," Draco reminded Harry.

"Harry," Ron called again. "Your ferret is missing."

Harry pushed the curtains open a few inches. "Draco's with me," he said irritably.

"Then why didn't you answer the first time?"

"I did. I forgot I had a silencing charm up."

Seamus burst out laughing.

"Smooth, Potter," Draco commented sarcastically.

"It's another attack!" Dean called from the window.

That stopped all other talk. Harry grabbed his dirty clothes from the day before and pulled them on over his pajamas, while looking out the closest window. He could see a group of people emerging from the Forbidden Forest, accompanied by .... something.

"You-Know-Who's with them!" Ron said, at a strangled whisper.

"Don't be ridiculous," Draco countered, but he nonetheless moved quickly to a place at Harry's window. "The Dark Lord does not go on raiding parties."

"Well, who else has a snake that big?" Ron asked.

"That doesn't move like a snake," Harry noted. "Neville? Grab my omnioculars, would you?"
Neville, who was just lurching over, his robe half on, grabbed Harry's omnioculars from his nightstand, and handed them over. Harry got a good look at the interlopers.

"Ah crap!"

"It's You-Know-Who!" Ron repeated hysterically.

"It's a bloody dragon." Harry looked closer. "With Bellatrix Lestrange, I think, and about twenty Death Eaters. Draco?"

He handed the omnioculars to Draco along with the best vantage point in the window they were now sharing with Neville. Ron, Seamus, and Dean were at the next window over.

Draco spent a full minute looking at the group. "That's Lestrange," he confirmed finally. "She doesn't care who knows it, either, or she'd cover her hair. I think the rest... It's hard to tell with the masks and all, but there are only two other people that look like they might be inner circle." He looked around at Harry's roommates and shrugged slightly. "It's the walk, or something. They don't move like Death Eaters. I think she got expendables. Probably they're to try to free or kill the prisoners."

"And the dragon?" Dean asked incredulously.

"That's hers," Draco said. "It's a Peruvian Vipertooth."

"Small, fast, and poisonous," Ron said quickly. He was no longer panicked, but Harry thought he sounded excited.

"You know dragons?"

"One of my brothers works with them."

Draco rolled his eyes. Harry stepped on his foot before he could make the obvious cut about Ron's numerous brothers. "Vipertooths," Draco said, through clenched teeth, "are slightly more vulnerable to magic than larger dragons, but still not much. Acceptable?" he asked Harry.

Harry nodded.

"It's coming right at us!" Neville squeaked.

As one, the six boys looked out the windows. The dragon had lifted off, and was, indeed, headed in their direction, rather than towards the castle doors.

"Common Room," Draco said quickly, pushing back from the window. "We can floo out of there, if need be. She's after Harry." The other boys stared at him, horror struck. "Or me," Draco added laughing slightly. "Come on!" He moved for the door. The others followed. Harry hung back. His broom, and Draco's, were still on the top of his trunk. When the others were out of the room, Harry grabbed his Firebolt and scrambled onto the windowsill.

"Harry!" Draco screamed, turning on the stairs. His way was blocked by Harry's confused roommates. "No!"

For the second time that night, Harry jumped.

It took three stories for Harry to catch the broom, this time, but that still left him high in the air. He
pulled up slightly and looped once, so the others could see that he was in control, then he got a bit of
distance from the tower, so the fight wouldn't affect those inside. The full import of what he had
done was starting to hit. He was alone. Lestrange was a powerful witch over twice his age, and she
was riding a venomous dragon that might be as fast as his broom. He thought this might well qualify
as the most idiotic thing he'd ever done.

Lestrange was still out of spell range. Harry tried to remember what Charlie, Hagrid, and others, had
told him about dragons, over the years. Dragon hide was highly resistant to magical attack, but the
eyes were more vulnerable. Spells that physically attacked the eyes, and spells that attacked the brain,
such as *Confundus*, if targeted through an eye, worked better than spells directed at other parts of the
body.

Lestrange sent a spell at him. Harry easily dodged. He expected that attack was just to test his
reflexes. She was still too far away for an effective attack, but closing fast. With her left hand, she
held to a strap cinched round the dragon's long body, and in her right, she held her wand. Her
voluminous cape spread out behind her, as did her hood, concealing nothing of her dark hair, loose
shirt, and shining dragonhide riding pants. She still wore the white Death Eater's mask. Within the
minute, Harry was dodging and twisting desperately, trying to avoid Lestrange's curses and the
dragon's hot breath, lashing tail, and venomous teeth.

"So this is what the Snitch feels like," he muttered, as he rolled under a flare of angry red from
Lestrange's wand. The maneuver slowed him, and the dragon twisted close. Harry dove, then shot
up, praying the quick change would confuse the great lizard.

"*Petrificus Totalus!*" Draco shrieked, from off to his left.

The dragon changed course as Lestrange dodged.

"*Petrificus Totalus!*" she screamed back. Draco plunged.

"*Finite Incantantum!*" Harry cast down. He was opening his mouth to follow with *Leviosa* when
Draco pulled out of the dive, fluttering the leaves at the top of a nearby tree. Harry couldn't watch
beyond that, as he was looping to avoid the Vipertooth again.

Draco ascended back to the level of the fight as Harry tried *Confundus* on the Vipertooth, to no
noticeable effect. The blond settled into a position opposite Harry, keeping Lestrange between them.
For a minute, the three shifted silently below the half-moon, the shining copper dragon twisting
between the two brooms.

"Shall we dance?" Draco yelled over. Harry laughed.

"Malfoy!" Lestrange shrieked, turning the Vipertooth to Draco. "Traitor!" She lifted up her wand.
Harry did not waste the time. "*Impedimenta,*" he cried, pointing to Lestrange. She dodged the spell,
and it nearly hit Draco, but whatever she had sent at Draco also missed.

"Off," Harry yelled, gesturing Draco to the side. Draco got the idea. He remained almost across
from Harry, but not exactly opposite, so they were not in danger from each other's attacks.

Remembering the Tri-Wizard Tournament, Harry attempted a Conjunctivitis curse on the Vipertooth
the next time he had a line on its eyes. It worked, but Lestrange immediately countered it.

"*Engorgio!*" Draco sent at Lestrange, swelling her wand hand. With a scream of rage, she turned the
Vipertooth, not on Draco, but on Harry.

"*Impedimenta!*" she shrieked. The spell hit. It didn't make the Firebolt any slower, of course, but
Harry could no longer dodge and twist fast enough to shake the oncoming dragon. With frightening slowness, he turned to face the onrushing beast. Draco was flat to his broom, coming recklessly up behind it. Lestrange's wand was missing — Harry could only guess it had fallen from her grotesquely swollen hand after she had cast the Impediment Jinx on him.

"Finite Incantantum!" Draco yelled, but a portion of the dragon's writhing tail moved into the line of the spell. Harry hovered in place, holding his wand steady, and waiting for the Vipertooth to move to the right position.

"Move!" Draco screamed at him.

The Vipertooth was nearly on him. Harry watched its right eye, waiting for the perfect line. "Imperio!" he bellowed.

Harry knew immediately that it had worked. The cool mind of the dragon, very like that of a snake, lay complacent beneath his will. With a thought, Harry set the dragon bucking and twisting violently. Lestrange screamed in terror and surprise. Draco, dangerously close, managed to hit the leather holding strap with Incendio. As she lost her seat, Lestrange's cloak whipped across the burning strap and caught fire. She plummeted in a corona of orange flame that lit the copper underside of the still-plunging dragon. Sparks flared up when she hit the moonlit lawn with obviously deadly force.

Gasping, Harry returned his attention to the Vipertooth. He nudged it down to the lake, and it steadied out as its wings swept the black water. A tentacle reached up to it, only to be raked by the dragon's narrow gouts of flaming breath. More tentacles rose to the dragon, which twisted in their grasp, biting and flaming, until hissing clouds of steam and great splashes of water rose up from the battle of the squid and the flying lizard. Harry watched, entranced, until both vanished beneath the turbulent water.

Draco, he noticed then, was hovering beside him.

"Glad you didn't try to save her," he said quietly.

"Didn't cross my mind," Harry admitted shakily. "That was so gorgeous. I hope the squid isn't susceptible to Vipertooth venom."

Draco laughed, choking a little at the end of it. "That would be a shame, wouldn't it? Hogwarts has had a giant squid for centuries." He looked at Harry. "Want to switch wands, and say we grabbed the wrong ones?"

Harry stared at him for a moment. "Switch wands. "You're offering to cover for me," he said.

"If I can."

Harry shook his head. "No one will fall for it. All of Gryffindor was watching that, for certain." He looked for the people who had come with Lestrange. The group, possibly dispirited by Lestrange's fall, seemed to have been routed by the staff. One of the buildings near Hagrid's hut was on fire. The night seemed suddenly very still.

"So what are you going to do?" Draco asked solemnly.

"Tell Dumbledore," Harry said. "About everything — the Imperius Curse, and what we did in January. If I don't do it now, I'm just going to get myself in deeper trying to hide it."

Draco nodded. "That's right," he said. He let out a long breath. "You could have used a Panic Curse."
"I didn't think of it." Harry replied. He recalled learning the Panic Curse, *Pavoro*, the previous year. Flitwick had said, at the time, that it was a useful spell for driving away animals that were able to retreat. A dragon wing floated to the surface of the lake. Harry shuddered.

"And that's the problem with learning things you're not supposed to do," Draco said emphatically. "If it's part of your repertoire, you'll eventually haul it out as the best thing you can think of, under the circumstances. It's much easier to think of the Unforgivables. They're so ... obvious."

They hovered in silence for a minute, looking down at the shining dragon wing floating on the black water. Harry twitched at the first brush of Draco's fingers across the back of his wrist, but he let Draco reach farther and clasp his hand in his own.

"Harry?" Draco said quietly. "This is going to sound hideously self-centered...."

"I'll be shocked," Harry quipped.

Draco's tone remained serious. "I don't need another Dark wizard in my life. Really, I have plenty of them."

Harry laughed softly. "Yeah. I bet."

Draco's grip tightened.

"Would you go back to being my Good Boy? Please?"

Harry squeezed Draco's hand. "I'll try," he whispered, and let go.

He looked back at the tower. Various of the Gryffindors had started yelling out the windows, but no words were distinguishable from here. On the ground, the teachers were just entering the castle. A lone figure was trudging over to the place where Lestrange had fallen.

"We'd better get back in."

"Yeah."

Harry looked at Draco, then back at Gryffindor Tower. His mouth went slack in sudden astonishment. "You jumped out the window," he said, in wonder.

"Well at least I had a reason!"

"Really?" Harry teased. "What?"

"I couldn't watch you get killed!"

"Why not?"

Draco looked away, then down. He seemed totally at a loss for words. Harry regretted putting him on the spot. Nudging his broom closer, he reached out and stroked the side of Draco's clenched jaw, lifting his chin.

"Harry..."

"Shhhh." Harry leaned forward and kissed him. It was a far briefer kiss than the one in Harry's bed, but enough that the yelling from Gryffindor tower paused, then increased in volume, with some change in tone. As Harry sat back, Draco laughed.
"You know half your house saw that?"

"Only half? Where were the rest of them?" Harry kissed him again. "Time to go in, Dragon."

They flew to the Gryffindor Common Room windows, which were quickly opened.

"That was fantastic!" Ron exclaimed. "I wish I'd had a broom, though! I thought it was going to get you on that last pass. What did you do to it?"

Harry looked helplessly at Draco.

"He panicked it," Draco said.

"Oh, good thought! I'd never have remembered that one."

"Do you always kiss your assistants, Harry?" Seamus teased.

"I can safely say no," Ron interposed. "Fortunately."

"I've always wondered what Gryffindors considered a properly romantic setting," Draco contributed. "Bits of slain monster floating on a moonlit lake, apparently."

"How did you set her on fire?" Parvati asked Draco.

"I didn't. I used Incendio on her hold strap, and her cape caught."

"Which of you did the Engorgement Curse?"

"That was excellent flying!"

"I got pictures, Harry! It was the most astounding composition — the brooms flanking the dragon! I wish you'd stayed directly opposite each other for longer!"

"I'm going to bed," Harry said shortly. Draco was basking in the attention, but Harry just felt guilty and uncomfortable. Draco looked disappointed, so Harry nudged him. "You can stay down here without me," he teased. "They won't kill you."

"Certain?"

"Hermione!" Harry called.

"Yes?"

"Look after Draco, for me? I need some sleep."
Harry did not get much sleep. He was awoken by another magical announcement, this one telling all students to dress and report to their Common Rooms.

"Can't," murmured Draco. "No point in going to the Gryffy one." With that, he fell back to sleep. Harry let him.

Whether from guilt or a twisted sense of humor, Harry found himself drawn to the shirt that Draco had transfigured to green. While he was covering it with his school robes, he looked up and saw Ron watching him.

"What?"

"Vivid shirt, that. Present from the Slytherin?"

Harry smiled sweetly. "It matches my eyes."

"Eww!" Ron made an exaggerated revolted face and turned away.

Harry thought he was probably joking, but ... "Ron?" Harry asked.

"What?"

"Is that okay?"

"Yeah, fine." Ron flashed him a smile. "I mean, if you want to wear green, sometimes, I'm sure it's not my business."

Harry laughed. They went down to the Common Room together.

to Harry's surprise, Professor McGonagall was not in the Common Room. Instead, they were greeted by Professor Vector.

"Good morning, everyone. I'm afraid your head of house cannot be present. She was injured in the second attack —" Vector held up a hand for silence, "but is recovering nicely. She should be back at her duties by midweek, at the latest.

"As I'm certain you are all aware, Hogwart was attacked a second time last night, by a larger, but less competent group, and the attackers were again routed. One of the Care of Magical Creatures buildings was burned, and the Crups, sadly, both perished, but we had no human fatalities."

Professor Vector waited a moment for the sad exclamations to die down. The Crups they had been studying with Hagrid were well-liked. A few people were wiping at tears as she continued:

"Everyone must stay away from the ruined buildings, unless with a supervised salvage team. We will start rebuilding operations this afternoon, but you may all take the morning to do as you please, including going back to bed, should you wish it. Mr. Potter, the headmaster requests that you come speak to him sometime before dinner."
Harry nodded.

After answering a few questions, Professor Vector left. Harry didn't think he would be able to get back to sleep. He nudged Ron.

"Huhn?"

"When Draco wakes up, tell him what she said, okay? I need to go do something."

"Words of doom," Ron muttered, but he smiled as he said it. "All right. Take care, Harry."

After some thought as to where the headmaster was likely to be, Harry went to the Hospital wing. He was correct. Dumbledore was sitting in a chair beside the bed of a sleeping Professor McGonagall. He looked very tired.

"Professor Dumbledore?"

"Harry?" the headmaster looked up in surprise. "Did you come to check on Professor McGonagall? She really will be fine."

"I need to talk to you."

Dumbledore nodded, then slowly pushed himself out of the chair. "Poppy?" he called. "I am returning to my office." Madame Pomfrey called back an acknowledgment. Dumbledore began speaking to Harry as they walked through the empty corridors.

"I do need to make a full report to the Ministry, as a death was involved, but you should not let it worry you, Harry. It can certainly wait until after breakfast."

"I wouldn't assume I'm untouchable."

"Nonetheless. From what I could see of the battle, you did not kill Bellatrix Lestrange directly, and even if you had, you would not be in trouble with the Ministry. Lestrange was an Azkaban escapee of the most dangerous classification. Legally, you had the right to respond with deadly violence to any threat from her."

"That's barbaric."

Dumbledore thought about his response for a moment. "I agree," he said finally. "In this case, however, it is to your advantage."

"And in Sirius's?"

"Ah. Yes, Sirius is vulnerable by the same ruling. Barbaric."

After that, they were silent until they reached Dumbledore's office. Dumbledore called down to the kitchens for tea, then sat behind his desk.

"You still seem worried, Harry," he said. "Did you come to give me your report of Lestrange's death?"

Harry dug his fingers into his hair. "Yes, but...."

Dumbledore considered him thoughtfully. "You are welcome to talk about anything that is troubling
you. The report for the ministry can wait."

"I ... I've been ..." Harry's voice failed. He tried again. "I took the dragon with ..." Harry groaned and risked a glance up. Dumbledore was regarding him with evident concern. Harry considered just handing his wand over and telling the headmaster to cast *prior incantato* on it, but he was afraid Dumbledore might snap it before getting an explanation.

"Go on."

"Imperius." Harry looked down, but once the word was out, he found he could speak, again. "I took over the dragon with the Imperius Curse, and made it thrash. Draco burnt through the strap she was using to hold on."

There was a long enough silence that Harry had to look up. Professor Dumbledore's face was frighteningly expressionless.

"I have heard," Dumbledore said mildly, "that the Imperius Curse is difficult to cast."

Harry, understanding the implied question, nodded. "It took me four tries, and some outside help, the first time," he admitted.

"And when was that?"

"A few weeks ago."

The headmaster's eyes closed briefly in a pained expression. Harry felt awful. Perhaps he should have waited until after breakfast, if only for Professor Dumbledore's sake. Dumbledore sighed. "Harry.... Draco Malfoy taught you this, I presume?"

"No!" *Of course, he would think that,* Harry realized belatedly. "Draco had nothing to do with it. He was furious when he realized — He screamed at me and called me a hypocrite, and ... other things." Harry bit his lip. "And he found out right before he left, so I've spent all week worrying...."

Dumbledore's eyes widened suddenly. "*Severus,*" he whispered. "That's what he was...." A flash of annoyance crossed his face. Harry guessed he was wishing he had pursued Draco's complaints further. "Did Professor Snape teach you this?"

"Er ... Yes, sir." *And I should have warned him. It will be my fault if he gets --*

In an instant, Dumbledore was on his feet and moving for the fireplace. Harry had not seen him look so angry since he took on Barty Crouch, Jr..

"Wait!" Harry cried.

Dumbledore stopped. For a moment, he stood completely still, then he slowly turned.

"If you have something to add, Harry, please do so promptly."

"It wasn't his ... his idea. I asked him to teach me. And we only did it on snakes." Dumbledore's expression remained grim, but he sat back down behind his desk, Professor Snape still unsummoned.

"I suppose you feel rather betrayed by both of us," Harry said awkwardly.

"Yes, Harry. I do."
Harry swallowed. "Sorry."

"I want you to tell me exactly what you did, and what he did. Then, I will speak to Severus. You were correct to stop me." Dumbledore rubbed the bridge of his nose, under where his glasses rested. He replaced them and peered over the lenses at Harry. "Harry ... to start, why did you wish to learn the Imperius Curse?"

Harry spent a while explaining about his "how to beat Voldemort" project, and his idea for using Nagini against the Death Eaters. He summarized advancing the idea to Snape, and Snape's lessons for him, emphasizing his own culpability and glossing over any place where Snape had suggested he do more. When he finished, Dumbledore looked calmer, although still uncharacteristically solemn.

"Well," he said.

The tea appeared. Dumbledore poured cups for both of them.

"Sugar, Harry?"

"One, please."

"I'll leave the milk to you. It is impossible to explain the correct quantity of milk to another person."

Harry added milk to his tea, getting it to the right color. "Headmaster?" he asked tentatively. "How much trouble am I in?"

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows. "Is that your only concern?"

"Well, I've already promised Draco I'll stop. He pointed out I could have used a Panic curse on the Vipertooth, just as effectively. Mostly I want to know if I'm going to get expelled, or arrested."

"Draco Malfoy doesn't want you using Dark Arts?" Dumbledore almost sounded amused. Harry allowed himself a smile.

"He told me he has enough Dark wizards in his life, and really has no use for another one." Dumbledore's mouth twitched. Harry thought he had almost got a smile. Harry shivered. "The Quiris look so horrible, now. You can't imagine how frightening they are."

"Professor Snape has a most interesting reaction to them. Of course, they are not enamored of him, either." Dumbledore took a sip of his tea and looked thoughtfully at Harry. "Are the Quiris themselves frightening, or does it frighten you that they appear repulsive to you?"

"Both."

"Good." Dumbledore studied him for a minute. "I don't see that expelling you would improve your behavior in any way — most likely to the contrary -- and you have not shown any sign of being a danger to the other students."

Harry relaxed slightly.

"The reaction of the Ministry of Magic is a bit more problematic. While it is not necessarily illegal to use the Imperius Curse on an animal, it is illegal to do so in order to cause harm. Similarly, it is not illegal to kill an Azkaban escapee of Lestrange's status, but to do so with Dark Arts, even indirectly ... I will need to say what you did."

"Do you wish to protect me, sir?" Harry asked.
Dumbledore's eyes flashed with anger. "I would not consider lying for you."

"That was not what I asked."

Dumbledore frowned. "Explain."

"Honestly, the person most directly responsible for Lestrange's death is Draco, not me, and he did nothing unacceptable. He could easily say what he did, without specifying how I caused the dragon to start thrashing ... If he is willing, of course. Would that lessen the chance they would require details of me?"

Dumbledore sighed. "Yes," he admitted. "Harry... I am glad that you told me. However, my day would be much simpler if I did not know of this. I will need to rethink a number of decisions."

Dumbledore put down his tea. He went back to the hearth and tossed a pinch of powder on the fire. "Severus Snape," he said calmly.

Snape's head appeared in the flames.

"What now, Albus? I'm busy rearranging my rooms, as you know."

"Leave it. I need to speak to you."

"What about?"

"I will explain when you are in my office."

Harry felt terrible. He should have spoken to Snape before confessing, he knew, but he had been afraid the Potions master would talk him out of going to Dumbledore — and Harry knew he needed to do that.

When Snape stepped out of the fireplace, Harry said quickly:

"I'm sorry, professor — I confessed everything. I made it clear, though, that —"

"Silencio!"

Harry's voice stopped. He could still breath, and move his mouth, but he could not make a single sound. The headmaster put away his wand.

