

Title: Oscillate Wildly

Author Name: V.G. Marks

Rating: R

Spoilers: PS/SS, CoS, PoA, GoF, OotP. Written between Order of Phoenix and Half-Blood Prince.

Genre: Drama, Slash

Era: Multiple Eras

Main Character(s): D, H

Ship(s): None

Summary: After a particularly gruelling Occlumency session, Harry practically comes apart at the seams and finds himself living partway between two lives. One is his life at Hogwarts. In the other, he's been in a mental institution for the better part of six years. What happens when Harry realises his whole life may be one elaborate fantasy? Harry/Draco, R, Partially AU

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Author's Notes: The plot bunny for this story spawned from the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* episode, "Normal Again", where she finds herself stuck between the world she knows and a world where she's been in an asylum since she was in high school. This is not a crossover though and my story will not spoil the Buffy episode. No *Buffy* characters will be making an appearance. Nuh-uh. The title comes from a song by The Smiths and I found it quite appropriate when viewed in light of the story. The song has no lyrics, but feel free to make up your own. This is a new, improved version of

"Oh, find me, find me! Find me! I'll haunt you when you laugh. Oh, I'll haunt you when you laugh. You might sleep, but you never will dream!"

- The Smiths

Chapter 1 - Suffer Little Children

Once again, Harry Potter found himself on his hands and knees in Professor Snape's office. Truthfully, it was his own fault that he found himself in this position again. A summer of wallowing had brought Harry to the inevitable conclusion that he needed to take up his Occlumency lessons again, and he needed to do so as soon as possible. Seeing no other way around things, Harry had personally humbled himself and apologized to his Potions professor for the infamous Pensieve incident, even though offering up that apology had pained him. After all, between Snape and Voldemort, Snape was the lesser of the two evils, and Harry normally didn't have a problem admitting when he'd done something truly wrong. Plus, these lessons were important. Without them, he didn't have any other way of keeping Voldemort from attacking his head whenever he pleased.

This fact didn't help Harry *like* Snape any more, though. In fact, he sometimes thought he might loathe Severus Snape even more than Voldemort. At least Voldemort knew he had to kill Harry, knew that Harry had been pre-destined to be his enemy. Harry thought it made some degree of sense that Voldemort would want him gone so badly, but the hatred Snape possessed had felt unjustified since its onset. Hating a child for something the child's father - the child's *dead* father, at that - had done fifteen years ago seemed so petty and judgmental. Then again, in the entire time Harry had known him, Snape had been nothing but a petty and judgmental person. Harry thought it would do well for Snape to remember that Harry wouldn't have hated him had Snape not hated Harry first.

But Harry would never share those thoughts freely, since Snape possessed the unique skill of being able to block his mind from Harry's enemy and Harry needed to learn that, too. For that, Harry could look past his grudges. The scar standing out in stark relief from his forehead was reminder enough of that. Harry had been surprised when Snape immediately agreed to resume his lessons, but believed that behind-the-scenes machinations by Dumbledore were probably at work.

So, Harry had once again subjected his mind to the brute force that was Professor Snape's Occlumency lessons. And once again, he found himself on the floor.

"Get up, Potter. Your emotions are too raw. The Dark Lord will easily rule your feeble brain," drawled Snape. Harry was overtaken by a sudden feeling of *du vu*. The two had had this conversation on numerous occasions - Harry was emotional; Snape was not. Harry was weak; Snape was strong. And on and on. Harry felt his body heat rise, but admonished himself before that anger displayed as flushed cheeks. Snape was sort of right, after all. Harry did act on his emotions too often. It's what put his friends in danger and why his godfather was *de-no*. He had to stop *thinking* so much and focus. If Snape thought he was easy prey, he'd be a lame baby bunny for Voldemort.

Focus.

Harry gritted his teeth and pulled himself to his feet. "I'm sorry, Professor," he said neutrally. "Can we try again?"

"Inner-turmoil all sorted out, then?" The sneer curling Snape's lips was so pronounced that Harry nearly rolled his eyes. Snape's sarcasm was somewhat like a blanket spell that affected everyone present.

Yet again, Snape raised his wand. "*Legilimens!*"

A flood of light and a rapid set of pictures crowded Harry's mind. He could feel his scar burning, reliving some of the worst moments of his life. Ginny Weasley on the floor of the Chamber of

Secrets, her face pale and lifeless. Seamus Finnigan coldly telling Harry that he thought Harry might have made up Voldemort's return. He flinched as Cho Chang rejected him for the Yule Ball once again, then felt her tears on his face as they kissed under the mistletoe. Cho again, this time as she heatedly accused him of running to Hermione instead of wanting to be around her. Hermione, after being petrified by the Basilisk, white-faced and frozen with her eyes wide open. Ron slept underwater as Harry - terrified - swam furiously towards him.

These were followed fast and furious by older memories of his time with the Dursleys, some of which Harry didn't even remember happening. Harry felt helpless, almost as though he was caught watching a film of his own life. He desperately tried to throw Snape off or push him back, but it was no use. Dudley and his gang tackled Harry on the playground, leaving him with a bruised stomach and blackened left eye. Uncle Vernon roughly shoved him underneath the stairs, his purple face the last thing Harry saw before blackness accompanied the sound of several clicking locks. As Aunt Marge insulted Harry's parents, Harry felt the anger inside him well up, reaching its peak when the hateful woman called his mother a bitch. A very young Harry with a scraped knee cried pitifully as Aunt Petunia decidedly ignored him.

Memories were flipping flipped past him much more rapidly now; he saw hundreds of identical black nights spent staring at the ceiling, brushing off spiders, and waiting for his parents to show up and save him. An even crueller-than-usual Dudley elicited hope in Harry when he was too young to know better, handing Harry a teddy bear that he said was too old and no longer wanted. Harry took the bear, astonished, as he'd never had a toy in his life. One hour later, Dudley spied Harry hugging the bear and flew into a jealous rage. Purple-faced and resembling either a miniature version of his father or a very large grape, he grabbed back the bear and ripped off its head. Harry cried. Harry was in pain. Harry was in the dark.

Harry fought back.

The pain in his head serving as a reminder that he didn't have to stay a passive observer, Harry pushed Snape out of his own head and found himself within his Professor's.

Harry instantly knew that this was different than looking in Snape's Pensieve, though he wasn't sure if Snape would see things that way. First of all, it was a method of protecting himself, and Snape had certainly seen enough of Harry's memories. Now that he was in control, Harry had the presence of mind to wryly joke to himself that he should start doing really embarrassing things so Snape would have more interesting material to watch.

Harry saw a vision of a tiny black-haired child sitting on a wooden floor with his arms extended, fists clenching and unclenching. The baby obviously wanted to be held, but two adults walked briskly past him. Strangely, Harry could feel the elation of the child as he was eventually picked-up, only to be dropped unceremoniously into a large, wooden crib a second later. The same child, now slightly older, enviously stared at three other children his age. The children stared back with undisguised hatred. One - obviously the leader - spoke solemnly, telling the other two, "Sevvie isn't allowed to play with us because he's so strange and ugly, all right? He runs after his mum, who barely looks at him. Can't blame her. I wouldn't want to look at his icky face if he was my son, either."

Harry scowled as he recognised his godfather, speaking to a younger boy who looked a lot like him - *Regulus* - and someone whom Harry guessed was a very young Narcissa Malfoy.

Now, he was facing a stark white wall. Behind him, a man was yelling about someone spending their weight in Galleons and something about the sanctity of blood and the family name, with a woman's sobbing faintly in the background. Young Snape was seated on the floor below Harry, morosely flicking peas at the same wall Harry faced. Suddenly, a loud *crack* rang in Harry's ears, causing him to flinch. The boy shuddered, got up and ran away.

The scene changed again, and Harry instantly felt like he'd taken a Bludger to the stomach. He was surrounded by Death Eaters. Lord Voldemort looked directly at Snape and tilted his head, the

beginnings of a smile playing on his thin lips. The other Death Eaters stood in a circle, reminding Harry of his experience in the Riddles' graveyard. Snape's forearm was exposed and the Dark Lord intoned, "*Morsmordre*." Harry could feel Snape struggle not to scream out in pain. Shocked, Harry gasped and nearly fell to his knees; he could feel the Dark Mark burning his own arm. Harry could already feel the fear and doubt coursing through Snape's body, but the strong need to belong and an even stronger need for revenge nearly overwhelmed him.

As Snape struggled not to scream, Harry noticed Bellatrix Lestrange, as she was not wearing her mask or hood. She stood a little away from the rest of the circle, and though she must have been around Snape's age, she looked far younger. Bellatrix spun around merrily, looking very much like a small child who was allowed to stay up with the grown-ups. She smiled widely, an insane gleam playing in her dark eyes. Harry stared, entranced. He'd thought that look had developed in Azkaban, but that didn't seem to be the case. Her dancing stopped abruptly when she reached Snape and Bellatrix grinned coyly as she dragged her wand gently across his cheek. Snape hissed in a breath, while Bellatrix jumped back and pointed her wand at his chest. "*Crucio!*" Snape writhed in pain, still willing himself not to scream. Harry could sense some of his pain, but he knew he wasn't getting the full brunt of Lestrange's curse.

Harry wondered why Snape didn't put this memory in the Pensieve.

Suddenly, everything shifted and Harry recognised Hogwarts. James Potter stalked down a long corridor, instantly filling Harry with dread. He idly wondered if Snape wasn't pushing him out of his head because he *wanted* Harry to see this. His father walked up to Snape, whose arms were laden with books and, without even looking, James casually slapped the pile, sending the books tumbling to the ground. Peter Pettigrew's hysterical laughter could be heard in the background as James called over his shoulder, "Study all you want, Snivellus! I'll still beat you in any class!" Harry saw the younger Snape wipe tears off his face with the sleeve of his robe, just as Snape pushed his way back into Harry's mind.

Lily, take Harry and go! It's him! Go! Run! I'll hold him off ☹

Not Harry, not Harry, please not Harry!

Stand aside, you silly girl...stand aside, now...

Not Harry, please no, take me, kill me instead ☹

Not Harry! Please...have mercy...have mercy..

Avada Kedavra.

Harry saw a flash of green and was in Tom Riddle, Sr.'s graveyard again.

Kill the spare.

Harry was in the Department of Mysteries and Sirius was falling and falling through the tattered veil, as Harry struggled and struggled against Remus.

"NO!"

Harry resented Snape stealing these memories from him, even if they were his worst. He violently pushed his professor out and felt the cool stone on his face. Harry was on the floor of Snape's office once again.

Surprisingly, Snape gave Harry time to collect himself, perhaps because he was as disoriented as Harry after all the time Harry had spent invading his mind. Harry's breath was ragged and he felt his scar burning with an intensity he had never felt without Voldemort either in his head or standing nearby. His eyes shut tightly, he forced himself to breathe in a more regular pattern as he tried to forget both what he saw in Snape's mind and what Snape had seen in his.

He had no idea how much time had elapsed, but he knew it must have been a long time. Clutching at his head, he dragged himself into a half-sitting, half-leaning position and braced himself against Snape's desk. He didn't care what Snape thought about that because Harry was just trying to feel somewhat normal again.

Harry blinked back hot tears threatening to spill onto his cheeks; he wasn't about to cry, especially not in front of *Snape*.

After a few moments, *Snape* finally spoke. "Nothing that was seen here will leave this office."

Harry felt a rush of gratitude so intense that it shocked him. *Snape* was not only protecting his own darkest times, but also promising that he would never voluntarily reveal Harry's worst memories. Eyes half-closed, Harry pounded his fists on the cold, stone floor. "I'm never going to get this, am I? I can't clear my thoughts, no matter how hard I try to keep everything blank. You saw things that I don't even remember happening."

And worse yet, Harry mentally added, *you saw the things that I've been trying desperately to forget.*

"Voldem..." Harry stopped himself, remembering how *Snape* had sharply reprimanded him for using his enemy's full name before. "You-Know-Who will be able to pick off everyone around me one by one, just by cracking open my head and having a look-around."

"Potter, I'm certainly not about to dispute the fact that your emotions lead you around by the nose." *Snape* grudgingly added, "But you are improving. You were able to view my thoughts for several minutes before I was able to get my bearings and combat you. Very few wizards have the skill to break past my barriers."

Harry wiped at his eyes with the sleeves of his robe, guiltily reminding him of the memory he'd just seen between his father and *Snape*. He felt the need to apologise to *Snape*, but he wasn't sure why. He wasn't his father, after all. No. He'd done his apologising and no longer owed that to the man in front of him, especially for events he'd had no part in. A wave of anger replaced the guilt and frustration as Harry dragged himself to his feet, staring defiantly at *Snape*. Harry half-expected the greasy git to aim another *Legilimens* at his head.

Instead, *Snape* made his way over to the Pensieve, retrieved his stored memories and motioned for Harry to go. "Keep working on clearing your head, Potter. By this time next week, I'd better not be able to break into your mind at all." The sarcastic tone, which had almost disappeared a moment ago, was back in full force. "Oh, and next time, please remember to keep your emotions *in* your nose."

If Harry hadn't been so unexplainably angry, he would have laughed when he felt his nostrils involuntarily flare.

"You're dismissed, Potter. Go on. Out." *Snape* pointed at his door with his wand.

Harry stalked through the corridors, quickly winding his way back to Gryffindor tower. It was very late and the shadows that played on the walls seemed to mock him. His muscles somehow simultaneously felt both stiff and jelly-like and the pounding in his head increased with each step. *Damn Snape!* Harry thought to himself as he walked. He had no idea how these lessons were going to help the greater good when he felt worse everytime he left *Snape's* office. *Why the hell does Dumbledore trust that bastard?* Harry wasn't about to ask. *Not that the old fool is going to tell me if I do. I doubt I even trust him anymore. Not after what happened last year.*

"I'm not a child!" Harry said aloud, scandalising a painting of three ladies dressed in Victorian garb. One of the women shushed him as he stomped past them.

He felt tears prick at his eyes again and, embarrassed, he blinked them away. Harry knew he was only doing this to protect everyone he cared about - *The ones left, at any rate*. If it were only him that needed protection, he wouldn't continue. Even when ordered to help Harry, *Snape* still found ways to humiliate him. *I hate him. I hate him, I hate him...*

"I HATE HIM. Bastard. I hope he DIES. BASTARD!"

