Annus Mirabilis

by Ren

Summary

Harry and Malfoy are trapped at Hogwarts around the time the school was founded. Stuck with a different way of doing magic, with no chocolate, and with each other, they have to find a way to work together if they want a chance to go home.

**Featured Book:** Hogwarts: A History

Notes

The title means a year notable for disasters or wonders; a fateful year. Most of the historical details are based on the book *The Year 1000* by Robert Lacey, Ravenclaw's riddle is from [here](#). A heartfelt thank you goes to Sas for handholding and for brit picking it even though it wasn't her fandom; all remaining mistakes, plot holes and historical inaccuracies are my own. Thank you, phoenixacid for the lovely prompt, I hope you will forgive me for running away with it. And thank you to the mods for another lovely fest.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#).
The enchanted ceiling was full of dark clouds, but no rain was falling on the crowd gathered in the Great Hall. Harry took a sip of his pumpkin juice and watched the couples on the dance floor. It was, he thought as Ron and Hermione waltzed in front of him, like the Yule Ball all over again. And once again he was on the sidelines watching other couples, except this time he didn't mind. Hermione flashed him a smile as she whirled past. Ron's face was red with the effort of not tripping over his own feet, but so far he'd managed to remain upright.

"Harry!"

Harry turned around and saw Nearly-Headless Nick, gliding through the crowd as he floated towards him. The guests didn't seem too pleased at having their dance interrupted by the ghostly equivalent of a bucket of cold water, but Harry couldn't suppress a grin.

"Hello, Nick," he said. "It's been a while."

Nick inclined his head in agreement, and then had to quickly push it back up as it threatened to fall off his neck. "It has, yes," he said. "It was strange having the castle empty of students for the past year."

"Sorry to hear about that," Harry said. "Must have been lonely for you and the other ghosts."

"Oh, it wasn't so bad," Nick replied, his voice slightly muffled as he straightened his ruff. "Most of the professors were around, and of course there were all the builders and restorers. But I have to say I'll be happy to see the start of another school year tomorrow."

"Harry!"

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"Yeah," Harry agreed. "I'm glad McGonagall managed to finish in time." The Daily Prophet had been writing about the rebuilding of Hogwarts all year, predicting that it was impossible to complete the task in the time allocated. When letters had gone off in mid-July, stating that the school would re-open as scheduled on September 1st, the Prophet had started speculating about a secret accord to borrow gold from the goblins at outrageous interest rates, and about how the castle hadn't been fixed at all and the students would have been forced to sleep and study in rooms that still lacked a roof or walls.

As if reading his mind, Nick snorted. "Codswallops," he said. "The Headmistress always had it under control." It was the same thing Hermione had been repeating all summer, but she too had been relieved to receive the official invitation. Officially the ball was to celebrate the reopening of the school after the war, but unofficially it was a way to show parents and the Ministry that Hogwarts was safe once more. The Great Hall was more crowded than Harry had ever seen it, filled from wall
to wall with parents, former students, Ministry officials, and witches and wizards who were simply curious to see whether Hogwarts had indeed been restored to its former glory.

"Speaking of Professor McGonagall," Nick said, "she was looking for you a while back."

"I wanted to say hello too," Harry said, craning his head to see above other people's heads and searching for McGonagall's tall, pointed hat. He had only seen the professor from far off, when she delivered a speech at the beginning of the ball, and then she'd been swallowed in the crowd. "Do you know where she is?"

Nick floated up a few feet to have a better view. "She's not here," he said. "I think she went back to her office to finish something before the students' arrival. You can probably still find her there." He gestured towards the crowded dance floor. "If you don't mind leaving the celebrations."

With a rueful grin, Harry shook his head and set down his half-empty goblet of pumpkin juice. The truth was that he was glad of an excuse to get out of the noisy Great Hall for a while. "Thanks. It was good talking to you, Nick," he said, and the ghost waved him goodbye.

Ron and Hermione caught up with him as he was navigating the press of bodies near the refreshment table.

"Hey, Harry," Ron called. "Where are you going?"

Harry jerked his head towards the big double doors. "McGonagall's office. She wanted to see me."

Ron let out a peal of laughter that made people around them turn their heads. "Sorry, sorry," he said to Harry and Hermione's puzzled stares. "It's just that you've been here for barely two hours and you're already being sent to the Headmistress' office. What did you do this time?" he said, still snickering.

Hermione grinned, too, while Harry did his best to pretend he was annoyed. "It's not like that, you git," he said. "She probably just wants to say hi. You two should come along too."

"I'd like that," Hermione replied. "But I'm parched, I need a drink first. And maybe something to eat." She looked at the crowd around the refreshments and sighed.

Ron sighed too. "All right," he said. "Sit down, I'm going to get us drinks even if I have to hex someone to get them."

"Please don't hex anyone," Hermione said, managing to sound both cross and fond at the same time. She turned towards Harry and waved him off. "Go ahead, we'll be along shortly. Maybe when we come back I can convince you to dance with me at least once."

Harry glanced towards the dance floor. The music had changed into something quick and jaunty, and people were no longer dancing as much as moving like clumsy, drunk chicken. Since nobody was pointing and laughing, Harry assumed that was how that particular dance was meant to be. "Yeah," he said, weakly. "Maybe."

Harry walked through the length of the Great Hall, pausing occasionally to greet former schoolmates and friends. As much as he enjoyed seeing all these familiar faces, he was relieved when he finally escaped to the quiet of the Entrance Hall. Only a few people lingered there, probably also seeking refuge from the noise and confusion of the ball.

The rest of the school was even more quiet, the silence only broken by the occasional rumble of thunder from the storm outside. Harry felt a sudden pang of nostalgia: the suits of armour, the
moving portraits, the heavy wooden doors and tall arched windows, the moving staircases, everything was just as he remembered, unchanged from his days as a student. His feet led him through the corridors and up the stairs almost mechanically.

Ron had a point: Harry had been to the Headmaster's office a lot of times, maybe more than any other student. Certainly more than he would have liked. At least this time he didn't have to be afraid he'd be expelled, even though whenever he came face to face with Professor McGonagall Harry couldn't shake the feeling that she was about to take away points from Gryffindor.

Harry stopped in front of the gargoyle that guarded the entrance to the Headmaster's office -- the Headmistress' office, now. He stood there in the deserted corridor, not really knowing what to do, as he realized that he didn't know the password to McGonagall's office. He looked up and down the corridor, but it was deserted. Should he wait until McGonagall came out for him? Should he have asked Nick for the password?

"Just come in already," said the gargoyle. "The Headmistress said to expect you, Harry Potter."

"Er," said Harry. He took a step forward, then hesitated. "Are you sure it's okay? I could be an impostor."

The gargoyle made a strange sound, like stone scraping on stone. "Nope," it replied. "There are spells now, to stop people from using Polyjuice Potion inside Hogwarts. Pretty useful, eh? Now come on, I don't want to stay out of my niche all night."

"Okay," said Harry. "Thanks." The gargoyle made the scraping noise again, and Harry realised it was yawning. "Did I wake you up?"

The gargoyle shook its ugly head and scampered aside as the wall behind it split in two. "I've been trying to catch a nap all night, but people keep coming through."

"Sorry about that," Harry said as he entered the passage.

"It's all right," the gargoyle said with another loud yawn. "Comes with the job. At least I don't have to stand outside in the rain with a piece of pipe in my mouth..."

The rest of the words were drowned when the walls closed behind Harry with a thud. The spiral staircase started moving up until Harry reached the familiar oak door with the griffin-shaped brass knocker. There were no voices coming from inside, just the sound of someone pacing up and down. Harry knocked.

The pacing stopped. "Professor McGonagall?" a familiar voice called out, tentatively.

Harry froze, hand still on the knocker. Then his Auror training took over. Without even pausing to think, he pushed the door open, one hand grabbing his wand from the pocket of his dress robes and pointing it at the lone figure in front of McGonagall's fireplace. Draco Malfoy was the last person he'd expected to see in McGonagall's office.

Malfoy's face blanched when he saw Harry. "Potter," he said, swallowing nervously, his eyes fixed on the wand's tip. "What are you doing here?"

"What are you doing here?" Harry snapped back, keeping his wand trained on Malfoy's chest.

"McGonagall told me to wait here," Malfoy replied, "while she went to fetch some things."

"Things?" Harry repeated. "That's a likely story. Like she'd let scum like you into the school, let
alone into her office."

This time, Malfoy's pale cheekbones turned red. "I'm referring to the rare books and scrolls that she borrowed from my father," he spat. "Family heirlooms containing details about Hogwarts that couldn't be found anywhere else. Ask her, if you don't believe me."

It made sense, Harry reflected. Most of the galleons for the rebuilt of Hogwarts had come from the families who had contributed in some way to its destruction, who were now trying to clean their name as best as they could from any association with Voldemort. The Malfoys' gold might easily have purchased them an invitation to tonight's ball, though they had been careful not to show their faces: a lot of people were still furious that they'd managed to stay out of Azkaban.

Harry lowered his wand but didn't put it back in his pocket. "I'll wait with you until McGonagall comes back."

"What is it, you don't trust me to be alone in her office?" Malfoy asked. Harry just glared pointedly. Malfoy glared back, then abruptly turned away and resumed his pacing.

Harry kept his eyes on him. The initial shock of running into his arch-rival after so long had worn off and now he took the time to study Malfoy. He seemed to be doing better than he had on their last encounter, but that had been during his family's trial and all three Malfoys had looked like death, with unkempt hair and frayed prison clothes and the looming fear of Azkaban in their eyes. Now Malfoy's pale blonde hair was brushed back neatly and his black robes were expensively tailored. There were still dark circles under his eyes, though, and something about his posture that made him look haunted, like he had for the past few years.

It suited him, Harry thought. He'd been pushing for a short imprisonment, at least for Malfoy senior, but the Ministry had been more concerned with the Death Eaters who had refused to cooperate.

"Can you please stop staring at me?" Malfoy snapped, wrenching Harry away from his thoughts. "It's not like I'm about to make off with any of this junk." He stopped his pacing next to the desk and gestured dismissively towards the books and instruments scattered around.

McGonagall's old office had always been very neat, but the desk before him was covered with towering stacks of books. There was also a large basin, which Harry at first mistook for the Pensieve, until he realized that it was full of fine white sand. Even more books were piled on the basin.

Malfoy took one of the books, brushed the sand from its cover and started flipping through the pages. Judging from the faded lettering on the cover and from the yellowing pages, the book was very old.

"Malfoy," Harry said, "put that book down."

"It's not against the law to read a book," Malfoy replied without taking his eyes from the book.

Harry's hand clenched around the wand he was still holding. "Just put it down."

"Or what?" Malfoy sneered.

"Or else I'll make you."

Malfoy closed the book with a snap. "Try it, Potter."

Harry reacted to the sudden movement by reflex. Without thinking, he raised his wand and shouted, "Expelliarmus!" while crouching into a ball to present the least target to his opponent.
Malfoy started reaching for his wand but the spell hit him before he could even point it at Harry. Book and wand flew from his hands and hit the wall, startling a few of the dozing portraits.

"What's going on here?" asked the portrait of an ancient Headmistress wearing a large turban, but neither Harry nor Malfoy paid her any attention.

Malfoy grabbed another book from the desk and threw it at Harry. Harry ducked and then jumped forward, lips shaping around another spell. The next book hit him right in the face, knocking his glasses askew and stunning him for a second. Malfoy tried to run past him towards the door, but he couldn't avoid Harry in the office's narrow space. Harry grabbed him by the front of his robes and pushed him back against the desk. Several books tumbled to the floor from the impact.

Harry had dropped his wand at some point, but it didn't matter. He pulled back his fist and aimed at Malfoy's nose. The punch connected with a satisfying thump. Malfoy looked completely bewildered, with a bloody lip and hair sticking out in all directions and his eyes very wide. Then he snarled, kicking Harry in the knee, and they both fell to the floor in a tangle of limbs.

Something fell down next to them, missing Harry's head by mere inches, and a shower of fine white sand filled Harry's eyes and nose. He closed his eyes and blindly aimed another punch at Malfoy's stomach, not caring about anything else but finally getting back at Malfoy.

At first he thought it was just the pain from Malfoy's blows. Then Harry realized that the strange feeling was something else entirely. It felt as if he was falling. He fell for a very long time.

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When Harry came to, he was lying face-down on the ground. He pushed himself to his knees and spat, feeling the taste of earth and rotten leaves on his lips. Wiping his mouth with his sleeve, Harry looked around. The storm must have stopped while he was passed out, because there was a clear sky overhead. The stars and the almost-full moon gave enough light to show Harry that he was lying on a narrow path somewhere on the ground of Hogwarts, not too far from the edge of the forest. He felt bruised all over but a quick check told him nothing was broken.

Harry squinted at the dark blurry shape of the school and realized he wasn't wearing his glasses. They must have been knocked aside in the Headmistress' office, or maybe they were lying somewhere on the muddy path. More importantly, he didn't have his wand. He started feeling the ground with his hands, looking for it, but even as he did he knew it was a hopeless task. He remembered quite clearly dropping it in the office, and he doubted whoever or whatever transported him outside had bothered to bring his wand along.

The sound of approaching footsteps made Harry jerk to his feet. Malfoy stumbled out from between the trees, holding his head with one hand. Harry noticed with satisfaction that he had a split lip and looked worse for wear.

"Potter!" Malfoy yelled when he saw him, stopping next to an elm tree and leaning against it. "What's the meaning of this? What did you do to me?"

"I could ask you the same thing," Harry snapped back, even though Malfoy didn't sound as if he was faking his confusion. "Did you bring me here?"

"I don't even know where here is!" Malfoy replied. His voice was shrill and Harry wished he wouldn't be so loud, not while Harry had no clue of what had happened to them either. "The last thing I remember is you assaulting me, and then I woke up in a forest." His eyes went wide, and Harry enjoyed Malfoy's moment of panic as realization dawned on him. "Is this... the Forbidden
Entertaining as it would have been, teasing Malfoy had to take a backseat compared to the more pressing matter of removing themselves from possible danger. "We're just outside the limits of the Forbidden Forest," Harry said, nodding towards the direction Malfoy had come from. He pointed in the opposite direction with his arm. "Hogwarts is right there, so we can just walk back."

Malfoy was too far for Harry to see his expression clearly without glasses, but his voice when he spoke was the now-familiar annoyance tinged with fear. "You still haven't explained why we're out here," he said. "Why should I listen to you?"

"I have no idea what happened," Harry replied, clenching his fist and wishing he could have his wand back. He wondered if Malfoy had managed to hold on to his, and whether he'd be able to do wandless magic if he needed to. "Stay here for all I care, I'm going back to the castle."

Harry turned around and started walking down the path, away from the forest. His Auror training was screaming against splitting up in a possibly dangerous situation, but he was counting on Malfoy's dislike of the forest being greater than his dislike of Harry. It took only a moment before Malfoy started hastily following Harry's footsteps. Harry slowed down his strides just enough to let Malfoy catch up, because he didn't want to be giving the idiot his back, just in case.

They didn't speak for several long minutes. The night was silent. No animal calls, no leaves rustling in the trees; even the wind had dropped. The only noises were their footsteps on the narrow track among the grass.

"What do you think happened?" Malfoy asked after a while.

Harry shrugged, although he was glad of an excuse to break the oppressive silence. "Don't know," he replied, keeping his voice low. "I doubt it was dark magic, there's even more wards and protective spells against that stuff now..." At least that's what Harry told himself. Because the alternative, that one of the Death Eaters was still at large and had managed to penetrate the school's defences, didn't bear thinking about. Not with the students about to arrive for the new school year.

Malfoy seemed to be thinking along the same lines. "If it's not dark magic, then what?" he asked, a trace of his old sneer back in his voice. "One can't Apparate or Disapparate inside Hogwarts! Someone had to stun us and bring us into the forest without anyone noticing, and I doubt it was meant as a harmless prank! If they managed that so easily, I can't say I think much of your exalted security wards."

Harry glared at him. "Maybe it was the castle itself," Harry said, caught by a sudden idea. Malfoy looked at him as if he was mental. "Maybe there was some booby trap in McGonagall's office and we accidentally triggered it. Something that boots you out of the school if you start fighting."

Malfoy considered it. "Maybe," he said, reluctant to agree with Harry on anything. "But it hardly seems safe to send students straight into the middle of the Forbidden Forest just for breaking the rule against duelling."

It was the second time Malfoy had used that phrasing, and Harry itched to point out that Malfoy had barely taken a couple of steps inside the forest, if that. However, there was something else that was bothering him, something about the position of the trees and the shape of the path. They were walking downhill and the path was winding around, making a wide arc before curving towards the lawn.

"Don't you think it's strange?" Harry asked. "I thought this path was shorter, and it should be paved
with gravel this close to the castle."

Malfoy shrugged. "Maybe McGonagall changed it. Maybe you remember wrong. What does it matter?"

"I'm not misremembering, I know it," Harry replied, bristling. He squinted in the direction of Hagrid's hut, but couldn't see anything in the darkness. Maybe Hagrid was still up at the castle, or maybe he had already gone to sleep. "This is close to the path I always took to visit Hagrid's hut, I've been here a hundred times with Ron and Hermione."

Malfoy's derisive snort made Harry's head snap around. "Then you obviously know best," Malfoy said. "I wasn't in the habit of keeping such poor company."

Harry clenched his fists, pursed his lips into a thin line, and didn't say anything at all until they crossed the lawn and reached the castle. They pushed the big double doors open and walked in.

It was dark in the entrance hall. Harry wondered why the torches had been put out and wished he could cast a simple Lumos. The spell was simply too difficult for him to maintain without a wand.

"Where is everyone?" Malfoy asked.

Harry, still pissed at him, just shrugged. Maybe they'd been out longer than he thought and all the guests had already left, even though from the position of the moon he didn't think it was that much later. He turned right into the Great Hall, from which he could hear a steady murmur of voices. Malfoy followed him, so close they almost stumbled over each other in the semi-darkness.

The first thing Harry noticed was that most of the lights inside the Great Hall had also been put out. There were still a few candles hovering in mid-air, and by the flickering light Harry could see that the four long House tables had been moved back into their usual positions. The tables were piled with food and drink, and students were laughing and talking as they stuffed themselves.

"This is... the start-of-term feast?" Harry said. He turned to look at Malfoy, whose face looked equally blank. Was it possible that they'd been unconscious a whole night and day?

"But..." Malfoy said, absently, and for once he didn't sound haughty. His eyes went wide and he looked around the room. "Something's not right. There are so few professors!"

Some of the students had noticed Harry and Malfoy's entrance and were turning their heads to stare at them.

Harry squinted, trying to pull the far end of the hall into focus. There was a handful of people seated at the staff table, but that wasn't all of the teachers, not by far, and the staff table was always full on September 1st. He couldn't see well enough to tell whether Professor McGonagall was here. "Maybe they're out looking for us?" he suggested.

"Where are all the other students?" Malfoy asked. "There's only the first years here at most."

At the same time, someone called out, "Who is there? Come forward!"

It was a man's voice, used to giving orders and having them obeyed. Harry walked towards the end of the room and the mysterious teacher, feeling everyone's eyes on him. Now that Malfoy had pointed it out, he realized that it was true: the long benches, usually so crowded during meal times, had more empty spaces than people sitting on them. He shared a glance with Malfoy, who looked equally confused.
They stopped in front of the high table, and the four people sitting there paused their meal to look at them. The expressions on their faces ranged from curiosity to annoyance, but Harry's focus was on the man who had spoken.

He was a giant of a man, as tall as Dumbledore had been but much broader in the shoulder and chest. His hair and beard were a rusty red and he was wearing equally red robes, which made him look like he was on fire. The stranger glared at him and Malfoy from under his bushy eyebrows, then grabbed a chicken leg and started munching on it.

"Who are you two?" he asked between bites, jabbing his chicken leg at the two of them. "Are you here to become students of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry?"

Malfoy snorted a laughter. "Is this a joke?"

The four at the table spluttered with indignation, but Harry barely noticed. Like a man trapped in a dream, he looked at the man, then at his three companions. He'd never seen his portrait, because none existed, but he knew who this man was. He raised his voice. "You're ... Godric Gryffindor?"

The red-headed man nodded and stuck out his chest. "You have heard of me," he said, pleased.

"You've got to be kidding me," said Malfoy. He spun around to face Harry, pale and shaky. "Is this your idea of fun, Potter? Knock me over the head and then make me believe we've, what, gone back in time to the Founders' era?"

"I didn't..." Harry began. He was interrupted when the other man at the high table set down his goblet with a loud noise.

"Cease this unseemly blabbering," the man said. He wore dark grey robes embroidered with a silvery thread, and his face as he stared at Harry and Malfoy was cold and disapproving. Harry could barely recognise him: this man was much younger, clean-shaven and with a full head of long black hair, but there was something in his eyes that was unmistakable. It was the same man whose statue Harry had seen years before in the Chamber of Secrets. "Who are you?" Slytherin asked.

Harry thought about Malfoy's words. If this was a prank, it was a very elaborate one.

The woman sitting on the far right of the table drank deeply from her goblet and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "I would have thought that obvious, Salazar," she said. She was wearing a sombre black dress and her brisk tone was a contrast to her jolly features. "They are here to become students."

Gryffindor snorted. "That cannot be, Helga. They are both men grown, far too old to be students."

"Surely they can speak for themselves," said the woman, and then gestured to Harry and Malfoy. "Well, then? Who are you, and to what purpose have you come here?"

The two boys shared a glance. "We want to become students here at Hogwarts," Harry said, quickly making up his mind. "My name is Harry Potter, and this is Draco Malfoy."

For the first time since leaving the Muggle world, there was no spark of recognizance when Harry introduced himself. The four people who claimed to be the Founders of Hogwarts regarded both him and Malfoy with the same bland disinterest.

"Too old," Gryffindor muttered again.

"One is never too old to learn, nor too young," said the fourth witch, speaking for the first time. Harry
was surprised to hear a marked northern accent in her voice. Ravenclaw had long, dark brown tresses and delicate features.

"They are too old," Slytherin agreed. "This is a school, not a lodging house for layabouts."

"Please," Harry said. He tried to ignore Malfoy's questioning looks. "We already know magic but we want to learn more."

"You arrived late," said Gryffindor. "We already sorted this year's students between the four of us, and wrote their names in the ledger." He made a large sweeping gesture that encompassed the whole room. "They weren't late."

"They brought money or livestock to pay for room and board and lesson," Slytherin interjected. "What about you, who come here without even a cloak on your back?"

Harry fidgeted, aware of his muddy, torn robes. "We don't have any money," he admitted. "And we lost our wands. But we really want to stay..."

"What kind of wizard loses his wand?" Gryffindor boomed. He turned towards the other three. "My friends, surely these men are Muggles, here to waste our time! Let us send them back to their village and return to our feast."

Ravenclaw shook her head. "That cannot be," she said. "They must be wizards. If they were not, how could they see past the charms that I set around the castle?"

Gryffindor frowned. "But what's a wizard without his wand?"

"A wizard is no less a wizard when deprived of his wand," Ravenclaw replied. "Much as a Muggle with a wand is still nothing but a Muggle."