"I thought I had best silence Mr. Potter, before he thoughtfully informed you exactly what he told me," he said to Professor Snape. "Please sit, Severus."

Snape sat, and looked over at Harry. "Thank you for the attempt, Potter," he said. "Next time, please consider that Professor Dumbledore is not a total fool."

"If you have finished with pleasantries, Severus?"

"Albus," Severus acknowledged.

"Please tell me what you did."

"I don't suppose you would inform me as to what we are discussing."

"If there are multiple matters of possible relevance, Severus, I am truly alarmed. Tea?"

Snape shook his head. He scowled at the tray for a moment, then looked up, sighing.
"I taught him the Imperius Curse. What else do you wish to know?"

"Why, Severus?" Dumbledore challenged. "I understand your divided loyalties with respect to Draco Malfoy, and realize you are occasionally put into the position of helping him, and other children of your ... associates. However, you are not the Hogwarts tutor for Dark Arts. We do not teach Dark Arts at Hogwarts ... or so I had believed."

"I taught him because his strategy is sound." Snape looked at Dumbledore's mild, but unyielding, disapproval and exploded. "Damn it, Albus, you know we need him to win! And the boy is finally trying! And there is nothing wrong with using the Imperius Curse on a snake."

"There is nothing illegal about using the Imperius Curse on a snake."

"I assure you, Albus," Snape growled, "my ... 'associates' will not confine themselves to spells you find acceptable, when next he encounters them." He scowled. "I suppose you may fire me now."

"Fire you, Severus?" Dumbledore asked mildly.

Snape glowered at him. "I have become expendable, have I not? I am not longer of use as a spy."

"True." Dumbledore smiled. "But I have grown accustomed to your constant gloomy presence — something to make the rest of the world look sunnier. And you are still one of the three greatest Potions masters in Europe." He pushed the teapot and a clean cup slightly towards Snape. "Please give me your account of what happened, Severus."

"Must it be in front of him?" Snape growled, gesturing to Harry.

"I think we have established sufficient agreement," Dumbledore acknowledged. He pointed his wand at Harry. "Finite Incantantum. You may go, Harry."

"I have one more thing to confess," Harry said quickly.

Dumbledore looked at him. "Not more Dark Arts, I hope."

"Yes. In January. Command Spirit."

Dumbledore took a moment to absorb this. His expression hardened. "You know, Harry," he said grimly, "if you are really so interested in making things obey you, you might do better to learn to integrate your not-inconsiderable charisma with your impressive reputation, so you might inspire obedience rather than magically coercing it."

Harry looked steadily at him. Dumbledore, he knew, inspired obedience quite well. "Admirably expressed, sir, but I doubt it would have worked on a Peruvian Vipertooth."

Snape snorted. "He's right, Albus. It is rather restricted to things that can understand what you say."

After promising to talk in more detail with Dumbledore later in the week, Harry left the headmaster's office. It was still too early for breakfast. Feeling strangely light-hearted, he walked back up to Gryffindor tower. Ron hailed him as soon as he entered the Common Room.

"Your ferret's upstairs, getting his knickers in a twist over not having money. You owe me for not rubbing his face in it."
"Later," Harry agreed. He continued up the sixth-year boys' dormitory. Draco was lying, fully dressed, on Harry's bed. He looked more sullen than upset.

"Hi," Harry said.

"Where have you been?" Draco demanded.

"Talking to Dumbledore, like I promised. What's wrong?"

Draco growled. "I'll be disinherited." He looked frantic. "What am I going to ... I expected to be able to negotiate! He'd want to avoid a scandal. But the idiot had to get caught with his mask on, and...!"

Draco looked at Harry again. "What do I do?"

"Get a rich boyfriend?" Harry quipped.

Draco, to his surprise, exploded. He jumped up from the bed. "You fucking arsehole! Do you think —"

Harry caught at Draco's wrists before Draco could pull out his wand. "Sorry! Sorry, Draco, I was joking! Joke, Draco!" When Draco stopped pulling against him, he slipped his hold from Draco's wrists to his hands. "I didn't ... I thought I was flirting."

"I'm not in the mood."

"Sorry," Harry said again.

"I thought you ..." Draco tugged a hand slightly, and Harry released it. Draco rubbed at his eyes. "Sorry. I badly need sleep."

"Can your father disinherit you, if he's in prison?" Harry asked. "Sorry if that's a stupid question. I don't know how these things work."

Draco scowled. "I'm not sure. I remember a murder case ..." He thought. "The ministry can disallow it, when it's a prisoner against a witness, but they usually don't. It requires a separate challenge ...."

The scowl had evened out to a thoughtful look. "Perhaps I should speak to a solicitor before absolutely panicking."

"Ask Dumbledore, when you speak to him — he needs to speak to you today. And really — you could survive without the money. You're very clever."

"It's not the money."

"No?"

"It's the ..." Draco waved his arms in imprecise arcs ... "the stuff that goes with it. The houses and lands. The things that have been in the family long enough to give historians wet dreams. I don't know who I am without that." He bit his lip. "And I don't want to find out, no matter who thinks it would be good for me."

Draco sat back down on the edge of the bed and stared thoughtfully in the direction of the windows. Harry sat beside him.

"Can I help?" Harry asked.

"I don't know," Draco mused. He had started to look more intrigued than sullen. "I think it depends on Mother. Whomever she supports will win this battle. And she will support whomever she..."
believes will win. A circular problem.” He laughed.

"If you can convince her that whoever she supports will win...."

"Yes. Then I just have to convince her she'd rather be getting her money from me than from him. That might be difficult, though. If he's in prison, he can't really interfere with her fun, now can he?"

"Would you?"

"Of course not. She's my mother." Draco scowled. "But that just brings me even with him."

Harry nodded.

"And then, there's the political situation."

"The immediate one, or long-term?"

"Long-term, if Voldemort loses, I think I am well positioned."

"With me and Dumbledore," Harry clarified, amused.

"Exactly." Draco looked coyly at him and Harry smiled. "Even short-term ... I can reposition myself in Slytherin — it will just take some time and effort — working on people I have mostly ignored. A few of my old allies may be approachable from a different direction." He sighed. "But then, there are father's friends and associates, and the extended family — that will split, I suppose. It's going to be messy." By now, Draco looked almost cheerful.

"What are you thinking?" Harry asked.

"I'm just tallying up my uncles and aunts," Draco answered. He looked absently down at his hands. "Which ones Mother favors may matter."

"You," Harry accused, "are having fun."

"I," Draco countered haughtily, "am going to win." He smirked at Harry for a moment, then slowly started to look wistful. "One thing you can do for me..."

"What?"

Draco glanced down. "Don't touch me in public. Don't ... stand too close. Sorry."

Harry tried not to look hurt. "Whatever you like," he said quietly.

"Until I find out how Mother feels about it," Draco explained. "She may be fine. Especially if I imply — misleadingly -- that an obsession with you will give her more control over my children."

Harry, once again, felt that Draco was getting substantially ahead of him in plans. "Er... Draco?"

"I'm just brainstorming. Don't read too much into it. We haven't even decided if we're seeing each other, right? But publicly, for now, we're not. And Mother always thinks ten years ahead. I need to think fifteen ahead, at least."

"And all of Gryffindor seeing me kiss you won't be a problem?"

"Who does Mother know in Gryffindor? Oh, my house will hear, eventually, but you know," Draco smiled — "An impetuous Gryffindor, bits of dead monster glistening in the moonlight ... it was easier
just to go along with it."

"Actually, the wing kind of bothered me."

"But it's too good a line not to use again. And it really is how my house thinks of yours."
When Harry passed the Slytherin table, at breakfast, Draco continued to accompany him. For a confused moment, Harry wondered if Draco was going to come to the Gryffindor table. He didn't think that would be allowed. Halfway there, however, Draco turned, strode a short distance down the Hufflepuff table, and stopped.

"Johnson."

Darren Johnson looked up. The people around him stopped talking. In the silence, Harry could hear Draco's words, even though he was twenty feet away.

"My condolences on the loss of your family."

Many of the Hufflepuff students twitched, shifted uneasily, or glared. Still, none spoke.

"I thought you would like to know that I've given up on my own."

Draco pivoted precisely, and strode away to a belated rise of murmurs and exclamations. He sat at an empty spot at the end of the Slytherin table.

Harry spent most of breakfast watching Draco and the other Slytherins. He wondered how much the others knew of what had transpired. Goyle was not present, and Harry was certain that Slytherin House must, at least, know of his father's death. Crabbe was sitting by himself, looking rather lost. Over the course of the meal, Blaise, Pansy, and a fifth-year whose name Harry did not know all came to sit briefly near Draco and exchange a few sentences with him. Blaise left looking uneasy, Pansy furious, and the fifth year contemptuously amused.

Harry had decided he was finished with breakfast and should go speak to Draco himself when a fourth Slytherin beat him to it. Professor Snape came down from the staff table, his usual smooth, predatory glide taking him straight to the spot before Draco.

Harry stood up. He had not been able to tell Draco about Snape's loyalties before last night, and it had not crossed his mind in the short time he could have done so. Now he could see Draco on the edge of panic.

Draco and his head of house exchanged a few words. Snape gestured to the door, and Draco slowly got to his feet and stepped back over the bench. Then, quite suddenly, Draco bolted for the door. Snape cursed, and followed, striding as fast as his dignity would allow.

"Draco will kill him," Harry muttered. "Or try, anyway." When Snape was halfway to the door, Harry made up his mind. He was not dignified. He vaulted the table, knocking over something that crashed loudly and caused several people to cry out, and he raced for the door. He passed Snape just as they gained the hallway. The heavy doors of the Great Hall swung closed behind them.

I guess Dumbledore thinks Snape and I can handle Draco, Harry thought, or maybe that I can handle Snape and Draco, or Snape can handle Draco and me. He reached for his wand. It came down to the inescapable conclusion that adding more people would not help the situation.
In the instant it took him to decide this, he spotted Draco. The Slytherin, at the far end of the hall, turned and drew his wand. Harry saw his mouth open.

"Expelliramus!" Harry bellowed, and Draco's wand shot out of his hand.

"Harry!" Draco screamed, angry betrayal clear in his voice.

Harry closed the distance between them. Draco punched him in the gut and turned to resume running. Harry tried to straighten against the pain, to follow, but by the time he managed to take a step, Draco was already down, immobilized by vines that had shot from Snape's wand.

"Mr. Malfoy," Snape growled, "this is hardly necessary."

"Harry!" Draco screamed. "Believe me! He's a Death Eater! He was there!"

Harry approached at a cramped walk.

"I was there, Mr. Malfoy," Snape said angrily. "Thanks to you and Mr. Potter and your damnable inability to inform anyone of your intentions, I shall not be able to return." The snapping fire in the Potions master's eyes faded slowly. "It's over," he murmured, so quietly Harry was not sure he was still addressing them.

His expression hardened again. "Draco," he said coolly, "I was Dumbledore's spy before you were born. I returned to it when Voldemort returned. Last night ... I was unprepared for your actions."

"Oh, good! I'm pleased to know you found our study session convincing," Draco sneered. "Did you think you had me nicely prepared?"

"I did not even know you were being presented until I arrived!" Snape growled. "Your father had told me it would be over the summer."

"Perhaps he was getting suspicious of you," Harry suggested.

"Harry!" Draco protested. "You don't believe this rot, do you?"

"Listen," Harry said firmly. "On one occasion, I gave Dumbledore information on Voldemort when Professor Snape was present. We used this information successfully. I have been present for two of Snape's reports to Dumbledore, one on the same occasion. I have shared plans with him. It took me a few years to trust he was loyal, but I believe it, now. And he has always protected me from serious harm, even at his worst."

"As I have always protected you, Draco," Snape snarled. "As I would whatever I thought of Lord Voldemort. I followed here, on the chase, in case I was needed, and I betrayed my true alliances by attacking your father, when first he attempted to kill you." Snape's mouth curled in a bitter sneer. "This will cost us. My information has been invaluable. But your are my spellchild, and I could not watch that monster kill another of his children."

"Kill--? My father had no other children!" Draco answered, staring at Snape as if he were mad.

Snape fixed him with a hard, black gaze. He drew himself up and his robes in, in that haughty way that made Harry want to cringe. Draco just glared arrogantly back at him.

"Surely, Draco, you remember when you were promised a sister?" Snape said softly. "I remember when you were told she had not lived. You destroyed everything you had set aside for her in a ten-minute tantrum, then locked yourself in your room and cried. That made him angry. I had to
persuade him that a six-year-old would still be emotional, no matter how well trained...."

Draco's eyes had lost focus. Harry could seem him struggling to remember, or perhaps not to remember.

"They said she wasn't strong enough."

"Or too strong. The Decernenti favors boys, you know. Girls are more alert, and do not retain their mother's womb instincts as well. None of your father's daughters survived."

"Decernenti," Draco repeated at a whisper, his eyes wide. He started to tremble.

It took Harry a moment to place the word. Decernenti. The now-illegal practice of dropping babies off towers, to ensure you would not waste your time raising a squib.

Snape snorted. "Not that your father considered favoring boys a disadvantage," he said. Harry thought he was attempting to lighten the conversation. "Girls do not carry on the family name. It's no wonder the old families cannot keep their population up, with all of them trying for sons." As Snape spoke, he released Draco from his bonds. "Don't run, now, boy. I went to considerable trouble to keep you alive last night; I'm not about to kill you, today."

Draco, still wide-eyed, nodded.

"Would you feel safer with Potter along?"

Draco looked at Harry uncertainly. Harry extended Draco's wand to him. "I was just trying to keep you out of trouble," he said. He looked between the two of them. "You know, this would be much easier if either of you had ever decided to trust the other."

Draco gave a contemptuous snort as he rose shakily to his feet. He took the wand, and, after handling it briefly, returned it to his robe. "I never had any reason to trust him. I'm not sure I do now."

Snape's black eyes clouded over with something quieter than anger. Harry pushed back a stirring of sympathy for the Potions Master.

"You might have risked it," Harry said to Snape. "You tested him, and the word went to Dumbledore, not his father."

"That was you!" Snape snarled. "All that proved was that he was too selfish to sacrifice you." He raised an eyebrow as Draco let Harry take his hand. "Which points up another reason why the old wizarding families are failing to adequately repopulate," he added dryly.

Harry stood frozen. Was that ... a joke? from Snape? No, maybe perhaps just an insult? Draco, beside him, glared.

"I assure you, spellfather," he said, "I will have children, and more than one."

Snape hesitated. "Better than I have done," he admitted. "Come along, now. I haven't got all day."
Complications of Family

Chapter Summary

Most of the rest of this story (with the exception of a few scenes throughout) was added a few months after the original ending I posted in July 2003. I have reflected this with a change in the posting date.

Complications of Family

Harry found the day after the attack strange. He spent the morning helping Draco settle in his new room and accustoming him to the idea that Snape was not loyal to Voldemort. After lunch, they had some classes, but with two professors in the hospital wing, and two others entirely occupied with the rebuilding, not many. The time that the pupils would have spent in Transfiguration, Charms, Herbology, or Care of Magical Creatures, was now all designated for somewhat related labor. During what would have been Herbology, the Gryffindor and Slytherin sixth years were assigned to sorting lumber and glass from the greenhouse ruined by Draco's pursuers. When Parvati protested that she wasn't a servant, she was moved to repotting and pruning damaged plants with Pansy Parkinson and another Slytherin.

Draco paused to watch. "Well," he commented, "she can't say it's not Herbology."

"More of yours than ours over there."

"I expect Pansy protested immediately." Draco laughed bitterly. "For myself, I'm just trying to stay where none of this debris could 'accidentally' fall on me. I don't mind being sent to Coventry, if I can just get there alive."

Harry straightened and looked around. Nott was watching them with murderous intensity. Deliberately, Harry levitated some rubble off the top of their heap and set it on the grass, where it could be sorted with danger to no more than fingers and toes.

"How's that?"

Malfoy looked in surprise. He wiped his sweaty hair back, leaving a line of dirt on his cheek. Harry had seldom seen him so dirty, and could not help considering it cute.

"Thanks. I'm still not thinking clearly."

"It's easier for me."

Malfoy nodded. "Still. Any trouble from, um..." He looked around at Harry's classmates. Ron and Seamus, at least, were watching them curiously.

"Not much. I went through most of the trouble when I admitted we were friends. By house standards, I haven't done anything considerably worse." Harry bit his lip. "That they know about, anyway."
The next morning, mail fell around Harry's breakfast in alarming volume. Quite a bit of it was from total strangers, but he had the knack of picking out Sirius's handwriting from any number of envelopes.

Harry --

**Congratulations! Dumbledore says I shouldn't tell you that, but I can't not. Surviving Lestrange or a dragon would be impressive; beating both is a major accomplishment.**

That said, I worry that you're still mucking about with the Slytherin boy -- a Malfoy at that! Dumbledore tells me he refused the Dark Mark, but you should still watch your step, Harry. He's a Slytherin, and he will use you. Don't think I don't know -- most of my family were Slytherins. You can't trust them -- any of them.

Don't think you're safe, either, just because Lestrange is dead. You-Know-Who will want vengeance for her and for your Slytherin friend's father. Still, it's better news than the last time I was contacted about you. (Don't suppose any of the prisoners will oblige me and mention Peter in testimony, do you? I can't help thinking that might clear my name.)

Moony is well, and sends his love, and being Moony, is fretting that you might be upset at having caused a death. He suggests a purifying bath -- oh, hell, he's going to make me write it out! Okay, this assumes you can get into the Prefects' bathroom, but we expect you can. The tap with the lavender stone is, oddly enough, lavender, and he says to use that and add a pinch of powdered unicorn horn, if you can get it, and soak until you're completely relaxed, then dry off, burn some rosemary, and meditate. Personally, I think that while you were sitting around smelling like that, someone might accidentally stick an apple in your mouth and roast you, but do whatever you like. It's just his way of saying that he cares. Oh, wait -- he says that should be followed by a nice cup of tea and an evening in the company of friends. Personally, I'd go right to that last bit, with the added advice that if you're feeling bad about it, just don't. We're all better off.

Warmly,

Padfoot

Harry, Ron, and Hermione walked across the lawn in the afternoon sun. Classes and work were over for the day, and Harry had said he still wanted to be outside, so outside they stayed. By unspoken agreement, they moved out of sight of the ruined greenhouse, and finally settled near a tree and some flowering bushes, with a view of the lake. For several minutes, they were silent. Finally, Ron cleared his throat.

"Anyone seen the squid?"

"Dennis Creevey saw it this morning," Harry answered. "I'm awfully glad. I'd have felt horrible if I killed it."

"Wouldn't have been your fault," Ron assured him. "You couldn't know a panicked dragon would head for the water."

Harry pulled up a stalk of grass. He split it from end to end, tinting his thumbnail green.
"Harry?" Hermione asked.

"I didn't panic it."

"What?" Ron looked puzzled.

"I was controlling it with the Imperius Curse."

Harry looked up in time to see Ron's eyes open wide. Hermione's narrowed.

"Malfoy teach you that?" Ron asked indignantly.

"No." Harry glanced over at Hermione. "That's what I was learning from -- in my other lessons. That's what Draco and I fought about."

"Harry...." Hermione looked desperately at him.

"You don't need to fret about whether to tell or not. I told Dumbledore everything yesterday morning. Just ... Don't tell anyone else, please?"

"I will talk with Professor Dumbledore."

"That's fine."

They were silent, again. Hermione was still frowning at Harry, while Ron stared unseeing out across the lake. Peripherally, Harry saw someone walking towards them. He turned his head enough to recognize Draco, then, contentedly, went back to watching the water.

"This patch of grass available?"

Ron jumped. Hermione looked quizzically up. Harry smiled. "Of course," he said. Draco sat down next to Harry and smiled back at him until Harry needed to remind himself that he should not shift any closer.

"How's it going?" Hermione asked.

"I really couldn't say," Draco drawled. "It's far too soon."

"You back in Slytherin?" Ron asked cautiously.

"Well, it's still my house, of course," Draco retorted. "I'm not back to sleeping in a Slytherin dormitory, though. Probably not until next term; it should be safer after the trial, as there will be less benefit to my death. For now, Dumbledore moved a doorway to annex a room to Professor Snape's quarters, and I'm staying there." He smirked. "So I haven't even lost my private bedchamber."

Harry shot Ron a warning glare, and Ron, who had opened his mouth to say something, shut it again.

"That's a bit odd, isn't it?" Hermione asked. "Putting a student with a professor?"

Draco shrugged. "I don't think even Dumbledore would, usually, but Professor Snape isn't just my head of house. He's also my spellfather."

"That's like a godfather, isn't it?"

"In a way. 'Godfather' implies a shared religion. One's godparents, as I understand it, are responsible
for one's spiritual education."

"Technically, I suppose. People use it more loosely now."

Harry thought that was probably a good thing. He couldn't imagine Sirius providing any sort of spiritual guidance whatsoever.

"Well, one's spellparents -- I don't have a spellmother; Father has little use for women, beyond the obvious -- are responsible for one's magical education."

"You mean, you knew Snape before you came here?" Ron asked.

"Slightly. He was at the manor frequently, when I was little. I liked him." Draco frowned. "When I was six, he stopped visiting so often." He glanced at Harry. For just a moment, Harry could see that he was frightened. "Apparently, that was after he showed up in time to see my younger sister fail the \textit{Decernenti}. He wasn't supposed to be there, for that. My mother --"

"\textit{Decernenti}?" Hermione squawked.

Draco needed to talk about this, Harry thought. It wasn't something he would mention accidentally.