This time, a suit of armour advanced on Harry. Harry ignored it, not really caring if it did attack. Dead tired, yet alert, a red-faced, sweaty Harry finally reached the portrait of the Fat Lady. She raised an eyebrow at him and Harry laughed sharply, startling her. He finally considered what he

must look like, after hours of having his brain scrambled, followed by some quality anger time in half of the Hogwarts corridors. He pushed the hair plastered against his forehead off his face and took a deep breath, flashing what he hoped was a winning smile.

"Password?" she droned, trying to sound impartial and bored. Harry was surprised and intrigued when he realised that she was putting on airs. *Why can I suddenly read her emotions?*

"Uh... *Centaurs are dreamy,*" Harry muttered quickly as humanly possible, momentarily wondering why the prefects let Parvati and Lavender pick the password the last go-round.

The portrait opened, but not before she shot Harry one more raised eyebrow and what he was pretty sure was a concerned cluck of the tongue. As he stumbled through the portal, he scornfully wondered if this event would be gossip-worthy enough for the Fat Lady's friend, Violet. He shook off the thought, because it was unnecessarily nasty and also because he would possibly be facing his friends in a moment. Better to be tired, dour little Harry, instead of angry, hateful Harry. At least his friends were used to the former.

He reached the Common Room, momentarily pausing in the doorway to drink in the room. Instead of its usual comfort, everything seemed stuffy and gaudy. The chintz armchairs that typically enveloped him in squashy warmth now seemed comically overstuffed. Absently, he rubbed at his forehead, only half-aware that his scar was still throbbing.

"Harry? Are you all right?" Harry leaped about a foot in the air when Ron spoke, having previously not seen him sitting there. Hermione and Ron sat with assorted books, papers, and quills scattered over two chairs and a table. Both were watching him with a mix of concern and fear, as though Harry was a teakettle without a spigot, ready to explode at any moment.

Harry supposed this wasn't a horrible assessment.

He also supposed the two expected a reply. "Yeah, I'm fine. Occlumency lessons just completely exhaust me. Oh, excuse me ☹ *Remedial Potions.*" Harry's voice dripped with sarcasm. "Honestly, is anyone really buying that excuse? Most people know that by some miracle of nature I got an O on my Potions O.W.L., I'm in his damned N.E.W.T. class, and yet, Snape can't let me use better reasoning for these God-forsaken sessions. I could be doing a research project, cleaning offices for pocket money or just have detention, but no. I have everyone thinking that I'm some sort of dunce." Harry sighed heavily.

Hermione and Ron gaped, open-mouthed. This could have been because this was the most Harry had said all at once in weeks, mostly preferring to answer his friends in monosyllables, or it could have been the uncontrolled anger that seemingly originated from nowhere. Hard to say, really. Hermione cleared her throat, exchanging a nervous glance with Ron. "Are you really all right? I mean, where did that come from?"

Harry shook his head, deflecting her second question. "I'm really all right, Hermione. Sorry. Just a long night, like I said, so I think I'm going to head up to bed. What time is it, anyway?"

"A little past midnight."

Even later than I would have guessed. Well, Harry thought wryly, time flies when you're having fun.

Ron asked, "Do you want me to come up now? I think everyone else in the room is already asleep."

"No, if you want to stay down here, it's all right. I'll fall asleep as soon as I get up there, anyway."

"Suit yourself. Good-night."

"Good-night, Harry," chimed Hermione.

Harry nodded to them both and started the ascent to his dormitory. As he pushed open the door, he could hear Neville lightly snoring, but other than that, all was quiet. After changing into his pyjamas, he climbed into bed, his scar still burning a bit. His muscles continued to ache, and if possible, he was even more exhausted than he'd been after leaving Snape's office.

He felt himself softly lulled into sleep. The bed was amazingly comfortable, surrounding him with warmth. He drifted, drifted....

Without warning, Harry's whole body stiffened, as it flooded with excruciating pain. He felt an sharp ache to his forehead, worse than a thousand knives and even worse than the pain of the Cruciatius Curse. He tried thrashing, but his body was frozen. Futilely, he tried screaming, but no noise came out. Stuck in his wordless scream, the pain grew unbearable and Harry passed out.

Then all he knew was blackness.

Still surrounded by the dark, Harry was confused. The pain in his head had subsided, his muscles no longer ached, and he felt very alert. Oddly, he also had the sensation that he was floating and he somehow knew he was somewhere he wasn't meant to be. If he tried to look around him, there was just murky dark. Harry couldn't even see his hands. In fact, as he tried to wiggle his fingers in front of his face, he didn't even think he could move at all.

He was floating, but not falling. He couldn't see his own body, not even the hands in front of his face. As he tried to call out "Hello!", he realised he possessed no voice. In desperation, Harry tried to scream at the top of his lungs, but there was no sound. Harry was terrified.

Then, Harry started to make out faint voices all around him, which started to get louder and louder. "I'm not supposed to be here! It's all a mistake! I was framed. The elves were attacking my feet and John Major issued a warrant for my death. I was to be hung in Albert Hall!"

What on Earth is that supposed to mean?

"Shh, it's all right, Terry. You're safe here. No one is trying to hurt you." This second voice was far more soothing than the first.

Yet another voice - more authoritative than the last - joined the first two. "It's time for Bed 8's meds, Peter. He's been a little jumpy today, but I'm hoping we won't have to sedate him. Try to get him to take them himself. If he doesn't, we'll put him under for awhile and hook up a drip."

"Got it, Dr. Mason."

"Oh, and Peter? You've been doing really great work lately. Thanks for coming in on a Saturday." *Dr. Mason? Peter?* Harry thought the voice sounded a bit like Pettigrew, but he had no idea what they were discussing. Frightened, he remembered the piercing sting he'd felt before falling asleep. *Or was I unconscious?* Maybe Voldemort had taken him hostage and he was in a Death Eater lair. How would they have got into Hogwarts, though? Had Pettigrew been in his rat form? He wildly hoped that they weren't going to do experiments on him.

Well, he thought pragmatically. If I was Death Eater, I might want to cut me open and see what makes me tick, too.

The one identified as Dr. Mason continued to issue orders. "Greg, Bed 12 needs to be made up. A new patient and his parents will be coming in to speak with me at three and this should be the correct age group."

The person Harry assumed was Greg replied, "I'll do that as soon as I deliver the linens down the hall."

"Very good, Greg. Thank you."

Harry heard a flurry of footsteps all around, as the voices grew louder. "Vincent, I'm going to go check on the Potter boy. Could you do a bedpan clean-up in Ward Four?"

A deep voice replied slowly, "Sure thing, boss."

"Please call me Dr. Mason, Vincent. I don't want you to think of me as your boss, especially with twelve doctors on this ward alone! It would be confusing to have that many people in charge." Dr. Mason chuckled.

"Right-o, boss."

Harry heard an audible sigh, which he assumed also belonged to Dr. Mason. Honestly, from what he could make out, the doctor didn't sound too evil.

Footsteps approached him, as the blackness Harry had experienced was replaced by a bright redness, which Harry recognised as the back of his eyelids. His eyes fluttered open and he squinted against the illumination.

From what he could make out, Harry was in an especially large, round room with fourteen or fifteen single beds with drab, olive-green walls. All the tables were grey with silver finishes, and a number of grey, high-backed chairs with green cushions were pulled up alongside several of the beds. Harry was strongly reminded of the Slytherin common room if the Dursleys had decorated it. He could see a few adults dressed in Muggle clothing bent over occupied beds. *Muggle clothing?*

He saw the doctor staring at him and frantically tried to make noise, but his mouth wouldn't work properly. Harry wondered what kind of hex had been used on him. Maybe it was a potion.

"Eyes open today! It's been awhile since we've seen that. Very good, Harry! Very good indeed." The doctor sounded excited.

Harry wondered just how many days he'd been asleep. The doctor had said Saturday, right? His Occlumency lesson had been on Monday. So quite awhile then.

Dr. Mason assured him, "I'm just going to check to make sure everything is still in working order."

As the doctor poked and prodded, Harry struggled to speak. He noticed the doctor was not dressed in mediwizard robes or, in fact, any robes at all, but in a plain white Muggle lab coat. When the doctor placed a stethoscope on Harry's chest, Harry noticed that he was dressed in a green and white hospital gown himself.

Where am I? he thought desperately.

"Where am I?" Harry blurted out. Harry was shocked and relieved that his voice was working properly again.

The doctor blinked at him rapidly, his jaw dropped open. "Harry? Did you just say something? Were you speaking to me?"

"Yes," he started slowly. The doctor seemed somewhat daft for a medical professional. "I asked, 'Where am I?'"

The doctor jumped up and started shouting, "Bed 4 is awake! Bed 4 is awake! Vincent, Greg! Get over here! I'll be right back. Harry, stay calm. Please stay awake! I'll be right back, I'll be right back!"

Two large orderlies, who reminded Harry very heavily of Draco Malfoy's cronies, rushed to either side of his bed. As Harry struggled to get up, even though his legs felt like jelly and his head still pounded, he felt the two hefty men attempt to push him back to the bed. Harry's adrenaline, however, was quite high and, moving with momentum he wouldn't have normally possessed, Harry jumped out of the bed. The orderlies grabbed him quickly and shoved him back down.

"GET OFF OF ME!"

One looked dumbly at the other, as the other man began yelling for a nurse. A squat woman waddled over as quickly as possible and Harry felt a slight prick in his forearm, which made Harry want to stop struggling and just sleep again. He drifted, drifted, and blissful darkness overtook him once more.

"When you say it's gonna happen now, when exactly do you mean? See, I've already waited too long and all my hope is gone."

- The Smiths

Chapter 2 - How Soon Is Now?

"Harry, wake up. Come on! Wake up, mate. We're going to miss breakfast."

Harry felt someone violently shaking his arm. His eyes snapped open and he reflexively grabbed the offending hand.

"Ow!"

"Oh. Uhm, sorry, Ron." Bewildered, Harry looked around, realising he was back in his bed in Gryffindor Tower. Ron hovered over him with a concerned look on his face. *Was that all just a dream?*

"No permanent harm done." Ron grinned and wiped imaginary dust off his robes. "You really must have been exhausted last night. It took me *forever* to wake you up. We really have to get moving, though. Breakfast is nearly done and we have Double Herbology this morning. Can't be around all those plants without something in our stomachs, right? Right."

"Yes, of course," Harry replied, finding it strange he needed to get his bearings in the place he'd spent most nights for the past five years. "You go on without me. I have to get ready and I think if I made you wait you might chew the bedposts from desperate hunger."

Ron laughed and agreed. "See you downstairs."

Harry sat on his bed and rubbed at his eyes. *What happened last night? I was in some sort of hospital...? I remember feeling a needle in my arm, but that's the last thing.* He finally decided it had to have been all in his head, so Harry shook off the last remnants of sleepiness and searched for his robes. He promised himself that he would tell Hermione and Ron what had happened at breakfast, just in case something more nefarious was at work here.

Stupid me. Can't even separate real life from my imagination.

As he stepped through the painting on his way to breakfast, The Fat Lady remarked that sleep did Harry a world of good. He smiled wanly at her, but he honestly didn't feel much better than he had last night. Anger had just been replaced with confusion. He supposed it wasn't doing him much good spending so much time alone with his thoughts.

Entering the Great Hall, he spotted Hermione waving him over. Neville Longbottom sat near she and Ron and Harry noted that Neville and Ron were speaking heatedly about something. As he approached, he caught the words "Seeker", "the cup" and "feint". Good. Quidditch talk was just the kind of normalcy he needed, but he wanted to speak to them about his dream first.

"Hi, Harry!" Hermione moved her books so Harry could take the seat next to her. "Are you all right? You don't look well." She moved to feel his forehead with her hand.

"I'm fine, Hermione. I just had a strange dream last night."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. I think I was in a Muggle hospital. At first, I only heard voices, but then a doctor started examining me and I tried speaking to him. The doctor was shocked that I was able to speak. Then, as I struggled to leave the bed, two orderlies pushed me back down and I think they sedated me. The next thing I remember is Ron waking me up for class."

Ron and Neville were now watching Harry and Hermione with interest.

"Dreams are often just that: dreams," stated Hermione sensibly. "Was this anything like the dreams you were having last year?"

"Not very much, no. Some of the people seemed familiar, though." Harry would have told them about thinking he heard Pettigrew, but Neville didn't know that whole story yet and Harry was in no mood to explain. "A couple of the orderlies reminded me of Crabbe and Goyle."

Ron snorted, "No wonder you think Voldemort's behind it. If I dreamed about those two gorillas, I'd think I'd been possessed, too."

Harry chuckled, but turned to Hermione. "What's the likelihood that this was just a dream?"

As Hermione replied, Harry panicked, as he realised he couldn't hear her. Sounds like running water filled his head and he could make out a male voice explaining, "Those are the friends."

"...probably just a dream. Let us know if you have any more, all right, Harry? Harry?"

"Oh. Yes. Right. I'll let you know." Any Quidditch-related distraction he may have desired was quickly forgotten. Visibly shaken from the unwelcome voice invasion, Harry got up without eating anything.

"I'm going to go...now. Yes. I'll see you in class, all right?"

As Harry moved through the Great Hall, he spotted Draco Malfoy staring at him from the Slytherin table. *Why must he always do that?* he thought spitefully.

Harry promised himself that during any free time he had, he would research magical ways to gain access to and manipulate thoughts. Not able to shake the feeling that something was very wrong indeed, he decided that if Voldemort was somehow behind this, he wanted to know exactly what was being done to him. *There are enough people messing about with my head without him interfering. More than he has already, at any rate.*

The rest of Harry's week was exceedingly normal, as long as he ignored the momentary bits of extreme strangeness.

On Wednesday, the Gryffindor Quidditch team challenged Ravenclaw to a practise match. Several residents of both houses watched from the stands below. Luna Lovegood gazed up at the action, while waving a large pennant decorated in alternating red, blue, gold, and bronze stripes. Harry was amused when he realised the pennant possessed both Gryffindor and Ravenclaw colours.

Periodically, the pennant flashed the words "HOUSE UNITY" in white letters.

To say the two teams were taking the match seriously would be a bit of an overstatement.

Gryffindor's Beaters, Andrew Kirke and Jack Sloper, made two of the Ravenclaw Chasers laugh as they tried to hit each other off their brooms, instead of aiming the Bludgers at the opposing team.

Ron, acting in his role of the new Captain, ineffectively tried to shout direction to his three Chasers before screaming at Kirke and Sloper to knock it off and try actually playing for once.