"Muggles," Salazar scoffed, taking a sip from his goblet. "I will not be forced into hiding by the likes of them."

"It will not come to that," Hufflepuff said. "Surely even Muggles can be made to see reason..."

While the four bickered among themselves, Harry glanced around the room. Around them, most of the kids had stopped staring and gone back to their food. Now that he was closer, he could see that the dishes on the tables weren't standard Hogwarts fare. There were huge roasts, including a large boar with an apple in his mouth, and a few tureens of steaming vegetables. But there was also what looked like a stuffed flamingo.

"Potter," Malfoy hissed at him. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Do you have any better idea?" Harry shot back. "I don't know what's going on, but I plan on having a roof over my head while I find out. And I doubt they'll let us stay the night unless we convince them that we're students."

Malfoy pursed his lips. "This could be just a Pensieve memory," he said after a while. "That thing back in McGonagall's office was a Pensieve, wasn't it? We haven't touched any of them, they could be incorporeal for all we know..."

"No," Harry replied. "If it was just a memory they wouldn't be able to see or hear us." He sighed, though, because it would have been so much better if that was the case. Whatever their current predicament, it seemed a lot more complicated than that. He felt stupid for even voicing his own idea, but as unlikely as it sounded, it seemed the only possible explanation left. "You don't think it's
possible that we really travelled back in time a thousand years?"

To his relief, Malfoy scoffed and shook his head. "Don't be stupid, it's impossible to go back in time this much," he said. But he hesitated for a few seconds before answering and didn't sound entirely sure.

Harry couldn't think of any other explanation. The Pensieve-like basin on McGonagall's desk had been full of a strange white powder. He seemed to recall seeing something else like that, but he couldn't remember when. "Then I have no idea what's going on."

"Me neither," Malfoy said. "There's no choice, we've got to stay here until we find out." Then he pulled a face. "Merlin help me, I never thought I'd ever agree with you about anything."

"I'm not thrilled about our situation either," Harry replied.

Malfoy glared at Harry without replying for a long moment, then he turned towards the high table. "Excuse me," he said, composing his features into what he probably thought was an ingratiating smile. "We are very sorry to disturb you in the middle of your feast, but there's a good reason why we arrived so late and without any money."

Harry thought his voice sounded obviously fake, but the four Founders simply stopped arguing about Muggles and turned around to listen. "What are you talking about?" said Gryffindor.

"Last night, while we were on the road," Malfoy said without any hesitation, "we were attacked by a group of bandits. Muggle bandits," he added, and there were outraged murmurs from the high table.

"Those dogs!" Slytherin exclaimed, clenching his fingers into a fist. "The nerve of them, attacking travellers on the open road. Attacking wizards!"

"Travellers are less safe nowadays than they've ever been, be they wizards or Muggles," sighed Hufflepuff.

Harry stared at Malfoy, equally awed and disgusted by how smoothly he was coming up with lies.

"We barely managed to escape with our lives," Malfoy carried on. "Without our wands we didn't know where to go and we got lost for a whole day, but finally we managed to reach Hogwarts. We have heard so much about your powers and would like to learn magic from the best witches and wizards of this era."

Malfoy shot the Founders another ingratiating smile, but they still looked unconvinced.

"If you two can be overpowered by a bunch of Muggles, you are not very good wizards," said Gryffindor, shaking his head. "I see no reason to waste time teaching you."

"Please!" Harry exclaimed. "We've come a very long way..."

"Hogwarts exists to teach magic," Hufflepuff said, cutting him off. She half-turned, so that she was addressing both her friends and the room full of students. "If they were great wizards already, they would be teachers instead of students."

Ravenclaw nodded. "I agree," she said in her quiet, mellow voice. "Even if they were great wizards, knowing countless things, there would be countless things under the sun that they still wouldn't know about."

"Very well," said Gryffindor, slumping back in his chair. "But I don't want those two weaklings in
my House, and that's final!"

Malfoy gave a small sigh of relief, but Harry felt as if he'd been slapped. Gryffindor tower had been his home for years and he'd assumed that, once they managed to talk those four into letting them stay, that's where he would go.

Harry stared at Gryffindor, dumbfounded. What could he say that wouldn't make him sound like a madman? In the future, I'm in your House. Neither of those items have been created yet, but I've pulled your sword from the Sorting Hat. I was born in the same village as you, even though I don't know what it's called right now. "But, sir, I wanted to..."

"Shut up," Malfoy hissed at him. "Don't make them change their minds!"

He had a point, but Harry refused to admit it. Instead he stared at Ravenclaw, who was in the middle of reciting some kind of riddle.

"I'm sorry," Harry said once she was finished. "I didn't get that, could you repeat it again?"

Malfoy snorted and the other three Founders glared at him, but Ravenclaw simply gave him the riddle again. "Croaking hoarsely I am vocal in the middle of the water, but my voice sounds with the sort of praise which praises itself. Whenever I sing no one praises my songs. Who am I?"

Harry thought about it. He remembered the riddle from Sphinx, and the philosophical questions asked by the knocker on Ravenclaw tower, and wished Hermione was here. "Sorry," he said. "I have no idea."

Malfoy was still deep in concentration. "I've got it!" he exclaimed after a while. "It's a bell."

He looked expectantly at Ravenclaw, but she shook her head. "It is not," she said. "The answer is: a frog."

That wiped the smug grin from Malfoy's face. Harry smirked at his discomfiture, even though he himself hadn't done that much better. "A frog?" Malfoy repeated, in those peculiar disgusted tones that he usually reserved for saying Harry's name.

"Frogs live in ponds, in the middle of the water," Ravenclaw explained, slowly, as if to a child. "Why would a bell be in the middle of the water? I'm sorry, I do not think you are suited to be in my House."

She shook her head again and turned to Slytherin, who leaned back in his chair and stared at the two boys as if assessing them.

"Do you have any particular skills or abilities?" Slytherin asked.

Harry's nervousness hit him like a punch to the stomach when he realized that this was the Sorting ceremony all over again. Without the Hat, it was the Founders themselves who handpicked their own students, and two of them had already refused to have Harry in their House. He had to convince one of the other two to let him stay, otherwise he would be thrown out with no place to go and no idea of where he was.

Slytherin huffed. "You have no talent to speak of, and still you want become our students?" he asked, his eyes moving from Harry to Malfoy and then back to Harry again. "Go find a hedge wizard to teach you how to cure boils and turn straw into needles. That will be good enough for the likes of you."
The cold disdain in his eyes reminded Harry of someone else who had despised him. Snape, too, had thought that Harry was a poor excuse for a wizard. And while it was true that Harry had no aptitude for brewing potions, nor any particular interest for it, there were lots of other things Harry was good at. He thought about the accident that happened in the same room they were standing in, during the Duelling Club's brief lifespan.

"I can talk to snakes," Harry blurted out. There was a sudden outburst of muttering but Harry ignored it. He kept his eyes on Slytherin, trying not to blink. It was like having a staring contest with a snake. Slytherin had chosen an appropriate animal for his sigil, Harry thought.

It was true that Slytherin had a special interest in snakes: all disinterest was gone from his eyes, but the surprise was quickly being replaced by cold fury. He silenced the students with an imperious gesture of his hands. "It is not a subject you should joke about," he said, leaning forward in his chair. "Young man... what did you say your name was?"

"Harry Potter," he said. If he still had his glasses, he could gauged the reactions of the others. He wished he could remember if speaking to snakes was considered black magic in this era. It probably was. Too late to go back now. "I'm not joking, sir. I can talk to snakes."

Slytherin took a deep breath through his nose. Then, without any warning, he stood up and threw a spell at Harry. Harry brought up his hands, though they would have been no defence at all against powerful magic. Malfoy yelped and jumped to the side, trying to flatten himself against one of the tables. However, Slytherin hadn't been aiming for either of them. His target was the empty space on the raised dais, between Harry and the high table.

There was a puff of acrid smoke, and then a snake uncoiled itself and raised its head, looking at Harry through yellow eyes. It hissed, and several students cried out.

"Truly, Slytherin, is this necessary?" said Gryffindor, though he made no move to get up or stop the snake. "The boy was boasting. He could not fight off Muggle bandits, he will not be able to defeat your creature."

Harry thought he detected a tinge of distaste in the way Gryffindor said the last word, but most of his attention was on the snake in front of him. It was large, with glossy black scales, and its head was almost at a level with Harry's eyes. There was no way Harry could have fought it, not without his wand. "Please don't eat me," he said, raising his empty hands. "I had a terrible day."

The snake's head bobbed up and down as it looked at Harry. Its tongue darted out to lick at Harry's hand. "I was not going to eat you," the snake said. "I'm not hungry. You look bony and unappetizing."

Harry smiled, weakly. The exchange had been in Parseltongue, so everyone else in the Great Hall was still looking at the snake with a mixture of horror and fear. Everyone else but Slytherin, who was frowning.

As suddenly as he'd cast the first spell, Slytherin muttered another harsh word. The snake vanished with a crack and another, even fouler puff of smoke.

"Harry Potter," Slytherin said, still unsmiling. "Your name... A childish moniker, I assume, short for Harold?"

"Uh," Harry said. "Er. Not really. I'm Harry, everyone calls me Harry..."

"Nonsense. It is a name fit for a toddler," Slytherin snapped. Malfoy snickered at that. "If you're to
be my pupil, from this day on you will be addressed as Harold." He made a sweeping gesture, his large sleeves fluttering around him. A large volume flew in with a rush of air, settling on the table and upsetting the plates of food.

Ravenclaw cast him a reproachful look and moved the goblets away from the volume. Ignoring her, Slytherin bent over the tome and started scribbling in it with a quill conjured out of nowhere.

"Harold... Potter..." Slytherin muttered under his breath as he wrote. "Wizard... How old are you? And where do you hail from?"

"I'm nineteen and I'm from London," Harry said. He couldn't say he was from Godric's Hollow or that he'd spent several years in Scotland at Hogwarts, but it was true that he'd lived in London last year. Harry let out a breath he hadn't realised he'd been holding. "Does this mean I can stay?"

The wizard didn't raise his head from the volume he was still scribbling in. "Go sit with the other students already," he said, shooing him towards one of the tables.

Harry had been about to head towards the Gryffindor table on the far left of the room, but of course he'd have to sit with the Slytherins for now. He found an empty seat and sat down in front of a couple of kids who stared at him with wide eyes.

Malfoy was about to take a seat too when Slytherin stopped him. "Not you," he said, closing the volume with a snap. "I do not recall taking you as a pupil. Do you also speak to snakes?"

For a moment Malfoy looked as panicked as he had when he saw the snake, but he quickly managed to regain his composure. "I'm the heir of the Malfoy family," he said, holding up his chin. "The blood of centuries of powerful witches and wizards is flowing through my veins."

"Centuries of being an idiot," Harry said under his breath.

Without his glasses, Harry had no way of reading Slytherin's expression, but he didn't sound impressed at all. "That name means nothing to me," he said.

"Malfoy," Gryffindor said, as if he was trying out the name. "Malfoy. That sounds foreign to my ears. Are you from Normandy?"

Harry seemed to recall that Malfoy's ancestors had originally been from France, and they'd come over to England centuries ago... with the invading Normans. "No!" Malfoy said, his eyes going wide as he realized his misstep. "I mean, my family came from there, but that was a long time ago! I was born and raised here!"

"A score years is not a long time ago," Gryffindor said, pounding his fist into the table. "Not for those who lost their home or their loved ones on the sword of those barbarians."

"You are not one of us," Slytherin said. Somehow, his coldness seemed even more dangerous than Gryffindor's open fury. "Leave." His wand was back in his hand, and he pointed it at Malfoy.

Malfoy looked from one teacher to the other, but they all shook their heads. Even silent Ravenclaw looked away. Malfoy's eyes met Harry's. He opened his mouth but no words came out.

"Please," Harry heard himself say. "Let him stay too. We came all this way together. He's not going to cause trouble, we're just here to learn." Learn how to get out of this place, wherever it was, and back to his time. Harry didn't know why he was vouching for Malfoy when he still suspected he could have had a hand in their current predicament. But Malfoy was the only person here that Harry knew. It was unthinkable to let him go alone into the night.
The Founders stared at Malfoy for a long time. It was Hufflepuff who finally broke the silence. "I will take you as my pupil," was all that she said. She spread her arms, palm up, and the large volume with the students' names flew into her hands. Unlike earlier, it didn't hover but rather jumped like a large leather-and-paper cat.

"I do not think that wise," Slytherin said, while Gryffindor jumped out of his chair and leaned across Ravenclaw to hiss, "Helga, if I were you..."

"Oh, hush, the two of you!" Hufflepuff said, waving one pudgy hand dismissively. "Name, boy? Age? Provenance?"

The last questions were snapped at Malfoy who, after a brief moment of relief for making it in, was looking horrified as he realized that he was being put in Hufflepuff. "Draco Malfoy," he drawled. "I'm nineteen. And I'm from Wiltshire, not France."

Hufflepuff grunted an acknowledgement and shooed him towards the table at one end of the room. "Get a seat already, it's almost time for the meal to end." She looked up from the book and frowned. "You look like you need a good meal, and your friend too. Has the harvest down south been that bad?"

Malfoy didn't reply, just hurried to find a seat that was as far as he could from Harry and the professors. Harry wanted to talk to him, but there would be plenty of time for that in the morning. It was only when Harry looked at the food on the table that he realized how hungry he was. He hadn't been starving, he'd always been skinny, but since he started living alone too many of his meals had been cold sandwiches made of whatever leftovers he could find in the pantry. The last thing he'd eaten was a shrimp canapé at the buffet, back in the other Hogwarts, and that felt like hours ago.

The food in front of Harry was not standard Hogwarts fare, but it still looked delicious. Most of the dishes were roasts of some sort: Harry spotted chicken, duck, geese, and several others that he couldn't name. There were also tureens full of steaming vegetables and baskets of flat round bread. Harry cut himself a large slice of what looked like a whole roast pig, piled his plate with all the different kinds of vegetables he could reach, and was about to tuck in when he realized that there was no knife or fork next to his plate.

"Excuse me," he said, turning to the kid sitting next to him, a girl with dirty blonde hair and wide round eyes. "I think I'm missing something..."

She dropped the morsel she was holding and stared up at him. "Yes?" she asked in a thin voice. Only then he realised that everyone at the table was eating with their hands. He sneaked a glance at the high table and saw Ravenclaw picking bits of meat from her place with her fingers.

"Er," Harry said. He glanced around the table. "Could you, er, pass me the duck?"

The girl nodded and held the large dish up for him, arms wavering under the weight; Harry took it quickly before she could drop it. She looked even younger than eleven.

"Thanks," he said. He helped himself to a slice of the duck too. Then, since there seemed to be no way around it, he picked it up with his hands and took a bite. It wasn't half bad, he decided: more lean and stringy than he was used to, and slathered with a strange sauce, but definitely tasty. He quickly cleaned his plate, using the soft bread to sop up the remainder of the sauce.

While he ate, he had a good look at the students around him. They weren't all first years like he'd first assumed. Their ages seemed to range from six or seven to maybe fifteen, though older students were few and far between. Harry and Malfoy were by far the oldest and tallest, towering above the kids by
The girl sitting next to him was still staring at him with wide eyes, and the other kids sneaked him surreptitious glances in between bites. Nobody tried to talk to him, which wasn't surprising given the age difference. Harry remembered his first year at Hogwarts, back when Prefects had looked so old to him. It seemed like a lifetime ago.

Since there were no serviettes or tablecloths, Harry licked his fingers clean of the grease. He craned his head, wanting to see how Malfoy was getting on with the lack of cutlery, but there were too many people sitting between them and all he could see was the blurry back of a blond head. He wouldn't have been surprised if Malfoy had refused to eat at all for fear of ruining his manicure.

Harry poured himself some of what he thought was pumpkin juice, but when he took a sip he realized it was some sort of fermented drink. He assumed it was mead, though it was very different from the mead he occasionally had at the Leaky Cauldron. It wasn't strong at all and it had a thick consistency, almost like soup.

Like the rest of the food, it tasted and smelt real. For the hundredth time that evening, Harry wondered what the hell was going on. It didn't feel like a Pensieve memory and it was too elaborate to be an illusion. Everything looked as if Harry and Malfoy had stepped back in time a thousand years. Malfoy had said that it was impossible to travel back in time this far, but he could have been mistaken. If there was a way to travel back in time, Harry would bet all of his gold that its secret was hidden somewhere at Hogwarts.

There wasn't much that Harry could do for the moment. After having dessert, which consisted of a warm bun filled with bits of nuts, he was feeling pleasantly full and sleepy. Some of the kids were yawning openly. Despite Hufflepuff's words, Harry felt as if the feast had gone on for hours, well into the night.

Finally, the four Founders stood up and called for attention.

"Now we will lead you to your rooms," Gryffindor said, his booming voice easily filling the whole of the Great Hall. "Follow close, and do not get lost."

Harry felt a pang at the realisation that he wouldn't be headed to the comfort and familiarity of the tower. He joined the kids where they'd been lining up after Slytherin and followed them into the entrance hall.

"See you tomorrow, Malfoy," Harry called as he passed him by.

Malfoy stopped in the middle of what looked suspiciously like wiping his sticky fingers on the hem of his fancy dress robes. "Don't get lost in the dungeons, Potter," he snapped back.

If it was up to him, Harry would have happily switched places and let Malfoy stay in the dungeons. He was sure that the Hufflepuff dormitory would have been much cosier. He followed Slytherin and the other students through the door to the dungeons, along the same path he used to go to Potions. The corridors here were pitch black and the only light was the bright blue flame on top of Slytherin's wand. Slytherin's dark robes blended into the darkness, so it looked like a will-o'-the-wisp was leading them.

A couple of kids produced wands from their pockets and managed to light them, but the feeble light didn't help much. Harry was sure he could have cast a much stronger Lumos if he still had his wand. Though, considering that those kids hadn't started school yet, it was amazing that they knew any spell at all.
Slytherin stopped in front of a blank stretch of wall. "Serpentarium," he whispered, and the wall split in two and widened to allow him entrance. He stepped aside to let the students through, scrutinising each of them carefully. "These rooms and the password to enter them are a secret," he said as they walked in. His pale face looked like a ghost's in the flickering light. "Sharing them with members of another House is strictly forbidden!"

Harry followed the other students inside, stumbling around in the darkness. Slytherin was the last person to enter, after checking that nobody had been left outside. The entrance closed behind him, making Harry feel as if they'd been buried alive.

Slytherin led them through a narrow passage on the left of the entrance and down a set of stairs, explaining the school rules as he went. "As students of Hogwarts, and particularly as my students, there are rules that you must follow." His voice was still barely above a whisper, but it carried well in the small enclosed space. "You are no longer children. You are apprentice witches and wizards, my apprentices, and I expect you to work hard and be diligent in your studies. The bell will summon you to the Great Hall tomorrow morning, and from there you will be told which lessons to attend." He looked around and his lips curled downwards. "I believe we shall start with lighting spells, as well as providing wands for those of you who are without one."

He flicked his wrist and a dozen or so candles appeared in front of him. With another gesture he lit the candles from his wand and distributed them among the students.

The candle felt cold and slimy under Harry's fingers, but it cast enough light to let him see around. Harry remembered the Slytherin common room as a dank and dreary place, but at least it had been furnished. The corridor they were standing in was barely more than a passage carved from stone. Pressed tightly by other students on every side, Harry leaned against the wall and felt it wet against his palm. From close by he could see patches of humidity and lichens already starting to grow on the walls. If it wasn't for the doors, Harry would have thought he was in some sort of underground cave. Harry wrapped his ruined dress robes more tightly around himself and added his cloak to the mental list of things he missed.

Slytherin motioned towards two barely-visible doors at either side of the passage. "Boys will be sleeping in this room, and girls will be sleeping in the other," he said. My apartments are at the end of this corridor, but do not be fooled into thinking I will not hear you if you are noisy. There will be punishment for those who disrupt the peace or wander around at night time."

The students nodded, heads bobbing nervously up and down in the flickering candlelight. Harry had been hoping to have a look around while everyone else was in bed, but it would have to wait until morning. It would have been difficult to get around without a wand, anyway, not to mention dangerous since he still didn't know what exactly that place was and who might have brought him there.

When Slytherin finally dismissed them, Harry and the other half-dozen boys went into their dormitory. The boys' dormitory was another cave-like room, furnished as scarcely as the common room. There were three rows of narrow beds, fresh rushes scattered on the floor and torches hanging on the walls. But the torches weren't lit and the room was freezing.

"Cor, look at the size of this room," said one of the tallest boys. He had a really amusing expression as he looked around with his mouth hanging open. "And all these beds! The teachers will never have enough students to fill them, not if they search through all of the land. Right, Harold?" he asked, turning to Harry.

The other students nodded and laughed, muffling the sound in case Slytherin was listening in at the end of the corridor. Harry looked around at the two dozen beds and thought about the hundreds of
students that filled the rooms of his Hogwarts. "Yeah, I guess," he conceded.

He picked a bed close to the door and sat down with a yawn. The mattress was stuffed with straw and it rustled when he moved, but it felt soft enough, and clean. Harry kicked off his shoes and set the candle down on the small wooden chest next to his bed. He thought about leaving the candle on, but its strange light gave off no heat and he didn't want Slytherin to kick him out for accidentally burning down the dormitory. He waited until all the other boys had chosen a bed and then blew out the candle.

It was too cold to even think about taking off his clothes for bed. All the boys huddled under the covers fully dressed, teeth chattering in the semi-darkness. Harry had it worse than the others, since he was only wearing thin dress robes while the boys were dressed quite sensibly in heavy woollen breeches and tunics. Soon they were all snoring, while Harry stared into the darkness and wondered if it was any warmer in Gryffindor's dorms, or Hufflepuff's.

After a while Harry got up and, stumbling around blindly, took the blankets from two of the empty beds and threw them over himself. He wrapped himself tightly in his bundle of blankets, which were scratchy and smelled like wet wool but prevented him from freezing to death, and finally fell asleep.

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When Harry woke up the next day, it took him a while to remember where he was. The narrow bed was unfamiliar and for a few moments Harry had the mad thought that he was back at the Dursleys. Then he heard the bell clanging faintly in the distance. He sat up, struggling against the bundle of blankets he was trapped in, and remembered: he was at Hogwarts, or at least in some place that looked like Hogwarts a thousand years ago, and he was in the Slytherin dorms.

Harry's nose, which had been outside his cocoon of blanket, felt numb. He rubbed his face with the palm of his hand and surveyed the room. The torches had been lit and were blazing with orange and yellow flames, making the room look less dreary if not warmer. Someone, probably house-elves, had also left small piles of clothes at the foot of everyone's bed. There was a pair of black robes, breeches, an undershirt, and even boots. Two of the boys were already changing into their school attire, yawning and chatting among themselves as they did so.

Harry washed in the large washbasin at one end of the room, as quickly as he could because the water was freezing, and then put on the new clothes. They were just his size, and not too different from his Hogwarts uniform. Wizard wear hadn't changed all that much through the ages. He left his dress robes on the bed, even though they were muddy and torn beyond repair from his fight with Malfoy and his subsequent walk through the castle grounds. Then he headed off towards the Great Hall.