"Professor Snape believes my mother hoped Father wouldn't do it with a witness present. She sent Snape word when she went into labor, instead of after the birth, as she was supposed to do." Draco hesitated. Hermione stared. Harry could see Ron mouthing the word "Decernenti" as if trying to identify it. "Snape was brewing, of course, and didn't get the message immediately. He told me he arrived just in time to see her break against the courtyard." Draco looked down. His voice became somewhat less airy, but only for a sentence. "He ... he wasn't around as much, after that. Mostly just at parties. We were only distantly acquainted when I started here."

"The \textit{Decernenti} is illegal, isn't it?" Hermione insisted. "Wasn't it banned? A long time ago?"

"Do you think my father bothers about laws, Granger?" Draco drawled. "Father respects tradition, not laws."

"It's barbaric!" Hermione snapped.

"Yes," Draco said. "And how do you think I feel, suddenly being told I should have had three sisters?" Anger grew in his voice. "And this from Father, who complains that the Muggles are overwhelming us with numbers. I never understood why he didn't have a second child, to at least maintain the wizarding population, but it's worse that he had more and killed them!"

"Shhh," Harry soothed, reaching over.

"Don't touch me!" Draco shouted. He curled his arms in around his chest. Harry could hear his breath, shallow and quick with panic. "Sorry," he said more quietly, after a minute had passed.

Harry eyed him appraisingly. "Is this because you don't want to be touched, or because your mother might mind ..." He didn't know how to phrase it. "... you being, well, with a man?"

Draco didn't seem to notice his uncertainty.

"I can't take being touched, right now. And my mother won't mind \textit{that}," he added dismissively. "At least, I don't expect so. She may mind me having you."

"Oh."
"She might consider it ... that I am betraying Father over a crush."

Hermione snorted. "I don't think that's it."

"Of course it's not. But it might seem that way to her. He," Draco nodded at Harry, "is the enemy, after all."

"I am?"

"Yes. You are. To Father, at any rate. With Mother, it's harder to tell, because she agrees with Father on all public matters. She considers it her duty as his wife. Now that I'm trying to deal with her separately, I'm realizing how little I know about what she thinks."

"Well, if you're right about why she called Snape early, she doesn't approve of Decernenti, anyway," Hermione said.

Draco snorted. "At least on her own babies. Of course, that story was all from Snape, yesterday, and he may have his own purposes in telling me this." Draco rubbed his forehead. "I should see what Mother will tell me about it. If it's all true, she may hold it against him -- Father, I mean."

"How could she not?!" Hermione demanded.

Draco shrugged "She may have agreed," he answered. "Snape may be wrong about why she called him early."

"If she bothered to read any of the studies ---"

"Hermione, this is my mother. Of course she didn't read any of the studies."

"Why not?!"

"Because that's not what well-bred ladies do." Draco sighed. "Look, I've no objection to witches being educated --"

"How progressive!" Hermione snapped.

"-- but it wasn't what she was raised to aspire to. She is supposed to be beautiful, gracious to her peers, publicly obedient to her husband, and willing to produce children. She needs only enough knowledge to be an interesting conversationalist."

"And would you marry a woman like that?" Hermione demanded. She glanced at Harry, suddenly, and blushed.

Draco looked at Harry.

"I expect to marry as a business relationship," he said steadily. "I would not mind an independent woman -- it might be preferable -- as long as our goals and views as to propriety in that relationship are compatible. Mostly, I want someone who will give me my life back, when the time comes."

Hermione spluttered.

"Oh, they'll be lining up for that," Harry commented sarcastically.

Draco looked down. "I don't want to talk about this, now."

"So, about the Decernenti --" Hermione began.
"I don't want to talk about that, either!" Draco fumed. "I'm disgusted. The only good thing about this is that it will make it much easier for me to testify against him."

Hermione bit her lip and nodded. "As long as you don't plan on continuing it."

"If I wanted to kill babies, I would have become a Death Eater."

For a few minutes after that flat statement, everyone was silent.

"I... um, think I should head back to Gryffindor," Ron said finally. He looked rather pale when he stood up. "Coming, Hermione?"

She smiled at him, but settled back against the tree behind her. "Not just yet. I haven't heard anything about Draco's holidays, yet. You go along -- I'll be in for dinner."

Ron looked as if he might object, but finally nodded and turned away. Draco shifted so that he, Hermione, and Harry were sitting in a triangle.

"You want to hear about my holidays?" he asked. He gave her a wry smile. "Are you certain?"

"Days of practicing Dark Arts?" Harry guessed.

"Surprisingly, no. We went through everything on his list at least once -- some a few times -- then the Crucius Curse a few times and the Killing Curse twice, but that was all in the first two days. And I was starting to feel comfortable -- no, pleased with it, as I was afraid I would. Then cousin Isabelle showed up, with Marcella and Desiree."

"And how is Marcella?" Harry asked solicitously.

"Who is Marcella?" Hermione asked.

"My favorite cousin," Draco said promptly. "She's eleven, as of a few weeks ago, pretty, charming, and vivacious. I'm also her favorite cousin, which has caused her nanny some distress. I suspect her mother is none too happy about it, either, though she would not be so reckless as to show displeasure."

"And you shouldn't be her favorite because...?" Hermione began questioningly.

Draco shrugged.

"She wants to be you," Harry said.

"Yes. So last summer she turned into the extra-junior Death Eater girl." Draco smiled slightly. "It was cute. Sick, perhaps, but cute. I transfigured some of her clothes to black and silver, when she asked."

"And her mother disapproves?"

"Her mother would at least rather she was trailing around after a girl, of whatever political leanings, learning useful things like how to bat her eyelashes." Draco frowned. "At least, that's been my impression. I suppose I should sound her out on politics," he said hesitantly. "She might disapprove."

"Her mother also leaves politics to her husband?" Hermione asked contemptuously.

"Isabelle, like many other members of the family, both men and women, also leaves politics to my father, on whom she is somewhat financially dependent. She's widowed. Also, she's French, so she..."
may be deluding herself that the Dark Lord is not relevant to her home life." Draco lay back on the grass. "So there was my darling little pet, still in black and silver, her hair pulled back like a man's, striding about trying to look dangerous ... and it bothered me."

Hermione nodded. "Fred and George have had problems with Ginny, like that."

"Not with Ron?"

"I'm not sure about Ron." Hermione smiled. "But I think it would have been Charlie with Ron."

Harry met Hermione's eyes. "But Bill's the cool one," he teased.

"Definitely Bill," Hermione agreed, blushing. She looked at Draco. "So, what did you do about it?"

"I told her that she looked too severe, and I'd like to see her in something pretty for the evening, in blue to bring out the color in her eyes...."

"Did she get mad?"

"No. I'd made sure not to be wearing black myself, when I spoke to her. She said I could redo her clothes." Draco rolled onto his side and went up on one elbow. "I'd gotten in trouble for transfiguring her clothing before, so this time I thought I'd be clever and take her to my room, so her nanny wouldn't catch us. So I had her skirt and robes off and laid out, and she was lying on my bed beside me, watching me --"

"Naked?" Hermione interrupted, her nose wrinkling.

"In her underwear, which was perfectly decent, though she was kicking her feet behind her -- it's not like she's a Muggle girl with a few wisps of clothing -- she was still wearing a camisole, and layers of petticoats, and stockings, and I expect things I didn't see -- but anyway, Father walked in."

"Oops," Harry said.

"I had this moment of panic, thinking I would get in trouble for transfiguring her clothes again, and then he leered at me, and I realized that wasn't what he thought I was doing, and I was petrified."

"What did he do?" Hermione gasped.

"He said," Draco smoothed out his voice in imitation of his father, and quoted, in a rather bored manner, "'So sorry, Draco -- I hadn't realized you were ... occupied. Please come see me this evening, at your convenience.' Then he left."

"He what?" Hermione yelped.

"Exactly. It was essentially, 'Oh, are you busy molesting your cousin, now? Carry on, then.' I was furious. If I thought someone was doing that to her, I would kill him!"

"Was that it?" Harry asked.

"Oh no -- it got stranger. I went ahead with doing her robes -- bright sky blue with gold -- then changed mine to darker versions of the same colors, which pleased her. I warned her, though, that my father was being odd, and gave her what were probably the strangest instructions I have ever given one of my cousins -- 'If anybody asks what we did in my room, tell them exactly and completely what we did.'"

Harry laughed, which got him an angry look from Hermione.
Then it was time for dinner, so we went down to dinner. She sat with Desiree and their nanny, and father motioned me to sit next to him.

"And?" Harry prompted. Draco was biting his lip, and had his eyes either closed or focused on the ground.

"Then he... He started by saying he had no idea that I was 'interested' in my little cousin, and if I thought I would remain so when she was older... well, she is only my second cousin, and we haven't had any similarly close unions on that side in recent generations, and 'really, she would be a fine blood match for you, Draco, and her mother would not dare refuse me' and 'I've been concerned about your lack of interest in suitable girls at school,' and altogether seemed so pleased that I didn't dare tell him he'd misunderstood."

Hermione stared. "That's sick."

"Well, I didn't say I was... I just didn't correct him. I had started thinking about our plans, again, and just told myself I was leaving anyway, so there was no point in causing myself trouble." Draco looked up and gave Harry a wan smile. "Your sort of lying. So I demurred on the matter of my future interest, pointing out that girls do change considerably, around fifteen. Father immediately started reviewing the breast sizes of all of Marcella's adult female relatives, and I had to clarify -- their behavior changes. He agreed, but said that if I wanted a girl biddable, it was best to train her young.

"I pretended to think the matter over, and asked if the end of summer would be soon enough to decide. He agreed to that, stipulating only that if I got her pregnant, or even just took her... technical virginity, he would force me to marry her." Draco raked his fingers through the grass.

"And anything else...?" Harry asked.

"He said quite plainly that I could do whatever else I pleased." Draco made a face. "I told him I'd behave sensibly. I'd rather lost my appetite, by then, and left as soon as I could." Draco frowned. "I ought to tell cousin Isabelle about it. She should know how badly he protects her daughters -- she leaves them there for a few weeks each year." Draco frowned. "Anyway, it was the perfect reminder of why I was risking my life and fortune on a mad Gryffy scheme."

Harry recalled Draco's speculations about the girl his father had handed to him on Halloween.

"He probably wasn't testing you, then." Harry said vaguely.

"No. I asked -- I told him I had thought that. He said, 'How could she look like Marcella, Draco? She was a Muggle!'"

"Who?" Hermione asked.

"I... A Muggle girl."

"Well, obviously! But --"

"I don't want to talk about it."

Harry looked sharply at Hermione, quelling any further questions. "We should go in," he said. He stood up. "Together?" he asked, "or will you follow, Draco?"

Draco stood up and cast a quick cleaning spell on his robe. "Simple association with the two of you has done all the damage it will. I'd be glad of the company."
They walked back across the lawn, the setting sun sending long shadows before them. Harry badly wanted to take Draco's hand. He bumped into him, instead, and Draco pushed him companionably back, laughing. They settled into a sedate walk, and Harry reached an arm around Hermione and drew her close. He couldn't help thinking that he was substituting, but she didn't object. He looked back at Draco.

"Shall we meet up, tonight?"

Draco scowled. "Little chance of that. I'm with Snape, remember?" He frowned, thinking. "Remember the picnic, after we'd had the Facilis potion?"

"Of course."

"Let's do that, again. Tomorrow."

"All right. Meet me in the kitchens?"

"As soon as my last morning class is out."
Draco left Harry and Hermione inside the Entrance Hall, and headed down to Snape's rooms. There, he found Snape sitting at his desk and frowning at piece of parchment.

"Professor Snape?" Draco asked tentatively.

"Hm?"

"What should I call you?"

Snape looked up. He frowned for a moment. "As a child," he said thoughtfully, "you called me Severus, as if I was an uncle or older cousin." He considered the matter a moment. "I do not object to you calling me by my given name in private, but if you call me that in class, I will discipline you. You might find it easier to consistently address me as a professor, until you leave school."

"I'll keep that in mind." Draco scowled, remembering that morning's Potions class. "Why did you give me detention, today?"

"Because you interfered with another student's work."

"But I do that all the time!"

Snape looked up sharply. "Mr. Malfoy," he said firmly, "you have gotten away with a great many things in my class, while I was courting favor with your father. As there is no longer any point to that activity, you will find things greatly changed -- as will a number of your classmates."

"I thought you liked me!" Draco complained.

"I do like you. I am very nearly as fond of you as if you were my own son." Snape's mouth curved in a thin smile. "Consequently, I will try to teach you an adequate amount of discipline in the short time you have left at this school. You are a clever pupil, but a rather spoiled young man."

Draco drew his breath in with a hiss. "As you wish, sir." He threw himself down on the couch. "Are you planning to dispute custody of me with Mother, try to get her to agree to you supervising me, or just keep me here illegally?"

"Narcissa and I have been on good terms since shortly after Voldemort's first fall. I plan to start with negotiating."

"Should we coordinate, then? I need to discuss matters with her as well."

Snape raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"
"I think whether or not Father is permitted to disinherit me will depend on whom Mother sides with."

"And you believe she may side with you?"

Draco ignored the faint scorn in his professor's voice. "If I can persuade her that whomever she chooses will win, it is just a matter of persuading her that I am more reasonable than Father."

"Reasonable?"

"Biddable, perhaps." Draco smiled. "Complacent."

"I see."

"Please don't mention Harry."

Snape put down the parchment and began to drum his fingers on the tabletop. "I have already reported that you had become friendly with Harry Potter, as it seemed he -- they -- would have this news from several others. Is there anything further to report?"

"Not yet."

"Girls who are friends will sometimes hold hands. Boys who are friends do not."

Draco looked down. "Understood. Please ... let me tell Mother what I choose, when I choose. I'm not intending to keep it from her, just ...."

"As you wish," Snape said sarcastically.

"I also need to discuss things with some of my cousins. Are you connected to the Floo network? That would work better than owls."

"My grate has a lock that must be specifically overridden to connect outside of the school. May I be here for these discussions?"

"That would probably be best."

Snape looked pleased. "Very well, then. Before dinner, after your detention, or tomorrow?"

"Isabelle before dinner, I think. I may wait till tomorrow for Mother. May I be here when you speak with her?"

Snape nodded. "Certainly." He sneered slightly. "Don't expect to be pleased with everything you hear."

Draco held his gaze steadily. "I would like to please you, sir," he said, "but the important thing is to know my parameters."

"Yes." Snape returned his attention to the parchment. "You please me," he commented distantly. "Lucius's guile, without some of his more objectionable fixations, and Potter seems to have charmed off the bulk of your ungoverned malice. Overall, you are maturing quite nicely." He made a few marks on the parchment, and then looked up. "Shall I open the Floo, now?"

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When Harry and Hermione reached Gryffindor tower, Ron was waiting for them.

"I'd like to talk," he said. "Someplace private." He turned to Hermione. "I think this is enough a matter of House discipline that your room would be all right -- I mean, no one who knew could say it was improper."

Somebody nearby snickered.

"Talk to me?" Hermione asked. "Or to both of us?"

"Both."

Harry looked at Ron, but Ron was avoiding meeting his gaze. Harry sighed. "Let's get it over with," he said, and marched off to Hermione's room.

Once they were there, and the door shut, Ron rounded on Harry. "Imperius!" he hissed accusingly.

Harry pulled out his wand and pointed it at the door. He was dismayed to notice that Ron flinched at the motion.

"Obscura Totum." He turned back to Ron. "You can yell, now."

Ron seemed rather taken aback by Harry giving permission. Hermione stood by her desk, watching carefully and absently worrying at her lower lip.

Ron drew together enough composure to take Harry at his word.

"Imperius!" he repeated. "What are you playing at? It's one thing for you to go running off with that ... Slytherin, but I won't have you messing around with Dark Arts!" He paused to let out a shaky breath. "Unforgivables! You know any more?" he asked angrily. "Have you been studying this on us all year?"

Harry steepled his hands in front of his face, then parted them to rub at his temples. At the look of horror on Ron's face, he recognized that he had mimicked a gesture of Snape's, and quickly put his hands down at his sides.

"I have done three Dark Arts curses --" he began, but Ron cut him off there.

"A particular Three?" he asked pointedly.

Harry clenched his fists. "Control Spirit, the Bone-Burning curse, and the Imperius curse," he answered, as evenly as he could manage.

"And Snape taught you," Hermione said quietly, looking for confirmation.

"Snape taught me the Imperius curse, because I asked. Draco taught me Control Spirit because I asked, but that was a bit different, because it didn't occur to me that it was Dark Arts. That was when I was just becoming friendly with Draco, not recently. The Bone-Burning curse I just saw, and I demonstrated it for Snape when he asked."

"On what?"

Harry grinned. "A plucked chicken from the kitchens. It wasn't anything. Just a demonstration." A thrill of memory shot through him, belying his words, and he fought not to shiver. Hermione saw something she did not like, but Ron seemed somewhat reassured.
"Why Control Spirit?" Hermione asked tersely.

Harry rolled his eyes. "To get Moaning Myrtle to keep her stupid mouth shut."

Ron snorted in amusement.

"About what?" Hermione asked.

"Draco and I using the Chamber of Secrets."

Ron's eyes widened. "Using what?"

"That's where we've been meeting."

Ron was horrified. "Harry...."

"It's just a room, Ron!" Hermione said in exasperation. "Why the Imperius curse?" she asked, continuing her interrogation.

"You two make a rather good team, you know?" Harry pointed at Ron. "He's innocent and emotionally forceful, and you --"

"Harry, why?" Hermione snapped.

"To turn Nagini on the Death Eaters. I've been practicing on snakes. The Vipertooth was the first other creature I did."

"So legally ..." Hermione's brow furrowed, as she tried to work out the implications.

"Legally, the matter is ambiguous. Dumbledore doesn't want to give Fudge leverage to threaten me, so he left the matter out of his report." Harry fixed each of them with a hard stare. "My use of Imperius curse should not be repeated to anybody. Ron, if you need to wail to your mum about my corruption, confine yourself to the other two curses."

Ron bit his lip. His face was red, but he kept his voice nearly steady as he said:

"I won't say anything if you promise you won't do it again -- any Dark Arts."

"No."

Ron flinched. "What do you mean, 'no'?"

"I will not promise," Harry said coldly. The despair on Ron's face made him softened his tone. "I will do whatever I need to do to defeat Voldemort, Ron. If the Imperius curse will help me, I will cast it. If the Killing curse will help me, I will cast it."

"And Cruciatuis?" Hermione goaded. "You could make a clean sweep of it."

"I can't cast Cruciatius," Harry confessed.

"Can't?"

"The Cruciatius Curse requires that you enjoy causing pain." Harry shook his head slightly. He knew that would require him to fundamentally change. "This is all risky, but that would destroy me."

"Imperius requires that you believe you should be obeyed."
Somehow, Harry was not surprised that Hermione knew this, when he had not.

"Guilty, I suppose," he said quietly. "At least, I can get there."

"And the Killing Curse?" Ron asked. "Maybe you couldn't cast that either. You don't like death."

"I expect the Killing curse requires only hatred beyond all thought. On the right target, I could do it easily." That, Harry reflected, had not been the most politic thing to say. He moved to take control of the conversation. "When you came to fetch me from the Potions lab --"

"You were frightening," Hermione completed.

"I was angry. You were interrupting. And I'd been working on the Imperius Curse. Draco is right, you see. It is different. You can get lost in Dark Arts. It's like a drug -- that power -- and Imperius itself -- everyone else is foolish, worthless...."

"He knew what you had been doing, didn't he?"

"Not immediately. But he felt me pull back when we saw the Quiris. They are terrifying. You can't imagine ...."

"I thought they were darling."

"You hadn't spent the evening practicing Dark Arts."

"Oh," Hermione looked confused. "But Draco ...."

"Hadn't done any Dark Arts in over a month. The aura of it wears off, apparently."

"But the list from his father..."

"He'd been ignoring it. Of course, Snape realized that as soon as Horsyr told him about the meeting, and he gave Draco some stick about it. The last night before leaving, Draco was strung up on practicing all of them, and angry at me for studying the Imperius curse --"

"Why?" Ron asked.

Harry hesitated. He wasn't quite sure of this, himself. Part of it had been simply his secrecy, but.... "I think he had been staying away from it for me ... to please me. Not that he'd been getting any credit for it, because I had no idea he'd stopped using Dark Arts." Harry shrugged. "Well, not until he knew I'd started."

"Does Dumbledore know about Snape?" Hermione questioned.

"Yes."

"Then why is Draco with him? I mean, if Snape is going to have him do Dark Arts --"

"Snape had him practice his father's list so Draco wouldn't get in trouble with Lucius. He was afraid if Draco's neglect was obvious, that Lucius would hurt Draco -- perhaps even kill him." Harry sighed at their disbelief. "He's perfectly capable of it. You heard about the Decernenti."

"Yeah, but no one said what it was," Ron complained.

"The Sifting. It is the formerly common Wizarding practice of dropping babies off towers to confirm that they are magical," Hermione said succinctly.
"Dropping ...?"

"Like this," Harry said. "You drop the baby. If it levitates or apparates, or somehow saves itself, it's magical and you raise it. If it splats, maybe it wasn't, and you haven't wasted any time on it."

"The majority of magical babies don't survive it," Hermione added.

Ron goggled at them. "Draco's father did this to three of his kids?"

"Draco's father did this to all of his kids," Harry corrected. He made an annoyed sound at the expression on Ron's face. "I keep telling you how lucky you are, idiot. You have a family, and they're mostly sane, and they love you."

"But that's just ... normal."

"Very good. It's not me, or him, or Sirius, or Lupin, or Neville. I'd bet my fortune it's not Snape, and it's clearly none of the Death Eaters' children, because those people are not sane."

"Look," Ron started. He stopped, and just stared at Harry, his mouth working occasionally, as if trying to form words.

"Look, what?"

"Do you love him? Malfoy, I mean?"