Harry and Cho Chang nodded amicably at one another before the match began. Harry was glad that Cho apparently possessed no resentment over the way things had turned out between them last year. Now both circled the pitch lazily, as each knew the other wasn't really looking very hard for the Snitch.

Cho yelled to Harry, "Glad to see you back. Nice to have some real competition in this game!"

Ginny Weasley, now a Chaser, neatly threw the Quaffle through one of the Ravenclaw hoops and called back, "I was competition enough for you, Chang! Harry may be better than me, but I gave you a run for your money!" She winked at both Seekers to indicate she was at least partially kidding.

Cho laughed and Harry joined her. Increasingly happy about being back on a broom after such a long absence, he gracefully flew high into the air, before pointing the nose into a spectacular dive.

The assembled members of both houses clapped at the impressive manoeuvre.

He was climbing upwards again when he heard the male voice from before. "Oh, Quidditch? Yes, strange word, but ingenious, really. It's like football on brooms. From what I gather, there are a lot more balls in play and catching one of them is worth one hundred and fifty points! His imagination is unparalleled."

Several voices yelled "Harry!" in unison and he recognised he was flying far too high over the Quidditch pitch. Dazed, he started his descent again, just as Cho spotted and gracefully scooped up the Snitch.

On Thursday, Harry received an owl from Hagrid with an invitation for tea. After his last class, Harry shuffled off to Hagrid's warm cabin. He absently scratched behind Fang's ears, as Hagrid poured them both drinks, then serving home-made chocolate biscuits, which Harry subtly ignored. "School's treatin' ya well, Harry?" Hagrid asked as he arranged his enormous body on an impossibly tiny chair.

"Oh yes, school's all right. We've a lot of work assigned, but that's to be expected. The professors are already getting us prepared for the N.E.W.T.s. But you'd know that already, wouldn't you?"

Hagrid offered him a wide grin. "Could do," he assented. Harry was in Hagrid's N.E.W.T.-level Care of Magical Creatures class. "Why din't ya bring Ron and Hermione along wit' ya?"

Just as Harry was about to answer, a voice at the back of his head asked "Hagrid? What a strange name!" This time the speaker was female.

The now-familiar male voice replied, "Yes. He's half-giant, half-wizard."

"He's certainly the creative type," a younger male voice commented.

"Actually, Harry here has invented an intricate universe completely based on the existence of magic. Quite unlike anything else I've ever seen."

The sound of pens to paper filled Harry's head.

"You all right there, Harry?"

"Yes, yes, Hagrid, I'm fine. Fine. I've actually...got to go now. Sorry. Thank you for the tea! I promise I'll come visit another time."

The groundskeeper peered at him with concern. "All right, Harry. You take care of yourself, all right?" Harry nodded and then nearly tripped over himself in his rush to escape Hagrid's cabin.

On Friday, Harry groaned at breakfast because he and Hermione had Double Potions. Ron grinned at Harry, as he did most Friday mornings, because he was no longer taking the blasted class. The lucky bastard had a free period. In fact, most Fridays, Ron was still in bed at this time.

Harry asked, "Ron, what are you doing at breakfast, anyway?" After a moment, he added, "And stop smirking at me."

"Wanted to get some flying time in. First Quidditch match in a week, Harry! Not much time. You could do with some extra practice, yourself."

Harry wondered when exactly his best friend had morphed completely into Oliver Wood. Jovially, he answered, "Yes, I'll skive off Potions to go flying right outside Snape's window. Sounds like a plan!" Ron laughed as Hermione, looking scandalised, retorted, "Harry Potter, you will be doing no such thing! Let's go! We have to get to class."

Grumbling slightly, but still smiling, Harry said, "I was just *kidding*...." Hermione dragged him away from the Great Hall and towards the dungeons.

On their way there, Harry and Hermione ran into Professor Dumbledore. Both were surprised to see him, as he wasn't usually seen patrolling the corridors. Worry lines creased his usually serene face and Harry was struck, not for the first time, that the headmaster looked very, very old.

The headmaster stopped the pair and said, "Harry, may I have a word with you? Miss Granger, please inform Professor Snape that Harry may be late because he is speaking with me." He turned to Harry, "If you have any problems once you arrive, let me know later. As it is, this news is rather urgent."

Hermione nodded and rushed off to Potions, leaving Harry and Dumbledore standing in the hallway. Once the hallways cleared of students, Dumbledore sighed heavily and said, "Harry, one of The Order's sources has informed me that a plot involving you has been hatched by Voldemort and his forces."

Harry half-smiled and shrugged. "What else is new?"

Dumbledore smiled back, though his eyes were devoid of their usual twinkle. "A very good point, Harry," he said. "I'm sorry I don't have any more information for you right now, but please be on alert for any strange occurrences you may notice."

Harry nodded his assent.

"Have you any indication of Voldemort's presence of late?" asked Professor Dumbledore.

Freezing, Harry remembered his hospital dreams and the odd voices periodically poking into his conversations. He shook his head, perhaps a little too enthusiastically. "No, sir. I'll let you know if I notice anything, though."

Dumbledore peered curiously at Harry over his glasses, but just nodded. "Good, Harry. Now, hurry along to class. Professor Snape is expecting you."

Harry mumbled a guilt-laden "Yes, sir," before dashing off to class.

When he arrived in Potions, all of Harry's classmates were already paired up and working on the day's assignment. Confused, Harry tried to figure out who was missing, as he knew there was an even number of students in his class.

"Good of you to finally deem us worthy of your presence, Potter," drawled Snape.

"Professor Dumbledore needed to speak with me."

"Yes, Granger passed on the message. Get to work."

"Shall I join one of the other groups?" Harry asked, moving to work with Hermione and Padma Patil.

Draco Malfoy appeared in the doorway, late for class and maddeningly nonchalant about that fact.

"No," Snape replied, cruel smile playing on his lips. "I don't believe that will be necessary. You and Mr. Malfoy will be partners."

Harry cursed silently as Malfoy joined him. At least his partner didn't look any happier about the arrangement.

Draco shot a cursory glance at the board and snapped at Harry, "Well, what are you waiting for? Get the powdered billywig." He pushed Harry towards the supply cabinet.

Harry moved, but not to collect ingredients. Instead, he swayed slightly, then passed out, landing hard on the stone floor.

Vision bleary, Harry squinted in order to recognise his surroundings. The last thing he remembered was moving to retrieve Potions ingredients. Even without his glasses, though, Harry now knew he was in an unfamiliar twin bed, lying on his side. Maybe I'm in the hospital wing, he hoped.

Just then, he recognised a thatch of platinum hair attached to the person with his back turned in the bed adjacent to his. "Malfoy?" he asked tentatively, more than a little confused. Harry wondered how they had both ended up in the hospital wing.

Knowing me, he mused, Malfoy and I got into a fistfight and I hit my head. Amnesia. Great. Just what I need.

The boy in the next bed stirred and wrenched his torso around, in order to face Harry. He solemnly regarded Harry and then intoned, "Never tickle a sleeping dragon." Malfoy then turned away from Harry again, flopping his head back down on the pillow.

Harry was awfully confused. *The Hogwarts school motto? What does that have to do with anything?*

"Yes, Malfoy, very good. *Draco dormiens nunquam titillandus*. I know it, too. Nice pun, by the way."

At this, Malfoy sat straight up and leaped out of bed, landing at Harry's side. "You know it!" He patted Harry affectionately on the cheek.

Harry stared at Malfoy, horrified. He grabbed for the glasses on the bedside table and shoved them onto his face, just to confirm he had the right person. They didn't feel like his glasses, but they were nearly the correct prescription. The glasses mystery was quickly solved as Harry confirmed he was

back in the strange hospital room from his dreams. He groaned. Harry never wanted to come back to this place. And now Draco Malfoy was here.

He slowly removed the patting hand from his face, placing it gently at Malfoy's side, not wanting to make any sudden movements that might disturb this Malfoy. He was obviously the touchy-feely type, which made Harry a bit queasy. "You *are* Draco Malfoy, right?" he asked other boy.

"Yes! Yes, I am! My name's Malfoy, Draco Malfoy." He held out his hand to shake Harry's and Harry thought this all seemed quite familiar to him.

This dream Draco seemed much friendlier – if slightly crazier - than the real Draco Malfoy, so Harry accepted the proffered hand. Dazed, Harry replied, "Pleased to meet you. I'm Harry Potter."

"I know that, Potter, Potter, Potter..." Draco trailed off and stared off into space for a moment before snapping back to the present. "Why are you talking to me, anyway? I mean, you never talk to me. And you never talk to *them*, either." Draco said "them" as though this should mean something to Harry. "You talk, though. You talk, talk, talk all day, but I never know what you're saying. I don't think you ever talk to anyone, though."

Harry was reasonably confused. He didn't understand how someone could talk all day, but not actually talk to anyone. *This is all just a dream, you know*, he reminded himself. He supposed it was possible to talk to no one at all as long as you were in a dream.

Pulling himself up, Harry hopped out of bed, joining Draco. "Do you know where my wand is? Do you have your wand? Maybe we can get out of this place...or maybe I'll wake up soon."

"Wand?" Draco said excitedly. "You have a wand? Can you do magic?"

Harry arched an eyebrow and patiently replied, "Yes, of course I have a wand. You do, too. We both can do magic. We both go to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Together. For nearly six years now."

"Is my wand very big?" Draco leered suggestively. Apparently, even in this world, Draco Malfoy possessed his trademark smirk. After a moment, Harry realised Draco was joking. Harry unexpectedly felt heat rise into his face.

"I've never actually gauged the, er, size of your wand." If possible, Harry blushed even more.

Draco examined him critically. He then said in a near whisper, "You're blushing. I like it. I think I'll make you blush more often."

"Yes, erm...uhm...hmm," Harry stammered. "Yes. All right then."

Harry ducked out of Draco's sight and searched around the bedside table's drawers and under his bed for his wand. Just in case this wasn't actually a dream, he figured he'd better be prepared, but he had no luck. Draco perched himself on the edge of Harry's bed and watched the proceedings with much fascination. As Harry prepared to crawl under his bed, Draco piped up, "Tell me about your magic. Is that what you talk to yourself all day about?"

Though his reply was muffled, Harry retorted, "I do *not* talk to myself all day."

"You do, too. All the doctors and nurses come in and watch you. They take notes, too. I mean, they take notes on all of us." Draco gestured around the room, indicating the other beds, several which were currently occupied by boys about Harry and Draco's age. "But they take a lot of notes on you. They call you 'fascinating' and 'ingenious' and 'intriguing' and a lot of other unnecessarily big words.

"Personally," Draco continued, "I don't find you all that fascinating. I mean, how interesting is a person who mutters under his breath all the time? I'm extremely interesting, but all they do is cluck over me and call me 'poor dear'. Maybe I should start muttering under my breath, too."

Harry emerged from under the bed and joined Draco. He repeated, "I don't talk to myself all day."

Draco waved this away with a flick of his hand. "Whatever you say, Harry." He smirked again. Harry was starting to think his dream Malfoy was catching up with his real life counterpart. This was the Draco Malfoy he knew and hated. Except, if he was being honest with himself, he didn't really hate Draco right now.

I've completely cracked.

Harry turned to Draco and asked, "Where are we, anyway?"

"Ah, the thousand quid question. You really don't know where we are?"

Harry shook his head.

"I suppose it makes sense, as you've been caught in your head all this time." Draco tapped on his own temple, indicating Harry's supposed insanity. "So, let me be the one welcome you to St. George's Hospital, Ward 4, which is also known as the Upper Boys' Ward, Psychiatric Wing, Kingston, Surrey, England, the United Kingdom, Earth. I believe you get the picture." Another smirk, though there was no cruelty behind it.

So he was in Surrey. Well, that was familiar, at least.

Draco continued, "We're the ones who are a danger to ourselves, but not to others." At this, Draco pointed out the scar on Harry's head and then to several on his right arm, in varying shades of pink and white.

"I didn't do this to myself," Harry said, indicating his head.

"No? Well, I'd say talking to yourself constantly and not being able to feed and dress yourself properly is enough to end up in here, too. You must be physically fine, though, or else you wouldn't be in here with us. You'd be with the sickies."

Indignant, Harry said, "I can feed and dress myself, Draco."

"Maybe now you can. For the past five or so years, though, I've watched people dress and undress you hundreds of times. Maybe even thousands."

Harry's blush burned hotter than before. "You have *not*."

"Have so," Draco countered. "Although, if you'd like, you can watch me dress and undress a hundred times so we'd be even."

"I'll, er, pass." Harry cleared his throat a couple times. "Thanks for the... offer."

Draco laughed. "I didn't think I'd make you blush again so soon. Sorry, Harry. I have somewhat of a reputation around here for being a charmer." Harry tried not to notice that Draco moved his leg so their knees were now touching.

Harry arched his eyebrow. *Draco Malfoy is flirting with me. I've honestly gone off the deep end.*

"Now let's hear about that magic. And the school. What was it? Hedwerts?" Draco seemed genuinely curious.

It was Harry's turn to laugh. "Hogwarts. It's where we you and I and a ton of other kids learn how to be witches and wizards. It's a boarding school. We learn charms, hexes, curses, potions and all about magical animals and plants. You're in Slytherin House; I'm in Gryffindor. We're bitter enemies. Ringing any bells yet?"

"You and I are enemies? Why's that? You seem like a nice chap and I know how great I am. I expect I'm a very powerful wizard." Draco sat up straight and puffed out his chest, while arranging his hospital gown in what Harry thought was a fairly respectable manner for a night-gown attached by a couple of thin strips of fabric.

"You're not a bad one. I'm better. You hate me because you're stuck up and I fight you whenever you insult my friends."

"Seems like a pretty thin reason for hating someone."

"Better than your reason, which amounts to, 'Because I want to.'"

"I do what I want," Draco huffed. "You said you're better than me. Maybe I hate you for that. What are you better at?"

"Well, not class, I suppose. I actually have no idea how you do in school, though you do have a tendency to rile up animals as much as you do people. I'd expect you perform better than your friends do, though. They're dunderheads named Crabbe and Goyle."

Draco squawked with laughter. One of the patients in a nearby bed stirred, but only mumbled to himself before falling back asleep.

"What's so funny?" inquired Harry.

Fanning his hand in front of his face, as though that would suppress his guffaws, Draco replied between snorts, "Harry, those are two of the orderlies here! What am I supposed to do with friends like that, unless I need my sheets changed?"