In the day, the Slytherin common room didn't look quite as dreary. At night the darkness had made it look like an empty cave ready to swallow them, but now Harry could see that it was furnished rather richly. There were several seats and tables placed around an ornate stone fireplace, and there was a faint greenish light coming from several stained-glass windows. The walls were covered with tapestries, which were richly decorated with green and brown threads and appeared to depict scenes of wizarding life. Harry hadn't seen them in the Slytherin common room in his time, and wondered what had become of them.

He had just stepped closer to look at one of the scenes, which appeared to depict a witch Transfiguring herself into a stool, when he heard two girls bickering in front of the entrance. One of them was the girl who passed him the duck the night before.

"That way!" the blonde girl said, pointing to the right and stomping her foot, while the brunette
opposite her shook her head resolutely and pointed in the opposite direction. "It's not!" she yelled.

They both fell silent when Harry approached them. "If you're going to the Great Hall for breakfast," Harry said, "the shortest way is to go right as you leave the common room."

The brunette was silent for a moment and looked like she still wanted to argue about it, but then she shrugged. "I misremembered," she said. "It was so dark last night and I was so sleepy. Thank you, Harold."

"You're welcome," he said. "But it's just Harry. Nobody calls me Harold." He smiled at the two of them, feeling awkward and out of place. He didn't belong in school and he didn't belong in this strange era.

The two girls followed him out of the passage and into the corridor. "I'm Hild," the brunette said. "And my friend is called Anwen."

"Do you know how to get to the Great Hall?" the blonde girl said, staring at Harry with something like awe.

"Yes," Harry said. "It's not that far, you'll learn the way in no time."

He led the way through the maze of corridors and up two flights of stairs. When they got out of the dungeons, Harry realized that outside the windows it was only just dawning. The autumn sunlight was weak, but it made him feel much warmer and more optimistic about the upcoming day. The castle looked different from what Harry was used to, without any moving suits of armour or portraits but with several more tapestries.

The corridors and stairs were still mostly where Harry remembered them to be. Sometimes Harry noticed that the corridors were shorter than he thought they would be, or stopped abruptly instead of leading into another wing. Perhaps those parts of the castle hadn't been built yet. Even with those forced detours, they reached the Great Hall very quickly.

"You have a very good memory," Anwen told him, "to remember the right way after only one trip." She sounded very impressed.

"Not really," Harry replied. The praise made him feel as if he'd tricked the girl on purpose into thinking he had a great sense of direction. "I've been here before, so I already knew the way."

Both girls looked confused. "How?" Hild asked, blinking. "The professors said that the castle was newly built and we are the very first students..."

"Yes, of course," Harry said quickly. What could he say that these two would believe? "I meant that I've lived in a castle like this one, and the way from the dungeons to the hall was similar."

It was close enough to the truth, and the girls seemed to accept that explanation, but now Anwen looked even more in awe. "Have you lived in many castles, Harold?" she asked, eyes going comically wide.

"Only one," Harry said, once again going with the closest thing to the truth.

Before the girl could say anything else, Harry heard a too-familiar voice calling out to him. Malfoy was sitting alone at the Hufflepuff table, toying with a bowl of cereals.

"Potter!" Malfoy said. "I see you've acquired a new fan club. What is it that compels you to be surrounded by admirers wherever you go?"
Harry glared at Malfoy and sat down at the Slytherin table, close enough to Malfoy that they could turn around and talk. "Still here?" he asked, doing his best to sound nonchalant. "I seem to recall you once said that you'd leave if you ended up in Hufflepuff. I was kind of hoping you'd keep your word."

Malfoy made a face like Harry had just spat in his cereals. "Sorry to disappoint," he said. "That was a long time ago. Besides, I'm hoping that this is only temporary. What about you, Potter, aren't you afraid that the evil Slytherins will stab you in your sleep?"

Harry looked around, worried that someone had overheard, but Hild and Anwen had gone to sit further down the table with the other girls and nobody seemed to be listening to their conversation. "Since they're all half my age, I'll take the risk," he said.

He made to get himself some breakfast and was dismayed to notice that the only food on the table was a large tureen of some thick brownish porridge. What he'd mistaken as cereals in Malfoy's bowl was probably also porridge. Harry spooned some of it into the wooden bowls that had replaced last night's silver plates and tried some of it. It tasted like watery bread and there were bits of grain in it that got stuck in his teeth.

Harry sat astride the bench and balanced the bowl on his knee, so he could keep talking to Malfoy while they ate. Or at least while Harry ate.

Malfoy was just playing with his food without eating any of it. "There's no tea," he whined. "I don't even think tea has been discovered yet. Or coffee."

Harry groaned. The thought hadn't occurred to him. He didn't mind some discomfort since he had the consolation of seeing that Malfoy was taking it worse than he did, but waking up at the crack of dawn and having to go the whole day without coffee, that was harsh.

His earlier optimism deflated. He gulped down a couple more spoonfuls of the watery porridge while Malfoy listed all of his complaints, making it sound like Harry was personally responsible for all of his troubles.

"These clothes are so scratchy, I think I'm getting a rash," Malfoy said. "It's like they're made from nettles. At least I had my undershirt, is soft underwear not a thing with these people?"

"It doesn't matter, we're not going to stay here for long," Harry replied, glum.

That only served to start Malfoy on another rant. "And where exactly is here?" he hissed, turning around on his bench and leaning forward until he and Harry were almost nose to nose. "Even if I believed your absurd notion that we travelled back in time, how do you plan on getting back?"

Harry clenched his fingers around his bowl of porridge and wished he could fling it at Malfoy's irritating face. "It's not like you have any better ideas," he shot back. "I thought we could have a look at McGonagall's office, if it even exists..."

"Not now," Malfoy said, quickly, his eyes darting sideways.

Harry followed his line of sight and noticed Hufflepuff walking towards them. He bent his head over his bowl and pretended to be absorbed in his food, but Hufflepuff stopped right in front of them.

"Good morning," she said. "You are both here, that is good. I won't need to repeat myself twice." She spoke in a brisk, businesslike way. "Do you know how to read and write?"

"Of course," Malfoy said, scoffing. Harry just nodded.
"Good," Hufflepuff said again. "We have decided that, in exchange for not paying us any tuition, you will help us with chores when you're not attending lessons. Start by teaching the youngest children and those from Muggle families who don't know their letters."

"Their letters?" Harry repeated, not understanding. He shot a sideways glance at Malfoy.

"You mean you want us to teach those kids how to read and write?" Malfoy asked, equally puzzled by the request.

"Yes, Draco," Hufflepuff said, a tinge of impatience in her voice. "Are you not familiar with Muggles? Most of them have no use for books and so never bother learning how to read or write. They're a very primitive folk. Witches and wizards born of Muggle parents are exceedingly rare, but quite a lot of them turned up here. There's at least ten of them and they all need to be taught how to read a spellbook. It is quite fortunate that the two of you came. You will teach them in the mornings, and in the afternoons you will work on crafting new wands. There is no point in teaching you magic if you don't have a wand."

Harry had hoped to slip away after breakfast and do some exploring, but he could hardly skip classes unnoticed if he was supposed to be the teacher. He tried to come up with some excuse but Hufflepuff had already moved past them to talk to three girls from her House.

"Teach them how to read and write?" Malfoy said again, in an undertone, making it sound as if they'd been asked to do cartwheels in their underwear.

Harry pushed away his porridge. "At least it's going to be easy," he said.

It turned out that teaching how to read and write to a dozen kids was much more difficult than either of them imagined.

Hufflepuff told them to use the empty classroom next to hers and gave them a manuscript to use as a textbook. When Harry opened it, he doubted he'd be able to read it himself. He had to squint and hold the pages close to his eyes to see the letters. It was written in a strange fancy script and the wording was so archaic as to be almost incomprehensible.

The biggest nuisance, however, was still Malfoy. "Can't you read, Potter?" he said, as Harry stumbled over yet another intelligible word. "It's 'urtica', the Latin word for nettle, which is a common ingredient in potions."

"I know that," Harry snapped back. He pushed the book to Malfoy across the table. "You do it, since you're so good at it."

Malfoy rolled his eyes. "Who's the child, you or them?" He went back to the book before Harry could reply. "Urtica. It's spelled U-R-T..."

The boys and girls crowded around the table, trying to see the words on the page. It would have been much easier if they had multiple copies of the book, or a blackboard, or if Malfoy jumped out of the window.

"Let's split the class," Harry said after a while, feeling like he'd go insane if he had to listen to Malfoy drone on about the properties of nettles for much longer. "You keep reading to six of them and I'll start teaching the other six how to write."

Even Malfoy had to admit that it was a good idea. Harry moved to a table at the other end of the room, distributed quills and pieces of parchment to the kids, and showed each of them how to write their name. He tried to imitate the strange script in the book, since he doubted Hufflepuff would have
been pleased if he taught them joined-up writing.

More problems that Harry hadn't anticipated turned up. Hufflepuff hadn't been exaggerating when she told them that their students had never held a quill before in their life. One of the kids insisted on holding the quill in her fist like a magic wand despite Harry correcting her grip a dozen times. Another kept dropping the quill and had to climb up and down from his tall stool to retrieve it. Worst of all, a boy hit the ink pot with his elbow and it spilled all over the table. Their small stock of blank parchment was completely ruined, and Harry had to go look for Hufflepuff and ask her for more. She didn't look pleased to be interrupted in the middle of her lesson.

By the time the bell rang to summon them to lunch, Harry's hands were black with ink and he felt like the whole morning had been a colossal disaster. He picked up one of the discarded pieces of parchment and stared at the disjointed lines and attempts at letters.

"This is a waste of time," Malfoy said, coming up behind Harry and looking at the scribbles over his shoulder. His voice was hoarse after all the reading. "None of them was paying any attention. They'd rather be learning magic than be poring over a musty book."

Harry was about to agree with him when Malfoy added, "And your clowning around didn't help. You're supposed to teach those brats, not add to the confusion." With that, he stalked off towards the Great Hall and Harry swallowed his reply.

Lunch was bread and cold meat left over from the night before. The bread had gone a bit stale, but Harry felt famished after skipping breakfast and wolfed down his portion. Malfoy seemed absorbed in the task of eating without touching the food with his hands and he ignored Harry through all the meal.

That suited Harry just fine, since he didn't have anything to say to the git, but he wished there was someone else he could speak with. The other students at the table were chattering and laughing as they ate, telling each other about their first classes and their teachers. But now that he was the teachers' assistant, Harry felt even more separated from them.

He finished quickly and left while everyone else was still eating, wanting to have a look around before the afternoon lesson.

To his dismay, Malfoy caught up with him just outside the Great Hall. He was still munching on a chicken leg, holding it fastidiously with the tip of his fingers. "Where are you going?" he called after Harry.

Malfoy still looked pissed off, so Harry saw no reason to stop for him. "I'm going to have a look around the Headmistress' tower," Harry said, starting to walk up the grand central staircase.

"Why?" Malfoy asked, but he followed Harry anyway. "What are you up to now, Potter?"

"I'm not up to anything!" Harry snapped. He took the corridor on the left and passed several rooms that should have been classrooms but were now empty. "I want to see what McGonagall's office looks like now. Maybe the magic that brought us here is still, dunno, hanging around." He made a vague gesture and Malfoy snorted.

"Waste of time," Malfoy muttered around a mouthful of chicken.

"You don't need to come with me," Harry replied. There was a secret passage on the third floor that acted as a shortcut, but without his wand Harry couldn't open it and had to take the long way. Maybe the passage didn't even exist yet.
Malfoy huffed and kept following Harry along the corridors. "If you're looking for some way to get out of here, I have a vested interest in whatever you might discover," he said. "Unless you were trying to keep that a secret from me."

"Why would I keep it a secret?" Harry asked. He almost forgot to turn left at the suit of armour next to the boys' bathrooms, because there was no suit of armour and no door to the bathrooms either. "We're in this together," he added, curling his mouth in distaste.

"Are we, Potter?" Malfoy said. He tried to keep his tone lofty but the effect was spoiled when his voice shook slightly at the end of the sentence. "I'm still not certain that you don't know more that you're letting on. And that's assuming you're not directly responsible for my current situation in the first place."

Harry turned around brusquely. "Your current situation?" he repeated. "Like I'm happy to be stuck, who knows where or when, with you! If I wanted to get stranded in some past version of Hogwarts, you'd be the last person I'd choose to bring along."

"So you say," Malfoy replied, but he stepped back, letting the last bit of chicken fall from his hands. "I could say the same to you," Harry snapped.

They walked the rest of the way in silence and by mutual agreement they kept as much distance between them as the corridor allowed. If Malfoy was faking it, he was a very good actor, but Harry couldn't afford to drop his guard.

The spot where the gargoyle should have been was empty. Malfoy marched straight past it, looking at the tapestries covering the walls, but Harry had been in the Headmistress' office often enough that he knew where the entrance to the tower should have been. Not only there was no door, there was no tower either. The windows on the wall, set at regular intervals between the tapestries, showed the cloudy grey sky outside.

Harry opened a window and stuck out his head. A cold wind hit his face; if he squinted he could make out the courtyard below and a few brave students who were lounging outside before the afternoon lessons.

"What are you doing?" said Malfoy's voice, closer than Harry had expected. He jumped, and Malfoy shouldered him aside to look out of the window too. He scowled. "What are you looking at?"

"Nothing," Harry replied, his tone equally brusque. From this close he could see that Malfoy's face was pale and tense. "This is where the entrance to the office should be."

Malfoy sniffed and looked up and down the corridor. "Are you sure?"

Harry nodded. He hadn't really been hoping to find a way out so easily, but not finding the office at all was disappointing. "If whatever magic brought us here is still around, I have no idea where it could be."

He tapped a few random stones with the palm of his hand and lifted the tapestries to look at the wall behind them. It was a pointless effort but going through the motions was better than doing nothing. He even murmured a few revealing spells under his breath, even though they were too complicated to be cast as wandless magic.

While Harry paced around listlessly, Malfoy remained in his spot next to the window. He had closed it but was still looking outside through the cloudy glass. "What if it's not here?" he said after a while. He made a vague gesture towards the window. "What if it's somewhere outside?"
"What? Why would the Headmistress' office be outside?"

"Not the office, you dolt! I meant the location of whichever spell brought us here." Seeing Harry's blank face, Malfoy gave him a condescending look. "The spell brought us from the office to the Forbidden Forest in what looks like the past. So it stands to reason that to return to the office, and our time, we ought to look in the Forbidden Forest."

"It was just the edge of the Forbidden Forest," Harry muttered. He had to admit that Malfoy made a good point, that thought hadn't occurred to him.

"Either way, we can't go in there without a wand," Malfoy replied. Just then, the bell that summoned them to afternoon lessons started ringing from somewhere far away. "You can stay here and knock on the walls like a troll, I'm going to get myself a new wand."

Malfoy turned around and stalked down the corridor. After a moment of hesitation, Harry followed him. "How are we even supposed to craft our own wand?" he said. "That could take forever!"

"It will," Malfoy replied with a shrug. "I'd rather find a way home long before that. But there is a chance that we'll be stuck here for a long while, and if that's the case I'd rather be able to use magic. Being stuck in the past with you is bad enough without having to live as a Muggle."

Harry didn't reply because he had a niggling feeling that Malfoy was right.

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The wandmaking lessons were held by Ravenclaw in her tower, a large room that was full of strange instruments and fragrant herbs and looked more like a woodcarver's shop than a classroom.

"A wand is the focus of a wizard's power," she said in her marked northern accent, holding up her own. "Yet the making of the wand requires little magic in itself. You will start by carving the shape of the wand from a piece of your chosen wood. Then the wand will be soaked in an infusion of gentian and oak leaves before lastly being imbued with the powers of its core. This last incantation must be done on the day of the full moon, so the wand will always obey its master."

It sounded like a lot of work, and considering the phase of the moon it would be at least one more month before Harry would have a wand again. He couldn't remember going for so long without his magic, not since his last summer at the Dursleys' years ago. The other kids didn't seem surprised at having to craft their own wand, but Harry stared blankly at the rough piece of wood that Ravenclaw handed him. It looked like a piece of firewood. The strange carving tools on the table were also unfamiliar to him.

"The wood is sycamore," Ravenclaw said, "from a tree I found in the south during my travels. I thought it an appropriate for two young men also from the south." She fixed him with piercing grey eyes. "Perhaps you have another favourite wood that you would rather use?"

"It's not that," Harry said. The wood, a thick branch that still had a couple of leaves attached to it, felt heavy in his hands. "But, er, I'm not sure of, er, what I'm supposed to do." He picked up one of the tools at random. Instead of metal, its blade looked like it was made of some kind of pale white horn. It also looked wickedly sharp.

Ravenclaw's eyebrows rose. "You have never carved a wand before?"

Harry shook his head. "Er, no. Sorry," he said, quickly. "I didn't make my own wand, I bought it."

"Who from?"
"Ollivanders," Harry replied without thinking, before realizing that there was no way that she would know about that shop.

But Ravenclaw inclined her head in acknowledgement. "Makers of good wands," she said. "Though it is my opinion that only the unskilled should resort to buying their wand. A wand is a very personal item, Harold, and as such you will find that a wand of your own crafting will be much superior to one you bought."

"I used that wand for years and it worked just fine," Harry said. There was a sudden lump in his throat at the thought that his wand really might be lost. He'd had that wand since he was eleven, kept it even when it was broken. He hoped it would be waiting for him in McGonagall's office when he got back, but the truth was that his wand could be anywhere. "Er, can't I just buy another wand?"

Ravenclaw pursed her lips at the suggestion. "I would not advise that. It's not only a matter of principles, but of practicality as well. Good wandmakers are few and their wares expensive. It will take you weeks to journey to London and back again, and even if you do, how are you going to pay for a new wand?"

Harry's shoulders slumped. "I hadn't thought about that," he mumbled. "You're right. I'll just, er, start working, then."

He picked up one of the carving tools, at random, and tried to shave off a piece of bark. The blade slipped over the wood and Harry almost stabbed himself in the arm.

"Goodness, Harold!" Ravenclaw exclaimed, stepping forward and taking the tool away from him. "Never hold your hand in the path of the blade! And you are using the wrong chisel, that's for the delicate, final touches." She lifted Harry's torn sleeve to check that he wasn't bleeding, but the only casualty was Harry's pride. Everyone had turned around to look at him and Malfoy was openly sniggering.

"What about you, Draco?" Ravenclaw said, without turning her head. She muttered a few words under her breath and swished her wand. The tear in Harry's sleeve started knitting itself together. "Do you also know nothing about wand crafting?"

"Yes, what about you, Draco?" Harry muttered, glaring at him.

Malfoy held his stare for a moment and then turned around, giving her a slightly more deferential version of his usual smirk. "I know enough not to slice my fingers off," he told her. "For example, this is the draw knife that Harold should have started with, to strip off the bark. Then this one to smooth the surface, and this chisel to carve the handle."

All the tools that Malfoy was pointing to looked equally foreign to Harry, but Ravenclaw nodded approvingly. "Just so," she said. Malfoy's smirk widened and he puffed out his chest. "I trust you to show Harold how it is done." That wiped the smirk off Malfoy's face. Harry's face fell too, but Ravenclaw was already walking away towards the next table, muttering as she went. "Kindly look over the younger children as well. I never had more than two pupils at a time, how am I possibly to supervise ten new charges..."

Malfoy gripped a chisel in one hand as if he'd like to stab Harry with it. The three students sitting at the other end of their table, little blonde Anwen and two boys from Ravenclaw, bent their heads and pretended to be very absorbed in their work.

"This is ridiculous," Malfoy muttered through clenched teeth. He slammed the strangely-shaped knife down on the table in front of Harry. "Here. Take this. Do exactly as I do, and for the love of
Merlin stop trying to stab yourself."

"Since when do you know anything about wandmaking, Malfoy?" Harry snapped back, but he took the tool anyway.

Malfoy selected a similar one for himself. "I've been studying, Potter. Reading books. They are quite useful, you can learn a lot of things from them." He grabbed his stick and started picking at the little branches and leaves still stuck to it. "Not all of us are lucky enough to get a cushy Ministry job without even sitting the NEWTs."

Harry wouldn't have defined the Auror training program as cushy. It was what he always wanted to do, but he'd worked hard to get through the first year of hellish training. Malfoy had no idea what he was talking about. "Nobody in our year sat the NEWTs," Harry replied, stabbing the wood like it was Malfoy's pale, sneering face.

"No, but the rest of us are still required to prove that we learned something in school, if we want to apply for a job." Malfoy pursed his lips and looked up briefly. "Stop that, you'll cut your fingers off. Hold the knife in both hands like I do. And look at what you're doing!"

Grumbling, Harry did as he was told and started stripping off the bark. "What do you even need a job for?" he muttered. "It's not like you need the money, not when your father managed to bribe his way out of Azkaban and keep most of the family gold as well."

Malfoy inhaled sharply. He opened his mouth as if to reply and then shut it again. Without another word, he picked up his things and moved to the other side of the table, where the three kids shuffled around awkwardly to make more space for him.

Harry half-turned in his seat and bent over his work to avoid looking at Malfoy. Woodcarving was not something he'd done before, and his knife kept slipping and threatening his fingers, but after a while he started getting the hang of it. He'd always been better with practice than theory. The bark slowly peeled away to reveal the paler core of the branch. It was a dull task, but it kept him too busy to mull over his current predicament or Malfoy's stupidity.

He was trying to work around a knot in the wood when Malfoy sat back next to him. "Fuck off, I'm doing just fine on my own," Harry muttered without looking up.

There was a high-pitched squeal. "Sorry!" Anwen said, fumbling with her tools.

Harry almost nicked his fingers with the blade. "I didn't mean that," he said, getting up to help her retrieve her barely-started wand from the floor. "I thought you were someone else."

She took the wand and cradled it close to her chest, staring at Harry with her watery blue eyes. "Did you quarrel with your friend?" she asked. Her voice was thin and carried across the room.

Harry shot a quick glance at Malfoy, hoping he hadn't heard. Malfoy looked up just then and their eyes met for a moment across the table. They both looked away quickly.

"He's not my friend," Harry muttered. Anwen just kept staring without saying anything, so he felt the need to add, "We just happened to come here together. Neither of us is happy about it."

Anwen bit the inside of her cheek. "I'm happy you're here," she told him, like she was revealing some secret. "The teachers too, I think. There's so few of them and so many of us."

Harry picked at a bit of bark with his thumbnail. He had no idea of what he was supposed to do next or which chisel to use, and he didn't feel like going over to Malfoy to ask. "You think fifty students is
many?" he asked Anwen.

"Yes!" she nodded. "And ten of us here, don't you think that's so many students in just one room?"

"Not really," Harry said. "In my school, where I studied before coming here, there were hundreds of us. Sometimes there would be thirty students in the same class."

Anwen's mouth fell open. "But Hogwarts is the biggest school in the country, and it has only just been built," she said. "You must have studied in the lands across the sea and far to the east, where there's giants and people with two heads and talking fish..."