Now it was Harry's turn to be silent. He went to the window and looked out. You jumped out the window! but then, when I marry...

"I think so," he said finally. "And I'm already thinking that I would have been better off letting it go."

***********

Draco peered out of the fire in his cousin Isabelle's drawing room and waited nervously for the maid to fetch her. It would be possible for her to attack him, but he trusted that Snape would protect him, if anything happened. When Isabelle appeared, however, she was alone, and her wand was not visible.

"Draco!" she exclaimed. "Are you safe? I heard about your father...."

"Yes, well, he was chasing me at the time," Draco told her. "I refused to become a Death Eater."

A wide grin broke out on the face that Draco was accustomed to seeing set in polite disinterest. Quickly, Isabelle brought her hand to her mouth and turned away.

"It's fine if you're pleased," Draco said. "I'm at Hogwarts. I won't tell anyone if you approve of my insubordination."

Isabelle turned back, still beaming. "Oh, Draco! I am so pleased. My little cousin is too good to waste on that nasty thing!"

"I nearly did it, you know," Draco said, embarrassed.

"Not nearly enough did, I think!" The words tumbled out muddled, her accent suddenly stronger
than her careful words at his father's table, but Draco understood what she meant.

"Yes -- Anyway, I wanted to tell you my side of it, so you would know what people are talking about if Mother or anyone contacts you, and I also wanted to tell you about something else that happened, last week."

Quickly, Draco told her about his flight from the Death Eater meeting, and then about his father's misunderstanding and marriage plans for him and Marcella.

"So that's what that is about, if anyone advances the idea to you. I'm not the slightest bit interested, really ... but you know how Father gets. And if he gets acquitted, this time ... I don't think you should leave the girls there, anymore."

Isabelle nodded. She no longer looked pleased. "Thank you for telling me, Draco. I will discuss it with Marcella, of course."

"Of course," Draco agreed.

"May I contact you?"

"Not by Floo -- this is a temporary connection. You can owl me, though -- just Draco Malfoy, Hogwarts, Scotland."

Draco had a brief impulse to note that she would be better off with him controlling the family fortune than with Lucius controlling it. He restrained himself. She knew that, he was sure; there was no reason to risk appearing manipulative.

"Good night, cousin," he said instead. "Keep in touch, whatever happens."

She smiled again, though it was a mere ghost of her earlier one.

"I will, dragonet."
"So," Harry said. He couldn't manage anything else.

"So," Draco echoed. For a while, he was silent. Leaves rustled around them in the warm greenhouse. Harry watched Draco nervously. Draco was staring at him -- that cool, absorbing stare he sometimes had, as if he was memorizing Harry, or comparing him to some collection of data. The picnic basket sat forgotten by his feet.

Finally, Draco reached forward and brushed back a lock of Harry's hair. He smiled. "I always know just what to say, you know," he commented wryly.

Harry grinned. "Glad I don't have that sort of image to maintain."

Draco leaned forward. His lips brushed lightly against Harry's. He started to shift back, but Harry locked a hand around the back of his neck, keeping him close. Draco moved willingly forward into Harry's kiss.

For a few minutes, Harry thought of nothing but the pliant pressure of Draco's lips and the softness of the skin at the back of his neck. Draco pressed his tongue between Harry's lips, and Harry whimpered, opening them further. He slid his own tongue along Draco's, exploring, inviting, sparring playfully. Finally, they relaxed apart.

"That damn well better not have been an experiment," Draco growled, "because I think I'm bloody well in love."

"Is it all right if it was a successful experiment?" Harry questioned.

"Harry...." Draco said threateningly.

"Oh, yes ... you're in love." Harry said, disbelievingly. He looked appraisingly at Draco. "In love enough to tell your mother?"

"Are you my boyfriend?" Draco shot back.

"If you'll admit to me."

Draco growled. "Harry, you don't understand. I will tell Mother. But you matter to me. I'm going to tell her properly -- in the way that makes her likeliest to approve, and that's not blurring it out to her. It's going to take time. And you are a political figure, and I am a political figure, to a lesser extent. Walking across the castle gardens holding hands is not something to do without adequate preparation, and certainly not while my house is so angry at me." He frowned at Harry. "Try to pull some Slytherin sense into this."

"There's nothing to make me so irrevocably Gryffindor as romantic impulses."

"Yet, you will note that I am the only one who has said anything about love. You are trying to bargain with me."
Harry thought for a moment. "Did you mean that?" he asked.

"Mean what?"

"Do you love me?"

Draco ground his teeth. "Yes," he snarled.

"Well, don't sound happy about it, or anything."

"I'm bloody fucked. Why should I be happy?"

Harry reached out and took Draco's hand. Draco left it limp. Harry turned it over and stroked a finger softly across the palm. He watched Draco's face as the blond's eyes closed, and twitches of ecstasy moved across his features.

"I love you too," Harry said quietly. Draco's eyes flickered open in surprise. "You're beautiful and intelligent and intense, and ..." He took a deep breath. "It's frightening."

Draco grabbed him and pulled him close for a kiss far more violent than the first.

"If you love me," he said forcefully, "everything else will be okay."

"Now there's an absurd thing to say!" Harry exclaimed. He laughed, but it was mostly nervousness. "Is that your Slytherin sense?"

"I can finesse Mother, my cousins, the council," Draco insisted. "Everything but you." He looked at Harry until Harry relented and nodded seriously. With a relieved smile, Draco reached over to open the basket. A nearby bush growled threateningly.

"Ignore it," Draco said, starting to remove morsels of food. "They just sound like savage animals. It's their only defense. Sandwich?"

"Sure," Harry agreed, smiling slightly at Draco's unnecessary reassurance. He accepted the sandwich and took a bite. He still felt breathless and wobbly from that kiss. "So, how are things going with your family?" he managed.

"So far, I've only talked to Isabelle. I've made arrangements with Snape for a Floo-talk with Mother, after classes today, and I may try cousin Gerard next, but not right away. Isabelle surprised me -- she was thrilled when I said I turned down the Mark. It seems that she's never approved. I'm not going to risk Flooing her again until I've heard from her, as I told her about what happened with Marcella and father. She'll want to check up on me with Marcella, of course, so I need to wait until I know that wasn't suspiciously garbled, or something. As long as that comes out all right, I'd like to check with Isabelle on what she knows of other family members, before I go talking to them." Draco sniffed. "This is obviously more complex than I have ever noticed. Careless."

"What do you plan to tell your mother?"

"That Voldemort, however much she may like his goals, is a madman and is going to fail; that I am in favor with you and Dumbledore, and this will help us through Father's disgrace; and that Father, she must admit, had been rather falling apart lately. If she hasn't exploded after all of that, but is still wavering, I'll bring up the Decernenti."

"Sometimes you're a terrible bastard," Harry commented.
Draco looked at him in mock surprise. "Oh no -- I assure you, I am very much my father's son."

Harry snorted. "Rather what I meant," he said. He reached out a hand for Draco's, to show he didn't intend any offence. Draco let him lift the hand, but again, did not respond. Harry kissed along each the fingertips. He felt an unexpected thrill at the brush of skin under his lips, and went back to Draco's ring finger, first flicking his tongue out to push against the nail, then dragging his lower lip along the tip of the finger. Draco whimpered. Harry started sucking gently on the finger tip. Draco gasped.

"Aaa. You...! I suppose if I tried to rip your clothes off, you'd run away?"

Harry stopped what he was doing to free his mouth for a reply. His thumb began to trace circles on Draco's palm. From the tensing in Draco's face, he could tell this was pleasurably distracting. "Yeah, I probably would."

"Well, what am I supposed to do then?"

Harry laughed quietly, his voice low. "I seem to be doing well enough, with all your clothes still on. Haven't you any imagination?"

Harry never did finish his sandwich.

*********

After classes, Draco returned immediately to Snape's quarters. His time with Harry had been far too short. They had arranged to meet again, but not that night. Harry had Quidditch practice. With the Gryffindor/Slytherin match in less than three weeks and likely to decide the Quidditch Cup, both teams were anxious to practice as much as possible, leaving Harry and Draco with little free time in common. They had arranged another lunch meeting in the greenhouse, instead. Draco wondered what the game would be like now that they didn't hate each other, and his father was in no position to express his disappointment if Draco lost. He decided he no less wanted to win, but would probably enjoy the game more, in either case.

Snape was in his rooms, and opened the Floo immediately. This time, he sat with a hand grasping Draco's arm as Draco stuck his head into the flames. Draco did not mind the uncomfortably tight grip. He knew his spellfather was ready to pull him back if he was seized.

He went to the private parlor at Malfoy Manor, a grate which was accessible only to those of Malfoy blood. There was no one in sight.

"Mother!" he called.

Draco did not have long to wait. His mother arrived a moment later, in stunning (and rather revealing) silk house-robes that draped elegantly about her well-kept form. Draco wondered if she was entertaining a private guest, or merely enjoying her own beauty.

"Draco!" she exclaimed. "Darling! I have been hearing the silliest rumors."

"Most of which are true, I expect," Draco interrupted. His expression softened. "I'm sorry, Mother. I
never expected him to chase me all the way to Hogwarts."

"Draco," his mother said severely. "You have disgraced your family, both in the eyes of society, and those of our lord."

_and thus the negotiations start._ From the formality of the statement, Draco wondered if someone was listening. "Mother, really! We'd be better off if that man never existed. He will lose, you know. Then it will be me keeping you from disgrace."

"Consorting with mixed-bloods and Muggle-lovers will keep us from disgrace?" she challenged sharply.

_Ah, that was a bit more sincere._ "If you mean Harry Potter and Albus Dumbledore, yes, it will. I'm in high favor with both, right now, and _that_ will save the Malfoys when that madman who has driven father mad goes down."

"Your father is far from mad!" Narcissa snapped.

"Mother, he tried to kill me! And that's just the latest. You can't deny how unbalanced he's been since the Dark Lord returned. You do remember him making me practice the Cruciatus Curse on you, don't you?"

"I don't know _what_ you are talking about."

"I see."

"I will not accept a son who turns on his father...."

"Mother! First, I did not turn on him. I just ran, someplace he should have had the sense not to follow. Two years ago, he _would_ have had the sense not to follow. Second..." Draco hesitated. Gently, he said:

"You bore four babies, mother. Only one lived to see a second day. Would you abandon that one for the man who took the others?" He paused. "You are too old to bear him new heirs, you know. If he goes free, he will need a new wife."

His mother stared at him without response.

"I have always been a good son, haven't I? I will take care of you. Always." Draco smiled at his mother's silence. That she had not turned away with a small biting comment was a sign in his favor. "May I have a kiss goodbye, then? I'll call again Friday, so we can discuss matters when you are more prepared."

Slowly, Narcissa approached. He took in the soothing smell of her perfume as she bent near. She kissed him softly on the cheek, and then turned her head gracefully to permit him to do the same to her.

"In three days, then, Draco, sweet. Stay safe in school."

"I will, Mother."

**********
"I had been thinking --" Harry began, as he stared at a chicken leg from another picnic lunch.

Draco interrupted him with a sniff. "And we know where that leads," he commented.

After a momentary glare, Harry smiled cheerily at him. "Ooo! Do you have an inner eye too?" he chirped.

Draco smirked. "Inform me of my doom, Potter."

"I was thinking we could offer to calibrate the Quiris. I mean, if you're sure you won't need to do any Dark Arts in the next month or so."

"Calibrate?"

Harry was surprised at the eager look on Draco's face.

"Well, yeah. I haven't seen any exact limit for how long they detect the aura. I don't think anyone ever determined it. Now, you did a large number of Dark Arts spells over the course of a week. I did one particular spell, several times over the course of a month. We could go see the Quiris every few days, and determine at what time they stop looking terrifying, and at what time they accept each of us."

"Great!" Draco said. "Let's talk to Horsyr after classes this afternoon."

"I wonder if Colin would loan me his camera."

"Why would -- oh, to see what they look like impartially?"

"Yes. And -- well, I assume the difference won't show through a photograph, but it's worth checking."

"We'll show it around," Draco suggested cheekily. "I'll show Professor Snape, you show Hermione."

"Now, if it does work...."

"I can just imagine how it would be passed around the Gryffindor Common Room," Draco drawled. "Lavender, dear, is there something you'd like to tell us?"

Harry choked. "As if Lavender would think of doing Dark Arts!"

"Perhaps to keep her skin perfect," Draco said slyly. "Mother could teach her a thing or two."

"And what would happen in the Slytherin Common Room?" Harry prodded.

"Oh, the usual art of subterfuge," Draco replied airily. He frowned. "Not that I've been back there, yet."

"I saw Crabbe eating near you, this morning," Harry commented. "Zabini's been fighting with you, hasn't he?"

"I think Blaise will be all right, in time. The matter has exceeded Vincent's limited mental powers. I am me, therefore what I do is correct, but Gregory's gone, and that was my fault, therefore I was wrong. He doesn't know whether to try to kill me or to carry on as if nothing has happened." Draco shrugged. "And I'm not trying to get him to be with me, which confuses him still more." Draco looked away. "A few of the younger students have been watching Quidditch practices, so they can
just happen to exchange a few sentences with me while I'm leaving. They want to know why I did it."

"Because they agree, or disagree?"

"In most cases, because they're trying to figure that out. I've been talking with them as much as I can without it being obvious that I want to talk to them. I don't need that sort of trouble."

"Talking to younger students?" Harry asked, confused.

"Being seen as a subversive influence."
All through his afternoon classes, Harry worried about seeing the Quiris again. Perhaps he should have suggested they start later – he knew how terrifying they would look. In his preoccupation, the cushion he transfigured from a rock was covered with leering, fanged faces that would have been quite impressive if he had intended them. Worse yet, one of them bit Professor McGonagall when she tried to examine it.

He ended up staying after the lesson to explain that it had been an accident, but that merely moved her from angry to worried, and still kept him five minutes late. He hurried along the corridors, afraid that by the time he got to the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom, Draco would already have finished advancing his idea to Horsyr. Instead, Draco was standing in the aisle looking bored while Professor Horsyr talked with two Slytherin third years. The younger students were obviously having problems understanding the difference between desire and consent or will.

Harry could understand the difficulty -- he and Draco had hashed this out between them while studying for a defense essay in January, but their progress had gone in something more like a spiral than a line. Understanding didn't help. After three minutes of waiting, he lost patience.

"May I have a go, Professor?" he asked.

She gave him a curious look, but nodded. "Please do, Mr. Potter."

Harry turned to the students, who looked a bit nervous. "Now imagine," he said, "that two younger students were being bloody irritating prats, and I would just love to see them turn into frogs. Is that, then, my will?"

The third years looked at each other nervously.

"Well, yes," one said.

"No, it is not," Harry growled. "It is my desire. If it was my will, I would pull out my wand and DO IT. Because my desire is subject to my will, I do not consent to do it, and you are not green and bouncy. Is that clear?"

"But if I cast Imperio on you ...." the braver third year squeaked. Draco snorted in contempt. Harry laughed.

"No one, prat, has ever controlled me with the Imperius Curse. Voldemort couldn't do it."

The third-years flinched at the sound of the name, and Draco sauntered forward. "Relax, Seymour -- Harry doesn't bite ... much." He turned his head slightly towards Harry. "I believe Seymour had been about to go into the argument about how you might more readily accept being controlled by someone who wanted you to turn them into frogs."

"Certainly," Harry said. Repeating the highlights of old arguments felt rather like he thought it might to be in a play. "My will is stronger when it is in agreement with my desires. So yes, it would be easier, just as it would be easier to stop me from running uphill than to stop me from running downhill. That does not make my action less distinct from the terrain."

Draco smirked, no doubt remembering that analogy from when they had come up with it, and he
made shooing motions at the third years. "Run along, now. You've had your answers, twice over. Come talk to me later, if you need a third round."

The third years did not quite run, but they were not slow about leaving. Harry suppressed the urge to pull out his wand and toy with it as they retreated. Once they were in the hallway, Professor Horsyr waved her wand at the door, and it swung closed and latched with an audible click.

"So," she said. "Here are two of my more ambiguous students ... what do you want to discuss?"

Harry and Draco looked at each other nervously.

"Well," Harry said, "I'm sure Dumbledore has talked to you...." He faltered. Professor Horsyr did not seem moved to help. She watched him with a steady interest.

"The thing is," said Draco, "we've both been doing Dark Arts, but in very different ways."

"He did a whole lot of different spells over a short period of time," Harry said.

Draco's eyes narrowed. "And he did one powerful one, not very many times, but repeatedly, over the space of several weeks."

Horsyr looked deliberately at Harry. A trace of contempt hardened the sorrow in her features as she said:

"And willingly."

Harry inclined his head slightly in acknowledgment.

"So we were thinking," Draco pressed on, "that this would be a good opportunity to calibrate the Quiris."

This was clearly not anything Horsyr had expected. Her eyebrows rose. "Calibrate?"

"See when they stop looking horrifying," Harry said. "See when they accept us."

"We both met the Quiris shortly before ... before these latest episodes, so we have a marker for previous interactions."

"And our last castings were only a few hours apart, so we can judge the effects of quantity." Harry looked over at Draco. "You know we sound like Fred and George."

"We do not. We're both using complete sentences. And I could never sound like a Weasley." Draco shuddered theatrically and looked over at Horsyr. "So... should we do it?"

Horsyr frowned slightly. "I suppose I should have some consolation prize for one of my most promising students taking up Dark Arts." She regarded them speculatively. "Still, this information has many different uses."

"You can't restrict it to just those you trust," Harry argued. "It's not possible. You need someone who has done Dark Arts. Perhaps you could test the Quiris' reactions to prisoners, but then you don't get the view from the other end. And without that, you can't say what their reactions actually mean. For example, you and Dumbledore treated me as innocent, but I had cast Umbram Jubo twice before you tested me. Had the headmaster actually questioned me, I might have confessed. I was feeling terribly guilty at how hurt he looked. Then you brought the Quiri out, and once I'd gotten over how cute it was, I was just angry at him."
"And you started studying the Imperius Curse when?"

"I approached my tutor at my next opportunity, about a week later. The next week I practiced countering the Imperius curse, but it wasn't until a week after that that I cast it."

"And then you cast it...?"

"Once that session, again a few days later, several times a few days later -- a week from the first -- and the last time a week and a half later, in the wee hours of Sunday morning."

"Did Dumbledore's actions, or mine, prompt you to do this?"

Harry had to think about that, for a minute. The level of distrust certainly hadn't dissuaded him. "No," he said slowly. "It was the Death Eater attack in London. Though I might not have dared, if I had confessed to the earlier spell."

"Why should a Death Eater attack prompt you to learn an Unforgivable Curse?"

"It's my job to destroy Voldemort," Harry said plainly. "That is all anyone expects of me, really. It's time for me to stop fooling around and do it. I wanted a way to turn Nagini against the Death Eaters, to provide a distraction and clear the field, a bit."

"I do not know whether or not it is your fate to destroy Voldemort, but I do know that it will do us no good if you immediately replace him."

"I don't want to rule the world."

"After casting the Imperius Curse a few times?"

"Oh, then I'd take it. But I didn't know that until I tried it." Pretending it didn't matter, Harry shrugged. "That's one thing no one ever tried to explain about Dark Arts. Except Professor Snape. Perhaps you really need to have done them to understand it."

Horsyr looked uncharacteristically sour. "I understand it," she said. "I'm never certain whether it dissuades or entices more students."

"Oh. I suppose that's a point. Still, it's better to have true information, isn't it? Because now I wonder what else I wasn't told, and you'll never stop me from wondering that, no matter what you tell me." Harry was surprised by the cold surge of anger that underlaid his words.

"Can we get back to the question?" Draco asked, with a warning look at Harry. "Should we calibrate the Quiris -- remember?"

"How do you propose to do this?" Horsyr countered.

"We meet them once now," Draco said, "though we all know it will be unpleasant, just so we can each record detailed reactions. Then again each week, recording reactions, until we start to see a decrease in the negative reaction, one way or the other, or until we've gotten to four weeks, if that comes first. Then every few days, going to every day."

Horsyr nodded. "I think it would be valuable." She smiled a challenge at each of them. "Ready?"

Harry shuddered. "Let's get it over with."
The meeting with the Quiris was horrible. It was all Harry could do to keep from pulling out his wand and hexing the creatures, and Horsyr actually did need to cast a few calming spells to keep them from attacking Harry and Draco. She quickly motioned the two students outside, and then followed them.

"I'm sorry. It's one of their more animal states -- reasoning with them is like reasoning with a child in mid-panic. I'll ask if I can put them in harnesses, next time."

Draco nodded. He was still panting. "Good."

"Terrifying, aren't they?" Harry asked wryly.

"Sweet Artemis, yes," Draco said. "I understand, now." He shuddered. "I wanted one of those ... things?"

"Your current perception is somewhat distorted," Horsyr said.

"Or perhaps it is truer," Harry countered. "Or perhaps neither is true."

"I want a photograph," Draco said.

"Yes," Harry agreed. He looked at Horsyr. "Do you have any pictures of them?"

"No."

Harry nodded. He didn't want to ask about taking one. Instead, he looked at Draco. "Let's go outside. I need a walk."

Draco nodded gratefully. "I need that, too."

In Harry's current shaken state, he longed for unrestricted space. They stumbled downstairs, still preoccupied with images of reaching, clawed hands and wide, fanged mouths. Harry hauled open the door and held it for Draco. They went down to the lake, and into the cover of the trees and bushes that grew alongside it. When they came to the first open spot, Draco set his arms against a tall tree and leaned his face into them. Harry thought he looked like he was about to count for hide and seek.

"Fuck, those things were scary," Draco said. "I've been wanting and wanting to see them again ... I wasn't ready for that."

Harry stepped up behind Draco and wrapped his arms around him. Draco's body was warm against the front of his own, and he wasn't sure that this was a good idea, but he needed it too much to pull away. "I'm here."