"Well, they're not orderlies where I am. They're just your idiot bodyguards. In fact, I'm pretty sure their position here is a step up, if anything."

Draco chuckled, probably thinking of orderlies protectively flanking him as he stalked through the hospital's corridors.

"I'm better at duelling and defending myself. I'm also better at Quidditch. That's a wizard sport,"

Harry added, after seeing Draco's befuddled expression.

Dubious, Draco asked, "So, you're one of those athletic bully types?"

"Not exactly." Harry continued, "Anyway, how is it that you know nothing about magic? I can't believe Lucius Malfoy wouldn't tell his son anything at all about magic, even in a dream of mine."

A shadow passed over Draco's eyes. They dulled to a slate grey, as he replied in a hollow voice, "My parents are dead."

"Oh, sorry," Harry softly replied, feeling very sorry indeed for Draco, even if this was all happening in Harry's head. He added, trying to help, "Mine are too."

Draco shot daggers at Harry and with a venom-filled voice spat out, "Liar!" He then stalked back to his bed and violently threw himself down, his back once again turned from Harry. Harry stared at the other boy's back for a few moments, wondering what that had meant. He sighed deeply and settled down in his bed once again. Without the distraction Draco provided, Harry felt without escape and totally hopeless.

Then, he heard footsteps approach. Harry was immediately at attention, prepared to bite and kick his way out of here. He wasn't about to be helpless just because he was without a wand.

An attractive, fairly young woman in a white medical coat entered, doing rounds. Harry sat up and stared straight at her. She was obviously startled. Harry tried to look innocent as possible and greeted her with a "Hullo!" Though he was still on guard, he thought it might be better to not look that way.

The woman made her way over to him. "Hullo, Harry. How are you feeling?" She said this as though she never expected him to answer.

"A little confused, but other than that, just fine. Who are you?" He smiled winningly at the woman. She smiled back, but couldn't hide the wariness in her eyes. "I'm Dr. Sinistra, Harry. I usually do the evening rounds. You're up awfully late, I hope you know. Not that I'm not happy to speak with you. Dr. Mason informed us that you'd spoken with him briefly a few days ago, but you haven't said anything to the staff since."

Dr. Sinistra? This woman looks nothing like Professor Sinistra. How...confusing.

The doctor took Harry's pulse and shined a light into his eyes. He squinted into the light.

"Well, Harry, you seem all right. I know this must all be very confusing for you, but you really should get some sleep. We can all have a long talk in the morning about what you're experiencing, all right?"

Harry quickly nodded, but said, "Doctor, can you please check on Draco? I...I think I said something that offended him, but I didn't mean it."

At this, Draco glanced over his shoulder at Harry. Harry smiled slightly at him and surprisingly, Draco offered him a small smile in return, before turning away again. Trying to fall asleep, though he was not particularly tired, he stared intently at the boy in the next bed.

"It's time the tale were told of how you took a child and you made him old."

- The Smiths

Chapter 3 - Reel Around the Fountain

The next morning, Harry woke up in a familiar round room, which was decidedly not Gryffindor Tower. As sunshine streamed through the windows, he was dismayed to learn he was still in St. George's, as he'd expected Ron to wake him in the same manner as the last time he had this dream. He sat up, rubbed his eyes and grabbed the unfamiliar glasses from the nightstand. The same large woman who'd sedated Harry the first day strolled through the double doors, pushing a trolley piled high with trays.

"Brekkie!" she cheerfully called. "Up and at 'em, lazybones!" Several of the other boys groaned and sat up, but others slept on or simply stared into space. The woman continued, "Time to start another bright and smiley day, sunshines!" Harry already didn't like her. Noting the huge, floppy pink bow situated at the back of her giant head, he was painfully reminded of Professor Umbridge, though this woman didn't so much resemble a toad as a water buffalo.

As she made her rounds, she noticed his watching her. The nametag on her chest read Nurse Bainbridge. "Hullo, Harry!" she called merrily. "What is it today? Quodmitch practice? Perhaps you're under attack by hooded men again!" She chuckled to herself.

Through gritted teeth, Harry tersely retorted, "It's called Quidditch and no. Today, it seems, I'm stuck *here*, listening to you."

Bainbridge seemed more than a little taken aback at his reply. Harry had to admit he was somewhat enjoying seeing the shock on people's faces when he answered questions to which they obviously didn't expect answers. He continued, "Didn't Dr. Sinistra leave a note for you? I woke up some time last night. She said we could deal with this today, which is good, because I don't want to be here anymore. I want to be in my proper world again."

"Yes," Nurse Bainbridge replied, smiling again, but this time with more than a little cruelty behind the expression. "But we didn't really expect to still have you with us this morning. It's such a rare occurrence, after all." Any cruelty Harry might have perceived was replaced with bright smiles once again. "But we're certainly happy to have you with us today! Here's your breakfast!" She swung a tray attached to the bed in front of him and placed a plate on top of it.

"Thank you," Harry replied, grimacing at the burnt toast and nearly raw eggs placed in front of him. He picked up his fork, shocked the faint scar reading "I must not tell lies" was now missing.

Bainbridge must have noticed his pause. "Will you be needing any help with that, Harry dear?" Bainbridge smiled beatifically.

"No, Nurse Bainbridge. I'm perfectly capable of feeding myself."

From the next bed, the supposedly asleep Draco Malfoy loudly snorted. Harry grinned, in spite of himself.

Later in the day, Dr. Mason came in to check on Harry. The doctor was still very excited at the prospect of speaking with him and Harry soon learned why. Perched on the edge of his bed, much as Draco had been the night before, Dr. Mason brushed a lock of grey-streaked brown hair from his face. He softly asked, "Harry, do you know who I am?"

"Well," Harry began, "I know your name is Dr. Mason. When I - uh...popped up? The other day? I heard some of the workers say your name. But I'd never heard of you before that."

The doctor admitted that he'd heard a rather lot about Harry. Dr. Mason said, "Harry, you've been in this institution for a little over five years now. Do you know what year it is?"

Promptly, Harry replied, "1996."

"That's quite correct. In 1990, you had a very serious accident the day of your tenth birthday party. Your head received blunt force trauma to your frontal lobe, by way of a doorknob. That's also the way you received this scar." The doctor lightly tapped on Harry's forehead with his index finger.

"But Voldemort..." Harry scrunched up his face, obviously upset and befuddled.

"We'll get there, Harry, but not just yet. Perhaps later today. May I continue?" Dr. Mason peered carefully at Harry, his light brown eyes filled with concern.

Harry nodded and the doctor continued, "That blow put you in a coma for nearly a year. The next year, you were physically responsive enough for all your vital signs to indicate that you'd wake up at any moment. And you did wake up, only not completely. Almost a year to the date after the accident first occurred, you started speaking.

"At first, we were thrilled, but later we realised that you weren't talking to anyone around us. Instead, you'd created a magical universe where you were a wizard and the Boy-Who-Lived. I must admit, your world has captivated me for the past five years. You live in a world filled with magic and friends and fantastical premises, but also one of corruption and evil. A lot like the real world, in fact. Only...enhanced."

Extremely upset, Harry managed to quietly murmur "No..." before looking down at his lap. This was all too much to take in. This was a dream. A *dream*. Harry pinched himself in order to wake up.

The doctor regarded him sadly, removing Harry's hand from the place where he'd pinched himself.

"This isn't a dream, Harry. *You* were in the dream. You're a Muggle here, Harry. We all are. Well, we're all just regular humans, I mean. There are no wizards. There is no magic here. At least," he conceded, "not the kind you're used to. We need you to stay here, Harry, especially if you want to get well."

Noticing the tears welling in Harry's eyes, the doctor reached over to the bedside table and handed him a tissue. Dr. Mason asked Harry, "I know this is a lot to take in. Would you like to visit the rest of the ward, Harry? It might give you time to let things settle."

Harry nodded and the doctor looked out the window, very interested in a tree, as Harry wiped his eyes. Feeling a discomforting breeze as he hopped out of bed, Harry asked Dr. Mason, "Would it be possible for me to get some real trousers?"

Dr. Mason laughed and said he thought that could be arranged.

Nurse Bainbridge delivered a dishwater grey sweatshirt and a pair of jeans, both at least two sizes too big for Harry. *Damn*, he thought to himself. *Even in this world I have to dress in clothing that probably belonged to Dudley*. Harry was happy he didn't have to deal with his cousin, at least. That would have been too much for him.

Because she was the Head Nurse, Nurse Bainbridge was not able to lead him around. Instead, she informed him that one of the orderlies would have the honour. Harry was not at all happy when that person turned out to be Peter Pettigrew. He greeted Harry nervously, probably not liking the murderous look in Harry's eye.

He works in a mental hospital. He should be used to murderous looks by now. Traitor.

Peter introduced himself with a stuttered "P-P-Peter. I've w-worked here for t-t-ten years."

Coldly, Harry replied, "I know who you are." Peter seemed confused and perhaps a little frightened.

Harry had to remind himself that like Draco, Peter might not be who he appeared to be. In fact, he had to remind himself several times. Then he reminded himself again, just for good measure.

However, just because he wasn't a deplorable turncoat didn't mean Harry had to like him.

It turned out that Peter's stuttering was from more than just extreme nervousness. He led Harry around, pointing out objects and rooms and people, each with a pronounced speech impediment. If it were anyone else, Harry wouldn't have thought anything of it, but with Pettigrew it was wearing

on his last nerve. He really hoped he didn't have to be shown any more c-c-c-coffee p-p-p-p-pots.

"And this is th-th-the c-c-common room." Peter pointed out a room filled with overstuffed armchairs. The room was quite stuffy and several patients sat by the windows. A few were gathered around an ancient television set. They were of all ages and he noticed girls present here, too. Peter led him to a window to observe the view. A girl a few years older than him stood nearby. She had short, bright pink hair sticking out at all angles.

"Tonks?" Harry tried, tentatively.

The girl took a drag off the cigarette she was smoking and blew a smoke ring into Harry's face.

"What the heck is a 'tonk', kid? New sexual position? Drug? Either way, I'm fairly sure I don't have what you want." For some reason, she seemed a bit wistful.

Harry coughed and shook his head, slightly scandalised. "No, sorry. You just look like someone I know."

"No problem, mate. If you happen to make up a definition for tonk, let me know. I'd love to hear what you come up with. And help you fulfil it, if at all possible." Not-Tonks winked and walked away. *Everyone here is a pervert.* He momentarily paused in his thoughts. *It's not all that bad.* Another pause. *Oh God, I've been infected, too!*

Breaking Harry's reverie, Peter asked, "M-m-m-mister Potter, would you like to meet any of the other patients?"

"All right, Mister...Pettigrew, was it?"

"I didn't actually s-s-say." Peter looked confused. "Did Dr. Mason tell you my name?"

Harry shrugged, feigning ignorance. "Must have."

Peter led Harry over to two girls Harry's age who, to his great relief, he did not recognise at all. He greeted them each. One looked up and fixed him with an intense stare. She solemnly intoned, "My name is Emmaline Aurora Serena LeFay. It is my destiny to keep you safe from harm. Do you like my violet eyes and lustrous platinum hair?"

Harry stared at the girl's brown hair and eyes and blinked. "Yes. Yes, I do," he replied, and very slowly backed away.

I've got to get out of this place.

"I have curves in all the right places!" the girl called as Harry hurried back to Peter's side.

While leading him to another location in the common room, Peter tried to soothe Harry. "It's all right," he said in a quiet voice. "There are patients here who scare me and I've been here for a long time!" Harry glared, befuddling Peter into silence.

The orderly silently led him over to the group of seven or eight patients gathered around the telly. To Harry, they almost looked like they were huddled around it for warmth. Suddenly struck with an image of the fireplace in Gryffindor Tower, he sighed heavily. Harry really didn't want to be here. He wasn't comfortable and things didn't seem right, even if it could be explained away by blunt-force trauma.

The huddled group had obviously appointed a leader. The leader had dirty blond hair and was sitting up very straight and tall and the other television-watching patients all looked to him for their next move. Unlike the other patients Harry had met, this man seemed somewhat together. The leader stood up; his perfect posture translated into his standing position as well. Keeping his back straight, the leader bowed formally and straightened himself up again. He smiled, revealing a nearly toothless grin. A slightly crazed look appeared in his eyes and he grabbed Harry around the shoulders. The man then bellowed, "I can do joined-up writing!"

At this, Harry felt a sharp pain in the region of his scar and he wrenched himself away from the man. He doubled over, suddenly dizzy, and his face scrunched up with pain. Letting out a small whimper,

he keeled over, as little explosions of stars appeared in front of his eyes. Before he passed out completely, he could hear Peter saying, "Sit down, G-G-Gilderoy!"

Then there was darkness.

In what was becoming increasingly familiar territory, Harry Potter was flat on his back in another bed. Being a sixteen-year-old boy, he fleetingly wished that this were under slightly different circumstances. In yet more familiar territory, Harry could not speak, nor could he move or open his eyes. He could, however, make out several voices surrounding him. These voices, at least, were *pleasantly* familiar to him.

He felt someone lean over him, a hand on his cheek, then heard Madam Pomfrey as she clucked, "Poor dear. Too much pressure on someone so young. No wonder he's having such odd dreams and passing out in class. It's too much for anyone."

Harry tried to stir to get her attention, but he was unsuccessful. He resigned himself to being an impartial observer in his own life. *Really, though, is this all that different from every other day?* he thought, bitter cynicism settling somewhere near the pit of his stomach.

Hermione then piped up, "Do you think we did the right thing, telling Dumbledore about that dream Harry had?"

Harry could almost hear Ron shrug. "I'm not sure, Hermione. It wasn't our dream to tell, but I do think doing whatever we had to do to help him can't be bad in the long run." An unidentifiable third person made a muffled noise of agreement.

The muffled noisemaker turned out to be Ginny Weasley. "When Tom Riddle was possessing me, I'd black out for hours at a time and show up somewhere, not remembering how I got there and no idea what I had done. I can't begin to describe how horrific and terrifying that is. If what's happening to Harry is anything like that, I say we have to do everything in our power to help."

Harry heard footsteps approach the bed. A soft hand moved hair off his forehead, brushing lightly over his scar. He couldn't move, but still shivered slightly. Hermione softly murmured, "Come back to us, Harry. We need you here."

Harry nearly screamed. *I'm trying! God, I'm trying.* He struggled to pry apart his jaw muscles, but was unsuccessful yet again.