"Er," Harry said. "Yeah, it was very far away. What about you?" he asked, trying to change the subject. If Malfoy overheard them, he'd think Harry was bragging again. "Is your family from around here?"

The girl shook her head. "No, they live far away," she said, and a shadow passed over her face. "My mother was going to teach me magic when I turned ten this winter, but then mistress Hufflepuff and mistress Ravenclaw came through our village." She chewed one of her fingernails absently. "They showed me spells and enchantments and said that they could teach me. We walked for so many days to get here... I've never been so far away from home. And from my family."

She looked so small and forlorn, sitting on a stool that was too tall for her and holding a branch longer than her forearm.

Harry had spent almost half of his life at Hogwarts but he'd never felt farther from home and his friends than he was now. "Come on," he said, giving Anwen what he hoped was a reassuring smile. "Let's go ask Malfoy what we're supposed to do now."

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Harry didn't have much time to feel homesick in the upcoming weeks, or much free time at all. The Founders had no qualms about using him and Malfoy as assistants or helpers or errand boys, and there seemed to be no end to the jobs that needed to be done around the castle. Every day they had to spread fresh rushes in the classrooms, water the herb garden and pick vegetables for dinner. Malfoy was particularly vocal in his hatred of the concoction that they had to spread over Hufflepuff's rare plants to keep them growing away from their native Mediterranean climate: the liquid smelled like sulphur and dragon dung, and smoked when left for too long.

Harry tried to go exploring whenever he had some spare time but he didn't find anything around the Headmistress' office, nor next to the Forbidden Forest where he and Malfoy had arrived. After a while Malfoy said that it was a waste of time and stopped following Harry around. Between lessons and their chores Harry was often too busy to wander around the grounds anyway. He decided to give up on his investigations until he had his wand, which Ravenclaw assured him would be finished very soon.

Until then he was stuck doing everything by hand like a Muggle, and one of the most tedious tasks was making the ink by crushing oak galls and mixing them with powders. Often it was the last job of the day, because neither he or Malfoy could spare a moment earlier between the lessons and the chores. It was already past sunset by then and they worked by the scant light of a candle, huddling around the flame for warmth and accidentally elbowing each other as they measured the ingredients and stirred the ink in little clay pots until it was ready.

On a particularly cold day in the middle of October, Harry's fingers were shaking so much that he couldn't pour the ink into the bottle and almost spilled all of the evening's work over himself.
"Merlin's pants, Potter!" Malfoy finally snapped. He snatched the pot of ink from Harry's hands so suddenly that a few drops spilled. His fingertips felt icy cold against Harry's hands. "Give that to me! I have no intention of spending the night watching you fumble with that, not while there's a warm bed waiting for me."

Harry shivered and rubbed his hands to keep the blood flowing. "Is that a joke?" Harry said. "This is nice and warm compared to the dormitories. If I had a blanket, I'd sleep here." He had to speak slowly because his teeth were chattering.

Malfoy bent over the empty ink bottle and placed a funnel made of bark over its mouth. "Must be the cold from the lake," he said. "I used to sleep with the curtains of my four-poster bed drawn until May." He frowned in concentration as he started pouring the ink. "Do you have a four-poster bed?"

"Are you kidding me?" Harry snorted. "I've got a straw mattress and as many threadbare blankets as I could get before everyone else started hoarding them. When I finish my wand, the first thing I'm going to do is transfigure my blanket into a quilt."

Malfoy looked up briefly from his work and smirked. "I can't believe I'm saying this, Potter, and I'll deny it if you repeat it to anyone," he said. "But I might be better off in Hufflepuff."

Harry started laughing but then noticed Malfoy's expression. "Wait. Are you serious?"

"It's warm," Malfoy said, shrugging his shoulders. He stoppered the bottle of ink with cork and a bit of wax, and Harry handed him another empty bottle. "The dormitories are right next to the kitchen, so the warmth from the ovens seeps through the wall. I don't think Hufflepuff chose the location for warmth, but it's a nice bonus."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked. It was slowly dawning on him that he was having an almost civil conversation with Malfoy, possibly their first ever, and at any moment Malfoy might remember that he was a git and tell Harry to fuck off.

Malfoy seemed equally surprised by the event, but he answered the question anyway. "She works late into the night and she loves midnight snacks. I've seen her go into the kitchen once and come back with enough cold roast chickens to feed the whole Wizengamot. It's a wonder she can still fit into the passage to the common room."

"At least you don't have to deal with Slytherin," Harry replied, mouth twitching at the thought of the Head of his House. "He sleeps at the end of the corridor and I think he listens in to everything we say in the dormitories. He'd kick me out if he caught me wandering around the castle after curfew."

"I don't go wandering around like a naughty schoolchild, unlike someone else!" Malfoy exclaimed, affronted at the suggestion. "Sometimes Hufflepuff asks me to stay up and help her with herbs and things. She's got me drawing illustrations for a book she's writing, about the magical properties of the plants she collected when she travelled to the continent. It's all very tedious and I'd rather be sleeping," he added, quickly, but Harry had seen the flash of enthusiasm in his eyes when he mentioned the book.

It was similar to the look Malfoy had sometimes when Ravenclaw started expounding on the finer points of wandcrafting. He answered all of her questions in class and often asked for more information about certain particular techniques. Some of it was just Malfoy being Malfoy, showing off and trying to prove to the teachers that he was a much better student than "Harold", but Harry was beginning to think that there was more to it. Why else would Malfoy put so much effort into learning about wands when there were no exams and no House points to be won?
Harry started gathering all of the pots and supplies while Malfoy put away the bottles of fresh ink. Neither of them seemed to have anything more to say. Talking had kept Harry's mind off the cold for a while, but it was freezing in the castle after dark. He'd have to see about getting a pair of the fingerless gloves that he'd seen several students sporting.

The Slytherin and Hufflepuff dormitories were in the same direction, so they walked together for a bit. That afternoon Ravenclaw had told them that their wands would be ready for the next full moon and among other things Harry was looking forward to not having to carry a candle and flint everywhere he went. For now, he and Malfoy walked almost shoulder to shoulder, holding their candles high to cast some light in the pitch dark corridors.

Malfoy turned left when they reached the entrance hall, while Harry headed towards the door to the dungeons. Most nights they both walked away in silence, glad to be rid of the other, but today Malfoy's presence had almost been tolerable.

Telling that to Malfoy would have been counter-productive, but Harry felt he had to say something, if only goodnight. He turned around and caught Malfoy looking back at him. They stared at each other uncomfortably.

"A couple of times," Malfoy said, suddenly. He made a face, as if his own words had caught him by surprise too, and went on, getting more animated as he spoke. "I might have wandered around a couple of times. Once I went into the kitchens and the house-elves wouldn't let me leave without giving me food. It wasn't even stealing, they wanted me to have it, and the cakes were still warm from the oven..."

Harry looked away. "Yeah," he said, quiet. "I know. I used to sneak into the kitchens, back... when we were still in school. With Ron and Hermione." He had tried not to think about them too much in the past month, but now he felt a lump in his throat remembering all the times they'd stolen down to the kitchens and stuffed their face with tea and biscuits. Were they looking for him now? Would Hermione figure out what happened and find a way to help?

"I miss my friends too," Malfoy said. "What?" he snapped, under Harry's incredulous stare. "Am I not allowed to miss my friends? Or did you think I have none?"

"That's not it," Harry said, quickly, though it was exactly what he'd thought. Only then he remembered Crabbe and Goyle, and how Pansy Parkinson was always hanging around Malfoy. He wasn't used to thinking of them as Malfoy's friends, more like his henchmen and enforcers, but if he squinted he could see a strange, subdued expression on Malfoy's face.

Before Harry could say anything else, Malfoy turned around. "'Night, Potter," he said, curtly, before walking away.

"'Night," Harry replied automatically.

His candle was already dripping warm tallow over his frozen, ink-stained fingers. Harry hurried along the passage to the dungeons, too busy with getting into bed before the candle ran out to think about Malfoy and his sudden shifts of mood.

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Ravenclaw kept her promise. On the next day she announced that Harry's and Malfoy's wands were ready to be infused with their respective cores, and that by the next full moon they would be complete and ready to be used. Ravenclaw had only a handful of different wand cores for the two of them to choose from.
Slytherin offered Harry a coal-black serpent scale, which he assured was very powerful and would allow his wand to perform great feats of magic. But the scale felt stony and sharp under Harry's fingers and it made him feel uneasy, so he thanked Slytherin profusely and told him he'd already chosen a piece of dragon heartstring with Ravenclaw and started to prepare it.

Later, as they worked together in Ravenclaw's laboratory, Malfoy told Harry that he'd refused a similar offer of a dried mandrake root from Hufflepuff. "Everyone knows that the three more powerful wand cores are dragon heartstrings, unicorn hair, and phoenix feathers," he said. "That's why modern wands are much more powerful than those made even a century ago, when people still used any old crap they found lying around as a wand core. Given the rarity of unicorns and phoënixes in this part of the world, dragon heartstring is the only sensible choice."

Harry, who didn't know anything about that, nodded as if he'd heard it all before. All the wands he could think of were made with those three cores but he'd never thought about why. Malfoy's explanation reassured him that he'd made the right thing in refusing Slytherin's scale, even though that meant his wand and Malfoy's were now almost identical, made with similar cores and wood from the same tree.

Harry didn't know if that meant that the two wands were twins and would refuse to fight each other. Malfoy, with his ever-expanding knowledge, would know; but he never mentioned the subject of twin wands and Harry couldn't find a way to bring the subject up without implying that he might at some point want to hex him.

Even without touching on that, Malfoy had a lot to say on the subject of wands, especially on the differences between Ravenclaw's teachings and what he'd read about modern techniques. He often insisted that many enchantments were useless and obsolete, though Harry noticed that he never said anything in front of Ravenclaw and followed all of her instructions, saving his objections for when he and Harry would be alone. On the night of the full moon he stayed up with Harry, both of them muttering spells from an old parchment while Ravenclaw dozed off in a corner, and when dawn broke Ravenclaw stirred and pronounced their new wands ready for use.

Dizzy with a mixture of sleep and excitement, Harry waved his wand and cast the first spell in what seemed like forever. Across the table, Malfoy caught his eye, grinned, and turned a pile of wood shavings into a toad.

"Quite good," Ravenclaw said, stifling a yawn. "From now on, you need not come to my tower in the afternoons any more, unless I require assistance. It is past time you started to attend lectures on other subjects. I will talk with my colleagues and we will let you know when we have decided your schedule."

She dismissed them to get some sleep before classes, since they still hadn't been excused from their morning reading and writing lessons. Harry and Malfoy left the tower almost skipping. Harry felt like he was seventeen again and finally able to use magic during the holidays. He kept casting simple spells just because he could, opening doors or making a small breeze ruffle the tapestries or turning a mouse into a turtle.

The wand worked nicely enough, but it seemed to be stuck on some of the more fiddly spellwork. Malfoy snickered as he saw the mouse, with its grey fur and dark shell, scuttle back to its hole in the wall. "Transfiguration was never your forte, wasn't it, Potter?"

"I just need to get used to this," Harry said, shaking his wand irritably. "It's kind of crooked, and longer than my old one. It'll be fine."

Malfoy wiped an invisible speck of dirt on his wand with his sleeve. "Mine's as straight as it should
be," he said, smug bastard that he was. "And works just as it should. Then again, I'm used to
changing wands, as you very well know."

He stared at Harry defiantly, daring him to say something about that. Harry remained silent.

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Autumn was starting to turn into winter and Harry felt no closer to finding a way home than the day
he'd arrived. He had hoped that with a wand he would be able to finish his chores more quickly and
have more free time to poke around the castle and the grounds, but there seemed to be no end to the
things he and Malfoy were supposed to do. In the afternoons they learned about herbs and potions
with Hufflepuff, about charms and transfiguration with Slytherin, and about offensive and defensive
magic with Gryffindor. This at least was something that Harry excelled at, even with his somewhat
reluctant wand.

Having a wand also meant that the teachers had no qualms about setting tasks that would have been
too difficult or dangerous to do without. One brisk late autumn morning, just after sunrise, Harry
found himself walking into the Forbidden Forest with Malfoy armed with wicker baskets and a
lengthy list of potion ingredients to collect.

The forest was thicker than Harry remembered, and much closer to the castle in several places. It was
also, as they had learned, not yet forbidden to the students. In fact it was customary for both teachers
and students to venture at the edge of the forest to gather wild herbs and mushrooms for use in
potion-making. The kids knew to go no further than they had to, on account of the magical creatures
that lived in the forest's depths, but Harry and Malfoy couldn't refuse a direct request from the
Founders.

"Do you think it's true that there are dragons?" Malfoy asked. He'd been on edge ever since they set
foot outside the castle.

Harry shrugged. "There used to be wild dragons in Scotland," he said. "But not in these parts. Of
course," he added, side-eyeing Malfoy, "there might be other dangerous creatures. In the present day
there are werewolves, Acromantulas, Thestrals..."

Malfoy shivered involuntarily and Harry tried to look concerned instead of gleeful. He refrained from
mentioning that the rumour about werewolves in the forest was false, that the first Acromantula had
taken residence in the 20th century, and that Thestrals didn't harm humans. There were other bad
things in the forest, but most of the creatures living there would leave them alone if they were not
disturbed.

"Do you think centaurs already live here?" he asked Malfoy.

"I'm not sure," Malfoy said, mouth curling downwards. He didn't like having to admit ignorance on
any subject. "Not much is known about centaurs, generally, they keep themselves to themselves.
And with good reason too, they're brutes."

"They're not!" Harry snapped. A couple of birds took flight overhead, startled by the sound of his
voice. "They don't like strangers, that's all."

"Yes, and they beat up whoever stumbles into their territory," Malfoy replied. "Sometimes they even
trespass into Hogwarts grounds to kidnap people, or have you forgotten what they did to Professor
Umbridge already?"

Harry snorted. "Umbridge had it coming to her."
"Of course," Malfoy sneered. "You would apply two different measures to what happens to your friends or your enemies."

It took Harry a great effort not to grab his wand and curse Malfoy into next week. They had reached the end of the narrow track they'd been following and the forest was closing in around them. There would be a better time and place to argue with the idiot.

Malfoy consulted a list written in his own meticulous handwriting and went off through the trees, casting several backwards glances to make sure Harry was following him. Harry wanted to go back and leave him alone in the middle of the forest, but Slytherin would have his hide if he returned to the castle empty-handed.

Most of the plants on Malfoy's list were unfamiliar to Harry, and even those he recognised gave him trouble. "What does hellebore look like?" he asked, poking around a bush.

"Merlin's pants," Malfoy snarled, uprooting a sprout with perhaps more force than strictly necessary. "Your head's not on your shoulders just to look pretty. Where were you all the times we used syrup of hellebore in Potions?"

"Shall I look for a small blue bottle labelled 'syrup of hellebore', then? Because that's what I remember it looking like," Harry replied in much the same tone.

Malfoy brushed some dirt away from the plant's roots and tossed it into his basket. "It's the flowery shrub with five petals," he said. "But you won't find it under there, that's a fern."

Harry huffed and straightened up, casting a look around. All the plants looked identical to him, and they were hard to see in the scarce light filtering down through the thick canopy of trees. He picked up a couple of plants at random, trying to choose the same he'd seen Malfoy put into his basket, only too conscious of Malfoy's muttered disparaging remarks.

"I know most of these plants!" Harry exclaimed, after Malfoy wondered out loud how much Harry had paid to pass his first year Herbology exams. "Just not under these stupid names. Who has ever heard of unicorn's breath as a potion ingredient?"

"It's the folk name for a kind of mushroom," Malfoy said, like he was doing Harry a great favour. "Mostly replaced by more powerful ingredients in modern potion-making, but since I don't fancy a trip to Africa to get a couple of shrivelfigs, do me a favour and keep your eyes peeled for a small white mushroom growing on tree bark."

Harry said nothing. Most likely he would have had to press his nose against the bark to see the mushrooms. He kicked a rock on the ground, making it roll down a slight slope. They were venturing into a part of the forest with less undergrowth and more rocks, and sometimes they had to climb over fallen trees to proceed.

The sun told Harry they'd been going north from the castle. While Malfoy searched for his precious mushrooms Harry cast the Four-Point Spell to check on their exact direction. The wand quivered in his palm but refused to start spinning.

"Point Me," Harry said again, frowning. He repeated it again and again, in an increasingly loud voice, startling a family of squirrels. "What's wrong with this thing?"

It was more of a frustrated exclamation than a question, but Malfoy took it as an invitation to come and hover behind Harry's shoulder, which made it even harder for Harry to concentrate when he tried to cast the spell again. Malfoy also tried the incantation and when it failed to do anything he
insisted it was Harry's fault for explaining it wrong.

"I know this spell, I've been using it for years," Harry said. His pride stung: he might not be good at teaching calligraphy and reading long Latin words but everyone agreed that his DA classes had been useful. He didn't understand why the spell wouldn't work now. "Maybe Ravenclaw knows why my new wand refuses to cast certain spells."

Malfy frowned. "Not this spell in particular," he said. "It's not in any of the Library's spellbooks, which means it's a recent discovery. Good luck convincing one of the teachers that it's a real spell if you can't get it to work in the first place."

"I thought the Library didn't exist yet," Harry said. He'd passed through the Library corridor a couple of times and all the rooms looked like empty classrooms.

"There's only a hundred books and scrolls but it's still a large collection for this era," Malfy said. "The teachers keep them locked inside cupboards to keep the damp and the rats from getting at them. You can ask them for the key like I did, it wouldn't hurt you to study something for a change."

Harry decided to ignore the jibe. "Did you find anything that could get us back?"

"If I did I would be home in my bed, not here tramping around the forest," Malfy snorted. He wandered off to examine some lichens growing on a rock. "I've only had the time to glance through some of the books, most of them are written in high Latin or ancient runes and are a pain to read. I doubt any of them deal with time travel."

Hermione would have found something helpful in the Library, Harry thought, but she wasn't here, and the thought of making sense of a bunch of ancient scrolls made Harry's head ache. "Keep going through the books," he said. "I'll keep looking around the castle." He picked up a sprig of what he hoped was fluxweed. "There's got to be something that we overlooked."

Malfy frowned. "At least take a look at Hufflepuff's book on plants," he said. "It's got pictures so even you can understand it. And read one of the spellbooks, you can't keep using spells that haven't been discovered yet, not in front of everyone."

They walked down a steep track and into a clearing that opened up to the sun. Harry stumbled on an exposed root, almost falling flat on his face. "What's the problem with that?" Harry said, picking up his wicker basket which had fallen and rolled away. Most of the plants he'd gathered had tumbled out and been squashed in the fall, and he started picking them up again under Malfoy's disapproving stare. "If they see us using spells that they don't know, the teachers might start to believe that we're actually good wizards."

"It's not as simple as that." Malfoy pouted. "So stop grumbling and find me some more fluxweed."

"I'm not grumbling," Harry said, and then he heard the noise. It sounded a bit like a grumble, but much deeper and louder than a human would. He was suddenly alert, his head snapping around to look for the source of the sound.

He saw it immediately. Not far away, what Harry had thought to be a boulder was now stirring and sprouting a tail. And wings. Harry dropped his basket and fumbled for his wand.

"What in Merlin's name," Malfoy began, and then he gasped loudly as he saw the dragon.

Too late Harry noticed that there were no birds or animals in this part of the forest. He wanted to kick himself for not being on his guard, for thinking that having a wand would be enough to keep all trouble away. His Auror training with all the warnings about constant vigilance came back to mock
He remembered the last time he'd faced a dragon, and the time before that. But there was no way to summon a broomstick now and the dragon looked hungry enough to eat them both in one morsel. Its bones showed sharply against its dark leather sides as it rose on its four legs.

"It's a Hebridean Black," Malfoy whimpered. He was clutching his basket like a useless shield, rooted in his spot by fear. "What is it doing this far south, it shouldn't be here, none of them ever leave the islands..."

"One of them did," Harry said, keeping his voice level and not doing any movements which might provoke the dragon into attacking. It looked like a youth, not yet fully grown and without the ridges along its back, but it towered over them in the small clearing.

Malfoy whimpered again as the dragon took a step forward. His face was a mask of terror, drained of all colour.

Harry gripped his wand and took a step sideways, towards the protection of the forest. "You've go to run," he said. "We might lose it among the trees, they prefer open spaces."

"I don't want to die here," Malfoy said in a strained whisper, and Harry understood the rest, the words that Malfoy left unspoken. It would be too cruel to have survived all they had only to die in this faraway place. The thought of his friends never knowing what happened to him scared Harry more than the dragon.

If Malfoy didn't move, Harry would just have to drag him away and hope that his survival instinct would kick in. He was just a few feet in front of Harry, and the dragon was maybe thirty feet away. Harry took a tentative step towards Malfoy.

Malfoy's nervous fingers let go of his basket. The dragon gave a startled cry and jumped forward, his purple slit eyes open wide, flames billowing from his jaws.

Malfoy stepped back and fell down, but Harry was already jumping past him, acting on pure adrenaline and instinct. He felt the spell on his lips without having consciously thought about it.

"Conjunctivictus!" he yelled, aiming for the dragon's eyes. He didn't know what was supposed to happen but it must have worked, because the dragon dropped to the ground and started pawing at his eyes, while his whipping tail made a ruin of the ground around it.

Harry didn't wait to see what would happen next. He dragged Malfoy to his feet and they ran from the clearing as fast as their legs would carry them. They stumbled over the forest's uneven floor, tripping over their own feet in their haste to get away, glancing nervously over their shoulders for signs that the dragon was after them.

Only when they reached the edge of the forest they finally stopped to catch their breath, huffing and panting, propping themselves against a tree stump for support.

"What the hell is a Hebridean Black doing in the forest?" Harry asked, pressing one hand against a stitch in his side. "Do you think anyone knows it's there? The teachers wouldn't have let us wander into a dragon if they knew about it."

Malfoy, still looking ghastly pale and strained, just shook his head. Harry noticed that he was holding his right hand close to his chest and there was a smell of burnt cloth and skin in the air.

"Did it get you?" Harry asked, and Malfoy grimaced. "Let me have a look." Malfoy's arm was criss-
crossed with angry red welts and Harry tried not to touch it as he inspected the damage. "It doesn't look too bad," Harry said eventually, forgetting himself long enough to grin at Malfoy. "You'll be okay."

"It hurts," Malfoy complained, and Harry knew that if he was being petulant again then he was feeling better. "Let's just hurry back, I need Hufflepuff to look at it. Maybe she has a salve for burns, though given my luck she won't."

He didn't say anything else until they reached the school doors, preferring to nurse his arm and scowl at the forest around the castle as if the dragon might at any moment emerge from it and attack. However, as they walked into the relative warmth of the castle, Malfoy stopped. "Thanks," he said, not quite looking Harry in the eyes. "For saving my life. You could've run away and left me there. But you didn't. So thanks for that."

Only then Harry realized that the thought of leaving Malfoy hadn't even crossed his mind. Like the spell, it had been pure instinct, not a conscious decision. His instinct had told him not to leave Malfoy behind. "You're welcome," he said, but Malfoy was already rushing towards the Hufflepuff common room.