Draco's pleased murmur was overrun by the sound of a twigs breaking back along the path. Annoyed, Harry stepped back from Draco, and Draco turned. They were both standing with arms crossed over their chests, looking, Harry thought, probably disturbingly similar, when the intruders arrived.

"Fuck off, Blaise," Draco said immediately.

Blaise Zabini stepped forward, regardless. Two younger students followed him into the open space.

"We want to talk to you," he said.
Draco looked hesitantly at the younger students. Harry estimated that they were fourth years. The girl might be older. "Talk away then," he said carelessly.

"Without him here."

"Anything you can say to me, you can say in front of Harry."

"About the Dark Lord?"

"Why not?" Harry challenged. "I probably know him better than you do. I've met him four times in person, and more than that magically."

"If I name Death Eaters, you will betray them."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Avery, Crabbe," he started, as if reciting leaders of the Goblin Rebellions, "Nott, Macnair, Pettigrew.... If you want to count them still, Malfoy, Goyle, Lestrange, Crouch and Karkaroff. Want more? No one has ever believed me. Snape -- what can I say about him?" He laughed slightly. Perfect, no matter what he knows. After all, what can I say? "I know names, Zabini."

"You can make them up, you mean." Zabini spat. "Bastard."

"I'm not making anything up. Voldemort called them in front of me, confident that I wouldn't leave alive. He's an idiot."

"You watch your mouth, Potter!" one of the younger students shouted. "The Dark Lord is more clever than you could ever hope to be."

Harry caught his first reply, and took two breaths. He felt almost like he was back with the Quiri, but without the fear. Slytherin children could be as hostile as they wanted to.

"He's very clever," he acquiesced, "but a clever madman." He shook his head at the fourth-year boy's spluttering fury. "He could have killed me a dozen times over -- but he had to make it spectacular. So I got away. Repeatedly."

"He will kill you in the end," the boy said fiercely. "You can't hide here forever."

"No," Harry said calmly, "He won't. Voldemort will lose; not because he is not clever or powerful -- he is both -- but because vengeance is more important to him than winning." My, this has become my little speech, hasn't it? Educate Voldemort supporters about their leader. I suppose someone has to do it, and "but that's not nice" won't get us anywhere.

Zabini had leaned back against a tree, his arms crossed over his chest, to watch.

"Around you," he amended.

Harry scowled. "Around Muggles, too. He only wants to kill them because the father who abandoned him was one."

Zabini smirked. "Now you're lying."

"I am not! When I was twelve, I met a memory he'd left from when he was sixteen, and he appealed to me as another half-blood--"

"You filthy liar!" the boy shrieked. Zabini caught at his arm to keep him back, taking one wild swing to his ribs, and watched Harry with narrowed eyes over the younger boy's shoulder. "Let me go! I'll -
"Shut it," Zabini snapped at him. He looked scornfully at Draco. "You don't believe this shite, do you?"

Draco shrugged. "I'm staying neutral on that particular point, until someone produces evidence. Harry's certainly right about one thing, though. The Dark Lord is a madman. In my opinion, my father has become steadily less sane since his return. Two years ago, he would not have been so reckless as to follow me to Dumbledore's office while trying to kill me, no matter what I had done. I cannot feel guilt over his arrest. Such stupidity deserves the consequences."

"And why did you do it?" Zabini asked intently. "Because you believed, or ...?" His eyes flicked significantly to Harry.

"Because Harry's evaluation is correct, and Voldemort will lose," Draco said fiercely. "Or did you think I would leave my family for a handsome boy who won't put out?"

Blaise smirked. "Not what I heard."

"Oh, he'll tease, well enough," Draco retorted. He glanced at Harry, who tried to conceal his anger at the dismissal. "We're friends, really."

The quiet Slytherin, a girl, spoke, addressing herself to Draco as if Harry wasn't there. "Have you seen significant military weakness in the Dark Lord's forces?"

Draco shook his head. "Only command weaknesses. But the strongest forces in the world will do no good if they are poorly commanded. He wastes his followers on battles without gain."

"And that is a real loss Voldemort suffered with the capture of your father," Harry contributed, jumping back into the debate. "He may be less sane than he had been, but he's still better at planning than Voldemort." He met Blaise's eyes and smiled knowingly. "I will win."

"And if you have to dirty your hands?"

Harry smirked. "Why should I? I have Draco."

Draco jerked back, gave him a moment's hard stare, and then forced a shrug. Zabini's mouth was still open.

"Don't gawk, Zabini," Harry said coolly. Damn! Why did I say that? I knew he was going to say I was just a friend. It shouldn't make me snipe back. "I am no one's innocent little boy. I could dirty my own hands, if I had to."

After another few minutes of pointed conversation, Harry stood listening to the Slytherins' footsteps retreating through last autumn's leaves. Draco sat on the mossy ground with his legs crossed and his back straight.

"Please tell me," he said acidly, "that that was political."

"Of course it was political," Harry answered, kneeling down behind him. He set his hands on Draco's shoulders and leaned forward to say lightly, "I was trying to impress a lot of Slytherins into
believing I'm a better bet than Voldemort. Shouldn't I be ruthless?"

He shifted back and started massaging Draco's shoulders, trying to remember what he had seen Hermione do to Ron, or felt her do to him.

"I suppose," Draco admitted, "but why impress them?"

He sounded petulant, and Harry worked on Draco's muscles while he thought. He didn't have much to compare with, but he thought they were pretty tight.

"Well," he said finally, "who else is going to do it? Dumbledore will talk morals and fairness and kindness at them, and get nothing but contempt, and my house will mostly just look down on them, so they hate us back. If I can say the truth so that they'll listen, shouldn't I?"

"Was that true, then?" Draco said coldly.

"Mostly." Harry hesitated. "You know I didn't mean what I said about you, right? I mean, I can't very well tell him I've done Dark Arts and am quite certain I can kill. I just meant to sound ... sound ruthless, and, well, cool, I suppose."

"Well, perhaps I'll tell him you're a good lay, then."

"Look, I'm sorry. I know I can't order you around, and I didn't mean to imply that." Harry laughed slightly. "I'm in a mood, I think. The Quiris, or perhaps just that intimidating the third-years went so well." He bit his lip. "Hearing you say we're just friends."

"Well, don't leave Blaise with the impression you're using me -- I think he may genuinely like me."

Harry nodded. "Perhaps I better let him corner me for a private talk."

"To say what?"

Harry leaned his cheek against Draco's warm shoulder. "That I genuinely like you," he whispered.
Harry wasn't at all surprised when Blaise Zabini was glaring at him during dinner. He tried to make things easy by leaving the room alone, but Blaise didn't follow. During the next few days, this situation continued. Harry could tell Blaise was studying him, but he never came close enough to address, except during classes, when they were surrounded by other students. On Friday of the next week, Blaise was still watching, and they still hadn't spoken.

"Are you coming to Hogsmeade with us, this time, or going with Malfoy?"

At the query, Harry tore his attention from the Slytherin table to look at Ron. Hermione was leaning over to catch his reply.

"Draco isn't allowed to go --" he began.

"What?"

"Because he'll be a major witness in the trial." Harry shrugged. "I offered to loan him my cloak, but he's not particularly interested in risking it."

Ron was smiling, although he appeared to be trying not to. "Too bad," he said insincerely. "So you'll spend the day with us?"

"I'd been going to, but --"

"Harry! You are not staying --"

"But Snape's being sent away on an errand, and won't be back until late. So Draco and I can finally - -"

"You're always with Dr-- Malfoy."

"Not recently! But yes, I haven't done much with you and Hermione, this year. So ..." Harry shrugged. "Well, I'll walk in with you, and spend the morning, but I'm coming back early."

Ron looked like he was going to protest, but Hermione yanked his arm down, as if he couldn't speak if he couldn't gesture.

"That's wonderful, Harry. We'll be happy to have you along."

Harry slipped into the Chamber of Secrets with a collection of sweets, a package of frivolities from various stores, and four pint bottles of butterbeer. Draco was seated on the now-furry inflatable couch, seemingly intent on his schoolwork. Harry felt a smile stretching at his cheeks.

"Hi."

Draco looked up a bit coolly. Harry wasn't surprised. He remembered how it felt to be kept at school for his own protection.
"Did you enjoy your excursion?"

"Loads," Harry answered, as if he hadn't noticed Draco's resentful tone. "It's fun to have someone to shop for, though I expect it would be more fun to have you along."

Draco, as Harry had expected, perked up immediately. "What did you get me?"

"Oh, just little things," Harry said casually. He sat down next to Draco and tossed the first package at him. "Sweets, of course, with lots of Tease Toffees, because we both like to chase."

"You can get those anytime," Draco said stormily.

"Treats for Susara, too, of course -- I couldn't neglect her."

"Yes, Harry. Now what did you get me?"

"Two color-changing ink pots, for notes -- or papers, if the professor doesn't mind that sort of thing." (Snape, of course, insisted that all essays be done in black ink.) "With matching self-cleaning quills."

The quill he handed Draco was quite beautiful -- the shop-clerk had said it was a fwooper feather. Draco began to look mollified. "And the stationer just happened to have two books bound in the undyed skin of a white goat --" (This, of course, had nothing to do with an owl Harry had sent several days earlier.) "-- so we can redo some old work."

Harry didn't mention the tiny emerald that he had secreted in his bag. That was for the next time Susara shed her skin. He sat back and opened two bottles of butterbeer. "Cale. What do you want to do first?"

For answer, Draco turned and kissed him.

For a first item, it took rather a long time. Harry hadn't understood, a few short weeks ago, how much one could spend in kissing. Draco's hands shifted uncertainly down his body before settling at the small of his back. Warmth spread out from them as Harry heated at the touch, and he put the energy into binding through Draco's mouth. It was a long time of lips, soft and firm, and agile tongues, and wet warmth, and perfect, blinding, trusting desire before their mouths parted, and Draco, with a slight moan, leaned into Harry's chest.

"God. My brain melted."

"Good thing I'm not working for Voldemort, then."

"Mm."

Slyly, Draco brought his hand around and slid it under the waistband of Harry's jeans.

"Draco..." Harry pulled awkwardly back, and Draco brought his hand out.

"You don't have to do anything."

"Just... no, don't, okay?"

"Why not?"

"Because..." Harry wrapped his arms more firmly around Draco and tried to think how to explain without sounding afraid. "Look, this is almost too much. Let me get used to it."

"Scared?"
"No, I... It's just too good to waste." That was it, he decided. He finally met Draco's eyes. "I don't want to rush through it."

Draco rubbed his forehead. "I cannot believe I think that sounds sweet. I'm going to explode of frustration, you know, wondering if it's time yet."

Harry shifted back, daring a parting pat at one cheek of Draco's arse. "Look, not this term, all right? Sex, I mean. So you don't have to wonder."

"Marvelous." Draco scowled. "I think I preferred suspense." He smirked. "I'll tell Blaise you really don't."

Harry shrugged. "If you must."

"I still don't think you've explained that adequately." Draco sat up, his back straight, and focused intently on Harry. "Not the part about me -- that whole scene."

Harry frowned. He had been thinking about this during the walk back to school.

"Professor Dumbledore," he said, "noticed that two of my three Dark Arts spells were control spells. He suggested I might want to combine my reputation with what he called my 'not-inconsiderable charisma' to find what obedience I could draw without it. I've never really tried to do that, though -- I mean, sometimes people follow me, but I haven't worked at making them, except for the Quidditch team, and I have a lot of experience with Gryffindor Quidditch players."

Draco snorted. "And if you do draw in a group of young Slytherins? What will you have them do?"

"I don't know. Just not become Death Eaters, I suppose."

"Oh no." Draco shook his head. "Have a plan, or give it up. If you get them, you better have orders for them. Cecilius, especially." He twisted back slightly. "That fourth-year boy, Hugh Cecilius."

"Maybe I better give it up, then," Harry admitted. "It was an impulse thing."

Draco laughed. "I'll talk to them sometime, and see what they thought of you."

"Are things getting better in Slytherin?"

Draco shrugged. "I can't tell. A little, I suppose; people have switched to staring curiously, rather than glaring, and my notes weren't 'accidentally' destroyed at all, this week. How are things for you?"

Harry shrugged as well. "Oddly better with Ron, and Seamus has been looking quite smug. I keep expecting a howler from Sirius, but it hasn't happened yet. I wonder if he hasn't heard about that kiss, or if he's not that angry, or if he's just too angry to write."

Draco's eyebrows came down as he frowned. "Are you sure he's okay? He won't hurt you, I mean?"

Harry started. He hadn't thought about how his worries might appear to Draco. "No, of course not." He grinned. "He's just loud. And I hate disappointing him."

"Because he's 'loud'?"

Draco made the word sound like a euphemism. Harry knew it could be, but it wasn't here. "Because he has enough problems. He deserves to have something work out, you know? I mean, his life has been a mess since my parents were killed, and I just wish I could make it better, but I can't. I can't
give him twelve years back; I can't even give him his freedom."

"Perhaps you should write to him, then." Draco rolled his eyes. "You'd get it over with, at least."

He opened a second butterbeer and looked contemplatively at Harry. "So, if you won't have sex, exactly what does being your boyfriend entail?"

"Er..." Harry tried to think. Draco was smirking at him, in satisfaction at his discomfort, he expected. "Rather like being friends, with snogging?" Harry tried.


Harry laughed. "Yeah, right!"

Harry was still feeling contemplative when he went back to Gryffindor after dinner. He took out a length of parchment, and wondered what to say to Sirius. Dear Sirius, you remember how I killed Bellatrix Lestrange? Dear Sirius, if Dumbledore told you that I have been studying Unforgivables, please don't worry. Dear Sirius: I hope you don't mind that I kissed another boy in front of the entire school.... He sighed.

While he was staring at the still-blank parchment, the door opened. Glad of the distraction, Harry looked over.

"Hi, Dean."

Dean's face tightened, but not in any identifiable way. "Just getting a book."

"I wouldn't mind company. I'm just not-writing a letter...."

But Dean had grabbed his book and heading out the door again. Harry returned to scowling at his parchment. After a few minutes, he grabbed his bag and went down to the Common Room.

The problem was, he decided as he sat there, ostensibly working on a Transfiguration assignment, that he was too accustomed to ignoring people. Now that he was paying attention to Dean, it was obvious that his roommate was avoiding him. In fact, there were several people who might be avoiding him -- who had edged around his space rather than tell him to move his books -- and one of the chairs next to his was empty, even though it was a prime spot, right by the fire on a rainy spring night. While he was staring glumly at the chair, Ron came and planted himself in it, and Hermione landed, giggling, in Ron's lap.

"All right there, Harry?"

"Mm." Harry looked desperately at his essay for something he might have been thinking about. "Just trying to remember the term Professor McGonagall used for last week's demonstration -- you know, when the silver went nearly molten without actually being hot?"

"Plastification," Hermione said promptly. "Honestly, Harry! How can you forget that?"

They talked about classes, and he got safely through the moment, but he caught more than one person watching furtively and developing conspicuous interest in something else as soon as Harry looked back. He excused himself early for the privacy of his bed.
There, he stared up at the canopy and thought. He'd told Draco that the Gryffindors didn't care, but perhaps some of them did. It had to be about Draco -- no one knew about anything else. Well, unless it was about killing Bellatrix, but that seemed unlikely. Most people had seemed impressed by that. Harry thought he would have more respect for his house if it had been the other way round.

He wasn't even *doing* anything with Draco! Well, he was doing *some* things, but not much, compared to what he suspected Ron did with Hermione, or what Dean claimed to do with his latest girlfriend.

He dreamed about Draco. He dreamed about *fucking* Draco, although his subconscious seemed even less clear on how that might work than he was -- as soon as he woke, he was sure the position was impossible, but Draco had been practically glowing, and when Harry moved, he found that he was alarmingly relaxed, and his sheets were sticky.

He cast a cleaning spell. It helped physically, but not beyond that. Harry hoped he hadn't cried out, like Ron sometimes did in his sleep. For a while, he lay staring at the canopy. His head hurt. He wanted Draco, and everyone knew it. Well, everyone at school, apparently. The question of his godfather kept coming back to him. What exactly did Sirius know? His letter hadn't sounded like he knew anything past the official story.

Exhaustion, Harry decided reluctantly, wasn't going to be near enough to get him back to sleep.

*Dear Sirius,*

* I'm not sure what you heard about the night that Bellatrix died. I did a lot of things that you might object to, that night. The one that I can't feel sorry about is the one that my house seems most upset by -- I kissed a friend of mine. Not a girl friend -- another boy. I hope you aren't disappointed. I don't know if Dumbledore told you that, or about any of the rest of it. If you have to be angry at me, I'd rather it was about one of the other things. You said you weren't angry, but I'm not sure you know anything except that I killed Bellatrix Lestrange. I hate wondering.

*Please write back.*

*Harry*

He slipped on his invisibility cloak and walked up to the Owlery while he was still sufficiently groggy to send the letter. When he got back, he was already half-regretting the post.

He woke up to Ron pushing him.

"Breakfast, Harry! Wake up!"

Harry shook his head, trying to clear a morass of incompatible thoughts. Slowly, he sat. He was still wearing a shirt over his pajamas.

Dean threw on his robes over a half-buttoned shirt. "Don't be disgusting before I leave the room," he said, but he was already leaving as he said it. Harry blinked.
"Um, sorry?" he said to Ron. "I'll tell him we're not--"

"He knows, well enough," Ron returned, glaring at the door. "He's just being a git." He looked ruefully at Harry. "You were out, last night."

"I went to the Owler y to send a letter." Harry rubbed the back of his neck. "You know -- one of those things I might have had too much sense to send in the morning."

"To Malfoy?"

"To Snuffles."

Ron's eyes widened. "Oh." After giving Harry an encouraging pat on the shoulder, he stood up. "Look, Harry -- I know it's a mess, but the Gryffindor/Slytherin game was just announced, and it's in only two weeks. You need to have breakfast and call a practice."

Harry practically levitated out of bed.

During the afternoon, he tried to talk with Seamus about Dean, but Seamus brushed it off. "You can't expect no trouble at all, Harry. Just carry on like you usually do, and he'll get over it."

Alone, Harry walked along the lakeshore, stones rattling underfoot, and a raw wind pulling at his hair. The problem was, he thought, that he could not recall how he usually carried on. Nothing seemed normal, now, even if he doggedly ignored thinking about Bellatrix. He had a boyfriend, except that he didn't, and he had got Snape in trouble instead of the other way round, and he was dreading hearing from Sirius and finding out if he had driven away his closest link to his parents.

He looked up and back towards a half-repaired greenhouse, and saw a skinny, dark-haired boy watching him. Zabini, he decided. Deliberately, he turned and walked towards his watcher, who did not come to meet him, but did not retreat, either. Five feet from the Slytherin, Harry stopped, and was greeted with a cool nod.

"Potter."

"Zabini." Harry shook hair back from his face. "I think we have something to discuss."

"Optimistic of you."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Look, I wanted to apologize for the other day. I was in a horrible mood from a run-in with Horsyr, and I was being a complete arse."

"I don't think I'm the one you need to apologize to."

"Oh, I did to Draco minutes later. Just ... Look, I don't want to leave you with the impression that I'm using him. I--" Harry kept himself from saying "love." "He matters to me."

"Because you have him well in hand."

"I don't think I do, really. But whether I do or not, I'll take good care of him. I promise."

Zabini shrugged, and took a step back, but his shoulders, which had been held high, stayed down.

"That's hard to believe, but I'll give you a chance." Zabini snorted. "Not like I have a choice. Just keep in mind that I'm watching you."
Harry shrugged. "All right, then. Likewise, I can't stop you."

That evening, he and Draco had their second meeting with the Quiris. They looked just as terrible, and reacted as badly to his and Draco's presence, but both of them were more prepared for it, this time, and Horsyr had them in harnesses that kept them close to her. Her touches seemed to calm them slightly.

Afterwards, Harry led the way to an unused classroom, and without preamble, pulled Draco against him and into a kiss. It went on for minutes, and when their mouths finally parted, Draco sighed pleasantly.

"Mm." He cuddled against Harry. "You're getting more comfortable."

"Yeah." Harry laughed. "Well, I seem to be getting the hang of this kissing thing, anyway. I still think that if you want wild sex, you'd need to lead me into it slowly."

"What if I want very tame sex?" Draco asked innocently.

"Prat. Not this term."

"May I touch?"

Harry was ready to move Draco's hands from his flies, but Draco stroked up, rather than down, exploring the front of Harry's robe until one hand was over each of his nipples. Harry was startled by how good the slight motions of his fingers felt there.

"Um..." Harry tried to think. "That -- yeah, you can ... do that."
Tea

Chapter Notes

This chapter contains the original (June 2003) ending. When I decided I was doing a sequel, I went a little further with this story, so there are three more chapters after this one.

Tea

It was several days before Sirius wrote back, and the letter was terse.

Harry,

We obviously need to talk, but I can't come to Hogwarts for a visit, and neither can our mutual friend. Once you're out of school, I'll come get you at the first opportunity. We can spend a day together.

Thanks for writing.

Snuffles

Harry supposed that was more encouraging than not -- Sirius at least was still interested in seeing him -- but it was hard to tell much beyond that.

On Friday afternoon, Harry was waiting for Draco by the corner of one of the more ornamental greenhouses. He hoped Draco would be back in the Slytherin dormitories next year. The relationship he was establishing with Snape seemed amicable, but it was definitely structured along the lines of parent and child, and Snape's subtle affection was coupled with a distinct decrease in the latitude he permitted Draco both in lessons and outside of them, so Draco didn't dare sneak out at night. He and Harry made the most of their free daylight hours, but that didn't provide them with nearly enough time alone.