Another voice softly intoned from his other side, "Harry will return whenever it is possible for him to do so." Luna. She somehow didn't seem quite as loony when trying to comfort Hermione.

When Harry recognised Neville's voice agreeing with Luna, he briefly wondered if perhaps he had been put out for viewing in place of the Head Table in the Great Hall. *Hogwarts own Sleeping Not-So-Beauty*, he thought, trying in vain to amuse himself. *It's like a joke, for God's sake. How many people does it take to watch over screwy Harry Potter?*

Neville said, "Hermione, fill us in. I'm a bit lost. I know you said Harry was having some weird dreams, but what's different about this one as opposed to the other strange dreams he's had in the past?"

"It seems," Hermione began, "that in the dream Harry had the sensation of being in a place that is...other. In short, he visited a place that doesn't actually exist, all without apparently ever having left his bed."

Ron agreed, "He was in our room all night. More likely than not, one of us would have noticed if he were gone. You didn't notice him missing at all last Monday, did you?"

There was a pause in the conversation, which Harry chalked up to Neville shaking his head.

"But Harry said he was in some kind of Muggle hospital room," Ron said. "He also thinks he blacked out."

Hermione interrupted, "Harry experienced a lot of pain in his scar. He never remembered falling asleep, only being woken up by Ron the next morning."

"So, Dumbledore thinks Voldemort's involved?" asked Ginny.

When is he ever not? thought Harry bitterly.

"When is he ever not?" said Ron bitterly.

Ha!

"It's a lot to go on based on one dream," said Hermione, ever sensible. "But we both still thought Professor Dumbledore should know."

Luna inquired, "If the dreams are being caused by Voldemort, how is he doing this?"

"You-Know-Who - oh, for Merlin's sake, Hermione, *fine* - V-V-Voldemort," stammered Ron, "and Harry are connected mentally somehow because of Harry's scar. Dumbledore thought because Harry's mind was weakened, he could have easier access to the formation of Harry's thoughts."

"In other words," continued Hermione, "when Harry's mind was vulnerable after his Occlumency lesson with Professor Snape, Voldemort had a clear conduit to Harry's subconscious. He'd actually be able to shape Harry's reality - the people, the places, and possibly even the situations, all based on Voldemort's whim. And once that vulnerability was discovered, it could be exploited again and again."

Neville said, suddenly understanding, "He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named could make Harry see whatever he wants, whenever he wants, for as long as he wants. He's trapped in his own mind."

Ginny let out a low whistle, while Luna murmured, "How awful..."

"Well," Hermione replied. "You're nearly right. Dumbledore doesn't believe that Voldemort can determine how long Harry is out, exactly, which is why Harry may be able to fight his way back."

Ron asked, "How long has he been out now, Hermione?"

Sighing, Hermione answered, "Nearly three days now." Harry felt her grasp his hand and for some reason, he felt comforted.

Three days? Harry thought. *But...if Voldemort can shape my reality, where am I now? Why can't I speak or move, but can hear what's going on all around me? Is this real or is what I saw before real? Or is neither real?*

Concentrating fully, he endeavoured to either force his eyes to open or wrench his jaws apart. He decided to focus on his jaw, ignoring the conversation that continued around him. After a few minutes, his jaw painfully started to move.

Through a nearly closed mouth, he managed to mutter, "I'm here." His jaw then pulled open properly, his eyelids following quickly thereafter. Harry was greeted at the sight of five gaping faces surrounding his bed in the Hogwarts hospital wing.

"Hi," he said softly.

After a moment, his friends managed to collect themselves and shut their mouths. Despite the fact he had just spent much of the last day in a mental hospital and then spent the last twenty minutes wrenching open his jaw, he laughed. "You should see your faces right now," he told them. "What a welcome."

Hermione, not caring that there were four other people present, launched herself onto the bed throwing her arms around Harry. Surprisingly, Ron followed. Then Ginny. Then Neville. Luna just vaguely patted his foot as she stared off into space. Ron, Ginny and Neville tactfully removed themselves, but Hermione stayed attached. She launched into a mile a minute speech. "Harry, we were so worried! You fainted in Potions and we tried to wake you up, but it wasn't working, so Snape levitated your body here and you've been asleep for *three whole days and never do that to us AGAIN!*"

"Yes, well, of course I did that on purpose in order to see if you really cared. Congratulations on passing my ingenious 'Faint in class and stay unconscious' friendship test." Harry smiled. He was

still puzzling over the hospital, but he was also thrilled to be back. "And uhm, Hermione, could you get off me now? I'd really like to see if my lungs are still working properly."

"Oh!" Hermione gasped. "I'm sorry!" She removed herself from the overly enthusiastic embrace.

"I do have a favour to ask, though," he said as he fumbled for his glasses. He slipped them on and blinked owlishly.

"Anything, Harry," replied Ron.

"Could someone go and get Dumbledore? I need to speak with him right away."

Ron ran off to find Professor Dumbledore, successfully returning soon after. Harry immediately turned apologetic. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you about my dreams when you stopped me before Potions. I wasn't quite sure what to tell you."

"That's quite all right, Harry. I have been known to make my own mistakes. *Dreams*, though? Miss Granger and Mr. Weasley only knew of one." Dumbledore curiously peered at Harry.

"Yes, dreams," Harry replied. "I was just trapped in another one and several times between my initial dream and this last one I kept hearing voices at the back of my head - voices that seemed to belong to the other place."

Dumbledore placed his index finger on his chin and looked thoughtful before asking, "Will you please describe your dream world?"

Harry then launched into a lengthy explanation about St. George's, describing the scenario. He told them about Dr. Sinistra sharing a name, but not a face, with her counterpart and about how Dr. Mason seemed familiar, but he wasn't quite sure why. Then, with some disgust, he illustrated Nurse Bainbridge's sickeningly sweet ways and her likeness to Umbridge. When he got to the part about Peter Pettigrew, Hermione let out a soft gasp and Ron looked like he was about to punch someone. Finally, Harry somewhat reluctantly told them some of his conversation with the other world's Draco Malfoy, revealing that they were roommates. He wondered why he wanted to keep that fact to himself.

Upon learning this news, Ron's face promptly turned the same shade of his hair. Harry wouldn't had been very surprised if smoke poured out of his ears, like someone who had just taken Pepper-Up potion. "You mean," Ron managed between clenched teeth, "you have to share a room with that git?"

"Calm down, Ron," Harry sighed. "I told you, he's not the same as the Malfoy here. Same name, same face, and honestly, same arrogance, but he's not a bastard." Harry winced when he remembered Dumbledore was still there. "Oh. Sorry, Professor."

"Quite all right, Harry." Something resembling a twinkle appeared in the headmaster's weary eyes.

"Do continue."

"The Malfoy from my dreams is a mental patient. He has a screw loose, he's an ace short of a full deck. You get the picture."

Ron looked thoughtful. "Doesn't sound too different from our Malfoy," he said finally.

Harry, exasperated, retorted, "Fine. This Malfoy is crazy but nice. Better?" He wondered why he vehemently wanted to defend Draco, especially if he was just a manipulation of Voldemort's. Which reminded him.... "Professor, if Voldemort was shaping my dreams, why would he pick people I hate? I mean, I have nothing against Professor Sinistra or Tonks, but I was nearly surrounded by people who either were the same or strongly reminded me of people I hated."

"I'm afraid I can't answer that, Harry. I suppose we'll just have to wait and see what Voldemort's next move is. Meanwhile, we'll try to devise a way to shut the conduit so he can no longer manipulate your dreams." Dumbledore paused, then said, "I have one more request, if you feel up to it."

Harry quickly nodded. "Go ahead. I want to stop this from happening, too."

"Could you please describe exactly what you feel right before you switch from Hogwarts to the hospital?" Dumbledore studied Harry intently.

Again, Harry nodded his assent. "It's not exactly the same every time. I always feel like I'm about to pass out right before it happens, sometimes there's pain in my scar, sometimes there's not. The first time I was in so much pain it was nearly worse than the effects of the Cruciatus Curse." It didn't escape Harry's notice when Neville shuddered at the mention. "Waking up in the hospital for the first time, I couldn't move or speak for several minutes. When I came back, it was from Ron shaking me awake, but the last thing I remember of the dream is being sedated by the nurse on duty. The next time I switched back to the hospital, I remember Malfoy pushing me right before I got really dizzy. Coming back, I had more pain in my scar, passed out, and when I woke up I couldn't move or speak. I finally managed to wrench my jaw open and then I could move easily again.

"I don't know, Professor," Harry continued. "It's similar, but never exactly the same. How is Voldemort doing this? Is it a hex? And can it be broken? I don't want to go back there."

Dumbledore removed his glasses and rubbed at his eyes. "As I said, Harry, I'm not sure exactly why this is occurring. I will do everything in my power to stop it, though. I promise you this." He placed his hand consolingly on Harry's shoulder. Suddenly, Harry was filled with inexplicable anger.

Confused, he looked at the headmaster, just as sudden pain fired up and he swore he could feel every nerve ending in his scar. Screaming, he plunged into darkness once again.

Sighing resignedly, Harry came to once again, but surprisingly this time he found himself in a cushy, green vinyl chair and able to move freely, instead of frozen in some hospital bed. As he shifted experimentally, he noticed Dr. Mason peer carefully at Harry from across his desk, much as Professor Dumbledore had just moments ago. Harry understood that he must be in Dr. Mason's office, but he wasn't entirely sure how he had arrived here. Cocking his head to one side, the doctor peered carefully at Harry and quietly asked, "Harry, are you with us again?"

Harry nodded, gulping nervously. "Yes, I'm here. I... I don't belong here. Why am I back? This is all just a *dream*." Frustrated, he wanted to kick a wall or cry. Possibly both.

Dr. Mason came around his desk to Harry's side and knelt down alongside the chair, to more easily facilitate eye-to-eye conversation. "Remember I told you earlier that we were going to meet again today?"

Again, Harry nodded. "Sure. What are we going to discuss?"

"First, I wanted you to acquaint yourself with your new surroundings and then I'll try to fill you in on a little more of the last few years," said Dr. Mason. "There are also some people here who'd love to speak with you. I think you'll be very interested in seeing them, too."

It was then that Harry realised that he and Dr. Mason weren't alone in the room. As he turned slowly, Harry swallowed hard and immediately went numb from shock. At that precise moment, he could have been knocked over by a feather. If Harry hadn't been sitting, he certainly would have collapsed because his bones were so like jelly.

Sitting behind Harry were Lily and James Potter, alive, nervously fidgeting and staring expectantly at their son.

"...Afternoons when we sat in your room, they meant more to me than any living thing on Earth. They had more worth than any living thing on Earth."

- The Smiths

Chapter 4 - These Things Take Time

"Oh, God."

Harry was in such a state of shock he nearly didn't realise those words had escaped from his own lips. His mum and dad looked just as he remembered from the Mirror of Erised, only older. Lily still possessed her dark red hair, but a few wisps of grey were evident and worry lines surrounded her eyes. Looking at James was like looking into a mirror and only James's age and a differently shaped eye and nose separated the two. His hair stuck up in all directions and he nervously tried flattening it with his hand as he gazed at his son.

His mother tentatively approached Harry and said in a formal tone, "I'm very pleased to see you again, Harry. Do you know who I am?" Harry could only manage a mute nod, his mouth hanging slightly open.

James came over to the two of them and placed a protective arm around his wife. Lily leaned heavily on him. Eyes filled with tears, he managed to whisper, "Welcome back, Harry. We've missed you very much." Harry tried blinking back tears himself and was unsuccessful. It was quite a lot for him to comprehend, but the elation he was feeling easily defeated any lingering confusion.

Harry understood that this was the first time he'd heard his parents speaking to him. To *him*. Not while screaming in terror, not while begging for mercy, and not from a greasy git's Pensieve. His parents were with him. He had *parents*. Harry no longer knew what he wanted, but he knew that right now, he didn't want to leave this place.

Dr. Mason smiled and told the reunited family that he was just going to get coffee and would be right back. None of them paid him any mind. Finally, after a moment, Lily completely engulfed Harry in a hug, despite the fact that he was already taller than she was. Her tears now flowed freely and she sobbed into Harry's shoulder.

James led his wife and son to the couch. His parents flanked Harry's sides, holding hands over his shoulders. James smiled, making his eyes crinkle. "Well," he said with a bit of laughter in his voice, "we have a bit of catching up to do, don't we?"

"Oh, yes," said Harry. "I... I really can't believe this is happening. This is too much. It's unbelievable." Harry heard Dumbledore's voice warning him that Voldemort would shape his reality to fit Harry's desires. Angrily, he squashed the old man's memory from his head and turned to Lily. "Tell me whatever you want to tell me."

Lily looked thoughtful and asked, "Do you remember us at all? We...well, we know that we're...not there...in your world. Dr. Mason has a theory about that, but..."

Harry shook his head and regretfully replied, "I don't remember you at all. Where I'm from, you died from a curse when I was only a year old. It's how I got this." He pointed to his forehead.

James face twisted with anger. "That was no curse. Well, not unless you consider Dudley Dursley to be a curse. And considering what that...brat..." James trailed off, glancing at his wife. He obviously wanted to use more colourful language, but held himself back. James continued, "Considering what that brat did to you, I certainly do. He nearly killed my son. That's not something you can forgive."

Shocked, Harry's eyebrows flew upwards. "Wait. *Dudley* did this? That's how I ended up here? Because of *Dudley*?"

Lily nodded sadly. "It was supposed to be such a perfect day. I'd invited your school friends over for a birthday party. Oh, you were so adorable, running around with them, smiling and laughing. But then, you were always popular."

"You get that from me," James interjected.

Rolling her eyes, Lily continued, "I invited Dudley out of obligation. Petunia" - At the name, James pulled another face ☹️ "begged me to invite him. I did it because he's part of our family."

Interrupting again, James declared, "That boy is no family of mine!"

Lily sighed and Harry knew this was an old argument between his parents. "When Dudley saw all the attention you were getting, he grew very angry. After opening your presents, Dudley called you over to him. The rest happened so fast, I couldn't stop it."

Soothingly, James told her, "Shh. It wasn't your fault."

"He'd always been bigger than you," she continued.

"Fatter," James said matter-of-factly. Harry smiled wanly.

"He attacked you and you tried to run away, but he threw his whole weight into you. You slammed into the door to your bedroom. The doorknob, to be exact. Dr. Mason told you that already, right?"

Harry nodded.