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The news about the dragon spread through the castle like wildfire. Harry had to tell his story over and over: first to each of the Founders, who displayed varied amounts of concern for his and Malfoy's safety. Hufflepuff asked if he had been burned as well, while Slytherin just snorted and said, "Next time, do not bother a sleeping dragon."

Then it was Anwen and Hild, who were waiting for Harry outside Slytherin's office and asked questions more quickly than he could possibly answer them. Finally, they dragged him to the common room and had him tell the story one more time in front of a crowd of gaping Slytherins. Nobody knew that a dragon was nesting so close to the castle and they were all eager to hear a firsthand account.

Harry tried to answer their questions as best as he could given that he'd only seen the dragon for a handful of seconds. He didn't know where it came from, whether it had eggs, or how likely it was that it would get into the grounds and attack people, but that didn't stop the younger students from asking over and over, as if the brief encounter had turned Harry into a dragon expert. Harry excused himself from the common room as quickly as he could without seeming rude and then spent a miserably long time trying to wash away the mud from the forest with cold water and a kind of soapy paste.

Malfoy showed up at dinner fashionably late and paraded along the tables with his arm in a sling and a long-suffering face. The students cast him reverent looks and crowded around him asking for his account of the story, which Malfoy seemed only too happy to provide. In his retelling, both Malfoy and Harry kept the dragon at bay with their spells, and only left after grievously wounding the beast because they realised that they had no way of carrying its body back to the castle.

Everyone generally agreed that he told the story better than Harry, with all the necessary dramatic pauses. Harry didn't mind that, or the embellishments, since it meant people would pester Malfoy and leave him alone with his dinner. He ate with relish, his stomach grumbling after the earlier dash through the forest.

Malfoy ate in between talking, holding his bowl of stew awkwardly in his left hand, while his housemates tripped over themselves for the privilege of refilling his cup with mead or cutting him a slice of bread. He ignored Harry through dinner, until Harry mopped up the last of his stew with a
piece of bread and got up to leave.

"Wait, Potter," Malfoy called out. "I've got something... I mean, come with me for a minute." His voice was a strange mixture of imperious and pleading, and it made Harry curious enough to agree without any questions.

Leaving his disappointed listeners behind, Malfoy led the way to a dimly-lit corridor on the second floor. One of the doors was more elaborate than the others and had a badger carved into the keystone. Holding his wand awkwardly with his right arm still in its sling, Malfoy cast a quick Alohomora and pushed open the door.

"It's all right," he said, seeing Harry hesitate on the threshold. "I'm not trespassing, this is Hufflepuff's potion laboratory." And then, since Harry was still looking nervously between the door and the empty corridor, "Merlin's pants, Potter, she asked me to keep an eye on her cauldrons! Go ask her if you don't believe me."

"Fine," Harry muttered, walking inside. After the draughty corridors it was like stepping into a warm bath. Fires were roaring in three large fireplaces, above which large iron cauldrons were boiling or simmering. Malfoy shut the door after Harry and then went to inspect the smallest cauldron, which contained some foul-smelling black goop.

Harry stepped away from the fireplaces and went to inspect some dried herbs hanging from a rack on the ceiling. He knew Malfoy had been helping out Hufflepuff, who was the both the Herbology and Potions Mistress and therefore in charge of brewing everything needed in the castle, but he hadn't realized just how much work went into it. The tables were full of ingredients in various states of preparation and scrolls of instructions. A large cupboard contained only finished potions in clay or glass bottles, many of them labelled in Malfoy's slanted hand.

"She used to make me do the boring stuff, like crushing daisy roots or writing labels, but now that I have a wand she lets me do some of the potions by myself as well," Malfoy said as he stirred the black potion with his good hand. Harry noticed that he looked much less clumsy or suffering than he had at dinner. "I'm still not allowed to do the really interesting elixirs, even though I'd be perfectly capable."

"So why am I here?" Harry asked. Even without Malfoy's constant remarks he knew that he was terrible at brewing potions. "Are you planning on using me as one of your ingredients?"

"Hardly," Malfoy replied, rolling his eyes. "I'm not going to ruin a perfectly good potion by tossing you into the cauldron, much as you make me want to." He replaced the lid on the cauldron and took a small jar from the pockets of his robe, holding it out for Harry. "I'm making more of it in case it's needed, this is all Hufflepuff had on hand."

The jar had a small label that said simply 'For Burns', and it contained some oily, dark green salve that still smelled of rot and mud like the potion in the cauldron. Harry wrinkled his nose.

"Could you give me a hand with this?" Malfoy muttered. His cheeks were glowing pink and he was addressing a bunch of dried rosemary instead of Harry. "Hufflepuff said to keep them on until it's healed but I want to change the bandages. I'm not sure she knows anything about infections and I'm not going to have my wand arm amputated by some backwood healer."

"I doubt it'll come to that."

Harry sat down on a stool and pulled an oil lamp closer to have more light to work with. He had to keep his nose almost glued to Malfoy's arm to see well enough to pull away the bandages.
Malfoy kept up a steady stream of complaints about Harry's clumsiness and how his wound was still tender but it sounded like Malfoy being Malfoy rather than real pain. At any rate the burnt skin looked pinkish and not angry red like it had that morning.

"It still stings," Malfoy insisted. The burn spread from the back of his hand to his elbow, and it did seem to give him some trouble with moving his fingers. "The salve doesn't help at all with that."

"You could try Murtlap Essence," Harry ventured.

Malfoy took a large dollop of salve from the jar and wrinkled his nose as he started rubbing it over his injury. "There might be Murtlap in the lake. I'll have a look in the morning."

The most difficult part was wrapping the bandages again after Malfoy was done with the salve. Harry didn't think he was doing it quite as neatly as it was before and he had to start over twice when Malfoy complained the bandage would come apart if he made a sudden movement.

"You could try not making any sudden movements," Harry complained, but Malfoy pointed out that he hadn't been planning on getting burned by a dragon and it had still happened, so Harry bit his tongue and started over.

"By the way," Malfoy said after a while, "did you tell anyone that you used Conjunctivictus on the dragon?"

Harry, focused on his work, didn't answer at once. "I don't know," he replied eventually. "Maybe. The Founders were more worried about the breed and size of the dragon and whether it was still alive, but everyone else asked a lot of questions..."

"You can't tell them," Malfoy cut him short. "If they ask, say it was some other hex or curse."

"What does it matter?" Harry asked, looking up from the half-bandaged arm. He'd forgotten how close they were sitting and almost headbutted Malfoy on the nose by accident.

Malfoy stared at him. "You don't seem to grasp the gravity of the situation," he snapped. "That spell hasn't been invented yet, you can't go around talking about it, or even worse showing it to anyone!"

"I don't even know when Conjunctivictus was created, or any other spell for that matter," Harry said. "Merlin's sake, Potter," Malfoy said, growing more and more irritated. "Did you learn nothing at all in History of Magic?"

"Nope," Harry replied, breezily. "Whenever I tried to pay attention in that class I ended up falling asleep."

For a moment, amusement sparkled in Malfoy's pale blue eyes. "Me too," he admitted. "But just because Binns makes everything sound as dull as paint, you're not allowed to be ignorant on major magical discoveries of the past centuries! What do you know about time travel?"

The question was easy enough. "It's closely monitored by the Ministry," Harry replied. "It's illegal to go back in time without authorisation, but there's not many who can do it anyway since all Time-Turners stored in the Department of Mysteries were destroyed." He let out the part he'd played in that incident, or how he'd once used a Time-Turner in his third year.

"It's illegal for a good reason," Malfoy said. "Just going back in time a couple of hours with a Time-Turner can change the course of events. Imagine what might happen because the two of us are in the wrong century!"
His face looked strained enough for Harry to take his concerns seriously. "I thought that travelling back over such a large span of time was impossible," he said. "Otherwise everyone would be doing it all the time."

Malfoy ignored him. "There was this witch," he said, staring at Harry. "I read about her in a book. She managed to go back to the fifteenth century. When she came back it was like all the years she'd travelled through caught up with her, because she grew old overnight and died. And then a bunch of her descendants died too, or were un-born, I don't remember the details at the moment. She hadn't even done anything to change the course of events, she just went and had tea with some great great aunt."

"Wow," Harry said under his breath. He looked down and tied the edges of the bandages in a knot. They'd already spent nearly two months in the eleventh century: who knew what damage they might inadvertently caused. It was difficult to find the words. "Is that why you're okay with it? The new wand, working with Hufflepuff, the lessons... Are you accepting it because you think we might never go back to our time?"

Malfoy bowed his head and fussed with the bandage, smoothing it down. "We might go back only to die. Or the future might have changed so much that it would be unrecognisable." He sounded strained. "If we could go home right now, I'm not sure I would want to go. Not without knowing what's waiting for us at the other end."

Harry thought about it for a long while, watching Malfoy's profile in the flickering light of the oil lamp. When Malfoy went to check on the potions, Harry also got up from his seat and stretched. His back was sore after being hunched in the same position for so long. "I'm going to keep looking," he said, "and when I find a way home it will be your choice to come with me or stay. Either way, I'm not going to give up on ever seeing my friends again."

"Fuck off, Potter," Malfoy said, without turning around from the cauldron he was stirring. His voice shook on the last syllable. He didn't say goodnight or thank Harry for his help, nor had Harry expected him to.

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The weather turned colder and windy, hinted at early snows. Harry and some of the oldest boys transfigured all the ratty blankets in their dorm into warm quilts and took to wearing their cloaks in the common room.

Gryffindor announced one night at dinner that he and Hufflepuff would be attending a fair in a market town several days away, to stock up on potion ingredients before the winter, and their classes would be cancelled until their return. Harry asked for permission to go with them, hoping to see what the world looked like outside of Hogwarts, but he was refused in no uncertain terms.

"I can't take someone else's student," Gryffindor told him, gruff, while Hufflepuff made it clear that Harry needed to study more if he wanted to help with potion ingredients instead of hinder. She might have allowed Malfoy to accompany her if he had asked, but Malfoy was happy to stay in the castle minding her potion lab instead of walking across miles of muddy and wet countryside.

Malfoy's burned arm healed. He got rid of his sling when he got tired of acting like an invalid, and then his bandages disappeared one by one. There were no further sightings of the Hebridean Black and the students slowly stopped talking about it, though they kept away from the forest and only approached it in small groups for protection.

On a rainy afternoon a few days after Gryffindor and Hufflepuff had left, Harry was sitting in the
Great Hall idling away the time before dinner. He had a book from the Library open in front of him and was ostensibly reading about Scottish herbs and flowers, but most of his attention was on the two kids playing chess next to him. It was a very popular pastime among the students, who seemed not to know card games or gobstones. The only other common game was riddles, but it was mostly played by Ravenclaws and the answers never seemed to make sense.

As the game reached its end, Malfoy sat down next to Harry and dropped something in his lap. Harry's hands closed around the thing by reflex but it wasn't a dead toad, which would have been Harry's first guess as to what a present from Malfoy would be. It was a small round cake, still warm from the oven and sticky with honey.

Malfoy was munching on a second one. "The Murtlap Essence worked," he said, somewhat awkwardly. "My arm's a lot better now. So. Thanks, Potter."

"You're welcome," Harry said. He pushed the book away (Slytherin would have killed him if he got crumbs on it) and took a bite of the cake. The honey was too sweet for his taste but still delicious and he'd only had porridge for breakfast and lunch. He wolfed down the cake while he watched the end of the game.

Malfy's eyes darted to the Herbology book. "Do my eyes deceive me?" he said, raising an eyebrow. "Could it be that you're finally going to learn something?"

Harry rolled his eyes and licked a bit of pastry and honey from his fingers. "It's because someone wouldn't stop bothering me about it. I wanted to walk down to Hogsmeade but then the weather turned," he said, glancing up out of habit. But the ceiling of the Great Hall hadn't been enchanted yet, so instead of storm clouds he only saw stone and wooden beams.

"Not so loud!" Malfoy hissed, leaning towards Harry and obtaining the opposite effect of attracting the attention of everyone within earshot. Malfoy glanced around nervously. "It doesn't exist yet," he said, barely mouthing the words.

"Sorry," Harry said quickly. He took another bite of the cake.

Neither of them said anything for a while, pretending to be engrossed by the chess game long after everyone else had gone back to ignoring them. The white player captured a rook with her queen and gave her opponent a gap-toothed grin. While the black considered her next move, Harry turned to Malfoy. "I thought it was founded at the same time as Hogwarts," he said in an undertone.

"Around the same time," Malfoy conceded, his voice equally low. "A couple of decades don't matter much when it's something that happened a thousand years ago, but right now it's rather a crucial distinction." He finished his last bit of cake and sighed. "The wizard who founded the village was a Hufflepuff, not that you'd know."

"Starting to feel some pride for your new House?"

Malfoy rolled his eyes and sighed theatrically. "Hardly." he drawled in a passable imitation of his younger, more annoying self. "I'm just trying to educate you, since you seem to be the only student in our generation who attended Hogwarts without reading *Hogwarts: A History.*"

"What would be the point," Harry asked, "when there's always someone ready to quote it for me?"

The two chess players were leaving for their beginners' Transfiguration class. On the spur of the moment, Harry borrowed the board and game pieces from them and wheedled Malfoy into playing against him. Malfoy complained that he didn't play board games and that he had to finish some
botanical illustrations, but he didn't seem eager to return to work with Hufflepuff away.

"Just one game," Malfoy said, setting up the pieces.

Four games and four losses later, it dawned on Harry that Malfoy might have not been entirely forthcoming about his skill with the game. He glared at the board while Malfoy, once again, removed his queen from play. Only a few of Harry's pieces were still on the board.

"I thought you didn't play board games," Harry muttered, leaning over the board as if seeing it better might have made any difference.

Malfoy smirked. "That doesn't mean I've never played before. If you were hoping for an easy win against a complete beginner, I'm sorry to disappoint you."

"You could've told me that before you..." Harry said, gesturing vaguely towards the mess on his side of the board.

"Before I completely and utterly annihilated you?" Malfoy finished, looking very pleased with himself. "I got you cake, Potter, I'm allowed a little annihilation in return."

Harry groaned. "This is worse than playing against Ron," he said, and then the words caught up with his brain. Sometimes the pain of missing his friends hit him like a physical blow.

Malfoy must have seen something on Harry's face, because he busied himself with sorting the captured pieces into neat little piles and didn't meet his eyes. "Do you want a rematch?" he asked, quietly.

Harry nodded, not trusting himself to speak around the sudden lump in his throat, and Malfoy set up the board. They played the next game in complete silence save from the click of the pieces being moved. Malfoy played without his earlier aggressiveness, lost in a daydream on his own. He never talked about his parents, but Harry had seen them huddled together after the Battle of Hogwarts. He'd seen the same look on Malfoy's face when he talked about how they might never go home again.

"I miss the ghosts," Malfoy said, suddenly, once the board was almost clear of pieces. "Every time I walk along the corridor on the fifth floor, the one that used to lead to the Ancient Runes classroom, or rather will lead to it in a few centuries..."

Harry was starting to regret not taking Ancient Runes instead of the useless Divination, since the Runic alphabet was still widely used in this century and there were no dictionaries in the Library. "I know which corridor you mean," Harry said. "It's the one with the ghost of a witch hiding behind the corner and waiting for people to walk through her by accident."

Malfoy nodded and picked up one of his knights. "Precisely. Every time I turn that corner I slow down to avoid her, and then I remember she's not there."

"She hasn't died yet. She hasn't even been born."

"I know," Harry said. "I think none of the ghosts have been born yet."

Malfoy's knight took one of his pawns. Harry cursed under his breath but there was no real feeling in it.

"The upshoot," Malfoy said, tossing the pawn aside, "is that we're learning a lot about pre-Medieval magic. Some of it is fascinating."
Harry laughed but Malfoy didn't join in. "Wait, are you serious?" Harry asked.

"Why not?" Malfoy said, glaring at Harry. His cheeks had turned pink. "There are scrolls in the Library from before the Roman invasion, and we're using plants that will be extinct in the nineteenth century..."

"Huh," Harry said. "I didn't peg you as the bookish, scholarly type."

"I don't even want to know what you pegged me as," Malfoy said. He made a face. "Second highest grades in our year for five years in a row, not that you'd remember that," he added, peevish. "If we ever go back I'm going to write a book about all this stuff. Seriously."

This time, Harry didn't laugh. He picked up a discarded piece. "If we don't," he said, trying to sound cheerful, "you can have the consolation of annihilating me at chess for many years to come."

Malfoy just rolled his eyes and waited for Harry's move.

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The next day, the rain turned into snow. An owl made it back to the castle with a message from Hufflepuff, informing them that she and Gryffindor had been snowed in at the inn where they were staying and were waiting for the weather to clear. Everyone cheered at what they expected to be a longer break from lessons, but Slytherin and Ravenclaw decided that they'd had enough of having the students wandering around the castle and getting underfoot because they had too much free time.

Harry and Malfoy were charged with teaching beginners' Charms and Herbology respectively until the other two Founders returned. It was certainly more rewarding (and less boring) than teaching them how to read and write from a musty tome, but it wasn't as easy as Harry might have hoped. He'd gotten used to having Malfoy around, who had a knack for making the younger kids shut up and pay attention just by glaring.

Another problem was that he wasn't sure of what was appropriate for beginners. He couldn't remember whether he'd learnt certain spells in his second or fifth year, and besides he could never be sure that the spells he'd learned from Flitwick had been invented already. In the end he picked the spells for his lessons from a dusty grimoire he found in the library, guessing at what would be considered useful and not too difficult for the kids. He counted it as a success whenever he got through a class without anyone setting anything on fire.

It was a couple more weeks before Hufflepuff and Gryffindor returned, carrying bulging sacks full of enough supplies and ingredients to last the castle not only through winter but through the coming spring as well. Harry and Malfoy were tasked with storing everything in its proper storage place, while Hufflepuff and Gryffindor stood in the entrance hall and bickered over the decision of not hiring Muggle helpers to carry everything back to the castle. Gryffindor was scandalised at the idea of having Muggles on the castle grounds. Hufflepuff insisted it would have saved them a lot of time and everyone's memory could have been wiped with a simple memory charm afterwards.

"I don't know what's more surprising," Harry whispered to Malfoy, who was contemplating a pile of stuff almost as tall as himself. "Whether they considered letting Muggles into Hogwarts or that they're so cavalier with using memory charms."

Malfoy shrugged. "Don't get your pants in a twist, if you haven't noticed everyone in this era is a lot more pragmatic and a lot less concerned with civil rights. At least they would have paid the Muggles for their trouble before wiping their memory clean." Then he sighed. "This will take all afternoon," he said, glum.
In the end it took them only a couple of hours. Malfoy enlisted the help of all the students he found wandering around with nothing better to do and who seemed half capable of casting Wingardium Leviosa. He got them to carry the bundles of dry herbs and the burlap sacks full of alchemised soil, all things that wouldn't be harmed if they took a tumble down a flight of stairs. Harry himself had to carry the more delicate items and make sure that they reached Hufflepuff's stores safely, while Malfoy stood by the stairs and ordered everyone around.

"This was carried all the way from the Mediterranean," Malfoy said, waving his wand carelessly towards one of the last items, a small lacquered box. "So make sure you don't damage it."

"You could carry it up yourself," Harry said. He tucked the box safely under one arm and made the rest of the parcels levitate in front of him. His control over the new wand was much better now. "It wouldn't hurt you to go up and down those stairs with the rest of us."

Malfoy pretended not to hear him. "They bought plants coming from all parts of Europe, they could have bought some tea from China as well. I'm parched and there's nothing to be had but muddy water or mead."

But he did go up with Harry to check that everything was in its proper place.

Hufflepuff and Gryffindor were still arguing when they came down for dinner. The subject now was the expenses they had incurred in and whether they needed quite so many rare plants. They kept talking all through dinner, speaking over the heads of Slytherin and Ravenclaw who were sitting between them. Slytherin sometimes put in a word, but Ravenclaw seemed to be staying out of it.

Midway through dinner, Gryffindor summoned Harry with an imperious gesture. Harry wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and cast a nervous glance to the high table. He was sure he was about to be reprimanded for setting one of the tables in Gryffindor's classroom on fire when he'd tried to teach some kids how to light more than one candle at once.

Instead, though Gryffindor still looked cross, he gruffly thanked Harry for taking care of his students in his absence. "I also have some news," Gryffindor said, "which might be of interest to you and your friend."

At the Hufflepuff table, Malfoy stopped pretending that he wasn't eavesdropping and got up to join Harry on the raised dais in front of the teachers.

"We came across a group of travellers on the road," Gryffindor said. "Do you know about the MacFusty clan, Harold?"

The name was still famous, enough for Harry to answer at once. "They're the ones who traditionally look after Hebridean Black dragons, aren't they?"

"That is correct," Gryffindor said, stroking his beard. "They told us that one of their young males flew south in the summer. Horribly territorial beasts, Hebridean Blacks, they need hundred of acres of land for themselves and won't share their territory with anyone. As you can imagine, the MacFustys were rather put out when it happened, and rightly so! The fact that they let the beast flee from the islands reflects ill on their clan..."

"Given yours and Draco's encounter in the forest," Hufflepuff chimed in, "we were able to give them an account of the dragon's whereabouts. You need not worry about that any longer, we have their word that we will soon be rid of it."

"Does that mean that the MacFusty clan will take the dragon back north, then, madam?"
Hufflepuff raised her eyebrows. "However would they accomplish that? Nobody tells a dragon what to do!"

"They're going to subdue the rogue dragon and kill it," Gryffindor said, matter-of-factly. "I was for hunting down the beast myself when you first came to me with your story, but my colleagues were opposed to the idea..."

"With good reason," Slytherin interjected. "Twenty feet long and with the spine on its tail fully formed already? To go after it alone and in winter would have been folly."

Gryffindor huffed. "Be that as it may," he said. "I freely admit that I was skeptical about this dragon at first, I thought you boys might have exaggerated its length or bulk to make your story sound more impressive."

"I'd never!" Harry exclaimed, indignant, before remembering that Malfoy had probably done that. Fortunately Gryffindor ignored the interruption.

"I know the truth of the matter now," he said. "How big the dragon is and how dangerous it is and how a dozen witches and wizards are even now looking for it. And I am impressed that you survived the beast's attack with hardly a scratch. You might not be the bumbling fools I took you for when you first came."

"Er," Harry said. "Thank you, sir."

"Therefore, I am offering to tutor you in the fine art of wizard duelling, as well as Muggle swordfight," Gryffindor said. He turned to Malfoy. "Both of you."

Slytherin stared at Harry with his piercing eyes. "Harold, I am pleased to see you keeping up the honour of my House," he said. "I hope you will continue on this path, upholding the qualities and the cunning that I seek to cultivate in all my students."

"You too, Draco, are doing very good work," said Hufflepuff. "Keep working diligently and you will outshine all the other students."

Malfoy gave the four teachers a small bow. "It would be an honour," he said, smirking.

To Harry it sounded like another addition to their workload rather than an honour, but Slytherin gaze was still on him. Harry was sure that if he refused it would be taken as a slight. He thanked the teachers politely and agreed to meet in Gryffindor's solar two nights a week after dinner, then quickly made his escape.