Being discreet was a problem as well. Harry doubted he hid the change in his feelings as well as Draco did -- he could easily forbear from touching him, but he frequently found his gaze lingering longer than was appropriate. In private, at least he was the one who set limits on their physical activities.

While Harry was reflecting on this, he saw Draco walking down from the castle. Harry moved around the corner, entered the greenhouse, and quickly checked that it was still otherwise unoccupied. That settled, he leaned against the wall on the far side of a large, but harmless, vine, and waited for Draco.
When Draco entered, he looked around for a moment, and then started walking along the path through the greenhouse. Harry let him draw even with his own position before stepping casually forward. Draco jumped impressively, nearly knocking over some potted succulents on the other side of the path.

"Harry!" he fumed. "Can't you ever just say 'hello'?"

"Hello," Harry said mischievously.

"Well!" Draco said, crossing his arms over his chest, "perhaps I won't tell you anything."

"Don't be cross, Dragon," Harry coaxed. "I made certain I wasn't across from anything that bit."

Draco laughed. "Kind of you, I'm sure," he commented. Harry pulled him back behind the vine, where they were shielded from the sight of anyone entering, and kissed him.

"So, what's your news?" he asked, a few minutes later.

"Oh..." Draco smirked. "I was talking about you with Mother.... a repeat of last week's discussion of how did I expect to survive this. Except this time I told her we were involved."

"And?"

"Well, she asked if I would still marry, and I said 'of course, mother,' at which she relaxed and asked me if I would like her to make up a new list of acceptable daughters of families 'favoring the opposition' and I quite gratefully accepted. Mother loves a challenge, especially one that involves social visits. By the end of the floo, she was in a flurry of plans and happy as a niffler at a carnival. She seems to have decided, quite on her own, that if I am in love with a man, I will be too preoccupied with him to interfere with her influences on my wife and children."

"Whereas you have told me this is strictly temporary." Harry could not restrain a scowl.

"Harry, I must have heirs." Draco looked haughtily determined. "And whatever Mother may think, when I have children at home, they will have my attention, and their mother will, as well."

"I've got to respect that, I suppose."

"You should do the same. You are the only living Potter, and you should have at least one son, to carry on the name, and at least one other child, to maintain the wizarding population."

"With a pureblood girl," Harry said mockingly.

"That would be best, but Hermione would be better than nothing."

Harry began to kiss him again. It was, he reflected, the easiest way to shut him up. Draco's hands slipped slowly down to his hips, then pulled him tightly close into his own body, his groin shifting slowly while he held Harry's still. Harry broke the kiss, gasping.

"Come on, now," Draco purred. "Rubbing isn't on your list."

Harry panted. "No, but..." The evening after the Quiris, Draco had flustered him by demanding a complete list of all activities that qualified. Harry had eventually settled on "penetration, anywhere, nakedness, and anything that brings one of us to orgasm." He was aware this left a large number of things they had not yet done. Certainly, rubbing together, with their robes still on, yet, was well within this, he just hadn't expected it to be so...
"I don't mind," he said aloud. "It was just a little intense, that's all."

"I think we should get a bit more intense," Draco returned. "Since we only have a year."

Harry couldn't think of anything to say that wouldn't sound resentful, so he kept quiet.

"If we still want," Draco said wistfully, "we could get back together when our youngest leave for school."

"It won't happen," Harry said. "Not if I marry. I wouldn't marry someone I didn't want to stay with."

Draco snorted. "Nothing like limiting your options!"

While Harry was wondering how to respond to that, he heard the greenhouse door open. They froze. Slowly, Draco eased away, and Harry peered between the huge, heart-shaped leaves of the vine. To his surprise, the person at the door was Professor Dumbledore. The headmaster's bright purple robes contrasted violently with the vivid green of the plants behind him. Harry stayed still. He had not spoken at length to the headmaster since confessing his experiments in Dark Arts, and he found himself feeling uneasy.

"Good afternoon, Draco," Dumbledore called brightly. Draco had stepped out into the pathway. "Might Harry be with you?"

Reluctantly, Harry stepped out as well.

"Pardon the interruption," the headmaster continued, "but I have matters to discuss with each of you, and another best discussed with both of you together." He waved his wand at a small, square, paved area among the plants, and a small wrought-iron cafe table appeared there, surrounded by three matching chairs and laden with a sumptuous afternoon tea. "Please sit."

With one apprehensive glance at each other, Harry and Draco sat. Dumbledore took the remaining chair. Harry could not help noticing that the bushes behind him bore flowers that exactly matched the color of Dumbledore's robes. If Dumbledore had sat first, he would have sworn the headmaster had planned it that way. If I were paranoid, I might even think that he planned interrupting us.

"A lovely place," Dumbledore remarked. "I really should spend more time in Hogwarts' many gardens. Tea, Harry?"

Harry, remembering when last Dumbledore had offered him tea, had to work to repress a knee-jerk refusal. "Thank you," he said politely.

"One sugar, I recall," Dumbledore said blandly. He not only stirred that in, but added milk. The result looked right. Harry took a cautious sip. He was mildly annoyed to find it perfect. That man is unreal! Sometimes I can't even get it perfect! he fumed silently, while the process was repeated with Draco, who seemed to accept a perfect cup of tea with considerably more aplomb.

When the matter of tea had been settled, the headmaster picked up a crumpet, spread it with a large quantity of jam, set it on his plate, and pushed all of it slightly to the side.

"Unpleasant matters first?" he suggested. Harry nodded. Draco shrugged.

"Very well. Lucius Malfoy's trial is finally scheduled. He will first be brought before the Council of Magical Law on July 14. Draco, I know you have been discussing various matters with both a solicitor and several of your relatives. If you need to have any face-to-face meetings while at
Hogwarts, I can put a room -- or a Floo-connected grate -- at your disposal. I think that would be better than continuing to use Professor Snape's rooms for this purpose."

So that you can listen in? Harry thought angrily, but if Draco was likewise suspicious, he gave no sign of it, and after a brief pause, the headmaster continued.

"Also, Professor Snape has offered to continue to host you for the summer. I suggest you stay at least until the trial, for your protection."

"Thank you, professor," Draco said. "I agree that would be best."

"You're quite welcome. I know you are in a difficult position on several fronts. Harry, I suggest you also plan to attend the trial, as you may be called as a witness." Dumbledore smiled slightly at Harry, and his eyes shifted briefly to indicate Draco. "Even if you are not required, your presence will be welcome."

So I can calm down Draco, Harry thought, or keep him focused, anyway. Harry thought of asking if he could receive some sort of official summons, in order to frighten Uncle Vernon into allowing him to go, but decided he could forge one, if necessary.

"Where do I go?" he asked.

"To the Leaky Cauldron, no earlier than the twelfth. There are places closer to the council hall, but I trust Tom. I will instruct him to hold a warded room for you. Owl him to let him know when you will arrive."

Harry could not repress a smile. For once, he would get to see other wizards and witches only halfway through July. "It will probably be the highlight of my summer -- sorry, Draco."

Draco shrugged. Harry knew he understood.

Dumbledore took a small bite from the jam-laden crumpet. Harry sipped his tea and waited. Eventually, the headmaster continued.

"While considering how to convey this news to Draco, or, rather, how to find Draco that I might convey this news to him, I recalled a discussion we had the night before the Easter holidays."

Harry listened attentively. He had never dared ask Draco what he had discussed with Dumbledore, and Draco had never brought up the matter.

"Draco talked about how difficult it was to be friends with someone from another house. Harry, do you have any thoughts on the matter?

Harry looked curiously at Draco, then back at the headmaster.

"Well," he said, "it's easier now that the weather is good, but the time we can spend together is limited by that. We could meet in the library, but we can't really socialize there. We can't sit together at meals. We're in few classes together. We can meet in the early evening in the library only -- not a social space -- and not at all after that, unless we sneak out. We've gotten around a bit of it by picking up two special projects, but the professors can't do that for everybody."

"Draco?" Professor Dumbledore prompted.

"Doing it properly," Draco drawled, "which, just now, we are not, involves breaking school rules on a regular basis." He shrugged. "Once you are sneaking out to meet someone, somewhere you are not
supposed to be, there is little incentive to obey any other rules."

"Do you agree, Harry?" Dumbledore asked lightly.

Harry thought about it. Malfoy, he remembered taunting, *we're not supposed to be out of our dormitories at night*. Partially, he had been trying to impress Draco with his bold disobedience, but his words had still been true. "I guess," he said. "Certain kinds of rules, anyway. Especially if you've found a place where you won't be caught."

"You can drink all night," Draco said, raising his eyebrows at Harry.

"And you can show me Dark curses," Harry returned, his mind full of the memory of scattered bones burning brilliant blue. He was belatedly startled by the almost lustful intensity of his own voice.

The headmaster cleared his throat. "I see."

Harry heated with embarrassment, but Dumbledore looked merely thoughtful.

"So," he asked. "Do you see any way to remedy this, short of allowing House visitors? That, I am sure, would cause a revolt among much of the staff and many parents."

Harry and Draco looked at each other.

"The UnCommon Room," Draco said.

"Yes," Harry agreed, and explained. "An inter-House Common Room. A social space, with the same evening hours as the library, maybe more, that anyone can use."

"Who would supervise this space?"

"The Common Rooms aren't always supervised," Harry objected.

"But the chances of a fight -- at least a bad one -- are higher in inter-house space," Draco countered.

"That's another reason for this," Harry returned. "We have too much animosity between houses. Everything we do is house against house. It makes people try harder, which is good, but it carries over to times we should cooperate, and then it's not productive." He frowned. "Could it be a rotating duty among the Prefects?"

"I don't believe they have time," Dumbledore objected. He looked suddenly mischievous. "Unless each house were to gain a third prefect."

"Not me!" Harry exclaimed.

Dumbledore laughed. "You are in no danger, Harry. I do not believe you qualify, either by academic standing or by disciplinary record."

"Good."

"It might work," Dumbledore conceded. "There is an unused room near the library that would suit this purpose well." He looked at them. "Inter-house social space. Any other ideas?"

Again, Harry and Draco looked at each other.

"Pick up Quidditch," Harry said.
"Pardon?"

"Quidditch games for fun -- for people who may not be on house teams."

"Quidditch is rather dangerous, Harry. That would require even more supervision, and Madam Hooch does not have the time."

"She could train people from the house teams to supervise, and they could pick time slots. I would qualify for that."

"The person supervising could not play."

"At that time, yes."

"You do intend to be busy, next year, don't you, Mr. Potter?" Dumbledore said lightly. "Very well." He pointed to each of them in turn. "Gryffindor, Slytherin. You will be your houses' representatives for planning the inter-house Common Room, and informal Quidditch games, if I can arrange them. I shall be responsible for breaking the bad news to Madams Hooch and Pomfrey. Who shall we have for planning each from Ravenclaw and from Hufflepuff?"

Harry was delighted. They set to the food in earnest as they discussed the few Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs who might be interested in helping to plan such ventures. Draco kept notes, while Dumbledore playfully tossed crumbs to a plant with rather active (and hungry) red flowers.

Eventually, with preliminary decisions made, Dumbledore stood up, and the table and chairs vanished. "Now," he said, "I believe it is time for the two of you to get ready for dinner." Harry and Draco found themselves ushered out of the greenhouse and into a grey afternoon shower. With matching looks back over their shoulders, they started for the castle.

"Do you think he'll really do it?" Draco asked. "Or was that all just to keep us busy until it was too late for us to have any time together?"

Harry shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine. I think you may have convinced him, though, that supervised space would be better than no alternative to sneaking out."

"A pity that neither of us likes being supervised," Draco observed.

"When we leave school--" Harry caught himself. No matter how well things went between them, they were not going to stay together after school -- Draco had said so repeatedly.

"Please, let's not talk about it," Draco answered desperately.

"Okay." They didn't have to be as discreet anymore, Harry remembered suddenly, and he reached out and took Draco's hand as they walked. "Just be with me now."
"Did you really need to walk into dinner holding hands?" Ron asked, as if the memory pained him.

Harry shrugged. "It made me feel better."

"You're begging for trouble, you know."

"Sorry. I just-- It's what I wanted." Harry couldn't explain how he had needed that connection to Draco that evening. He didn't even want to try, because Ron would tell him he shouldn't be with someone who made him feel like that, and he wouldn't know how to argue the point. He was too confused himself. "Anyway, he asked if you -- well, mostly Hermione, but you're invited as well -- would join us for a picnic lunch tomorrow."

Ron stared. "You're joking."

"No. He says he misses Hermione." Harry grinned. "And I'm afraid he has too much breeding to invite half of a couple. Think you can be polite again?"

"So, what are you doing for summer, Draco?"

Ron rolled his eyes at Hermione's question. He looked like he still couldn't quite believe he was here. As solace, he took a bite of pork pie.

Draco moved a slice of the salmon to his plate. "Staying here, of course. Mother is pretending to dither -- really, she's biding her time until the trial."

"You'll be at the trial, though, right?"

At Hermione's question, Draco looked up and met Harry's eyes. "Yes, of course."

"We'll be meeting before it starts," Harry said, watching Draco for confirmation.

"A day at least," Draco agreed.

"Won't your mum miss you?" Ron asked. He seemed to realize that was a bad question as soon as he said it. Harry watched him stuff more pie into his mouth and have trouble chewing.

"Of course not," Draco said lightly. "Mother loves to travel."

"Do the other Slytherins mind you living with Snape?" Hermione asked.

Draco shrugged. "So many people mind so many things that it's rather difficult to identify which guides whom." Again, he looked at Harry, and this time Harry reached out a hand and brushed it against his arm.

"No kidding."

"And you, Hermione?" Draco asked politely. "Any summer plans?"
Hermione brightened.

"I'll be working with Quintona Myers, can you believe that? I have a learner position helping with research statistics on fontagraphic influences in runic construction."

Ron's eyes widened in a sort of panic response. Harry was tempted to tell him to smile and nod, but he was cut off by a snort from Draco.

"Better you than me, I say."

"Myers is brilliant!" Hermione protested.

"Of course, but you'll be measuring serifs till you're cross-eyed." Draco winked at Harry. "And you know my opinion of work."

Rolling her eyes, Hermione leaned forward for another canapé. "Yes, I do. You're perfectly fine with it, as long as no one notices."

"No one who doesn't outrank me, in practice," Draco corrected blithely. "I mean Severus should think I'm working terribly hard at all times."

"Severus?" Ron repeated, in incredulous dismay.

"Oops," Draco said calmly. "Well, he is my spellfather. I can call him that in casual conversation, I think."

Hermione looked between Draco and Ron with obvious worry. "So what are you doing for the summer, Harry?"

Harry thought changing the subject was an excellent idea. "I'm at the Dursleys' until a few days before the trial, then I'm in London for that, and then back to the Dursleys' until my birthday, when I'm leaving."

Ron stopped frowning about Snape and sat up. "Is that safe? Do you have somewhere to go?"

Harry shrugged. "I doubt I'll be safe with them, once I'm an adult in Wizarding terms, and if I stay around, I'll probably just get them killed. They're horrible, but not that horrible. I haven't decided where I'm going yet. If Professor Dumbledore has plans, he'll tell me them at the last minute, of course." Privately, Harry had already decided not to wait until his actual birthday to leave the Dursleys, but he wasn't going to tell anyone that. It was safest all around if no one knew, and they just showed up to find him gone.

"Mum would have you, I'm sure."

Harry shrugged.

Uneasily, Ron plucked a stalk of grass and began to split it end to end. He stopped when he got to the small feathering of seeds at the top. "Harry! our Divination assignment."

"Oh! Yeah, I haven't done it either."

"Is now good?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Ron...."

"Won't take two minutes," Ron said cheerfully.
"Well it ought to!"

Harry laughed and summoned more grass from by the rocks, where it was taller. He handed three stalks to Ron and began to strip the seeds from three more. "Don't worry, Hermione. It'll take us some time to write up."

Hermione looked beseechingly at Draco. "They just make things up!"

"Hey, we're throwing the grain, yeah?" Ron objected.

"Besides, Hermione," Harry added. "You'd hate it more if we believed it." Cupping his seeds, he let out a long breath on them, and then tossed them on the blanket. Ron leaned over to examine them.

"Hm. Well, there's a sort of person, here, but the body is squiggly, like a snake.... No, wait -- a lightning bolt. That'd be you, then Harry. And there's some sort of trophy. Sort of looks like you're pissing in it."

"RON!"

Harry laughed.

Draco leaned forward and looked. "Oh, is he that well endowed?" he said casually. "I really do need to get into his pants soon."

Ron went from triumph at shocking Hermione to complete embarrassment. Harry decided it was his turn to take a look at the flung grains.

"Don't think that's piss and a trophy, Ron. Looks more like I'm being attacked by a woodpecker."

Draco coughed with the effort of not laughing. "You are so vulgar, Potter! I shouldn't even be in the same room as you."

"We're not in a room."

"Ah. Well, that's all right, then."

Ron scattered the picture with a small wind, clearing the blanket. "My turn. Ready, Harry?"

"Toss any time," Harry answered, and got slapped from both sides, by Draco and Hermione. "I didn't mean that one!" he protested, and Ron sniggered and threw the seeds.

Harry looked down. It didn't look like anything, really. "Um ... want to do it again?"

"Oh, come on! There must be something."

"You'll get caught in a hailstorm?"

Ron looked down. "Ah. Look, it's got this boxy thing, right? That's a fight in the house."

"You'll have an argument with me?" Hermione suggested, perhaps a little too brightly.

"No, that's boring. Trelawney would tell me to 'try to open myself more' or something. No, I think it better be a feud within Gryffindor. That has a little drama to it." He looked at the picture again. "Ah! And see all these grains here, and all these grains here? Harry can say that there will be two groups of opposed forces, fighting for the rest of the year. She'll eat it up."
After the picnic, they all walked up to the school together. Harry held Draco’s hand again. He thought that should feel stupid, but it didn’t. Ron blathered on about a seemingly random string of things; Harry thought he was trying not to think about what his best friend was doing a few short feet away.

When Draco said they had a meeting with Professor Horsyr, Hermione offered to return the picnic basket. Draco shrugged.

"You do know that the house elves can pick it up from anywhere, don’t you?"

"I don’t see any reason to put them to extra work, or to make the school messy."

"As you wish." Draco’s mouth quirked as he handed it over. "Thank you."

Horsyr, with two of the Quiris, was waiting for them. Harry, as soon as he stepped into the room, let out a slow breath. The Quiris looked dangerous, but not hideous, and he wasn’t reeling with panic. "There," he said. "Not so bad."

Horsyr, looking pleased, nodded. "A definite improvement." The Quiris were regarding Harry with a mirror of his own wariness, but nothing like their former hostility. One of them let out a perfunctory hiss, then backed up a step, but neither showed any inclination to charge him. Harry reached over for Draco’s hand, only to find he had lingered back by the door.

"Faster for me than for you?" he suggested.

"It hardly seems fair," Draco complained, his voice high with tension. "But perhaps it’s the same, and you’re just better with frightening things."

"Come see what she thinks of you, then."

When Draco stepped up beside Harry, the Quiri that had hissed before did so again -- but this time she stretched out her long, sharp claws as well. Draco backed up rapidly, and Harry moved back as well, staying in front of Draco. Horsyr nodded briskly.

"It’s good progress," she said, "and I’m glad to see it. A week, as planned, or four days?"

With a grim look at Harry, Draco replied for both of them. "Four days," he said stubbornly.

Harry shrugged. "If you like. May we go?"

The encounter hadn’t been truly traumatic, at least for him, but Draco’s eager body was still a comfort. They spent a while snogging in a shadowed alcove behind a suit of armor before walking together up to the library. Draco went in to do some research, and Harry continued up to Gryffindor tower.

He never got there.

A flight up, his wand flew out of his pocket, and he was knocked back into the corridor. A Muffling charm deadened the air as someone dove across him, mostly pinning his legs, and another grabbed his arms.
He struggled wildly, twisting and thrashing in an attempt to throw his attackers off. His knee connected with something, and there was a muffled oath in a familiar voice. Shocked to discover that at least one of the lot was a Gryffindor seventh-year, not (presumably) a Death Eater, Harry momentarily lost his terror and tried to re-evaluate.

He couldn't see his attackers well in the unlit corridor, and their faces were covered, but there were four of them, and he was fairly sure that the one with the dark hands was Dean. "What--"

Someone kicked him in the ribs. Harry tried to twist free, but when his fear for his life had faded, he had also lost his momentum, and he was now well and truly immobilized. Noises that should have been loud -- this blow, that yell, the taunt of 'where's your boyfriend now, poof?' were all barely audible, like a scene on a muted television. He managed to bite someone, and their scream was also quiet, as was the answering blow across his face.

A new, older voice was almost inaudible.

"What are--? Back! Off him, you cravens!"

Deep cold passed through Harry, and he thought there were screams, but he couldn't hold on. He fell into blackness.

He woke in the hospital wing, alone. His torso was bandaged uncomfortably tightly, and pretty much everything was sore. He glanced at the bedside table, saw that his wand was safe, and fell back to sleep before he could reach for the water beside it.

The next time he woke, there was pallid light coming in the windows and his bandaged body itched as much as it hurt. Draco was asleep in the chair by his bed, and Hermione and Ron were standing uncertainly by the door. Harry thought he may have woken when they came in.

Seeing his eyes open, Hermione moved forward. In a moment, she was holding one of his hands and looking tearily down at him. "Oh, Harry!"

"What hit you, mate?" Ron asked. "Nearly Headless Nick said it was boys...."

Draco had sat up and was now blinking at them. Harry thought he might feel that he, as the person who had slept there, deserved to be first, so Harry reached out a hand to him, and Draco took it firmly in his own.

"Yes," he drawled, "do tell."

Harry sighed, and the motion made his bandages itch more. "Let's just say that Gryffindor isn't taking you as well as I thought."