James, his face ashen, said, "I ran over to you as soon as I saw what was happening. When I got there, you were already unconscious and your head was covered in blood. You were brought here and you...you were in a coma." James and Lily looked at each other, overcome with emotion, as Harry angrily rubbed at his scar.

Dr. Mason returned then and handed cups of coffee to Harry's parents. When he returned to his desk, he faced the trio on the sofa and eyed them carefully. Dr. Mason said, "I expect your parents have told you the circumstances of your stay?"

Finally managing to find his voice, Harry said, "Yes. They told me it was all Dudley's fault. Nice to know he's an arsehole here, too." Lily gasped softly, but his father just chuckled.

"Language, Harry," said Dr. Mason, but he was smiling a bit, too. The doctor rubbed his tired eyes.

"Have they told you anything about what's happened since you've arrived here?" Harry shook his head.

Dr. Mason nodded and said, "As I told you before, you were in a coma for a year before waking up."

"We were all so excited when you woke up," Lily said. Harry was awash with guilt.

"You woke up just before your eleventh birthday, but you weren't the same. You didn't recognise your parents or any of your other friends or relatives. When you were asked a direct question, you would never answer, preferring to talk about Hogwarts," said Dr. Mason. "However, when we would ask about your parents, you would hide under your bed, curled into a little ball."

Curious, Harry asked, "Why would I do that?"

Dr. Mason sighed and said, "When you climbed under your bed, you would tell us your parents were dead. For a month or so, you said they'd died in a car crash. Later, you would tell us they died because of the *Abracadabra* curse."

"*Avada Kedavra*," Harry corrected automatically.

"Ah," replied Dr. Mason, quickly jotting down notes on a pad of paper. "That's not Latin, is it?" Harry shrugged. "Interesting. Most of your phrases are in Latin. Which brings us to an fascinating tangent, at least from an academic viewpoint. How could an eleven-year-old boy know so much Latin to come up with syntactically correct spells? On the other hand, how many eleven-year-olds could create and maintain an imaginary universe for five solid years?"

Harry shrugged again, but wondered what that meant. He certainly didn't have a vast Latin background that he knew about and filed away that little bit of information to think about later.

Dr. Mason continued the story. "As I said, you hid under your bed for a good deal of the time. You were often heard muttering about your cupboard, you told us spiders were all over you. When we

would try to pull you out, you'd scream because you thought you'd be in trouble. Harry, you would insist that Vernon Dursley put you in your 'cupboard' and that you would be punished again if you came out.

"The morning after your birthday, we found you sitting on top of your bed instead of under it, for once. We were happy, but you weren't. You kept telling us you just wanted your letters. In fact, you insisted you *had* to get your letters and tried sneaking out of the boys' ward several times. Hogwarts started coming up in the conversation not long after." The doctor spread open his hands to indicate everything he'd just said was up for discussion.

In nearly a whisper, Harry asked, "How much do you know about Hogwarts?"

"We know some of what you see, but not everything. Some names we have, but not all. You speak quietly much of the day, but it's as though you're participating in a conversation of which none of us are a part. Sometimes, though very rarely, you answer our questions, but if we try telling you anything of this world, you ignore us and go back to muttering. Also, on several occasions you've gone completely catatonic, not moving or speaking for days, or even weeks, at a time."

Patting Harry's hand, James said, "It's been a very difficult five years. We visit you all the time, but you always look through us." Lily gave her son an awkward, sideways hug. When Harry hugged her back, he felt a slight twinge in his head and briefly closed his eyes.

When he opened them, he was back in Hogwarts. Harry screamed out "NO!" and was greeted by Ron and Hermione's concerned faces. They rushed over to his bedside, where Harry yelled "NO!" over and over again.

Hermione, panicking, asked, "Harry, please please stop! Are you all right? You passed out again, but you came back very quickly this time!" Harry momentarily stopped shouting and looked to Ron for confirmation.

Glancing at the clock in the hospital wing, Ron nodded. He said, "Yeah, it's only been a little over an hour. Same place again?"

"Yeah," said Harry, suddenly filled with regret. He looked off to his side for a moment, deep in thought, and wondered if that would be the last chance he'd ever have to see his parents again. It wasn't fair. He'd already lost them once before. Then he lost Sirius, too. And now he'd probably lost them all forever.

That was my only chance to be with them. He hastily wiped at his eyes before his friends could see the tears threatening to fall again, but it was too late.

"What did you see this time?" Hermione inquired softly.

"I didn't have any pain coming back this time. None at all. In fact, I only closed my eyes for a second and when I opened them, I was back here."

"So, why were you shouting?" asked Ron.

Harry decided then that he might as well tell them, as it didn't help any holding it in. He said, "I saw...I saw my parents. They were at the hospital. They're alive there. I was in a coma because of Dudley. They're alive. Voldemort never killed them because Voldemort doesn't exist. They were with me. They spoke with me and it was the first time that I can remember it." Harry glanced at Ron and Hermione's dropped jaws for a moment before looking away. Hermione rubbed Harry's arm and he sighed dejectedly, closing his eyes in pain.

Surprised, Harry opened his eyes in Dr. Mason's office again, with his parents still at his side. It seemed like very little time had passed since he'd last been there, which was confirmed when James told him he'd gone glassy-eyed and unresponsive for a few minutes. Shocked, Harry watched his father suddenly grow angry, though the anger wasn't directed towards him.

"I want to know," James demanded, "what exactly you can do to stop this from happening to my son." James eyed Dr. Mason warily and Lily placed a warning hand on her husband's forearm. Dr. Mason said, "Harry alone can stop this from happening. I believe he is trying very hard to stay with us. He's never returned from his catatonic state so quickly before. It gives me hope and it should do the same for you."

The mood in the office shifted considerably. Before, Lily and James seemed filled with hope and nearly giddy with the promise of having their son back in their lives. Now, with reality settling in again, each clutched at Harry almost painfully. He believed they might actually be trying to physically restrain him from leaving their presence again and he wasn't all that startled that he might want that, too. He grabbed for his mother's hand and squeezed it tight.

Three loud knocks sounded at the office door, breaking the room's sober atmosphere. Confused, Harry looked to the three adults present, who now looked quite a bit happier than they had a moment ago. Dr. Mason stood up to answer the door, telling Harry he thought there might be someone he'd like to see on the other side of the door. Harry's curiosity took hold of him and he eyed the door with slight suspicion. The someone at the door knocked again, this time more impatiently.

Dr. Mason greeted the person on the other side of the door. When the man answered, Harry felt his stomach drop to his knees, but he leaped up to embrace him, anyway. "Sirius!" he shouted, his voice muffled by having his face buried in his godfather's shoulder.

Sirius Black was alive.

"Harry," breathed Sirius, his voice filled with emotion. "I take it you know who I am?" Harry managed a nod, though his face was still pressed to Sirius. He reluctantly pulled away.

"You're supposed to be dead!" Harry said half-accusingly. "You fell through the veil and you *left* me. It was all my fault." Harry's voice wavered dangerously and he wondered when exactly he'd become such a big crybaby. If this truly was all a big stunt by Voldemort, - if Sirius and his parents were impostors - he would make him pay. Over and over again, if at all possible. Harry felt a surge of anger, which was quickly quashed when he remembered the three people in the room.

Sirius broke out into his familiar grin and Harry observed that *this* was the way Sirius was supposed to look. Without the years in prison, Sirius was still handsome and his blue eyes had a child-like quality that Harry doubted his own eyes even held. "Group hug!" he shouted and the Potters laughed. They did, however, comply with his request and surrounded Harry. As his mum, his dad, and his godfather nearly squeezed the life out of him, Harry never felt more loved or accepted. He felt like he *belonged*.

Lily, James, and Sirius chatted with the familiarity that only long-time friends could achieve. Harry was briefly overcome with the feeling that they were monopolising his doctor's office, but the man was listening to the threesome with almost as much interest as Harry was. It occurred to Harry that if Dr. Mason had truly been Harry's doctor for the past six years and in such an intimate environment that he would indeed have an intense interest in Harry and his family's lives. He caught the doctor's eye and smiled, a gesture which was quickly returned.

Sirius nudged Harry and asked, "Harry, do you remember me telling you how these two met?" He jerked his thumb in the direction of Harry's parents.

Harry shook his head vigorously, hungry for any information he could obtain. Sadly, he replied, "I don't have any recollection of my time here... before. Tell me."

If Sirius was uncomfortable with the subject of Harry's other life or the memory loss that supposedly accompanied the accident in this one, he didn't show it. With a mischievous gleam in his eyes, he said conspiratorially to Harry, "Well, she was mine first. Mr. Potter over there stole her right out from under my nose."

Harry gaped. "You mean you dated mum first?"

With mock solemnity, Sirius nodded. "Oh yes," he said, teasingly. "Ms. Lily Evans sweetly agreed to accompany me on a date after we met in a pub, only to lock eyes with my best mate while we were all out to dinner. It was the first and last time I'd ever seen your father speechless, you know." This statement earned him a cuff about the ear, courtesy of James.

James retorted, "Well, if I was a girl out with you, I'd have fallen for the first good looking bloke I'd seen, too!"

"Now, now, boys. You're both pretty," said Lily, jokingly. "I just have a thing about men in glasses. You never stood a chance, Sirius."

"It all turned out okay," Sirius assured Harry. "I met a drop-dead gorgeous blonde that night and your mum married your dad." Sirius and Harry looked at the old marrieds, now snuggling on the sofa.

Sirius pulled up a chair, facing Lily and James, and motioned for Harry to do the same. "Well. Maybe Lily got the short end of the stick." Harry laughed and Sirius earned himself another playful punch, this time from Lily herself.

"You don't know how happy I am to see you," said Harry to Sirius a little while later. "You're the closest thing to a father I've ever known." He glanced at his parents to gauge their reaction, but they seemed relatively calm. "Ever since you...died, I've been so lost. I needed you there, but you weren't."

"I'm here now, Harry," said his godfather, enveloping him in another hug.

"We are, too," said his father as he rubbed Lily's back. "You're safe here."

Dr. Mason said, "Yes, Harry. You're safe here. Promise me you'll work as hard as you can to stay with us."

After a moment's hesitation, Harry agreed, even though he had no idea how to achieve this, because he desperately wanted to keep these warm feelings he was experiencing. To his family, he said, "Tell me another story."

"Ah," said Sirius fondly, patting Harry's hand. "I remember the first time I laid eyes on you. You were only six hours old. Your father handed me to you, though your mother wanted nothing more than for us all to get out so she could get some sleep. You were so tiny, I could have held you in one hand." James agreed. "I think I tried that, too. I was lucky Lily was so tired or I probably would have been beaten senseless." Lily swatted at James's arm.

Sirius glared at his best friend and said, "Will you please hush up for once? I'm trying to tell a story!" James threw up his hands in defeat. "Fine, fine. I know when I'm beaten and outnumbered," he added, glancing warily from Lily to Sirius.

"Where was I? Oh yes - I wanted to hold you in one hand, but didn't because I'm smarter than your father and I know Lily would have killed me." He smiled at Harry and said, "You had ten perfect little fingers and ten perfect little toes, the most gorgeous pair of green eyes courtesy of your mum and the worst case of bed head I'd ever seen. It left no doubt who your father was, at any rate. Ow!"

Sirius broke off when James issued a quick kick to his shin.

"Anyway, it was love at first sight, which was saying a lot for me because I'd never known what that felt like. When I looked at your parents, I knew it was the same for them. We were all absolutely besotted by a twenty inch creature wailing his brains out and who'd just shit his nappy." Harry blushed deeply and Sirius laughed at his reaction.

Fondly, Lily continued, "When we told Sirius that he was going to be your godfather, he had such a look of shock and pleasure on his face. In fact, he was so shocked I made your father take you from him because I was afraid he was going to drop you."

"He's right, you know," said James. "We were all absolutely in love. As were your grandparents and our other friends and just about everyone else that came in contact with you. We still are."

Harry looked at them with surprise. "I have grandparents?"

Lily chuckled. "Oh yes," she replied. "Four of them, all of whom have been waiting a very long time for you to come back to them. We've all missed you very much."

Dr. Mason cleared his throat, obviously regretting having to interrupt the reunion. "I'm sorry, folks," he said. "We need to be getting Harry back. He's still having episodes, so he'll have to stay here for observation and we want to run some tests." At seeing Harry's crestfallen face, he assured him, "You'll see your parents tomorrow, I promise. You should eat and get some sleep, though, and I have another patient meeting me in a few minutes."

Harry embraced his parents and Sirius once again. His mum placed a kiss on his forehead and promised, "We'll see you tomorrow. We'll be back. All of us." It was almost painful to watch them all leave. Defeated, he let an orderly he couldn't identify lead him back to the Upper Boys' Ward.

On his way back, he saw Draco Malfoy being led in the direction from which he'd just come. Draco didn't look well. Dark circles could be seen standing in relief from his pale face and he looked steadfastly at his shoes, hands clasped in front of his body. Something about his whole body spelled defeat and Harry was reminded of Sirius's time in 12 Grimmauld Place. As the two boys passed, Draco looked up and met Harry's gaze. The pair stared at each other for a moment and Harry was overwhelmed with the urge to reach out to Draco. The two, almost imperceptibly, brushed hands and continued in opposite directions down the corridor.

Before Draco was out of sight, Harry felt a slight burning in his scar and, recognising the symptoms, whispered a desperate "No!" to himself. He briefly closed his eyes once again.

And opened them in the darkened Hogwarts hospital wing. It took him a minute to acclimate to his surroundings, which made sense, as he'd just been upright, walking, and in bright light. Now, he was in near darkness, prone, and well, obviously not doing a whole hell of a lot of walking. His stomach rumbled and he wondered if his hunger was cumulative.

Probably not, he reasoned. I honestly can't remember the last time I ate, but I'm obviously being fed both here and there. Still. It would be nice to actually be present for a meal.

Considering it was the dead of night, there wasn't much hope of calling Madam Pomfrey for some food and he really didn't want to deal with her if he was caught sneaking down to the kitchens, so he settled for hunting for food in the hospital wing. He fumbled around his bedside table for his wand and muttered a quick "Lumos" under his breath.

Jackpot! Next to his bed, someone had left several Chocolate Frogs. Probably Ron or Hermione, thinking that he might wake in the night. He unwrapped a Frog. Just when he was about to shove it in his mouth, he noticed movement in the room. He dropped the chocolate and groped for his illuminated wand, which he'd placed at his side.