Malfoy followed him shortly after. "That's a bother," he said, with no trace of smile left on his features. "I already spend most evenings working for Hufflepuff, if they keep giving me things to do I won't have time to sleep at all."

"You sound a lot less enthusiastic now," Harry pointed out.

Malfoy snorted. "Since we had to agree to it anyway, I saw no point in antagonising the old fool. Why are you not enthusiastic? It's duelling lessons, I thought you'd like this sort of thing."

"Yeah," Harry sighed. He should have been in his London flat, sitting on his rickety armchair with a cup of tea and reading a book on advanced duelling theory for one of his classes. What he wanted was go back to Auror training practice and to his friends, but he didn't want to talk about that with Malfoy. "Hey," he said instead, "do you need any help? I'm not much good with potions but I can crush stuff in a mortar and write labels."
Malfoy stared at him for a long moment, eyes open wide with surprise. "Yeah, sure," he said, carefully. "Even you couldn't muck that up."

Harry snorted. "Thanks for the vote of confidence. You and Gryffindor are boosting my ego to no end tonight."

"Maybe we're hoping it'll finally burst," Malfoy said, but without real venom. He frowned and looked back at the Great Hall. "I'm sorry about the dragon," he said, suddenly.

"Are you?" Harry repeated, incredulous. He glanced at Malfoy's right arm, even though the burn scar was hidden under the long sleeves of his robe.

The tips of Malfoy's cheeks turned pink. "I am," he said, clenching his singed right hand. "It only attacked us because we stumbled into its nest, it didn't go after us at all."

"If only there was a way to bring it back north," Harry said. "I know we can't because it would mess with history," he added quickly, before Malfoy could protest. "I just wish there was something we could do."

"Yeah," Malfoy said. "Me too."

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Despite his early lack of enthusiasm, Harry ended up enjoying the duelling lessons with Gryffindor. Gryffindor was a strict teacher and had little patience for mistakes, but he truly was one of the greatest duellists of his time. He knew several spells that weren't listed in any books, most of which Harry and Malfoy had never heard about.

Harry's quick grasp of even the most intricate defensive spells earned him rare words of praise from Gryffindor. He had to pay attention and refrain from using any modern spells when Gryffindor made him spar against him or Malfoy, which made him slower than he would have been under normal circumstances, but it turned out to be a good exercise in control.

Muggle fencing was a completely different thing. It was more difficult to master the different movements and the practice wooden swords were heavy and prone to slipping from their grasp because of their incorrect grips. Malfoy complained that it was a barbaric way to fight, little better than fisticuffs, but most wizards of the time carried a sword: if they had to defend themselves against Muggle assailants, using magic would be considered unsporting.

Nobody went home for the holidays. Even if the Founders had stopped the lessons for longer than two days, the roads around the castle were blocked by the snow and travelling anywhere before spring was out of the question.

There were no decorations in the corridors or in the Great Hall, save from the icicles which formed naturally every night, but both staff and students were in a festive mood and looking forward to the lunchtime Yule feast.

That morning Harry slept in for the first time in what felt like ages. There was no tradition of exchanging presents but the boys left the dormitory early, to take advantage of the holiday and have an epic snowball battle, so Harry huddled under his comforter and enjoyed several more hours of undisturbed sleep.

Only when the boys returned, laughing and leaving puddles all over the floor, did Harry finally get up. Malfoy was already in the Great Hall, playing chess against a mousy-haired Ravenclaw girl. He nodded a "Happy solstice" when Harry sat down next to him, seemingly absorbed by the game, but
Harry saw him make several mistakes in a row.

As they were about to finish the game, Gryffindor arrived and shooed everyone out to get the feast ready.

"You could've let her win," Harry told Malfoy as they filed out of the room.

Malfoy arched an eyebrow. "Why would I do that?"

"I know you were holding back intentionally," Harry said, and had the satisfaction to see Malfoy's cheeks turn pink. "It was nice of you not to crush her, but in the end you still went for the win. You could've given her the satisfaction."

"Don't be ridiculous, Potter," Malfoy drawled. "To improve, one must play against better players. If I played worse than her on purpose, what would be the point?"

"Then why is it that I still can't defeat you?"

Malfoy lounged against the wall and smirked. "Maybe you're just too dense to learn," he said.

Harry snorted a laughter. "I was almost hoping that holiday spirit made you nicer, before you opened your mouth."

Malfoy said nothing and just kept smiling.

The air was filling with delicious smells and Harry's stomach grumbled, reminding him he'd skipped breakfast. They didn't have to wait long before the bell rang for lunch and the doors to the Great Hall opened again.

The Yule feast was unlike any of the Christmas feasts Harry remembered. There were no baked potatoes with gravy, no flaming Christmas pudding, no magic crackers. Still, the tables were piled high with all sorts of different dishes and it was all delicious. Maybe it was because now he was used to the food or maybe because then he'd been too worried or confused to enjoy it, but Harry thought it was much better than the start of year feast.

Before the pudding was brought in, everyone had to suffer through each of the four Founders giving each other pats in the backs, saying how they were proud of what they'd accomplished in the past few months and how everyone must keep up the good work in the upcoming year. The speeches seemed to go on forever, but the seed cakes and sticky pastries at the end of the meal made up for it.

Malfoy, who had a sweet tooth and always complained about not getting dessert with every meal, was one of the first to leave. "Meet me in Hufflepuff's lab when you're done," he told Harry as he walked past.

Harry groaned. He'd been sticking to his promise and spent a couple of nights every week helping Malfoy with Hufflepuff's potions, doing the most menial tasks while Malfoy breathed down his neck waiting for him to make a mistake. At least Malfoy seemed grateful for the help, but he never said thanks and Harry had hoped to get a break during his short holiday.

At least, on Christmas, pudding came before Malfoy's workaholic whims. Harry helped himself to two portions of pudding, and he was one of the moderate eaters. When he got up to leave some of the students were refilling their plates for the third or fourth time, scraping away the last bits of honey and pastry from the serving dishes.

The corridors were empty, with most students still in the Great Hall or digesting the meal in their
common rooms, and Harry hurried towards the warmth of the potions lab whose fireplace was never put out.

When he opened the door, for a moment he thought he had the wrong room. Malfoy stood in a corner with his arms crossed, glaring at the floor. "This was a terrible idea," he said as soon as Harry walked in.

Harry gaped and looked around the room. There were no potions on the fire that day, so instead of the usual weird smells the room only smelled like dry herbs. Bunches of holly and evergreens were strung around the walls and on the tables, along with a few pine branches that looked like they'd been dragged in from the forest. On one of the tables there was a plate piled high with cakes and two flasks. "Did you do this?" Harry asked.

"Yeah," Malfoy said. "It didn't feel like Christmas at all without any decorations around the place. I know it's stupid..."

"It's not!" Harry exclaimed. "It's... nice. Very festive."

Some of the tension left Malfoy's shoulders. "I also got something from the kitchen," he said. "That's good mead, not the watered down stuff that we usually get. And I thought it'd be better to eat here instead of being surrounded by a bunch of loud kids who chew with their mouth open."

That sounded more like Malfoy. They sat on the floor in front of the fire, making a nest with some blankets Malfoy had brought. Malfoy had also borrowed a chessboard, so Harry spent the afternoon being soundly defeated over and over again. After the feast Harry felt full so he only nibbled on a cake while Malfoy scarfed down the rest. They both agreed that the mead was much better than what they usually had.

"Did you raid the Founders' private stores?" Harry asked. He couldn't hold back a grin. Everything was going pleasantly fuzzy around the edges, even more so than usual.

Malfoy grinned back. "Are you going to tell on me?" he replied. "In that case I'd better get rid of the evidence." He took another sip from his flask and fumbled his next move. Harry won that game.

When it became too difficult to tell the pieces apart and to remember the rules, they gave up on chess and sat around waiting to sober up.

"I'll take down everything before Hufflepuff sees," Malfoy slurred, making a vague gesture around the room.

Harry started nodding but had to stop when it made his head start spinning. He hadn't realized mead was quite so strong, there were probably good reasons why the students' drinks were so thoroughly watered down. "If she comes in, you can always tell her those are the ingredients for a new potion," he said, laughing at his own wit.

"She might believe that," Malfoy agreed. "She likes me. She says I have a knack for it and I'm well on my way to becoming a scholar of potions lore." Then his face clouded. "But you'll say it's easy to be better than others in this age since I studied everything on textbooks from the future. It's cheating," he added, raising his voice in what might have been an attempt at imitating Harry.

Harry considered this for a while. He fell back on the floor and stared up at the wooden beams criss-crossing the ceiling. "I don't think it's cheating," he said after a while. "You studied those things. I don't think I remember half of the stuff I was supposed to know for our OWLs."

Malfoy just snorted and wrapped the blanket more tightly around himself.
"For example," Harry said, searching his addled brain. "You're doing all this work for her. You've made a lot of potions. A thousand potions, even. That's a lot of potions." He wasn't sure of which point he was trying to make, but he knew that Malfoy was turning maudlin and people shouldn't be maudlin on Christmas, especially not people who had stolen cake for him.

"Last week I completely burnt the cough cure," Malfoy confessed. "I threw it out and stayed up all night to make a new cauldron so she wouldn't notice."

"I'm sure if she knew she'd appreciate your dedication," Harry said. "Me, I think you're insane. If you keep this up you're going to spend the rest of your life shut up in here."

Malfoy leaned over him and looked into his eyes. Flames, reflected from the fireplace, danced into his grey eyes. "What else do you think I should do with my life?"

Harry felt the room spin around him. "Leave a message," he said. Malfoy's face scrunched in confusion, so Harry tried to explain his idea. "Write a letter for posterity. Something like... 'Do not open until 1998. We're trapped at Hogwarts a long long time ago. Please send help.'"

Malfoy nodded gravely. "That makes sense, but I'm not sure it will still sound like a good idea once we're sober."

"Yeah, me neither," Harry agreed. "That's why I didn't say it when we were sober."

"Maybe we could write a letter," Malfoy said, slowly. "Not to ask them for help, just to let them know that we're all right. That we're still alive."

"We'll be dead by the time they get the letter," Harry pointed out. "But yeah, we could do that. If we don't find another way out. Do you think they're still looking for us?" It had been months since they disappeared.

"They're looking for you, maybe," Malfoy said in a small voice. He sounded so miserable that Harry felt the impulse to pull him into a hug, but his coordination was so bad he was afraid he'd accidentally punch him in the face if he moved. Malfoy sat back against the leg of a table and the moment was lost. "I miss tea the most," Malfoy said, changing the subject. "I tried making tea with herbs from the garden but it tasted awful."

"I miss coffee," Harry agreed.

"Sugar. Honeydukes sweets. Chocolate."

Harry groaned. "Stop talking about chocolate or I might start drooling."

"All right," Malfoy said. "We should talk about the good things, like there's no spinach either. Or broccoli, or cauliflower, or brussel sprouts."

"That's more like it," Harry said, grinning.

They carefully stuck to similar trivial topics for the rest of the afternoon. By the time the bell rang for dinner, they'd both sobered up enough to get up from the floor and go down to the Great Hall. Anwen and some other Slytherins asked Harry if he wanted to play riddles with them after dinner, but he felt sleepy and decided to go straight to bed. All in all, Harry thought getting under the covers, it had been a nice Christmas day.

His bed had been warmed by a simple yet effective spell Malfoy had taught him, and he fell asleep at once. He had a weird dream, in which familiar voices calling his name over and over again, but
when he woke up the next morning he'd forgotten all about it.

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Spring came late that year, but it didn't make any difference for the Founders. As soon as the snow around the castle melted, Harry and Malfoy were sent out armed of wicker baskets and tasked with replenishing the castle's ever-dwindling supply of fresh potion ingredients. There had been a small epidemics of flu and several cases of dragon pox, so Hufflepuff was keeping a sharp eye on their stock.

Harry saw now why it made sense to keep so many potions ready at hand: there was no telling what might be needed, and in case of emergency they couldn't nip down to the apothecary in Hogsmeade or send an owl to London.

At least it was better than being inside the castle, where the thick stone walls still trapped the winter chill. Once the weather turned warm enough that they didn't need cloaks, gathering herbs became less of a chore and more of an excuse to spend a couple of hours wandering the grounds.

On one such day Harry was dozing in the shade of a copse of trees while Malfoy tossed pebbles into the lake, making them bounce on the surface. A particularly loud splash jolted Harry awake.

"Was that the Giant Squid?" he asked, rubbing his eyes.

"Don't be daft," Malfoy said. "The Giant Squid wasn't sighted in the lake until the eighteenth century or so."

The surface of the lake, from what Harry could see, looked perfectly still. "Oh," he said. He tried to settle back down but he didn't feel like sleeping any more. "Did you wake me up on purpose?" he asked, narrowing his eyes.

Malfoy smirked. "You're not a toddler, Potter, you don't need naps."

"Whose fault is it that I woke up before dawn to prune bubotubers?"

"Not mine," Malfoy replied, sniffing. "Those things are vile." He lifted the sleeve of his robe to his nose and pulled a face.

Harry knew that he didn't smell much better after a morning spent handling bubotuber pus. He'd managed to avoid burning himself, despite Malfoy's pessimistic predictions, but some drops of the stuff had ended up on his robe and the stink lingered. Clean laundry wasn't a priority in this era.

"That's it," Malfoy said. He sat down and started pulling off first his boots, then his socks.

"What are you doing?" Harry asked.

Malfoy was starting to take off his robe. "What does it look like?" he said, his voice slightly muffled by the fabric tangled around his head. "I'm going for a swim." When he finally managed to pull the robe away, his hair was mussed and sticking up on his head. He started folding his robe neatly.

Harry stared at him like he'd just been turned into a merman. He might as well have, since nobody else in Harry's knowledge went swimming in the lake. "What, here?" he asked. "You don't even have a swimsuit."

"I am well aware of that," Malfoy replied, unfazed. "Nobody's going to see me, those trees block the view." He paused with one hand on the hem of his undershirt. "Unless you plan on staring while I
Harry hastily averted his eyes. "You're going to freeze to death."

"Are you concerned for my well-being?" Malfoy said, laughing. "I'm touched." There was a rustle of clothes and then splashing sounds as he walked into the lake.

Harry heard a sharp intake of breath and snickered. "How's the water?" he called out.

"Lovely, thank you very much," came Malfoy's reply. His voice sounded somewhat higher than usual. "I can't stand not having regular baths, it's something I could never get used to."

"I still think you're out of your mind," Harry said.

"You stink, Potter," Malfoy called back. "Literally! I suggest you get your arse in here."

Harry didn't know what made him agree to the suggestion. As soon as he took off his robe he realised that he was making a terrible mistake: the morning air, which had felt warm and pleasant until now, suddenly felt cold on his naked arms.

Malfoy, submerged up to his shoulders, was looking away; but there was a hint of a smirk playing on his lips. Harry decided he wouldn't give him the satisfaction of complaining: he stripped quickly, tossing his clothes on the ground in a bundle, and stepped into the lake. The water was even more icy than he remembered and he kept slipping on the silt-covered rocks underfoot.

If he didn't get in the water quickly, Harry knew he'd just run back to the shore. He waded in until the water reached his chest, then he took a deep breath and went under. The pang of cold was so sudden that he gasped, taking in a large mouthful of muddy water, and he reemerged spluttering and coughing.

"Malfoy, you fucking liar," he spluttered, pushing his wet hair away from his eyes.

Malfoy laughed, though his lips were already turning blue. Harry splashed some water in his direction. If he moved, the cold was more bearable, though not much. He swam around a little, careful to stay where he could still touch the bottom of the lake. Malfoy mostly stayed in one spot, running his hands up and down his arms.

Even from a distance it was impossible not to notice the burnt scars on Malfoy's right arm: angry welts, red and shiny, that contrasted with his pale skin. The scars on his chest were less visible, only a couple of slashes showed above the waterline, but Harry could imagine the rest.

Malfoy caught him staring and crossed his arms over his chest. "Admiring your handiwork?" he spat.

"No!" Harry exclaimed. His face fell. When he thought of the blood pooling on that bathroom floor, it felt like it happened to someone else, in another life. But those scars were his fault, and Malfoy was the same person who played chess with him every night. They had said he might have died from the wounds. The thought made Harry ill.

Malfoy made a face and started walking away, hunching his shoulders so only his head emerged from the water.

"I'm sorry," Harry said, weakly. He wanted to go after Malfoy, but something told him that the gesture wouldn't be appreciated. "I should never have used that spell. It was reckless and I never thought about the consequences. And I ended up hurting you. Badly." He swallowed. "I just want you to know that I'm sorry."
"Why are you telling me now?" Malfoy said. He didn't turn around, but he stopped, tensing as he waited for an answer.

The easy mood from a few minutes before had completely evaporated. "Because it's the truth," Harry said. "I did something stupid and I regret it." Somewhere along the line Malfoy had turned from an acceptable target for vitriol into someone Harry actually cared about, and it suddenly felt very important to make Malfoy believe him.

Malfoy bowed his head and raised his left forearm out of the water, staring at it. "About what happened that year," he said after a while. "There are things I also..." He trailed off, clenching his fist. "It's too bad the dragon didn't get this arm instead. At least you'd stop staring at this fucking mark as if it was infected." His voice was shaking.

"I wasn't," Harry began, but Malfoy was staring at him and his eyes were hard. "Okay, yes, I hate the Dark Mark and everything it stands for." Malfoy flinched at those words as if he'd been slapped. Harry ignored him. "I hate that you're a living reminder of what Voldemort did. But I stopped hating you a long time ago, as you'd know if you stopped wallowing in self-pity for long enough to notice."

A sudden gust of wind made them both shiver. Harry turned away and watched a few small waves in the distance. After a while Malfoy started wading back to shore. Taking a deep breath, Harry went underwater again. When he opened his eyes he could see nothing but the dark blue-green water in front of his eyes. It would be easier if the water could wash away everything that had happened between him and Malfoy. There was just too much baggage there.

Harry's arms and legs were starting to go numb. He was half-hoping Malfoy would storm off, saving him from another awkward confrontation, but when he looked he could see Malfoy still standing under the trees, walking up and down. There was no way to avoid him.

Harry got out of the water as quickly as he could hurrying towards where he'd left his clothes. It took him forever to find his wand, because his fingers were stiff and wouldn't obey him. Finally he found it and Transfigured his undershirt into a fluffy towel, which he wrapped around his shivering body.

When he started getting some feeling back, Harry towelled himself dry and put on his clothes. He kept sneaking glances to Malfoy, who had gone back to staring at the lake and throwing pebbles. Harry thought he might be ignoring him.

"You'll catch a cold if you don't dry your hair," Malfoy said, quietly, just as Harry was about to sneak past him and head back to the castle.

The position of the sun told him it was almost lunchtime, but Malfoy didn't seem in a hurry to leave. Harry hesitated. "Malfoy?" he called, and when the other didn't leave or told him to shut up he took it as encouragement. "Are we okay?"

If it had been someone else, he wouldn't have felt the need to ask. If it had been anyone but Malfoy, after the events of the past few months, Harry would have taken it for granted that the two of them had become friends. But this was Malfoy. Harry pushed a strand of hair out of his eyes and tried to guess what Malfoy was thinking.

Malfoy moved his weight from one leg to the other, still looking out to the lake. Finally he turned around. "I don't hate you, if that's what you mean," he said. His voice was carefully clipped, giving
nothing away.

"That's not what I meant," Harry said, though he breathed a sigh of relief that Malfoy was willing to concede at least that much.

Malfoy pouted. "Don't tell me you want to be friends," he said. "Last time I offered, you turned me down in no uncertain terms."

Harry searched his brain for the incident Malfoy was talking about. He didn't remember anything of the sort. They bickered all the time, but that was just Malfoy being Malfoy and Harry answering in kind. They hadn't had a real argument in a while, at least not like they used to when they were in school.

That made Harry think back to his first meeting with Malfoy, all those years ago. "You mean when you were eleven and insufferable?" Harry said. He could hardly believe that was what Malfoy was talking about, but Malfoy pursed his lips and nodded. "Of course I didn't want to be your friends then, you were a brat!"

"So were you," Malfoy replied petulantly, proving that he wasn't completely out of his brat period yet. There was something else in his eyes, some underlying sadness.

"That was ages ago. We've both changed. Now that we're stuck here for who knows how long..."

Malfoy cut him off. "You might as well admit that we're stuck," he said. "We're going to spend the rest of our lives trapped in this backward era."

"Maybe," Harry said, stubborn. "I haven't given up yet. But even if we are stuck, I guess I could live with being stuck with you for the rest of my life. What about you?"

"I never thought this day would come," Malfoy said, "but I find myself inclined to agree."

Harry gave him a tentative smile. "Friends?"

A hint of the old smirk came back on Malfoy's face. "If you insist, Potter."

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The duelling lessons became much more interesting once they moved past the basics and on to moves that they could use in actual combat. Never one to be easily outdone, Malfoy stubbornly kept at it, staying behind after Gryffindor had left to train against a straw practice dummy. Sometimes Harry joined him, sitting at Gryffindor's large desk and coming up with new offensive spells to bolster his repertoire. He was getting quite good at it and the best part was watching Malfoy's face in the split second when he realised he was going to be hit by something new and inventive.

One night, Harry looked up from his notes and saw that the moon had already risen and the oil in the lamps was burning low. The weather had been miserable and a cold wind was blowing outside, making the lamps flicker and getting under their clothes. Harry rose and stretched his arms, rubbing some life back into his stiff, cold fingers.

"Didn't you say you wanted my help with pickling horned slugs?" he called out to Malfoy, who was still going at it with the dummy and seemed equally oblivious to the passing of time.

Malfoy's head turned around and the dummy took advantage of his distraction to strike, disarming Malfoy with a quick move. Its sword stopped less than an inch from Malfoy's skull. Malfoy huffed and took his wand from his sleeve. "Finite Incantatem. I almost had it this time" He glared at Harry.
His face was red from the exertion and his breath made white puffs in the cold air. "Let me try one more time, you can go ahead and get started."

Pickling slugs was, all in all, not something that Harry was eager to do. He selected a wooden sword from the practice rack. "A feint isn't much use against a straw opponent," he said. "Try me."

Malfoy smirked and picked up his sword. "Are you going to try one of your tricks again?" he asked, falling easily into the right stance.

Harry did the same, albeit with a lot less elegance. "You mean when I beat you three times out of three earlier?" He waited for Malfoy to make the opening move.

As always, Malfoy's impatience had the best of him and he acted first, lunging for Harry. His strike didn't have enough momentum, Harry deflected it with his sword and stepped aside.

"You cheated," Malfoy complained. "You used the Jelly-Legs Jinx again, don't tell me you once again forgot that it was invented just a century ago. Or should I say nine centuries in the future?"

Harry flushed. It was difficult to remember it in the heat of the moment, and he'd hoped Gryffindor would mistake it for one of the spells Harry had invented. "That was just once," he replied. "The other two times I beat you fair and square."