"What!" Hermione looked outraged. "This was our house?"

"You're sure it was about Malfoy?" Unlike Hermione, Ron didn't sound as if he disbelieved it, merely as if it ought to be confirmed.

"Not Draco as himself, as far as I know," Harry answered. "But yeah, the use of 'poof' and such made it pretty clear what the problem was."
"That's...." Hermione was briefly at loss for words. "Barbaric!" she exclaimed finally. She let go of Harry's hand and put her schoolbag up by his feet to rummage for a quill. "Tell me everything you remember. They're not going to get away with this!"

"I don't know who they were," Harry lied.

"We'll figure it out. You must remember something!"

"It was dark, and they'd covered most of their faces. I have no idea, and I don't care."

"Harry! You could have died! If we were in a Muggle school, you would have died! How can you not care!"

Ron looked uneasy, but he reached for her arm. "His decision, Hermione."

"What are you talking about?"

"Look -- if one of my brothers does something to me ... well, there are times to go tell Mum, and times not to, understand? And if he thinks he knows which this is, then he chooses."

Draco nodded. "It can be a sound strategy." His expression grew darker. "Not that it will prevent me from getting revenge if I figure it out on my own."

Hermione looked wildly at them. "You're all mad!" she said shrilly. "He can't just let it go!"

Harry shrugged. "Doesn't matter, anyway," he said stubbornly. "I don't know who they were."

He stuck to that when Professor McGonagall and Professor Dumbledore came to talk to him, although he did confess that the attack seemed to be over him being with a boy, and that he thought his attackers were Gryffindors. He did his best to sound sincere. Dumbledore had left with a sigh and a request that he be informed of any memories that suddenly emerged.

Draco visited at lunchtime, with Hermione and Ron arriving later. That was expected, but his first visitors after lessons were a surprise. Seamus and Parvati came in together, both looking angry.

Seamus flopped down in the chair by the bed. "Sorry I didn't take you more seriously, Harry," he said apologetically.

"Never thought he'd do more than huff."

Harry started to shrug, and caught himself. The motion hurt. "S'alright. Didn't think he would either, or I would have been paying more attention." The thought galled him. "Stupid to let my wand get taken, like that, but I didn't expect trouble between the library and Gryffindor."

"I think it's horrible!" Parvati burst out. "I hate how people get about houses, and don't think anyone should care that you're with a boy, either."

"I think it was more the boy," Seamus said. "For that, houses mean more."

Harry shrugged. "Not all of what people think they do, though." He looked at Parvati as she said it, and she nodded emphatically, making her necklaces bounce.

"I hate being called 'the stupid one', or people expecting Padma to be timid."
"Still," Seamus said. "It can't last, really. Not a Gryffindor and a Slytherin."

Harry wanted to argue that it could, but he knew it couldn't -- not because Draco was a Slytherin, but because he was determined to marry.

"That it's a fair boy, though -- not their business, is it? It's not like you're shagging him in our room."

"Not like I'm shagging him at all," Harry protested. "We've scarcely done more than kiss."

"What! After all that, he's putting you off?"

"He is not!"

"So, then?"

"I don't think I'm ready for that."

"Dear God, Harry! Don't start acting like a girl!" Seamus protested. Parvati slapped him, hard, on the arm.

"I think it's sensible," she said haughtily.

"As I said...."

Harry smiled. He didn't mind this sort of teasing -- not from Seamus. "Well, it's more than I've done with anyone else," he said. "Just -- he can be overwhelming, you know?"

"I suggest earplugs," Seamus answered, laughingly ducking another threatened slap from Parvati.

"But that would take away half the fun," Harry protested, grinning. "I like him clever."

Parvati giggled. "Well, that must be why Hermione and Padma approve. Really, Harry, none of the girls are faulting your taste! If any pretend to, it's just sour grapes."

The two stayed until Draco and Hermione arrived (Ron, Hermione told him, was in detention, but would come by in the morning), and they stayed until Madame Pomfrey shooed them out.

"Now let's look you over," the mediwitch said cheerily. "If those ribs have healed, you might get out tomorrow." She examined him, tsked, gave him a hideous tasting potion, and left him with orders to lie still. A few minutes later, though, she was back with a small package.

"The headmaster said to give you this, so it should be safe. Use a charm to open it, though -- I don't want you pulling at tape."

With that, she was gone again.

Curiously, Harry examined the package, floating it in front of himself to turn it. There was no indication who it was from, but if it had come from Dumbledore, he could probably trust it. Using his wand as instructed, he unwrapped the box. As the flaps of the top parted, brightly colored glass balls began to float out. Among them were two flying horses, a Granian and an Aethonan, also of glass. The horses swooped among the balls in a seemingly random pattern. When Harry looked inside the package, he also found a letter.
Harry,

This was more trouble than I expected when you said people in Gryffindor were upset. Was it that bad then, or did things get worse quickly? McGonagall's annoyed that you won't give names, but I think I understand. Keep your wand in hand when you're walking alone, and don't let them get you again. Don't worry about getting in any trouble for fighting back, either. Old Dumbledore is furious, though I doubt he'll let you see that.

The horses and balls are an old set of mine. There are some games you can play with it; have someone with a wizarding upbringing show you if you don't know any. (I wouldn't have thought of that, but Moony did -- he sends his good wishes.) When I was laid up recovering from injuries, though, I used to mostly use it in the children's way, as something to look at when I was alone and couldn't sleep any more. You can also direct the motion of the balls, to use them to demonstrate Quidditch maneuvers and such, if you can't move your arms around enough.

Take care,

Snuffles
Harry did get out the next day, but not until evening. During the afternoon, he heard quite a lot of activity from the other side of his screen.

"What's going on?" he asked Madame Pomfrey, the next time she stopped by his bed. "Was there an attack?"

She sniffed disapprovingly. "If you want to know, ask your friends."

That was all she would say. When she finally let him out, Hermione and Ron were waiting for him.

"Dumbledore thought you shouldn't walk down to dinner alone," Ron explained, as they left the room together. "Not until you've got your balance back," he amended hastily.

"I'll be fine," Harry said automatically. At Hermione's angry look, he added: "tomorrow."  

Hermione sighed. "You may not know who went after you, Harry, but a number of other people seem to think they do. I've seen more black eyes today than I did all of last year."

"A few retaliations," Ron elaborated, with obvious satisfaction. "I wasn't in on any, but some people bragged to the wrong friends, I'd say. The house is more narked at them than you, now, except for a few of the Muggleborns."

Hermione grimaced. "It does seem to be an issue for more of the people raised outside Wizarding society, but it's not as if--"

"Yeah," Harry assured her. "I won't make assumptions."

Dinner was uncomfortable, but not as bad as Harry had expected. A few people made a point of stopping to speak to him. Except for Ryan, one of the Gryffindor Beaters, Harry suspected that they were just showing support. Ryan genuinely wanted to know if he would be able to play in time for the match.

"Madame Pomfrey says I should be able to fly tomorrow. Even if she's wrong, I should be okay by Saturday."

After Ryan had left, Harry turned, puzzled, to Ron. "Do you understand that? He was one of the people who was most upset by Draco when we were just friends."

Ron shrugged. "Draco turning down You-Know-Who, maybe? I mean, everyone knows. It was in the Prophet!"

"Or maybe he just thinks you have a better excuse now," Seamus suggested slyly. Dean, further down the table, made a face, but didn't say anything.

Madame Pomfrey's diagnosis may have been correct in terms of safety, but ability was a more complex issue. When Harry went for practice that evening, he was certain well enough to fly -- he could control the broom and maintain his balance -- but he was unable to turn as sharply to the left as he expected to. He had to keep the problem from Draco's attention, as he had no doubt that Draco
would take shameless advantage of any weakness that he discovered. On Friday, the team practiced after lessons, and Harry was relieved to find the tightness almost gone. The house standings were close, this year.

At dinner, he didn't see Draco at the Slytherin table. Harry frowned. That was odd. Unlike him, Draco never showed pre-match jitters -- or, at least, he went to some effort to try not to. He should be with his teammates, preening and putting up a front of confidence, with only his pallor giving him away.

So it was that after dinner, Harry found himself headed down to the dungeons, to a place he had been to only once before. The dimly lit corridors were mostly deserted, and he confided his worries in Susara as he crisscrossed the tangle of unfamiliar paths, looking for a particular carved archway. At his touch, the stones inside it melted back, revealing a conventional looking door with a sneering gargoyle knocker. The gargoyle took one look at his school tie and told him not to bother. Harry took great pleasure in bashing its bat-like wings back against the brass plate.

Snape wore a similar sneer when he opened the door.

"If you intend to ask if Draco can come out and play, the answer is no."

Despite the man's contemptuous tone, the statement was definitely a joke. Harry found himself less worried and more unbalanced. "Er, just wanted to be sure he was okay."

Snape raised an eyebrow. "Hoping he'll be grounded tomorrow, I expect?"

"Hardly." Harry smiled, finally. "That would take all the fun out of it."

"Hmph." After a long, critical appraisal, Snape turned. "Come in. You may have ten minutes only; I cannot mark in the presence of nattering children."

For the second time, Harry stepped into Professor Snape's rooms.

Draco was curled up at one end of the couch. Other than his presence, he seemed to have had no effect on the room. It was still austere and underlit, with most of the color provided by the many books that lined the walls. Snape moved to a small writing desk and, despite his words, began marking essays. Harry, oddly conscious of being chaperoned, moved to sit on the other end of the couch. "Hi."

Draco smiled wryly. "Hello, Harry."

"What's up? You don't look sick."

Draco shrugged. It was a tight movement that made him look smaller than he was. "The Wizengamot wants me to testify about Bellatrix," he said. "Next week. I received the summons, and ...." He shrugged. "Didn't feel like going out."

A flood of guilt washed through Harry, and regardless of Snape, he moved close to Draco, his hand reaching out to settle on Draco's knee. "You don't have to do this. I'll go. It was--"

"No, you will NOT!" Draco snapped, sitting upright and dislodging the touch. "Damn it, Harry, if you go, we're both doomed. I can handle this, all right?"

"Can you? You skipped dinner."

Draco rolled his eyes. "I skip meals rather easily, as you may have noticed. I thought it was better to
get my sulk in tonight, rather than risk being distracted tomorrow." Crossing his arms over his chest, he huffed and sat back into the couch. It was too stiff to give much. "And then you have to go and spoil it!"

Harry laughed. "So sorry," he said insincerely.

"Forgiven. It was becoming rather tedious anyway." Draco stood gracefully. "Perhaps you could escort me to the library?"

"Of course."

The dungeons to the library was a marvelous walk, Harry decided. It had so many shadowy alcoves and corners along the way.

The next day dawned clear, but by the time they walked down to the pitch, a blustery wind had risen, going first this way and then that, in a manner that Harry knew would exhaust them in the air. It was a relief to duck into the changing rooms, and Harry didn't have to tell anyone to use the woolen robes and heavy gloves that had been set aside weeks ago. He could request a time out if the day grew warm.

When everyone was suited up, and the clamor of their fellow students was heard in the stands above, Harry called the team together.

"This is the last match of the season," he said, "and crucial for the Quidditch Cup, which is the only thing that will give us a chance at the House Cup. I'll do my best, and I expect this same from all of you." He looked around at all of them. Damian was rolling his eyes. "Any complaints or questions about Draco need to be now, or after the match."

"Is he good?" Ryan called out, but the gibe seemed to be in good humor, and everyone laughed. Everyone except Damian, anyway. He crossed his arms over his chest and added his own question.

"Is he worth it?"

"More something you should ask him of me, isn't it?" Harry shot back. "Considering his father's trying to disinherit him, and all I have to deal with is a few crabby housemates. But yeah. Worth it." He grinned. "Not that he's getting an inch for the next few hours. Are we ready?"

"Gryffindor!" shouted Cornelia Carter, and they were suddenly united, answering her back with "GRYFFINDOR!" Harry sent a spell at the door, it swung open, and they strode out onto the cold, bright pitch.

Two hours later, Harry was feeling less inspired and more stubborn. Gryffindor had been doing well -- indeed, at the one appearance of the snitch, Draco had obstructed him, but not gone after it himself, because Gryffindor had been so far ahead that Slytherin wouldn't have had the points to beat them if he caught it. Now, however, they were all starting to tire, and Cornelia, who had taken several blows, was losing precision in her attempts to guard the hoops. The wind was wicked, bearing bludgers and quaffles and brooms off-course, and raising debris which obscured the tiny snitch and got in the eyes and stung. The Hufflepuffs grew quieter as the scores climbed, eroding their faint chance at the Quidditch Cup, which relied on a speedy victory by one team or the other.

When the sun was halfway to the horizon, Dumbledore spoke to McGonagall, and McGonagall
called a time out. Harry swooped down, feeling angry, but as his feet touched the ground, he stumbled. He hadn't realized quite how exhausted he was, he thought, as someone pushed a sandwich into his hand. His legs and arms felt like rubber. He took a bite of the sandwich -- a peppery egg mayonnaise -- and at last remembered to look around.

Sandwiches had appeared in the stands as well, it seemed. Everyone was eating. While he was swallowing his second bite, Professor McGonagall appeared.

"You have a twenty minute break," she told him. Harry suspected she was repeating the earlier announcement, but he appreciated it. "You may enter and leave the changing rooms during that time. Oh, and Mr Potter?" He looked up, and she nodded briskly. "Good flying."

Twenty minutes later, they were back in the air, still tired, but refreshed, and Harry climbed back up to a Seeker's height to scan the pitch for a glint of gold.

"And it's Slytherin in possession!" Ernie Macmillan announced, with bipartisan enthusiasm. "Coming in to the hoops, and Carter saves! Ouch! She moved in front of the bludger too! The players are definitely suffering from the duration of this game. Will that blow slow down the Gryffindor keeper?"

To Harry's dismay, it did. Cornelia was definitely having trouble stretching out to guard as much territory. Now Slytherin's scores started to climb, and Harry tried hard to keep the current state in his head, as well as listening to the announcements. Slytherin had two hundred and eighty, now, a ninety-point lead; catching the snitch would still get Gryffindor both match and cup. If the lead extended to one hundred and thirty, they would get match, but not cup; to one hundred and fifty, and they would draw for the match as well as losing the cup. The actual score, however, was a moving target, as the Chasers continued to score. Gryffindor were still falling behind; Slytherin scored more often. He hoped Ryan or Damian could slam a bludger into the Slytherin keeper.

The action below was fast and furious when Harry next saw the snitch. The score was to three hundred and thirty to two hundred and ten, with Slytherin regularly getting the quaffle through the Gryffindor hoops. He twisted and dove. At this point, he might even settle for match.

Draco saw the motion. He was further away, but he put out the effort, and the snitch's course favored him, heading towards him for a few crucial seconds.

"The Seekers are on it, both moving fast. We could have a collision -- no! Brilliant!"

Draco and Harry, both unwilling to lose ground, had adjusted their courses with a rolling corkscrew turn that Harry was sure they could never have executed had they planned and rehearsed it. They ended up neck and neck, both flying flat out, and Harry felt a familiar rush of exhilaration. For just a moment, there was no exhaustion, no spectators, no Quidditch Cup, just the rush of flying with Draco and pushing himself to the limit.

They were close. The snitch glittered in front of them like a dream, and Draco's robes fluttered into Harry's in a motion perceptible from the rush of the wind. Harry pulled ahead an inch -- two -- stretching out to compensate for Draco's longer arms. He was almost there. Almost....

"Slytherin scores! Slytherin in possession."

Wingtips tickled past his fingers. He could let it go, hoping for a later gain. The Cup....

He was suddenly ahead of Draco, and the snitch was in his grasp, wings still beating desperately.

"GRIFFINDOR!" Ernie's voice faltered. "Er ... That's match to Gryffindor, and cup to Slytherin.
Well played!

No one seemed to hold losing the cup against Harry. It was generally agreed that catching the Snitch then had been the best move he could have made, under the circumstances. With Cornelia injured and everyone blurry, delaying would only have cost them the match. The Gryffindors partied good-naturedly. Dean, when rather tipsy, even came over and offered Harry a truce. Harry would have rather it had come with an apology, but he was feeling relieved enough to be generous, and he didn't say so, just shook hands before Ron dragged him back into analyzing the match.

Draco, when they met the next day, was practically glowing. "I could have beaten you," he said cheerfully. "I was expecting you to fall back."

Harry shrugged. "No point. We weren't getting any better."

"You see? That's realistic, and you're never realistic! Especially not about Slytherin leading in house points."

Harry rolled his eyes, and Draco lunged in and kissed him, hard, but fast. "Come on, Lightning! We have Quiris to meet."

They started up the stairs to Horsyr's office, not touching, but walking as friends. His good mood made Draco restless, and he walked sideways, or sometimes backwards, talking. "You know, I was thinking about Ron's predictions. At first I thought he might actually have picked up on something. You did give up the Cup ... but that's hardly pissing in it, really. Is your house split over it?"

"Nah. It was generally agreed to be a good call. It's even smoothed over some of the earlier trouble."

"Ah well. The cup was just chance, then."

In the door to Horsyr's office, Harry stopped. He had thought he had remembered what the Quiris had looked like the first time he had met them, but he hadn't, not really. One was sitting on Horsyr's shoulder, now, petting her hair with its long, slender fingers, and another was on the desk, examining a quill feather, the ear tufts shifting slightly as it cocked its head, and its almost human face exhibiting a studious expression. Harry heard a small surprised sound come out of his mouth at how darling it looked. The Quiris heard also, and the one with the quill feather left it, seized the edge of the desktop, and somersaulted down to the floor to come and investigate Harry. Harry stepped forward, squatted down, and held out a hand to it.

"Come here, darling!"

The Quiri moved rather like a monkey, but the gait that had seemed lumbering and threatening a few weeks ago now looked spry and comical. When it stopped and sniffed at his hand, its whiskers tickled his wrist. Harry glanced back at Draco and found him standing where Harry had paused, looking wary and wistful.

"I'm not ready for that, yet, I think," he confessed. "It doesn't look scary, much; I just feel like it might bite me."

The Quiri had climbed up onto Harry's shoulder, and Harry stood. "Well, that was how I felt last
time, so you must be close," he said encouragingly. He had forgotten how happy the creature made him feel when he touched it. "In a few days maybe."

"We shall see," Horsyr said, but Harry could hear the smile in her voice. He turned and looked at her and the Quiri on her shoulder. Its long tail wrapped around her shoulders, with the lion-like tuft tucked between her breasts. Harry felt embarrassed to have noticed it that way, but it was hard not to. Professor Horsyr didn't seem aware of it.

"Is that the one I met the first time?" he asked, emphasizing that he was looking at the Quiri. "I remember that gold. This one is more white." Like Draco's hair, he thought. He stroked the kitten-soft fur of the animal on his own shoulder, and it responded with a pleased chirrup.

Horsyr nodded. "Yes. This is Tuktuk. The one that has you at the moment is Cheefi. They are a mated pair, but young."

"There are browner ones, aren't there?" Harry thought he had seen a browner one last week. "Or is that part of the Dark Arts effect?"

"Keeba and her daughter are darker, but the brown is still golden."

Harry nodded. "Like a dark lion. I recall." Cheefi swung down from his shoulder and clung until he put an arm around her. Nestled in the crook of his arm, she looked back at Draco, who had been easing closer, and yawned, showing sharp, white teeth. He stepped back.

"Hey there!" Harry scolded. "Be nice to my boyfriend."

He set the Quiri down on the desk, resisting his reluctance like he would the Imperius Curse, and moved back to put an arm around Draco. Draco stood stiffly. When Harry looked at Horsyr, she was smiling.

"I think you're a good match," she said mildly, and Draco groaned.

"I think Harry should watch his mouth."

"What?" Harry demanded, stepping away. "Everyone knows."

"No. Everyone suspects, which is fine."

"I thought it was okay, now."

"It's ... Mother knows. That was the main danger. But I still have my house to placate, you understand, and if you insist on keeping this chaste, I have little to excuse the association to them."

"Because, of course, this needs to be about sex."

"It would be the most acceptable reason."

Horsyr laughed. "Slytherins!" she said. Her tone was dismissive, if not unkind, and Harry saw Draco tense. He reached out and took his hand.

"We should go," he said to Professor Horsyr. "Tuesday, after lessons?"

"I look forward to it." After setting down Tuktuk, she took a few quick steps forward, intercepting Draco at the door. "Draco. I meant no offense, just ... the mode of reasoning is foreign to me. What should you need to say but that you love him?"
"Love is a folly."

"Love is a joy."

Draco shrugged. "One that gets in the way. My house is about results. I need reasons."

She looked at him solemnly. "For them, Draco, or for yourself?"

"For ... for them, I suppose." He let out a huff of air. "I know I'm just mad, but there's no point in advertising it." He looked desperately at Harry. "May we go?"

"Of course." Harry grinned at him. "Let's grab our brooms and fly until dinner."

"That sounds brilliant."

After dinner, Harry found the Common Room noisy. His mind was going in too many directions to concentrate over it. He went up to the dormitory. No one was there, so he sat at one of the desks and tried to decide what to work on. Susara shifted against his arm -- the slight movement that he had come to recognize as a reminder that she was there.

"Come out," he hissed, laying his hand palm-up on the worn wood of the desktop.

Smooth scales twisted down his arm, and the torclinde emerged from the arm of his robes, gold coils gleaming in the firelight. "Master? Are you sad?"

Harry wasn't sure. "It is Draco."

"He is leaving again?" Susara asked.

"No. He is just..." Harry couldn't find a word, in any language, for how Draco would sometimes move close and then step away.

"He makes you unhappy," Susara hissed indignantly, and Harry realized that Draco had come up before, recently. He had been telling her rather irritably last week about how Draco had already scheduled the end of their relationship.

"He makes me happy too," he countered.