"Potter," spat a voice from the darkness. Malfoy emerged from the shadows, an almost psychotic look twisting his pale features. Despite the fact that by the look on Malfoy's face, Harry was probably in mortal danger, he paused to observe that while Draco wasn't exactly beautiful, he certainly had some interesting features.

What the hell is wrong with me? Harry shook off that traitorous thought and prepared for Malfoy to make the first move.

"Potter," said Malfoy again, approaching the bed. "Look at Dumbledore's Golden Boy now. Laid up in a bed, having fainting spells." He placed the back of his hand to his forehead and sighed dramatically. In a high voice, he mocked, "'Oh, someone save me!'" Malfoy snickered.

Harry sighed and calmly asked, "What do you want, Malfoy?"

"I just wanted to see if the rumours were true. Harry Potter's been done in by his own head. Well," he said, sneering, "I always knew you were cracked. It's about time everyone else did, too." He now stood so close that Harry's knees were brushing against Malfoy's thighs. "The Dark Lord was eventually going to break you. Father always said so. And he'll escape from Azkaban any day now."

At first glance, Malfoy seemed to look triumphant, but Harry thought his words lacked conviction. In fact, there was a look of defeat that reminded Harry heavily of the Draco he'd just left at St. George's.

Still scared of Voldemort, are you? I wonder if you're better off at St. George's too, even with your father dead.

Draco looked at him sharply. "What did you just say?"

"Oh shit." Harry had spoken out loud. "Listen, Malfoy, you weren't meant to hear that. Sorry. I was just babbling." Before he realised what he was doing, he reached out to grab Draco's hand. Draco's eyes widened, but the two stayed in that position for a beat, with Harry's hand atop Draco's. Then Malfoy turned tail and ran away from Harry at top speed.

Harry stared at Draco's retreating form for a moment, then retrieved his fallen Chocolate Frog, using the guiding light from his wand. "Well," he said out loud to no one, while chewing thoughtfully, "that was interesting. *Nox.*"

"All I do know is that we're here and it's now, so stretch out and wait...There is no debate, no debate, no debate."

- The Smiths

Chapter 5 - Stretch Out and Wait

An unbearable amount of light was pouring through the window, so Harry had no choice but to wake. He cautiously opened one eye, half because of the sun currently blinding him and half because he wasn't quite sure where he would be this morning. Hogwarts, then. All right. A robin perched on the windowsill trilled happily. Harry felt like throwing his pillow at it on the off chance that might shut it up.

Harry was pleased to see that he was alone for once. It was getting a little unnerving to wake up to anywhere between one and two-hundred sets of eyes boring into him. Flipping onto his stomach, he punched the pillow into a satisfactory shape before flopping down again. He mulled over the events of the last day and sighed.

So. Here I have magic and I have Hermione and Ron and the rest of the Weasleys and Hagrid and Lupin. I actually remember my life in this world. On the down side, I have a megalomaniac who's been trying to kill me since birth and will continue to do so until a prophesy is fulfilled one way or another. I also live with the Dursleys.

Harry made a face and punched at his pillow again, pretending it was Dudley. Or Voldemort. Or Snape. Any of them would do, really.

In the other place, my parents and godfather are still alive. Draco Malfoy is not only tolerable, but somewhat likeable. My doctor seems like a pretty nice bloke. On the other hand, I'm in a mental institution, haven't been able to feed or dress myself since I was ten because of Dudley, and have no memory of any of it.

Oh, and it may all be some sort of grand hallucination by Voldemort in order to lock me away in my mind for the rest of my natural life, so he can either become supreme ruler of Wizarding Britain or perhaps, just kill me in my sleep. Can't forget that.

Sighing, Harry was tempted to throw a wobbler, but that would accomplish nothing. He wished there was some way to combine the good elements of both lives, while pushing out the bad. Really, he just wanted his parents and godfather back with him here and Voldemort dead, but that was impossible.

Startled by a sudden noise, Harry looked up only to find Madam Pomfrey coming in to check on her only patient. He sat up quickly, eager for the company, though moments ago he'd been relishing his solitude. Thinking about one's dead-but-possibly-alive parents along with one's own mortality tended to make a person crave another's presence.

The nurse was pleased and relieved to see Harry up and about. She thoroughly examined his head for bumps, then started poking at his arms, legs, stomach and chest and asked, "How are we feeling today, Mr. Potter?"

Cheerfully, Harry replied, "We're feeling rather like a pincushion today, Madam Pomfrey. Thanks for asking."

"Cheeky boy."

Harry grinned. "I'm just being charming. Actually, to be honest, I'm rather hungry. Is there any way I can go to the Great Hall and join the others for breakfast?"

Madam Pomfrey looked scandalised. "Out of the question!" she cried. "I'm keeping you here for observation today and possibly tonight. Let's see if you stay conscious for a whole day before you go running off and getting yourself into trouble again." Seeing the scowl on Harry's face, she added, "Miss Granger should be arriving with your breakfast shortly."

At that, Harry brightened considerably. Madam Pomfrey smiled down on him. It seemed that Dumbledore wasn't the only staff member whose eyes could twinkle.

Hermione popped in to the hospital wing just then, balancing a plate of eggs and toast in one hand, a glass of pumpkin juice in the other. On her back, she carried the biggest sack of books that Harry had ever seen. He was reminded of a shorter, younger and more feminine Santa Claus. *Well, without the beard*, he reasoned. Quickly, Harry decided not to share this thought with Hermione. Grunting under the strain of the books, plus the food in her hands, Hermione said, "I could use a little assistance here." Harry leaped up to take his breakfast from her and placed it on the table next to his bed. She eyed him critically. "Are you sure you should be out of bed?"

"I'm *fine*," Harry said, rolling his eyes. "A little reality-shaping from my worst enemy doesn't mean I can't walk about." At least, it didn't right now. Harry shook off the memory of being petrified, while the voices of his friends surrounded him.

Madam Pomfrey took her leave, but warned Hermione not to stay around chatting all day because her patient needed his rest.

Harry rubbed his eyes. "What time is it? Actually, what day is it? Time seems to be moving a little strangely for me."

Concerned, Hermione pulled a chair up along the side of Harry's bed. "It's Wednesday." Hermione ticked days off with her fingers. "You first passed out on Friday in Snape's class, then were asleep for Friday, Saturday and Sunday. You woke up for a little while on Monday and then passed out after speaking with Professor Dumbledore. Then you woke up again, about an hour later and spoke with me and Ron. Do you remember that?"

Harry nodded. He'd been pulled away very quickly that time.

"Then, Madam Pomfrey noticed you stirring sometime last night. Well, not stirring exactly. She heard some loud noise, so she ran in here and you were calmly eating chocolate on your bed. She told Professor Dumbledore that this morning, while he was talking to Ron and me. I take it you've been conscious since then?"

"Well, I've actually been conscious a lot of the time - either here or in the other place," Harry corrected. "But yes, I've been awake and at Hogwarts since last night."

Hermione confusedly said, "What were you doing that made all that noise? Did you fall out of your bed?" She looked even more concerned.

"NoDracoMalfoymadeallthatnoise. Anyway, I'm starving!" he said quickly. Harry grabbed for his eggs. "Where's Ron?" he managed to ask around a mouthful.

"He has Care of Magical Creatures this morning. You should know that," she admonished. "It's one of your classes, after all. I have Arithmancy later on and Ron and Hagrid are going to try and visit you then."

Satisfied, Harry smiled a bit.

"But don't change the subject. Why, exactly, was Draco Malfoy in here? Was it about his father?"

"Sort of. Maybe. I don't know. He made a lot of noise when he left, though." Harry didn't want to talk about this with Hermione, though he wasn't sure why. Perhaps because Draco reminded Harry of St. George's and thinking of St. George's made Harry think of his parents and Sirius. It was odd to think of Draco reminding Harry of some of the people he loved, but it did snap him out of the forced cheerfulness of a few moments earlier. Depression settled onto his chest like a heavy weight and he was forced to lie back. His appetite had soured, too.

God, even I'm having problems keeping up with my mood swings.

Hermione must have detected the change in Harry's demeanour because she changed the subject. Grabbing her bag with both hands, she managed to swing it onto the bed and began unloading books. "I brought your books with me," she said.

"That much is obvious," said Harry, warily eyeing the rapidly growing pile at the foot of the bed.

"Ron collected everything for the classes I don't have with you. You've missed a number of lessons." Scoffing, Harry said, "What's a little ruminating on my formerly dead parents when I can work on six feet of parchment for Potions, right?" One of Hermione's eyebrows nearly flew off her head in reaction to Harry's statement. Harry morosely lied back on his pillows and turned away from Hermione, staring off into space.

"I didn't want to bring that up without you doing so first. It...Ron and I were really shocked when you told us that. I didn't know if you were going to come back at all. If I were in your shoes and given that chance, I don't know that I would. Even if it did mean leaving all my magic behind."

Quietly, Harry confessed, "Sirius was there, too."

This time, Hermione's eyebrows nearly went into orbit. Just as quietly, she said, "Really? He was alive? And with your parents?" She flopped into the chair next to Harry's bed and started to stare off into space herself. Harry knew this was a lot to comprehend. After all, he was still dealing with the gravity of the situation himself and he'd at least had a few hours to digest the information.

The two sat in a not-quite-comfortable, but not-quite-uncomfortable silence for a few minutes. Harry, finally finding the silence unbearable, cleared his throat, causing Hermione to study his face carefully.

"Do you think that Voldemort is attempting to lock you within your own mind?" Hermione's face was one of mixed concern and curiosity.

Harry thought for a moment. "I suppose it's possible. I mean, that's what you and Dumbledore and whoever else came up with, right?" He shrugged.

She returned his shrug. "I think Voldemort may have just given up. After all, you're sixteen years old and he's supposed to be the most powerful Dark Lord of the age. Yet, you've somehow managed to meet him and defeat him four times."

"Five, if you count the Chamber of Secrets."

Hermione nodded. "Exactly. Five times and your powers are still growing. Every time he tries to defeat you, he's foiled. It must frustrate someone that powerful - someone that willing to sacrifice lives all for the pursuit of his own life - to lose time after time to you." She paused, collecting her thoughts. "Despite being just as dangerous and possibly more unstable than he was the first time he gained power, many witches and wizards are no longer afraid of him. Because you're there to be their saviour. It's not fair for you, but it turns Voldemort into a caricature of himself. How would you feel if you were he?"

Grimacing, Harry told Hermione that he didn't want to think about what it would be like to be Voldemort. "But," he said thoughtfully, "I see what you mean about him being a shell of himself. No matter how reluctant I may be, I'm expected to play the hero. And he's my enemy. The villain. And heroes always triumph over villains."

"In stories, at least." She sighed. "Anyway, back to my point. I think he may have just...given up. This is his last resort. He's tried to kill you half a dozen ways to Sunday and this is probably the most damage you've ever sustained." Hermione eyed Harry critically, again. "He's trying to trap you within your own mind because he can't beat you any other way."

"Hermione, that's silly. I'm sure he could come up with about a million ways, if he tried."

Leaping out of her chair, Hermione began pacing about the room. Harry knew that the wheels were turning in that giant brain of hers, which both revved him up and scared him. When her eyes got that crazy gleam, there was no stopping her and he'd long ago given up trying. Harry watched her pace for awhile, worrying that she might create a groove in Madam Pomfrey's floor. He expected the nurse probably wouldn't be too thrilled by that development.

"Uh, Hermione," he finally said tentatively. "Could you stop moving all around? I think you're giving me a headache." His friend abruptly came at a dead stop at the foot of Harry's bed and steeled a fiery gaze upon him. After a second, he squirmed, uncomfortable with that much direct attention.

Hermione cried out, as though there hadn't been any pause in the conversation, "Of course he could come up with a million different ways! That'd be easy! But Voldemort doesn't like things to be easy when it comes to you."

Quickly, Harry nodded his assent. He wasn't quite sure what she was hinting at, but in situations such as these, it was best to just let Hermione's brilliance take shape.

"Voldemort sees you as a personal affront. He wants - no, needs - to take care of you personally. Face-to-face has failed him and your wands are equals. No, Voldemort's taken his last escape route." She ran over to the side of his bed and ran a finger over Harry's blemished forehead. It was the first time she'd touched the scar on purpose and a shiver ran down Harry's spine. Hermione must have noticed because she asked, "Are you all right?"

"Yeah," said Harry. "Just felt a bit odd for a moment."

Her voice lost that hysterical quality and she grew deathly quiet. "That's his escape, Harry. You're connected mentally and he's abusing that connection. Think about the Department of Mysteries." Harry didn't want to. "He led you there by leading your thoughts. That connection is worse than an Unforgivable curse in a lot of ways. It's all so...personal. He's using it for his own purposes - making you see your parents, your godfather. Pretending all the time you've lived with the Dursleys never happened. It's all in here." She softly rubbed her thumb over the scar again. Harry decided he preferred the hysterical tone she'd previously been using.

The two sat in silence for a moment, Hermione obviously expecting some sort of reply from Harry and Harry pointedly ignoring that unsaid expectation. In fact, Harry was having some quality brooding time with himself. He stared off into space.

Hermione tried getting his attention, "Harry, I - " But Harry cut her off by merely holding up his hand. Some more time elapsed and Hermione was obviously growing impatient. She stared at the hospital wing's clock and tapped her foot. "If you want me to go, just say so," she said crossly. Harry, in a tone even more deadly quiet than the one Hermione used earlier, replied, "No. That just doesn't feel right to me. What you said, about Voldemort, I mean." He shot her a look that caused her to jump noticeably. "I'm not angry with you, Hermione. It's just not *right*."

With a quizzical expression, Hermione asked, "What do you mean?"

"If he just needed to trap me within my own mind, why would he give me my parents back? Why Sirius? Why would he give them back story? Why would I now know how my mum and dad met or what it was like for them to first hold me? Why would they tell me that Dudley rammed me into a door and gave me this scar?"

Hermione gaped, for once at a loss for words.

He continued, his voice low and dangerous, "Why, for that matter, would I be in a coma at all? Why would I wake up in a *mental institution*? It doesn't make SENSE! He could just lock me up in my own head, exploring never ending corridors or something!"

"Maybe he needs you to want to stay there for it to work," suggested Hermione in a voice barely above a whisper. She was visibly upset, nearly cringing as she waited for Harry's reply.