Malfoy grunted and said nothing. They exchanged blows in silence for a couple of minutes, their breaths misting the air between them. At least the exercise kept them warm. Twice Malfoy tried the feint he'd been practising, but Harry was waiting for it and the telltale movements were easy to read.

"Don't look," Harry told him. "You always look at where you're about to attack, that's a dead giveaway."

"So you keep saying," Malfoy said, rubbing his ribs where Harry had hit him with the flat of his sword. He glared at Harry. "It must be easier for you since you're half blind."

"I'm not," Harry lied. He had to squint to keep Malfoy's face in focus. "From this close, I can see well enough to knock you on your arse for the fourth time in a row."

Malfoy snorted. "I'd like to see you try," he said, and at the same time he stepped forward and attacked again. His movements showed that he'd paid attention to Harry's advice, but they were still too slow to pose a real threat. Harry parried his blow and for a moment they were almost nose to nose. "Your face looks weird without glasses," Malfoy commented, before Harry pushed his sword aside.

"Weird how?" Harry replied, absently. All of his attention was focused on the sword in Malfoy's hand and in his footwork.

He'd expected some witty remark, instead Malfoy stared into his eyes. "Different," he said, lowering his sword imperceptibly as he grasped for words. "Were your eyes always this shade of green?"

Harry was suddenly aware of how close the two of them were with the blades of their swords locked together, breathing into each other's personal space. "Yeah," he said. Malfoy's ice grey eyes were wide open, as if he couldn't believe he'd just asked that. Harry blinked.

In that moment, Malfoy hooked his feet behind Harry's leg and tripped him, while at the same time knocking the sword from his hand with a swift blow. All the wind went out of Harry as he fell down on his back. Malfoy followed, his knee on Harry's chest pinning him to the floor, the tip of his sword pointed at Harry's throat.
"I win," Malfoy panted. He was grinning, face flushed with exertion, and seemed quite proud of himself.

Harry mentally kicked himself for being so stupid. "You cheated," he said. "You were distracting me."

"I was feinting," Malfoy replied. "It's your fault for falling for it so easily."

"Did you also compliment the dummy on its eyes?" Harry asked.

Malfoy moved aside, so he was kneeling on the floor instead of Harry's chest, but he made no move to straighten up or get to his feet. "You're the only dummy I've had a chance to compliment," he replied. His shoulders tensed slightly as he spoke and he watched Harry for a reply.

Harry propped himself on his elbows. Bruises were starting to form all over where he'd hit the floor but he was barely aware of that: he felt out of breath in a way that had nothing to do with physical exertion. Malfoy was so close and his lips were slightly parted. He looked like he was waiting for something. Harry hoped he hadn't misread the signs.

He reached and grabbed a fistful of Malfoy's robe, pulling him forward, crushing their mouths together. Malfoy made a soft noise in the back of his throat and went completely still. Harry's heart stopped for a moment.

Malfoy buried his hands in Harry's hair and closed his eyes, kissing him back in earnest. Harry felt as if he'd just fallen down a second time, stunned and dizzy. Malfoy's lips were chapped and his skin smelled like clean sweat. Before, Harry hadn't even known he wanted to kiss Malfoy, and now he couldn't stop, couldn't get enough of it. He wrapped one arm around Malfoy's waist and pulled him closer.

Malfoy made that soft keening noise again and licked into Harry's mouth. Harry let him, surging forward to press himself closer to Malfoy's body. His fingers curled into the thick fabric of Malfoy's robe, tugging at it. He longed to take it off but that would require him to pull away from Malfoy's mouth, to stop that hot, messy kiss.

Instead Harry leveraged himself and flipped both of them over, so he was the one straddling Malfoy on the floor. Malfoy gave a soft yelp and tightened his grip on Harry's hair, but he didn't complain. One of Malfoy's hands moved down to Harry's neck, lightly scratching his scalp. He tilted his head to allow Harry better access and Harry obliged him, running his tongue along the back of Malfoy's teeth.

Harry took Malfoy's lower lip in his mouth and bit down none too gently. Malfoy's body arched under his. If Harry's weight hadn't been pinning him down, he would have arched off the flagstones. As if was, it only served to press their bodies closer together as they tried to occupy the same space. Harry groaned. He'd always thought Malfoy pointy but he was soft and pliant now under Harry's hands.

Then, quite suddenly, Malfoy turned his head aside. His fingers, still cradling Harry's face, kept him still when he tried to kiss him again. "Stop," Malfoy said. His breath was coming in shallow, laboured gasps.

Harry pressed another kiss to the corner of his mouth. "Why?" he asked, his voice equally rough.

"Because," Malfoy replied, "we're on the floor of Gryffindor's solar, in case you hadn't noticed. We can't do this here." A shade of the customary annoyance slipped back into his voice, but he still
sounded far too wrecked to be convincing, especially after he wrapped one knee around Harry's leg.

"We can," Harry said. He bowed his head to place a kiss on the heated skin of Malfoy's neck. Malfoy's full body shiver told him he'd found a particularly sensitive spot so he bit down, suckling and licking in a way that would no doubt leave a mark in the morning. Malfoy didn't complain, just made low noises in the back of his throat that Harry felt against his lips.

"We should go," Malfoy said again after a while, making no attempts to move. "Anyone could walk in here."

Harry's hands trailed down Malfoy's sides. "Nobody's going to walk in," he replied. "Gryffindor's motto is 'early to rise, early to bed' and none of the others have any reason to poke around his rooms." He pulled back a little, staring into Malfoy's eyes. Malfoy had very pale lashes. "Unless you want to stop."

Malfoy's lips were red and shiny. "I don't want to stop," he said. "In fact I'm very much in favour of continuing." The words and the breathless way they were spoken sent a shiver down Harry's spine. He tried to capture Malfoy's mouth again, but Malfoy put his hands on his shoulders, keeping him at arm's length. "However, I'd rather move to somewhere that's not a cold stone floor. Weren't you going to help me with something?"

Harry frowned, then sat back on his haunches. "You can't mean your blasted potions?" he asked, making a face. Malfoy looked extremely determined. "I can't believe you're picking slugs over me..."

Malfoy snorted. "I wasn't," he drawled. "Though I daresay the slugs have more brain than you. I only meant that the door to Hufflepuff's potions lab has a lock and there's still a couple of blankets in one of the cabinets." He pushed himself into a sitting position, leaning closer until his nose brushed Harry's. "Unless you planned to spend the rest of the night here on the floor."

Harry licked his lips. "Thought so," said Malfoy.

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As the days turned longer and warmer, the castle started to prepare for the end of the school year. There would be no end-of-term exams, a foreign concept to the Founders, so the most popular topic of conversation was where everyone would go. The youngest kids were looking forward to going home and seeing their families again after so many months.

"I hope I get home in time for the harvest," Anwen told Harry one day at lunch. "I can help mother and father with my spells and show them everything I've learned this year."

"I'm sure they'll be very happy to see you," Harry said. He had no idea whether any of her spells would be of any use for a farmer, but she seemed pleased by his answer. After his first year at Hogwarts, Harry had felt like he knew half the spells in the world already.

Anwen frowned at him over a large tureen of porridge. "What about you? Are you going home for the summer?"

Harry's smile froze a little. "It doesn't look like I can," he said. He pushed around the food in his plate.

"Surely you are not going to spend the the summer here, all alone?" Anwen asked, her eyes going wide. "Ravenclaw is coming with me and some other kids, to see us home, but then she's going back to her family. Even Slytherin is going all the way to London."
"I'm not going to stay in the castle," Harry said. "Me and Malfoy are going to travel around a bit."

They didn't have anything planned yet but they'd talked about it, in between lessons and their very secret, very frequent makeout sessions. Malfoy had mentioned maybe looking for Merlin, who was said to be one of the most powerful wizards of all times. He was supposed to have been from the ninth century, but given wizards' long lifespans they thought there might be a chance he might still be alive.

Harry also thought maybe he could tell them something about time travel, though he was careful not to mention that in front of Malfoy. While he tried to put on a front and act like it didn't matter, the pain in his eyes was only too clear at any mention of home.

Anwen beamed at Harry. "I'm happy the two of you made up," she said, disrupting Harry's thoughts. "You're both nicer to be around now that you aren't at each others' throats. Why were you quarrelling last autumn?"

Harry laughed. "That's a very long story," he said.

It was nicer to be around Malfoy, now that their quarrels were mostly out of habit and about trivial stuff. It would never be easy, not between the two of them, but at least now Harry could shut him up with a kiss rather than with an hex.

On the first real sunny afternoon of the summer, Harry rushed through his chores and dragged Malfoy out of the castle. Malfoy only put up a token protest, so that he could say that it was Harry's idea if one of the teachers caught them lollygagging around. They ended up wandering around the hill that in a few centuries would be flattened and turned into the Quidditch pitch. It was still wild at the time, with tall grass and bushes of lavender and wildflowers growing everywhere.

Harry sat down on the ground and looked at the clear blue sky overhead. "The first broomstick should have been invented by now," he said. "Do you think I could build one?"

"Maybe," Malfoy replied. "But it wouldn't be safe, or comfortable." Harry patted the ground next to him and Malfoy sat down, putting his head on Harry's lap. He stretched like a cat in the sun. "And we'd still be twelve people short to play Quidditch."

Harry nodded in agreement. The warmth was making him feel sluggish. He ran his fingers through Malfoy's hair, taking advantage of the fact that Malfoy had closed his eyes and was dozing off. Malfoy had the softest hair of anyone Harry had ever met. Even in this era without shampoo or hair conditioner it was like spun silk. Malfoy made a pleased noise when Harry's fingers ghosted against his scalp, like a cat being petted. He was half-asleep already.

"I've been having the same dream lately," Harry said, struck by the sudden memory. "About someone calling my name." It was always a very vivid dream but somehow the memory faded when he woke up.

Malfoy stirred but didn't move. "Cheating on me already?" he said, words slurred a little by sleep.

Harry wanted to swat him, but somehow the gesture turned into his hand cradling Malfoy's head, fingers tracing the line of his sharp cheekbone. "Nothing of the sort." He closed his eyes and tried to remember. "It's someone I know. Sometimes there's only one voice and sometimes more and they always try to tell me the same thing. I always wake up before I can figure it out."

It was probably nothing, but Harry had learned to pay attention to recurring dreams, especially those that seemed strangely real. And those voices were real, he was sure of that. They were voices he
knew very well. He could have identified them, if only he could remember them more clearly.

He could almost hear them now. He was in the dark, nothing around him but empty blackness, and someone was calling his name over and over. The voice came from above, but when Harry looked up he saw only more darkness.

"Harry!" the voice called, more urgent now. It came to him distorted, as if from a long distance, but it was unmistakable.

"Hermione," Harry said, just as Hermione said again, "Harry! Wake up, Harry!"

Harry's eyes flew open. Malfoy was staring up at him, looking awake and rather puzzled.

"I just had the same dream," Malfoy said

"About someone calling you?" Harry asked. "I heard her this time, it was Hermione. She was telling me to wake up."

Malfoy frowned. "I didn't... I heard your friends calling for you, not me. Why would I dream about that?"

Before Harry could answer that they were awake now, he felt himself fall forward. He braced himself, sure he was about to faceplant ungraciously over Malfoy, but that didn't happen. Malfoy felt it too. His arms reached up to wrap around Harry and Harry tried to hold on to him. They kept falling as everything else around them faded.

Harry lost consciousness for some time. When he came to, he was sprawled on the floor in a very uncomfortable position. There was a ceiling overhead so someone must have carried him indoors. But where was Malfoy? Harry sat up so quickly that his head started spinning.

"Careful!" said Hermione, wrapping her arm around Harry's shoulders to stop him from falling over.

Through the haze in his brain, Harry focused on Hermione, crouched on the floor next to him and beaming. Ron's face appeared over her shoulder.

"You gave us a fright, mate," he said. Harry didn't even give him the time to finish, just launched himself forward and pulled them both into a hug.

Ron yelped and then laughed nervously, startled. Hermione patted him on the back. "It's all right," she said. "We got you out. Sorry it took a while."

"What about Malfoy?" Harry asked, pulling back from the hug but still keeping one arm around his friends. He looked around and saw Malfoy propped against a cabinet, his head in his hands.

Before he could say something, quite a group of people crowded around him: Professor McGonagall looked in equal parts annoyed and relieved, Flitwick was talking quietly to Madam Pomfrey, Madam Pince was cradling a large book like a newborn baby. The portraits on the walls were whispering to each other and pointing.

The Headmistress' office was just as Harry remembered, with piles of clutter everywhere, but there was something off about the whole situation.

"Are you all right, Harry?" Hermione asked. "You were out of it for a really long time."

She held out Harry's glasses and wand for him and he took them, blinking as his vision readjusted
after so long squinting at everything.

Harry noticed that she was wearing a set of very elegant navy robes. He remembered she'd been wearing something similar last year at the ball. Everyone, even Ron, looked dressed for a formal event. Looking down, Harry was surprised to see that he wasn't wearing his worn-down, scratchy clothes: he was also wearing dress robes, the same he thought he'd ruined beyond repair when he'd landed in the past. The wand, too, was his old one with holly and phoenix feather, not the one he'd made himself.

"Which day is it?" Harry asked.

Hermione paused. "August 31st, of course... Well, September 1st, it's a little past midnight already. It took you a while to snap out of it."

"But it can't be," Harry replied. He could still feel the warmth of the sun on his face. "It was May..."

"Are you all right?" Hermione asked. She gave Harry a long, concerned look, and then turned to Madam Pomfrey. "Maybe it would be better if you went to the infirmary."

"No," Harry said. Malfoy was getting up, leaning on the cabinet for support. Harry turned towards Malfoy, looking for confirmation that he hadn't dreamed up the whole thing, and their eyes met.

"Tell them," Harry said.

Before Malfoy could say anything, Ron rounded on him. "This is your fault!" he yelled. "What did you do to Harry?"

Harry brushed Hermione aside and pushed himself to his feet. "He didn't do anything," he tried to say, but his voice was drowned out by the portraits, who stopped even pretending to be asleep to share excited comments from across the room.

Malfoy gave Harry a panicked look, then he turned around and fled the room. Nobody bothered to stop him and, by the time Harry reached the door and rushed down the stairs, he was long gone.

The stone gargoyle guarding the office yawned as everyone else filed out into the corridor. "What's with all the comings and goings tonight?" he said. He rubbed his eyes with one stony fist, making a scraping noise. "It almost makes me wish for my old spot on the roof."

Whichever way Malfoy had gone, he was probably heading home now. Harry wanted to talk to him but didn't know what he would say. And besides, everyone else was still surrounding him and they were talking all at once. Hermione was still saying that he should go straight to the infirmary, while Madam Pomfrey took hold of his arm and started taking his pulse. Madam Pince was talking to nobody in particular but seemed very concerned about some old book. And Ron insisted to go and alert all the Aurors downstairs and tell them to bring Malfoy in for questioning.

Harry's temper, already frayed thin, snapped at the last suggestion. "Shut up!" he yelled. "I don't need the infirmary and I certainly don't need anyone to arrest Malfoy, so stop telling me what to do!"

Everyone shut up, mostly because they were too stunned to do otherwise. Madam Pince was the first to recover and she started huffing at the idea of being addressed that way by someone she'd often had to chase out of her library for disrupting the peace.

McGonagall raised one hand and hushed her. "No, Irma, it's all right. Mr Potter never had a great deal of tact and tonight's ordeal didn't seem to have improved it. What he needs right now is some quiet." She turned to Harry, as if daring to shut her up. "I will believe him when he says he has no need of a healer. If he collapses, you're more than free to cart him off and do with him as you
Madam Pomfrey pursed her lips but said nothing. McGonagall had effectively dismissed them, and they all went back to the Great Hall, where the ball seemed to be still in full swing.

Harry wanted to follow them, slip out quietly and return to his flat. His emotions were all jumbled up, from relief to finding himself back in his time to confusion at how that happened to pain when he remembered how Malfoy had all but ran away from him.

"Can someone explain what happened?" Harry asked, feeling suddenly very tired.

He followed McGonagall back into her office, now blissfully silent, and watched as she conjured armchairs and a pot of tea.

"Drink it," she said, offering him a cup. "It will make you feel better."

Hermione and Ron sat at either side of him, acting rather like honour guards, and watched him as he downed the tea. Harry wasn't much of a tea-drinker, but he hadn't had any for the past year and found he did feel much better afterwards.

McGonagall refilled his cup and handed him a small plate full of chocolate biscuits. "What happened?" Harry asked, stuffing two biscuits into his mouth. He stared at the professor and resolutely ignored the glance that Hermione and Ron shared above his head.

"From what we've been able to gather," McGonagall said, glancing at the portraits on the wall, "you and Mr Malfoy were duelling when you both collapsed. Is that correct?"

Harry nodded around his mouthful of biscuits. "Did we really go back in time?"

"Time travel is impossible," Hermione said.

"That's what Malfoy said," Harry replied. "But it felt real. I know what Pensieve memories look like and this wasn't it, we really were in the tenth century."

"Miss Granger is right," said McGonagall. "What you entered wasn't a memory, but rather a book. This one, to be precise."

She held up an old book with a cracked leather cover. It was somehow familiar to Harry. When he held out his hand, McGonagall put it back on a shelf. "Better not," she said. "Madam Pince will murder you if you get crumbs on it. She was rather distressed to learn that you'd creased some of the pages."

Harry had a vague recollection of Malfoy dropping a book during their scuffle last year. Or yesterday, if Hermione was to be believed. His mouth felt suddenly dry as he swallowed the last of his biscuit. "What is that book?"

McGonagall looked at Harry from above the rim of her glasses. "It's a copy of *Hogwarts: A History*. It was donated to the school by the heirs of Bathilda Bagshot, and it's been enchanted to be used as a reference during the restoration of the castle."

"We were trapped inside a book?" Harry asked. "All this time?" He couldn't wrap his mind around it. It felt like a joke. He knew he'd spent months living there, with Malfoy and everyone else; he couldn't accept that 'there' was between the pages of a book. "How?"

"With this," McGonagall said. She held up a small green velvet bag, filled with what looked like...
silvery sand. "In hindsight it was careless of me to leave it lying around, but how was I supposed to
know that the two of you would behave yourself like Erumpents in a china shop?"

"Sorry," Harry muttered, looking down. He thought he remembered the sand from something he'd
seen long ago in the Department of Mysteries.

It was Hermione who explained it to him. "The Ministry is developing it; it's still experimental. What
it does is letting people enter a book as if it is a Pensieve memory, so it's possible for people to walk
around Hogwarts as it was built and use it as a reference instead of having to wade through hundreds
of pages cross-checking details."

"More like thousands of pages," Ron said, glaring at the book. "I wish I could have gone too, it
sounds much better to me than reading the book." He grinned at Harry, but Harry didn't feel like
returning his smile.

Hermione didn't find amusing either. "It's no joking matter," she snapped. "With the amount of
powder they spilled and without knowing the proper counter-spell, they could have been trapped
inside the pages for a very long time!"

Ron grimaced. "I guess it wasn't that funny if you were stuck with Malfoy all this time," he said.
"Sorry."

Harry shook his head. He didn't want to talk about Malfoy. He didn't know how to talk about
Malfoy.

McGonagall was still staring at him. "Time passes differently in the book," she said. "It took Miss
Granger a couple of hours to locate your consciousness and wake you up. Were you in there for very
long?"

Harry thought about it. "A while," he replied, avoiding her eyes.

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It was difficult to Harry to get used to his old life again. Auror training started again and kept him
busy for the next few days, but he kept all his friends at a distance and refused their invitations to
hang out after classes. The most jarring thing was that nobody had any idea that anything was amiss,
while Harry felt like he'd spent the past year in a foreign country.

He was sure that Ron and Hermione would understand if he explained it to them, but that would
have meant talking about Malfoy, and Harry wasn't sure he was ready to talk about Malfoy yet. Not
while Malfoy refused to talk to him.

Harry owled Malfoy several times. From brief notes to long rants, all his letters came back unopened.
He hadn't thought it would be possible for him to miss Malfoy, but now he felt his absence.
Sometimes Harry would make a mental note to tell Malfoy about an incident that happened during
training, or about a new bakery that had just opened next to his place, and then he remembered that
he wouldn't be seeing Malfoy any time soon. They were no longer speaking, let alone friends or
anything more.

It was the same as being cut off from his friends while in the book, except in that case it had been
circumstances keeping them apart. Now it was Malfoy who was deliberately cutting Harry off,
without even a word of explanation, and that rankled.

Finally, after his owl returned with yet another unopened letter, Harry caved in and went to see Ron
and Hermione. They didn't say anything when Harry turned up on their doorstep, but Harry didn't
miss the pointed look that Hermione shot Ron before going to get some drinks from the kitchen. Harry sat down on their comfy old armchair, salvaged from a yard sale, and played with his unopened bottle of Butterbeer.

"What's going on?" Ron asked. "You didn't even come to Sunday lunch at the Burrow."

Harry winced. "I forgot," he said. Not surprising, since from his point of view he'd got the invitation months ago, but for everyone else it had only been last week. They must think him very preoccupied by his troubles, or very scatterbrained. "Tell your mum I'm really sorry about it."

"It's okay," Ron said. "She's worried that you'll forget to eat and just waste away, but that's nothing new." He frowned. "There is something wrong, though. Is this about what happened with that book?"

Harry looked up, startled. "How did you know?"

Ron shot him a rueful grin. "It wasn't so hard to guess. You were fine until that night and then you started avoiding us like the plague..."

"It's perfectly fine if you don't want to talk about it," Hermione said, in the voice she used whenever she and Ron had rehearsed what to tell him beforehand. "But if there's anything at all we can do, you know you can tell us."

Harry sighed and picked up a cushion that was digging uncomfortably into his back. It had a knitted Chudley Cannons cover, a present from Hermione and an apology for barring all orange from the bedroom. He tossed the cushion aside. "I wanted to ask if what I saw inside the book was real," he said. "Did it really happen like that, with the Founders and everything?"

He could tell that this wasn't what they were expecting. Ron shrugged, but Hermione thought about it. "Well, you know you weren't really in the past," she said after a while. "If you're asking about historical accuracy, you have to keep in mind it all happened a long time ago," Hermione went on. "First-hand accounts from that period are extremely scarce, so it's more of a reconstruction based on later documents, but overall I'd say it's fairly accurate."

"It was like having a dream," Harry said, surprised by the vehemence in his own words. "A very vivid lucid dream."

Hermione nodded. "Yes, that describes it rather well. I haven't tried it myself, of course, it's still all very experimental and strictly regulated," she added, quickly, but her eyes brightened up as she talked about it. "Where exactly did you go? Or rather, when?"

"Right at the beginning," Harry said. "The first year that Hogwarts was a school."

Ron whistled appreciatively, and even Hermione managed to forget about the strict regulations as she sighed wistfully. "That must have been fascinating," she said.

Harry bowed his head. She stopped smiling and quickly elbowed Ron to shush him.

"Look, Harry," Ron said, "we can guess you're upset at something. Is it something to do with Malfoy? The portraits said you were fighting about something. Did he put a hex on you?" he asked, slamming one fist into the other hand. "Because if he did, I'm going over to his place right now and
turning him into a ferret. Permanently."