"I will bite him whenever you tell me to."

"I do not want you to."

"When you do."

On Tuesday, Draco was late. Harry had been waiting at the first floor landing for over fifteen minutes when he finally arrived -- coming down the stairs instead of up.

"It's--"

"Dumbledore," Draco panted. "His office! I'm off, Harry; I'm cleared!"

"What--" Harry stopped. Draco had grabbed him in a hug and was hanging off of him, as if they
were not in a public corridor. "Cleared?"

"Of killing Bellatrix. They closed the case today. The headmaster just told me."

Finally understanding, Harry pulled Draco tight to him in a fierce embrace. "That's great!"

"Isn't it?" Draco wriggled clear. "Let's go see the Quiris. Do you think it will be today?"

It was. Draco was ecstatic. He stroked the Quiris with a naked joy that he rarely showed in anything. "Do you like it here?" he asked Cheefi. "Do you wish you could meet more of the people?"

"That might be a bit complicated for her, for English," Horsyr said.

Confused, Draco looked up at her. "Is there a better language?"

"Wolof, perhaps, or French."

"Ah." Draco smiled at the Quiri. "Aimes-tu faire la connaissance des gens?"

The Quiri looked up, cocking her head to the side in puzzlement. Her ear-tuftts bobbed as her ears flicked forward. Harry thought she hadn't understood, but she had had more of a sense of the words as language.

"M'aimes-tu?" Draco tried.

Cheefi rubbed her head against his hair and chirruped.
That is the final chapter of *Snakes and Lions*. Tonight, I will start posting the sequel, *Teamwork*, which I must warn you all is a long-running WIP.

A week later, just before the end of term, Harry, Hermione, and Ron walked down to breakfast to find the Great Hall in an uproar. House points had changed. Gryffindor was one hundred points up, and Slytherin ten points down, changing the house order from Slytherin, Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff, Gryffindor, to Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, Slytherin, Hufflepuff. Even the Gryffindors looked confused, and the Slytherins were livid.

"Yes! " Ron punched the air with his fist, but Harry frowned.

"It doesn't make any sense."

Hermione hesitated, but then shrugged. "Sit down, you two. If someone's earned that many points, there'll be an announcement."

However, there wasn't. Possibly that was because Professor Dumbledore was absent; Harry suspected that many points had to come from him. Professor McGonagall might know; he could ask her after Transfiguration. Shouldn't she know if Gryffindors had done something that impressive? It was Wednesday, though, so that lesson was in the morning, but not until after Potions. He left breakfast early, feeling a bit unsettled, and headed down to the dungeons.

Early as he was, he hadn't even finished unpacking his supplies when Draco, with uncharacteristic lack of grace, landed on the bench next to him. "Spill."

"What?"

"What did you do?"

"Nothing!" Harry exclaimed indignantly. "I have no more idea than you do!"

"Blaise said it was you."

"'Blaise' is making it up!"

"That will be quite enough, Mr Potter," Snape said irritably as he swept past them toward the front of the room. "Five points from Gryffindor."

"But--" Harry began reflexively. Snape whirled and glared, and Harry suddenly felt more at home with the situation. "It's not fair!" he protested, with a challenging look. Snape's mouth twitched.
"And five more for impudence."

Harry spent the lesson wishing he knew what had prompted the rise in points. If he were certain it was undeserved -- which it definitely was if Blaise was right -- he would have lost as many points to Snape as he could. However, he rather felt that he would have been told if the points were for something he did. If someone in another year had done something spectacular, he didn't want to take away from their accomplishment. He kept his head down, and at the end of the lesson, made his way up to speak to Snape.

"Professor?"

Snape looked nearly as hostile as he had before their private sessions. "What is it, Potter? I've better things to do than stroke the inflated egos of irresponsible brats."

"I was just wondering if you knew how Gryffindor had got all those points, sir. None of us know of anything." He motioned back to where the class had been. Snape's mouth twisted like he had bit into a quince.

"It was my understanding that the headmaster had awarded them to you, Potter. Heaven forefend that Gryffindor should lose the house cup when you have been so impressive."

"Impressive at everything I shouldn't! You've got to be wrong. He wouldn't. Not after Bellatrix!"

"No, Mr Potter? You're not still under the delusion that he is fair, are you?"

"More fair than that!" Harry protested. *More fair than you*, he wanted to say, but he bit it back. "I'll ask Professor McGonagall, then."

"Please do. Now get OUT OF MY SIGHT!"

Talking to Professor McGonagall was less hazardous. She smiled at him when he stayed after the lesson.

"Professor? Do you know how Gryffindor came by all those points?"

"For your defeat of Bellatrix, I expect."

"But--" *I used Dark Arts. And Draco was with me.* "That was months ago!"

She peered over her glasses at him. "I'm not certain, of course, but I did mention the incident when we were reviewing the year, and he remarked that he had never awarded points for the matter, with all the worry of the next few days."

*Which included finding out that I'd been studying the Imperius Curse with Snape. Of course, he may want to get back at Snape more than punish me."

"I don't deserve it."

"I'm afraid you'll have to take the matter up with Professor Dumbledore, Mr. Potter. I cannot even say with complete confidence that the points were for you."

When Harry asked at lunch, though, up and down the table, no one in Gryffindor knew of any other reason. Dumbledore had not been at his office and was not at the head table. Harry settled with Ron and Hermione and Seamus and Neville, and he fumed.
"I don't see why you're going on about it," Ron complained. "You can't want Slytherin to win the house cup."

"I can if they deserve it! You know what I did, and anyway, Draco was with me!"

"But he wouldn't have done anything if you didn't."

"That's not--"

"I think he was just afraid to stay with us without a protector."

"Ron!" Hermione protested.

"Ah, well, he has a point there," Seamus said with a wink.

Harry looked across the room at the Slytherin table where Draco appeared to be getting as much disapproval, probably for even less reason. He pushed his plate away. "See you later."

"I don't believe you!" Ron fumed. "You're going to side with your little snake boyfriend against your own!"

"That has nothing to do with it!"

"That's everything to do with it."

"It's wrong. Just WRONG!"

Harry stormed out of the room, trying to pretend that he didn't care that everyone was staring. He had his broom, and he had his cloak, and afternoon classes could be missed. After all, what could Binns and Hagrid do? Take points?

Harry decided he was drunk enough for it to show no matter what he did, so he attempted to walk in a straight line down the empty corridor. A group of students coming down the stairs -- probably from a lesson that had ended early -- halted and fell silent. He felt stupidly proud when he made it past them and all the way to the office door without stumbling.

From behind him, he heard some sort of hissed words and someone leaving at a run. He didn't look back, just hammered on the heavy door.

It opened sooner than he expected, and rather than just McGonagall, he found himself facing both McGonagall and Dumbledore. He stumbled back. That didn't change what he wanted to say, he realized. He had wanted to talk to Dumbledore, and it wasn't as if he'd be in less trouble in front of the headmaster.

"Mr. Potter!" Professor McGonagall took one look at him and drew herself up like an angry cat. That worked, anyway.

"Won't have anything to do w'it," he said defiantly. That hadn't come out quite as he had prepared. He thought he might have missed a line.

"Thirty points from Gryffindor!" McGonagall snapped, advancing on him. "Explain yourself."

Harry leaned his head back and grinned. "Y'can do better'n THAT," he taunted.
His voice was suddenly extremely loud, although he knew he hadn't changed it, and his tone was the same. He looked around for a reason, and saw the group of students still loitering at the bottom of the stairs. Blaise Zabini, among them, was just tucking his wand away. Harry gave him a nod, the motion unbalancing him as he turned back to McGonagall.

"Would you prefer more?" she said icily. "You'll cost us the House Cup, if you don't mend your manners quickly."

"GOOD. 'S'A FARCE," he said, his unsteady voice echoing down the corridor. "POINTS FOR OFFING --"

Professor McGonagall pointed her wand at him. "Fi Sobrium!"

The spell wasn't as bad the second time, especially as he had been expecting someone to cast it, but it still made Harry stagger. "FUCK."

Blaise's spell was still in effect. The crowd at the stairs sniggered.

"Mr. Potter. Twenty points from Gryffindor for language, in addition to the thirty for public drunkenness."

Harry straightened. "YOU CAN DO BETTER THAN THAT," he said again, clearly and loudly, this time. "THIS ISN'T FAIR. I REFUSE TO HAVE ANY PART IN IT. SLYTHERIN DESERVES THE HOUSE CUP, AND GRYFFINDOR WILL NOT HAVE IT, NOT IF I HAVE A DAMN THING TO SAY ABOUT IT."

"Harry--" Dumbledore said gently. Harry glared at him.

"WHEN THE MINISTRY ASKED WHO KILLED LESTRANGE, DRACO DID IT," Harry said grimly. "NOW THAT IT'S POINTS -- points for a KILL -- IT WAS ME."

McGonagall had undone the Sonorus, and Blaise -- or someone else -- redone it. "GRYFFINDOR GOT A HUNDRED points for THAT; slytherin got none. But--" When his voice didn't grow loud again, he glanced back toward Blaise, only to see Snape approaching, his robes billowing behind him, and a touch of amusement to his sneer.

"Pray continue, Mr. Potter."

Harry took a deep breath. "It would have been his fault if there was trouble." He stood looking at them -- the three professors, so different -- and felt suddenly uneasy.

Dumbledore inclined his head. "A reasonable objection, Mr Potter," he said, "however unreasonably made."

"I did try to find you, earlier. Three times. You weren't around."

"I see." Dumbledore regarded him curiously. "So you attempted to lose a hundred points single-handedly?"

Harry shifted uneasily from one foot to the other. "More or less," he admitted. "Considering how she reacted last time...."

"Would you rather that I retract my hundred points, or award a similar number to Draco?"

Harry tried not to look at the head of his house, or at the head of Draco's. "Retract," he said firmly. "No one should get points for killing someone."
"I had intended them more for your bravery in confronting a dangerous enemy."

Harry glared at him. "Draco should get more, then. I jump out my window for fun; I'd never got him to do it."

Snape coughed, and McGonagall's mouth twitched in a conflict of amusement and horror.

"Fifty to Gryffindor and sixty to Slytherin, then?"

Harry calculated quickly. He thought that would put Slytherin five points ahead of Gryffindor -- well, before the fifty he'd just lost. "Yeah. I can accept that."

"Very well." Dumbledore turned to McGonagall. "You might retract the twenty, I think. He meant well, and you could consider that an involuntary response."

"Leaving Gryffindor ahead?" Snape asked sharply.

"No, thirty-five behind," Harry explained. "She took fifty points from me, and that still leaves the thirty for drunkenness."

"Again?"

"Yeah, but it was intentional this time." Harry took a step backwards. "Um ... may I go?"

McGonagall frowned at him. "Please do, Mr. Potter."

Harry walked back down the corridor. The crowd of kids -- larger now, he thought -- was still in the stairway, but now a few steps up to be out of sight of the teachers. They were all Slytherins. Draco, among them, raised an eyebrow at Harry as he drew near.

"I am not impressed."

"Good thing I didn't do it for you, then," Harry said hotly. He looked at Zabini. "Thanks for the charm."

"You're welcome," Zabini said politely. "What was the result?"

"He split the points for fighting Bellatrix between me and Draco, and McGonagall docked me thirty. Slytherin is back in the lead."

"Well, I should be thanking you then." Zabini grinned. "A bloody waste of whatever you drank, though. Shall I send you some firewhiskey?"

Harry laughed. "Cognac, and that would be great. My Muggle relatives don't let me out of the house, much." He looked back at Draco, who was scowling. "Lighten up! You'll get your bloody House Cup -- enjoy it!" He pushed his hand through his hair and then pulled his fringe forward again. "Gryffindor is going to kill me."

"None of them saw," Zabini assured him.

Draco rolled his eyes. "Please. No one else in Gryffindor can lose that many points in between lunch and dinner." He stepped forward. "Do be careful where you walk, Harry."

Draco's displeasure suddenly made more sense. Harry nodded. "Um, yeah. I'll do that."
Indeed, when the school sat down to dinner and saw the changed counters, heads turned towards Harry from all houses, and those from Gryffindor frowned more than the others. He suspected that enough people had heard him ranting that his house suspected the loss had been intentional. Harry shrugged and slipped onto the bench beside Hermione. "Sorry I'm late."

Ron leaned across her to glare at Harry. "What did you do?"

"Told Professor Dumbledore that I didn't think anyone should get points for killing people."

"You said he wasn't around!"

"Okay. First I went to McGonagall's office -- drunk."

"Harry!" Hermione squeaked.

"Oh, brilliant move!" Ron said sarcastically. "How many points did that lose?"

"Only thirty, but Dumbledore was there, and we talked." Harry tried to ignore the people who were turning their heads to listen. "And he agreed to split the hundred between me and Draco, since we both fought her, so Slytherin got half."

"So you lost eighty points for Gryffindor."

"Fifty of which we never should have had!"

"You fucking traitor!"

"Ron!" Hermione exclaimed

"Hermione, are you listening to him?"

"Yes, and I think he's right." She looked quickly at Harry. "About the fifty, anyway. If Gryffindor is to get points for that, Slytherin should as well."

"We could have won the House Cup!"

"But we shouldn't have!" Harry exclaimed. "We were dead last a week ago, and that was fair. This wasn't fair!"

"Malfoy's really got you wrapped around his finger, doesn't he?"

"Malfoy," Harry said nastily, "doesn't even approve."

"Don't believe that."

"It's true." Harry shrugged tightly. "Mostly because he's afraid my house will kill me," he admitted.

"Might at that."

"RON!"

Hermione, glaring, turned on Ron. Parvati, who had been several seats down, stood up, plate in hand, and moved down to sit next to Harry on the other side. Colin let her push in. "You were right," she said to Harry, "completely right, and they will figure it out."
"I don't approve of the drinking," Hermione interjected.

Harry shrugged, his face heating. "It was the best plan I could think of in an afternoon." He looked earnestly at Hermione, trying to ignore Ron on the other side of her. "Sorry. I just needed something that would make her angry."

He might actually have been killed, Harry thought, if it hadn't been for the earlier attack. As it was, a number of people saw this as his retaliation, and quite a few thought he had the right to it. Some told him so, with rolled eyes, and hindsight advice on better ways he might have handled the matter. Others walked past him with stony glares that reminded him of fourth year. Dean, oddly, wasn't one of them. The next afternoon, when Harry was studying in the library to stay away from Ron, and Colin, and the Gryffindor Common Room, in general, Dean came and sat next to Harry. Harry tried not to feel alarmed as he looked over in question, but his hand inched toward his wand.

"I ..." Dean cleared his throat. "Look, I wanted to say... I'm sorry. It -- I think the thing with Draco is really, well, gross-weird, but it was just -- the group of us had been talking, and revving each other up, and I hadn't meant it to go that far, and I don't know why I went along with it. We all just...." He trailed off, looking almost panicky.

Harry smiled. He was so pleased that he felt Susara stirring with curiosity, and drew his shirt cuff tight against the table to signal her to stay inside. "Thanks," he said. "For saying that, I mean. I didn't think you ever would."

"Do you actually fancy him?" Dean blurted out.

"Yeah." Harry shrugged. "Can't say why I can fancy him just as much as I did Cho -- I just do."

"Is it really like that?"

"Well...." Harry considered, for a moment, how to explain. "Better, really, because we're friends, too."

Dean looked horrified. "You don't think of me like that, do you?"

Harry almost laughed. "No. Not you, or Ron, or Neville, or Seamus. Not Hermione or Parvati, either. I mean, it's a lot more than what sex someone is, right? You're not attracted to all girls, are you?"

"Of course not!"

"Well, there you go." Harry shrugged again. "I'm not attracted to everybody ... just a few of each."

With a shaky laugh, Dean stood. "All right," he said. "I'll try to ... well, ignore it, I guess."

"If that helps. And it wasn't because of you -- the House Cup, I mean. It was just because it was unfair."

Dean nodded. "Yeah, I know. Ron and Hermione have been having such a row that I have a pretty good idea how it came about. And I thought that if you can give that up because you ought to, I could come talk to you." He bit his lip. "Because I knew I ought to, I mean."

"Thanks. I appreciate it."
Dean nodded tightly and walked off. Feeling loads better than he had in weeks, Harry turned back to his paper.

His pleasure was short-lived. Dinner was horrible. Ron sat nearby, but only to cause trouble. He took things that Harry was reaching for, spilled pumpkin juice onto Harry's plate, and made rude comments. Harry eventually got up and stalked off. He had dinner in the kitchen and then a shower, and returned to his room late. He remembered just in time to check his bed for hexes, saving himself from something nasty -- he dispelled it before thinking to try an identification.

He woke up in one piece, feeling more or less normal. It wasn't until he was in the bathroom that he realized that someone had turned his hair a disturbing leprechaun green. He rolled his eyes and decided to not even bother trying to change it; if it had been Ron who cast it, he certainly had learned enough from the twins to build traps into trying to disrupt it. He made his usual token attempt to comb the mess, whose resemblance to new grass made it no more tractable, and then headed down to breakfast.

Breakfast promised to be much the same as dinner, improved only by sitting out of juice-spilling distance of Ron. Even people who weren't angry about him were sniggering about the hair. Harry concentrated on eating and tried not to blame them. He was sufficiently preoccupied by ignoring an insult from Ron that he didn't notice the routine chaos of the arrival of the morning post -- until, that is, a Howler was dropped in front of him, one corner landing in his eggs.

Nervously, Harry picked it up. The egg-damp corner began smoking slightly and gave off an unpleasant odor of sulphur. His name was in a hand that looked familiar, but which he couldn't place. Bracing himself, he opened it.

HARRY JAMES POTTER! I WOULD NEVER HAVE IMAGINED YOU CAPABLE OF SUCH IDIOTIC, LOUTISH BEHAVIOR! DRUNK AT MID-AFTERNOON? INSULTING YOUR PROFESSORS? DID YOU THINK I WOULDN'T HEAR ABOUT THIS?

Harry forced the shouted words to blend to a featureless roar as he got to his feet, struggling for a moment to make it over the bench. He couldn't help looking at Ron, but Ron looked as surprised as he did, and possibly as red.

"Harry..."

He pulled back from Hermione's touch. "It is NONE of HER business!" he shouted, and then swallowed. "Sorry," he ground out, not managing to sound as all as if he meant it, and he fled.

In his blind rage, Harry nearly let swing at the person who brushed against him in the hallway. It was only with the barest grip on his control that he managed to look before raising his fist. It was Draco.

"Good morning," Draco said smoothly, as if Harry had not just whirl ed murderously to face him.
"Or, at least, I hope the rest of it is better."

"I'd say it would have to be, but it doesn't."

"No. It never does." Draco shrugged. "I have a morsel of news for you."

"Oh?"

"Mm. Snape is away. Until tomorrow."

For a moment, Harry didn't understand what Draco was waiting for. Suddenly, he got it.

"Tomorrow?"

"Exactly. Do you think you could survive sneaking out, tonight?"

"Yeah." Harry laughed harshly. "It might be the only way I'll survive tonight."

"Excellent. The usual place, then." Draco smiled slightly. "Lovely hair, by the way."

"Thanks, but I can't claim credit." Harry suddenly felt a lot better. "I'll pass on your compliments."

Draco smirked. "Please do."

They walked together to Transfiguration. Both of them lost ten points for whispering during the lesson.

When Harry arrived in the Chamber of Secrets that evening, Draco was sitting on the harlequin plastic couch, looking as poised as if it was crafted of velvet and hand-carved walnut.

"There's butterbeer," he said, "and cream puffs. Terrible sorry I can't offer you anything more."

"Can't you?" Harry asked.

Draco tossed his head, making his bright hair flash in the torchlight. "Well, perhaps," he demurred, patting the seat beside him invitingly. "Did your day improve?"

Harry shrugged. "Yes, not that that's saying much. Ron stopped being actively awful, at least. He was embarrassed about the howler."

"Was it his fault?" Draco asked quizzically.

"It was his mother."

Draco looked taken aback. "I had been meaning to ask you if you knew the harridan, or if she was just a deranged fan. The Mother Weasley, then?"

"Right. Ron swears he didn't tell her, which means it was probably Professor Dumbledore who did."

"What! Hardly her affair, is it?"

"Hardly." Harry finally sat, but he was too agitated to touch. "I used to stay there at the end of each summer, but she's not family, as she's made quite clear."

"But she'll do that to you."
"I don't know what she's thinking! A year ago, yeah, I would have accepted that, but Ron's father died last summer, and she didn't want me staying there because of that, so I'm clearly not family. And last Christmas, Hermione was invited to the Burrow, because she's Ron's girlfriend...." Harry lost the ability to speak. He hadn't realized that it still hurt so much.

"Ah," said Draco. "I remember now."

His arm slid behind Harry and Harry forgot about not touching. He leaned into Draco, and suddenly they were kissing desperately.

"Summer's so soon," Draco whispered, a long time later.

"It only lasts for nine weeks. And there's the trial."

"Nine and a half. But yes. The thought of you there makes it bearable."

"I'll have my own room."

"Mmm."

It was long past midnight when Harry returned to his dormitory.

Two days later, Harry left on the Hogwarts Express. Draco stood on the platform and watched, expressionless, as the train pulled away.

"Cold fish, isn't he?" Ron commented.

"Shut it. You don't know how it feels."

Ron stalked off and didn't speak to him for the rest of the ride, even after Hermione hauled him into their compartment several hours later. Hermione and Ginny tried to pretend everything was normal. For the most part, Harry went along with that, while he watched Ron stare out the window.

At King's Cross, they wrestled their baggage down to the platform, and looked around. Ron turned to Harry and met his eyes, and for a moment, Harry thought things would resolve, but then Ginny called "Mum!" and the moment was broken. With a glare at the approaching woman, Harry collected his trunk. He was gone before she got there.

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