"Ronald Weasley, you will do no such thing!" Hermione exclaimed. "Though I wouldn't be against some other form of retaliation that didn't break the law..."

"No," Harry said, quickly. "It's nothing of the sort. Something did happen, but it's not what you think."

He took a sip of the Butterbeer, just to give himself something to do while he tried to find the right words. Ron and Hermione exchanged another significant glance and waited for him to go on.

"You have to understand," Harry said, "that we thought we were really in the past. For a while we thought we might be trapped there for... for a very long time," he finished, not looking at them. 'Forever' sounded too dramatic now.

"McGonagall met us outside the Great Hall by chance and we all went up to her office," Hermione said. "When we found you and Malfoy passed out on the floor, we immediately started trying to bring you back."

"Well, I couldn't do much to help," Ron said, giving him a half-smile. "So I went and brought back Flitwick and some other professors. I figured they'd be more help than me. But that book is hundreds of thousands of pages long, it took them some time to find you."

"It's not hundreds of thousands of pages, Ron!" Hermione complained.

"You said time passes differently in the book," Harry said, trying to sound casual.

Hermione nodded. "For us, it was a matter of a few hours. But for you it would have been longer. Several hours. Days." She stared at Harry, voice shaking slightly. "Maybe even weeks."

"Yeah," Harry said. "Something like that."

"How long were you there?" Hermione asked, her voice very gentle.

Harry finished the Butterbeer and put the bottle down. He looked into his friend's eyes. "Eight months," he said.

The two of them gasped. Ron's mouth dropped open rather comically.

"You have to see someone at St Mungo's," Hermione said.

Ron looked a little green. "Yeah," he agreed. "You spent almost a year trapped in a book, stuff like that can mess with someone's head. You need a healer to have a look at you, mate!"

"My head is perfectly fine," Harry said. He looked around Ron and Hermione's familiar living room. There was nothing he could do but tell them. "Like you said, this is about Malfoy."

"I knew it!" Ron howled. "What did that fucking moron do this time?"

"He's not a moron," Harry said. "He can be quite nice if he wants to. Actually, we became friends."

Hermione and Ron both stared at him as if he'd announced that he befriended a Crumple-Horned Snorkack. Harry hadn't expected anything different. He returned their stares and suddenly he realized how much he wanted Ron and Hermione to understand. He didn't know what was happening with Malfoy, but he didn't want to hide it from his friends. He didn't want to have to hide any of it.
Harry started telling the events of the past few months as he remembered them, starting with his scuffle with Malfoy in the Headmistress' office. There were lots of interruptions, mostly Hermione asking about some irrelevant historical detail and Ron making gagging noises whenever Malfoy was mentioned. The only thing Harry didn't mention was that they'd gone skinny dipping in the lake, because in hindsight it had been a terrible idea and he still felt freezing cold at the memory.

By the time he finished, they'd gone through several more Butterbeers and a plateful of sandwiches. Ron had been long shocked into silence and even Hermione wasn't saying anything, probably thinking of a way to politely ask Harry if he'd taken leave of his senses.

It was Ron who finally cleared his throat and broke the awkward silence. "So," he told Harry. "You and Malfoy."

"Yeah," Harry confirmed. "Me and Malfoy."

"Give me time to wrap my head around it," Ron said, shaking his head. "You and Malfoy are together!"

Harry groaned and fell against the back of the armchair. "I don't know about that," he replied. "I haven't seen him since that night and he's ignoring my owls."

Hermione leaned forward and patted him on the shoulder. "Maybe it's better this way," she said. "You and Malfoy have... history. The Prophet would have a field day if it got hold of the news that you two were dating."

The thought had occurred to Harry. "You mean he's right in keeping his distance and I should do the same."

Hermione gave him a nod full of sympathy. Ron was still frowning. "Wait a second," he said. "I don't buy this, why is it Malfoy who gets to decide what to do? Harry's obviously not okay with leaving things like this."

Harry shrugged. "What else am I supposed to do? Show up on his doorstep and ring his doorbell until he lets me in?"

"Yes!" Ron exclaimed. "If Malfoy's really turned into this great guy you've been talking about," he said, pulling a face, "then maybe there's a reason why he's been avoiding you. And if you find he's returned to his dickish ways, you can punch him on the nose and go back to hating him without feeling bad," he concluded, somewhat hopefully.

Ron's enthusiasm made Harry grin, but that quickly faded away as he thought about it. The latter outcome was the most likely, and he wouldn't be able to brush it off as breezily as Ron. Hearing Malfoy say that it was over would be worse than the uncertainty. He turned to Hermione for support.

"I think it's like she said. It would be easier for me to think of the past few months as a dream." Easy, if not for the feeling of loss whenever he thought about Malfoy. "It's not as if there's anyone else who knows about what happened."

She looked pensive. "You know," she said, slowly, after a while, "McGonagall had a disagreement with the school council. She left one of the outer walls as it was after the battle, scorch marks and all."

Harry raised his eyebrows. That particular detail hadn't made the papers. "I bet that didn't sit well with the council."
"No, it didn't. They said it was an affront to centuries of history and wanted it back to how it was, but McGonagall insisted. She said the battle is part of the history of Hogwarts, too, and of course in the end she had her way."

"I'm sure she did," Harry nodded. It was strange to think that Hogwarts students would read about the battle in textbooks and write papers about it in History of Magic. Somehow, having a visible reminder of the war's damages felt right, even if it was just a section of wall.

Ron huffed. "What has that to do with the Malfoy problem?"

Hermione shushed him. "Those marks are a reminder for future generations. Not for us. Even if she erased all physical signs and pretended that the war never happened, like some people were trying to do, we'd still remember."

"I don't think any of us will forget," Harry said.

"What I'm trying to say is that the people involved don't need any external reminder," she replied. "Even if your wand is different and nobody else knows about the dragon you met, the two of you still have your memories. You were together, even if nobody else knows about it, that's not something you can simply erase."

"So you also think I should try to get through to Malfoy," Harry said.

"Yes, if it means to much to you," she replied. She gave him a small smile. "I know it does, otherwise you wouldn't be so torn up about it. Go talk to him. See if you can patch things up."

This time, Harry's smile was sincere. "And if I do, what about gossip?"

Hermione snorted. "Oh, please," she said, rolling her eyes. "As if you ever cared about what the Prophet prints!"

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Harry's resolve lasted only until he Apparated in Wiltshire. As soon as he saw the gates he felt that coming there had been a terrible idea: everything was just as he remembered, minus the albino peacocks, and the thought of his last visit was almost enough to send him back to London at once. He paced up and down the gravel for a good five minutes before he found the strength to walk to the Manor.

The sky was overcast and promised rain, but Harry reached the doorstep before the first drops began to fall. It occurred to him that perhaps Malfoy would open the door himself. It wasn't very likely but, just in case, Harry ran a hand through his hair and tried to get it to lie flat. He was still wearing the faded jeans and old sweater he'd thrown on to visit Ron and Hermione, and for a moment he thought it wouldn't be too late to run back home and get changed into something nicer. Then, cursing himself for a fool, he mussed up his hair again and rang the doorbell.

It was Narcissa who opened the door, looking particularly regal in a high-necked black dress. Harry felt even shabbier by comparison. "Harry Potter," she said, raising an eyebrow.

The gesture reminded Harry so much of Malfoy that he forgot about any misgivings he might still have. "Hello," he said, trying to sound natural. "I'm looking for Malfoy. Er. Draco." The first name felt odd on his tongue.

Narcissa's face didn't show any emotion, save perhaps for the usual hint of distaste, but the fact that she hadn't slammed the door in his face yet was promising. "Is this about what happened last week at
"Hogwarts?" she asked.

"Yeah," Harry said, wondering just how much Malfoy had told her. "I'm not here to fight, I just want to talk to him."

Narcissa pursed her lips. "Draco has been acting strangely ever since then," she said. "He wouldn't say what's wrong, but he mentioned you several times."

"Did he?" Harry asked. It sounded ominous.

"That's not an uncommon occurrence," Narcissa said. "However, your name is usually followed by several expletives. Now Draco mutters and sulks but refuses to speak ill of you. That's a new thing."

It was better than Harry had dared to hope. "I tried writing but he ignored my owls."

Surprisingly, she stepped aside and held the door open for him. "Come in," she said. It sounded like an order and Harry hastened to obey. She led him down a long corridor, to a part of the Manor that thankfully Harry hadn't seen during his other visit. The house was silent, as if the two of them were the only people there.

Narcissa stopped in front of a door and knocked. "He's been holed up in his rooms ever since," she said. "I don't know what happened, but if you can get him to come out of there you're welcome to try."

From inside came Malfoy's voice. "Go away, mother."

She ignored him and waved her wand at the door, opening it. Then, before Harry could say anything, she turned around and left. Harry peered inside what looked to be a small but elegant sitting room.

Malfoy was curled up in an armchair reading a book. He looked so relaxed that Harry didn't want to disturb him. However, as soon as Malfoy glanced up, he jumped to his feet and tossed the book aside.

"What are you doing here?" Malfoy said, crossing his arms.

All Harry wanted to do was to grab Malfoy and kiss his frown away. He forced himself not to. "You never answered my letters," Harry said.

Malfoy glared. "I thought that was a clear hint that I didn't want to talk to you."

"Too bad," Harry replied. He took a couple of steps inside the room. "I don't accept that as an answer."

Malfoy moved to stand beside the window, so that the armchair was between the two of them. He glared. "Go away, Potter," he said.

"I won't," Harry replied, hoping Malfoy couldn't hear his heart beating madly in his chest. "Not until you agree to talk." To make his point, he sat down on the armchair Malfoy had vacated, trying to look as if he was ready to spend the whole day sitting there if necessary.

"Why do you always have to be so stubborn?" Malfoy snapped. He started pacing up and down. "I don't have time for your childish games. I'm busy."

Harry picked up the book Malfoy had discarded. "Hélas, Je me suis Transfiguré Les Pieds," he read.
"A play. Yes, I can see you're very busy. I can wait until you've finished reading it." He held out the book to him.

Malfoy took the book and slammed it on the table. "Why are you here?"

"I should be the one asking questions," Harry said. Now that he had his glasses Harry could see all the little details in Malfoy's face, like the flecks of silver in his eyes and the creases on his forehead. His hair was shorter and tidier than it had been in the book but there were shadows under his eyes that Harry didn't remember. "Why did you run away? Why were you trying to avoid me?"

"I should have thought that was obvious," Malfoy said, stiffly.

Hermione's words echoed in Harry's head. "Because we have history." He leaned forward, staring at Malfoy and trying to read his expression. "Is that the only reason?"

Malfoy hesitated just one second before turning brusquely away. "It's reason enough for me," he replied, slumping his shoulders.

"We got over that," Harry said. "We were together." Malfoy made a sudden, aborted movement at that, and Harry wished he could see his face. "We never talked about it but you can't say otherwise, I know we were. That's got to count for something."

"Not really," Malfoy said. His voice was shaking. "We were together in a book. McGonagall was kind enough to write and let me know. It was all fake." He almost spat the words.

"It wasn't fake to me," Harry replied. He got up to stand a few feet away from Malfoy, clenching his hands into fists to stop himself from reaching out to him. "It was real to me. You were real. So stop being so fucking miserable and admit that you want it too." He almost yelled the last words.

Malfoy shook his head, still not looking at Harry. "What did you think was going to happen once we got back? We can't do this. People wouldn't understand how we went from being at each other's throats to... to being together."

Harry felt the hesitation on the last few words. His heart fluttered. "I don't care about people," he said to Malfoy's back. "I care about you!"

"What about your friends? Last time we met they didn't seem very happy to see me."

"They know," Harry replied, cutting him off. "I told them. They think I'm crazy, but they sent me here to get you back. So here I am." He paused, hoping for a reply, but none came. "Unless you don't want me."

Malfoy finally turned around. His eyes looked desperate. "I do," he said, choking on the words. "Damn you, Potter, why do you always have to make everything so bloody difficult? We can't be together, not in the real world, so stop talking like we can."

"We can," Harry insisted. "We can if we both want this."

"You're saying that now," Malfoy whined. "It was fine when we were in that bubble far away from everything we know, but now that we're back you're going to remember why you hated me. I couldn't stand that. A clean break is much better."

Harry shook his head. "It's not going to happen," he whispered. He raised one hand to cup Malfoy's cheek, tracing the line of his cheekbone. Malfoy inhaled sharply but didn't pull away.
Slowly, as if a sudden movement could startle Malfoy and make him flee, Harry leaned forward and kissed him. His glasses bumped against the bridge of his nose and he realized that it was the first time they were kissing in the real world.

Malfoy made a soft sound and then returned the kiss, wrapping his arms around Harry's shoulders and holding him close. Malfoy's lips tasted like tea and spices, strange and familiar at the same time. "Promise me," he murmured against Harry's lips.

Harry was almost too dizzy to answer. Instead, he pulled Malfoy into another rough kiss. His hands slid down Malfoy's back, untucking his shirt tails. "If you promise me you'll stop trying to get away from me."

"Fuck, no, I'm done with that," Malfoy gasped.

Harry pushed him back against the wall and licked into his mouth, swallowing his moans. He could have gone on kissing Malfoy forever, but after a while Malfoy turned his head and pressed his lips along Harry's jaw.

"You know," he said in between kisses. "There's a bed in the other room." He was trying to affect a casual tone, but his voice betrayed him. He looked up into Harry's eyes.

"Yeah," Harry said. He felt in a daze, unable to string words together. "That's... yeah. Good idea."

He pressed one last bruising kiss against Malfoy's mouth before grabbing his hand and pulling him into the bedroom. They went slowly, stumbling over their own feet because of their unwillingness to pull apart even for one second. Harry only stopped to take off his glasses, tossing it on the nearest flat surface. His sweater followed suit.

They fell together on the bed, with Harry pressing Malfoy against the mattress. Malfoy's eyes were heavy-lidded and he was breathing hard. His fingers slid under the hem of Harry's shirt and brushed against his skin, making Harry shiver.

Malfoy grabbed a handful of shirt and tugged it. Harry got the idea and went to his knees on the bed, helping Malfoy pull the shirt over his head. Malfoy's hands took immediate advantage of the newly exposed skin, roaming over Harry's back and his sides. One of his thumbs brushed over a nipple and Harry's breath hitched. Malfoy gave him a wicked grin and did it again, deliberately, fingers lingering over the sensitive spot. Harry hips moved of their own accord, thrusting against Malfoy's leg.

"Impatient?" Malfoy asked with a grin. His hand moved lower, to cup Harry through his jeans.

By way of an answer, Harry grabbed Malfoy's wrists and held them down. He leaned in, shutting up Malfoy with a long kiss before he could complain. Then he moved his head lower, pressing open-mouthed kisses against the side of Malfoy's neck. He found his pulse point and scraped the tender skin with his teeth.

Under him, Malfoy's chest rose and fell rapidly. He was still wearing all of his clothes, which was very unfair, so Harry set to work unbuttoning the front of Malfoy's shirt. Even though his wrists had been released from Harry's grip, Malfoy's arms remained still on the mattress. In fact, despite having been an enthusiastic participant so far, he had tensed up.

Harry thought he knew the reason behind the change of mood. He leaned down and pressed a soft kiss on Malfoy's chest, just over one of his scars. Malfoy held his breath as Harry kissed the length of it. "I'm sorry," Harry murmured, looking up at Malfoy through his lashes, lips still ghosting over
Malfoy's skin.

He couldn't see Malfoy's face well from that angle, but he felt him shudder under him. "Doesn't it turn you off?" Malfoy asked.

"Never," Harry replied, pressing his face against Malfoy's chest and breathing in the smell of his skin. He moved down slowly, one button at a time, kissing his way across Malfoy's chest and stomach. By the time he reached the soft fuzz under Malfoy's navel, Malfoy was panting hard and clenching his fists in the bed sheets.

"Potter," he gasped, chest rising and falling with each loud breath. His skin was flushed pink. When Harry nuzzled his cock, whose outline showed through the fabric of his trousers, Malfoy's back arched off the bed. "Merlin, Potter... I want you..."

"Me too," Harry replied, equally breathless.

Malfoy shook his head. One of his hands tangled in Harry's hair and pulled his head up so that their eyes could meet. "No. I meant I want you." Malfoy swallowed, almost looked away. "Inside of me."

Harry made a small noise in the back of his throat. He surged forward to kiss Malfoy again, while at the same time he blindly tried to undo Malfoy's belt with one hand. Malfoy moaned against his mouth. Harry could feel Malfoy's hard-on against him: he rolled his hips and Malfoy rocked against him, sending sparks of arousal down Harry's spine.

Finally, Harry managed to unbutton Malfoy's pants and pushed them down his hips along with Malfoy's underwear. Malfoy kicked them out of the way. Excluding that time in the lake, when they'd both carefully refrained from ogling, it was the first time Harry had seen Malfoy completely naked. He ran his eyes appreciatively down Malfoy's body, admiring his long, sharp lines and the pale expanses of skin.

Malfoy still had his unbuttoned shirt on, but when Harry tried to take it off Malfoy stopped him. "Leave it," Malfoy murmured, not meeting his eyes. "I don't want you to see that thing." Harry glanced at Malfoy's left sleeve and he nodded.

Instead he settled between Malfoy's legs, pushing his knees apart. "I've never actually done this," he confessed.

He was half-expecting mockery, but Malfoy's eyelids just flickered for a moment. "There's a bottle in my bedside table," he said, jerking his head towards it. While Harry got up to look, he stretched himself more comfortably on the bed, resting his head against the mountain of pillows.

Harry found the lubricant quickly enough and put it in Malfoy's outstretched hand before climbing back on the bed. He watched in fascination as Malfoy slicked his fingers and reached between his legs, circling one finger against his own entrance. Malfoy's eyes fluttered shut as he pressed inside, slowly, moving in time with his ragged breaths.

Harry placed one hand on Malfoy's thigh, feeling the warmth of the skin against his palm. His other hand unbuttoned his jeans and slid inside his boxers. He was painfully hard already, but he only stroked himself once or twice, knowing that otherwise he wouldn't last long.

Malfoy was moving his hips now, pressing them up against his hand. He added a second finger and had to bite his lower lip to stifle his ragged cries.

"Don't," Harry said. "I want to hear your voice."
Malfy wriggled his fingers in a way that must have felt good, because his whole body shuddered. "Fuck you," he moaned.

Snorting a laughter, Harry pressed forward to bite Malfoy's nipple. "I thought you wanted me to fuck you," he said with a teasing smirk.

Malfoy's fingers clenched in Harry's hair and he wrapped his long legs around Harry's hips. "Then do it," he replied, thrusting up so their groins brushed together.

Harry's head snapped back and he swore under his breath. He didn't know if Malfoy was ready, but Malfoy's hand was already pawing at his jeans. If this went on, he wouldn't even be able to last until he was inside Malfoy. Harry pushed the jeans down his hips, cursing when they tangled around his knees, and shoved them aside.

He hissed as Malfoy slicked his cock with a liberal amount of lube, and had to resist the urge to thrust into his hand. "Ready?" Harry asked. Malfoy's erect cock was leaving a trail of precome on his belly, and Malfoy was flushed and panting hard, but Harry wanted to make sure he wasn't rushing this.

Malfoy just slumped back against the pillows and nodded, his mouth half-open. Harry licked his lips. He hoped Malfoy was ready, because he couldn't hold back any longer.

Harry slid inside him, slowly, one inch at a time. He wanted to keep looking at Malfoy's expression, to focus on the way his face tensed, but he found that he couldn't keep his eyes open. He braced his arms on the mattress and concentrated on their breathing instead. Malfoy put a steadying hand on Harry's hip, grabbing him hard enough to bruise.

When Harry finally managed to open his eyes, Malfoy was staring up at him. "Move," Malfoy said, shifting his hips ever so slightly.

Harry choked on a moan. He wasn't going to last long, but neither was Malfoy. He rocked his hips and Malfoy's head fell back, displaying the gorgeous line of his neck. Malfoy moaned something incoherent.

"Are you okay?" Harry asked, unsure. "Should I stop?"

Malfoy glared at him. "Only if you want me to kill you," he said, rocking back against him.

Harry grunted and started moving again, thrusting inside Malfoy harder. One of his hands wrapped against Malfoy's erection and started stroking him. It was messy and uncoordinated, but Malfoy gasped and wrapped his arms around Harry, fingernails digging into his shoulders.

Malfoy looked close already: his pupils were blown wide and his hair was tousled and plastered on his sweaty forehead. Harry knew he wouldn't last either, but he wanted to wait for Malfoy first, to feel him come undone around him.

He stroked Malfoy again, flicking his thumb over the head of his cock the way he liked to do to himself. Malfoy tensed under him, face scrunched up, and then he was coming. Harry felt him tighten around his cock and shudder with aftershocks. He only managed a couple more thrusts before pulling out and spilling all over Malfoy's stomach.

He slumped forward and fell on top of Malfoy without a care for the sticky mess between the two of them. Malfoy was still panting hard. The hand tangled in Harry's hair slid down along his neck and his back, tracing the ridges of his spine. Harry shivered at the coldness that Malfoy's touch left behind. He wrapped himself closer around Malfoy, soaking in his warmth.
Malfoy swatted at his shoulder. "We have to clean up," he mumbled, but didn't seem in a hurry to put words into action. Harry himself felt boneless and utterly spent.

They stayed like that for a long time, until the air of the room started to feel chilly against their sweaty skin. Harry rolled aside, grumbling, and Malfoy retrieved his wand and Vanished the mess of come and spilled lube.

Neither of them talked much as they put their clothes back on, except to Accio a wayward sock. Harry felt as if the wrong word could break the fragile truce between them and drive Malfoy away again. Malfoy seemed lost in his thoughts. He walked up and down the room and ran his hands in his hair in a futile attempt to make it look less of a wreck.

Harry cleared his throat. "So," he rasped. He felt parched. "What now?"

Malfoy turned around to face him. "Potter," he began, before being interrupted by a soft knock.

The door swung open and Narcissa looked in. Harry paused with one arm halfway inside the sleeve of his sweater, his glasses askew. His eyes widened as he realized how rumpled the two of them looked, not to mention the state of the bed. He shot Malfoy a panicked look, but Malfoy seemed frozen on the spot and just stared ahead at his mother.

"I wanted to know if you were staying for tea," Narcissa asked Harry. If she thought that anything was amiss, she didn't give any sign of it.

Harry glanced at Malfoy again and wondered what he'd been about to say. This would be awkward for him, but Harry couldn't think of a way to refuse the invitation without seeming rude. "Er," he said. "Yeah, thanks. If it's no bother."

It had been directed to Malfoy, but it was Narcissa who answered. "No bother at all," she assured him. Her gaze made him look as if he was being scrutinized.

Harry swallowed. "Actually..." he said, starting to conjure up excuses about work to do or previous engagements.

Finally Malfoy met his eye. He exhaled slowly, then stepped forward and grabbed Harry's hand. "Actually, Mother," he told her, "there's something I'd like to tell you first."

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End Notes

Thanks for reading! All comments are extremely welcome either here or on Livejournal.

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