Harry finally relented. "Maybe. But you don't know what it feels like to wake up one day and find out your life might not be real." He flopped down onto his pillows once more and tried to choke back his tears. Hermione surprised him when a minute later she joined him on the bed and circled her arms around his middle in an awkward, sideways hug. Unable to hold it together any longer, he buried his face into her shoulder and cried. Huge, body-racking sobs took hold of him. Through it all, Hermione said nothing.

Eventually exhausted, Harry fell asleep again, Hermione still holding him.

When he woke in the Hogwarts hospital wing a short time later, Hermione was knitting some...socks? Hat? Scarf? Hard to tell. Whatever it was, it was in Gryffindor colours.

"Hello, sleepyhead," she greeted him. "You made me miss class you know."

He groaned and sat up. "Did Ron stop by?"

She nodded. "He did. He'll be back later. And he said to give you this." She threw something orange at him. It was Ron's official Chudley Cannons sweatshirt.

"Why, exactly, did he give me this?" Harry was puzzled.

"Because," said Hermione, an amused smile playing on her lips, "when those with an emotional maturity equal to the average five-year-old need to express themselves, they do it the best way they know how." She pointed at the shirt. "It's his favourite."

Half-smiling, Harry could only manage an "Oh." It wasn't often that Ron expressed appreciation for their friendship. On the other hand, neither did Harry. It was just unspoken.

"And what is it that you're doing?"

"I'm knitting you socks." She shot him a lopsided smile, "Sometimes I forget that my emotional spectrum isn't that much bigger than yours and Ron's."

Again, Harry could only manage a soft "Oh." It was no wonder they were all friends, considering their stunted emotional growth. Common interests lead to bonding, after all.

"I've been thinking about what you said."

Harry stared at her. Confused, he asked, "Said about what?"

"About waking up and finding out your life might not be real."

A third "Oh" crossed Harry's lips. Considering this was the third time he'd woken up at Hogwarts today, he was starting to think everything might just be one huge dream. Probably, he was still ten years old and stuck in a cupboard. He pinched himself, just to test the theory. It stung.

"So, this is what I've come up with. I know that I feel real here. I'm willing to bet that Professor Lupin or the Weasleys or Hagrid or Professors McGonagall and Dumbledore all feel like they exist, too."

Harry laughed, despite himself. "I feel real, too," he said. "But I feel real when I'm there, too."

Hermione regarded him solemnly. "I don't doubt that for a minute. If this is all a dream, I don't know it. And if that other place is a dream, they probably don't know it. Reality is tricky that way."

Harry muttered under his breath, "Tell me about it."

"What I do know is this: everyone here feels real and we need you here to protect us, just like you need us to protect you. When you've passed out, I'm still here, staring at your lifeless form and it makes me ill to look at you. It reminds me too much about what could happen to you or Ron or anyone else that I love."

"Without you here with us, we may be killed. You'll probably be killed, too. Of course, there's always a chance that we'll die with you here, too, but I feel better about our odds with you around. Besides," she concluded, "we miss you every time you're gone. We need you here because you're you."

Harry nodded, intently studying his own lap.

Choking back her tears, Hermione continued. "You're not just the Boy-Who-Lived to us. You're Harry and my best friend and I'm clueless if I try to figure out how to carry on without you. It may sound selfish, but it's the truth. We need you here with us."

What else could be said to that? Harry's look softened and the two stared at one another for a beat. After a moment, though, things became uncomfortable and Harry found his lap fascinating once again.

Bending over, Hermione rustled through her bag and grabbed out a newspaper. Glad to have a distraction, Harry looked eagerly at it. "What is it, Hermione? Did the news about me leak out to the press? Am I the Invalid-Who-Lived or something now?"

Shaking her head, Hermione chuckled. "No. But there was some news on the Voldemort front today. Not exactly unexpected, but the end results sort of were." She held up the paper so Harry could better read the headline.

"BREAKOUT AT AZKABAN; MALFOY KILLED"

Harry's mouth dropped slightly. "Malfoy's father was killed?" He remembered what he said to Draco last night and winced slightly. Like Malfoy didn't have enough reasons to hate him, now he'd blame Harry for his father's death, too. Whether or not he'd been referring to the other Draco's father, he knew he was at least inadvertently responsible for his death, anyway. It was Harry's fault that Lucius was in Azkaban in the first place.

He shook that thought off, angrily. *Remember. Just because you were the reason he was arrested, doesn't mean that it's your fault he got himself in that situation. It was Lucius's choice to...uh, eat death.*

Peering carefully at her friend, Hermione asked if Harry was all right.

"I'm fine," he replied honestly. "Lucius Malfoy wasn't exactly the sweetest guy on the planet, what with wanting my brutal death and all."

"And mine," Hermione interjected.

"And yours," Harry agreed. "And all other Muggleborns. And all of the Weasleys, too, I'm willing to bet. However, he was also someone's father, even if that someone was Malfoy. I know what it's like to lose parents, after all." *And find them again. And lose them once more.* Harry felt himself grow frustrated with his situation once again.

Hermione nodded, encouraging him to continue.

Harry tried focusing his thoughts away from St. George's again. "Right. So, I know what it's like and it's not a pleasant experience. I don't wish it upon anyone, even if it is Malfoy." He paused to ask himself, *Would you have felt this way a few days ago?*

The honest answer came. *Probably not.*

Harry gestured at the paper. "So, what happened, exactly? I'll read the article later, as sitting around this place is dead boring, but give me the short version."

"Well, obviously Voldemort tried breaking his followers out of Azkaban again," said Hermione. Harry was impressed that Hermione barely stumbled on his name. "It seems that, for once, the Ministry was actually somewhat ready for this. Voldemort had brought the Dementors back to Azkaban, but the Aurors have been guarding the prison in the Dementors' absence. A couple of the prisoners were stunned in the jail break, Malfoy among them. I suppose the Dementors found him too tempting and he was Kissed."

Harry looked confused. "But Kissing isn't death. Might be as good as, but it's not the same thing. This says he was killed."

"Yes, well, this is where things get interesting. Voldemort was so enraged by the behaviour of the creature who was supposedly obeying him that he killed the Dementor and Malfoy both. He must have known Malfoy would no longer be any use to him."

Harry gasped, "So *Voldemort* killed Malfoy?"

"That's what it says here, at least." She tapped the paper again. "Who knows if we can trust *The Prophet*, though? They could be covering up for an Auror. I'm loathe to say it, as I hate the manipulation usually purported by this newspaper, but it might be better if the readership thinks that Voldemort would go around killing his own followers."

Harry agreed. "Yeah. I mean, if he'd kill a powerful member of his inner circle, who's to say that anyone's safe? And maybe it'll get Malfoy to rethink his attachments to the Dark Lord." He nearly clapped a hand over his mouth, but managed to restrain himself. This was the second time in two days he'd said aloud what he'd meant to keep inside.

Smooth, Potter, he thought sarcastically. *Don't let Hermione know you're thinking about Draco or anything.*

But Hermione merely raised an eyebrow. Harry was almost more afraid by that than anything else. Ignoring his last statement, she added, "You'll definitely want to read that later. Fudge is completely torn up in it. Not like his support has been that great the past few months, but it seems that a lot of

people are turning towards Amelia Bones now." Harry now recognized Madam Bones's stern face on the front page. "Fudge will probably be finished in a matter of weeks."

"Good riddance." Harry didn't even try to cover up his bitterness.

Harry looked at the paper for a moment, silently reading the article. He hadn't got very far when Hermione began clearing her throat, fidgeting noticeably. When he looked up, she said, with some trepidation, "Harry, do you mind if I ask you a question?"

"Go right ahead." He smiled a little, hoping to look encouraging and non-threatening. He wasn't sure what was making his friend so nervous.

"Well, um. In that other place...in the *hospital*," she said firmly. "I know your parents and Sirius and a few other people from this world are there. Are...well, are Ron or I there? With you?"

She looked so hopeful that Harry felt something constrict around his heart. His head shot downward and he studied his lap again. Barely above a whisper, he softly replied, "No..."

"Oh." She said nothing else, but Harry could tell she was quite upset. So was he.

"So for once in my life, let me get what I want. Lord knows, it would be the first time."

- The Smiths

Chapter 6 - Please Please Please Let Me Get What I Want

Harry stretched his arms wide over his head and arched his back. Apparently, he'd just woken up, but he didn't remember falling asleep. He furrowed his brow, deep in thought, but the last thing he could remember was speaking to Hermione this afternoon. *Maybe Madam Pomfrey gave me a Sleeping Potion.* Propping himself up onto his elbows, he cracked his neck, which was unbearably stiff, and didn't bother covering his mouth as he emitted a monstrous yawn.

Mid-yawn, he noticed two glittering eyes staring back at him from the darkness.

"Boo!" said Malfoy.

"Holy...," Harry managed as he scrambled back onto the bed. "Malfoy, what the hell are you doing? Are you trying to give me a heart attack?"

Malfoy sauntered over to the bed's side and ran his index finger down Harry's upper arm. Harry involuntarily shivered. "Maybe," he smoothly replied. *Oh. So it's that Malfoy,* he thought, observing his surroundings. Back at St. George's again. Harry wasn't entirely sure this was an unpleasant development.

Regaining some semblance of self-control, he managed to ask, "What time is it, anyway?"

"Midnight. The witching hour." Draco smirked.

Harry groaned and lay back down, half throwing a pillow over his head, leaving enough just enough room to breathe. "Actually, I think the witching hour is three AM. And don't talk to me about witches." Thinking about Hogwarts while he was in his non-magical world was just as painful as thinking of the non-magical world while at Hogwarts.

Draco suddenly stuck his face directly in Harry's line of vision and Harry gave a startled gasp, since their faces were now only about six inches apart. Harry managed to surprise himself when, with a mutinous thought, he considered closing that gap. Whatever Draco did had a way of surprising Harry.

"Whatever not?" Draco pouted. "I want to hear about magic and witches." Harry could now see that Draco was clutching a plastic fork in one hand and a plastic spoon in the other. He thrust the fork through the space between the pillow and the bed. "Here. This is your magic wand. Honestly, they really should keep a closer eye on us; who *knows* what we might steal at dinnertime?" Draco clucked in mock-concern.

Pulling the pillow off his head, Harry sat up and eyed the fork. "You want this to be my magic wand?" he said incredulously.

"Would you prefer the spoon?"

Harry swung his legs over the edge of the bed and stood up, so Draco was now crouched in front of him. *Oh, no,* Harry thought. *Not good at all.* Jittery, he jumped back a bit, crashing into his bed. Draco smirked, but didn't say anything, lingering in that spot for a moment before standing as well. Harry considered things. He could just go back to sleep and ignore Draco, but knowing Malfoy's personality at Hogwarts, he probably wouldn't easily accept being ignored. For some reason, it was one of Harry's top priorities that this Draco not be angry with him. On the other hand, he could entertain Malfoy's whims and teach him some magic, even if nothing actually happened. It'd be a nice way to pass the time, at least.

Harry glanced around, noting the other beds filled with sleeping residents, and jerked his head toward them. "All right, I'll teach you magic. But there are too many people here, so we'll have to be really quiet."

Draco's whole face lit up. "No, that won't be necessary. I know a place. Come on." He started walking away, but noticed Harry wasn't following. Arching an eyebrow, Draco asked, "What's wrong? Chicken?" He offered an outstretched hand.

If there was one thing that Harry Potter wasn't, it was chicken. Summoning up his courage, he grabbed Draco's hand and allowed himself to be led away. Honestly, taking Draco's hand was a lot more unnerving than sneaking out. Harry was skilled in the latter, after all.

The pair tiptoed out of the Boys' Ward and down a narrow corridor. Harry, who was concentrating very hard on not letting his hand get all sweaty, tripped over his own feet, but managed to catch himself in time. He blushed deeply, but Draco only let out a soft snort, not even letting go of Harry's hand.

At the end of the hallway, Draco pinched two coats hanging on pegs and whispered to Harry, "These hospital gowns are a wee bit revealing. We might want to cover up a bit." He held up the coats.

"What do you think? Pink or brown?"

"Uh, brown," Harry mumbled. He eyed the other coat warily; it seemed to be partially covered in shiny, shimmery material.

"Just as well," said Draco lightly, dropping Harry's hand and slipping on the pink one. "I look horrible in brown." Harry wanted to tell him that he looked pretty horrible in the pink, too, but he couldn't bring himself to do so. Noticing the look on Harry's face, Draco let out a sharp, short laugh. "Yes, I know. Horrible in the pink, too. Beggars can't be choosers, though."

After Harry shrugged on the stolen - *borrowed*, rather - coat, Draco grabbed his hand once again and Harry felt his face go pink with pleasure. The boys made a sharp left, Harry struggling to keep up with Draco, finally reaching a door at the end of a corridor. It turned out to be an emergency exit, with a sign reading, "DO NOT OPEN EXCEPT IN EMERGENCY. ALARM WILL SOUND."

Harry looked doubtfully at Draco. "Are we going to make everyone in the building deaf, too?"

Draco fixed Harry with an intense stare and Harry felt his knees give a little, causing him to once again wonder what exactly was wrong with him. "Silly boy," Draco replied. "Obviously, the door's broken. I noticed it when wandering around one day. You just have to know how to handle it." With that, Draco jutted his hip out, forcing the door open. "This is my little paradise. After you," he said and bowed with a little flourish. The exaggerated, elegant gesture reminded Harry of Gilderoy Lockhart - the obliviated professor, of course, not the toothless hospital resident.

The little paradise turned out to be a balcony leading to a fire escape. "Your little paradise has an awful lot of concrete, you know," Harry informed Draco.

"Shut up, Harry," Draco retorted fondly. Draco gestured to a darkened corner. "We also have amenities." Apparently, two soggy, smuggled pillows counted as amenities. Still, Harry reasoned, it was nice to be outside. St. George's was a little claustrophobic. After all, Harry wasn't actually crazy; he just couldn't keep himself on one plane of existence.

"Very posh. Next you'll be telling me every morning they put mints on those things," he joked, pointing at the pillows.

"Oh, they do," Draco assured him. "Still have your wand?" Harry did, holding the fork up as proof. In reply, Draco pulled out his spoon and gave a short bow.

Duelling with plastic cutlery. I really have gone mad.

"What do you want to learn magic for, anyway?" Harry asked Draco. "It's not like we can use it here." Sullen, Harry looked out over the balcony. The lights of the town glittered in the distance.

Draco gave a petulant little sigh. "Because," he said, as though it was the most obvious thing ever. "I make my own magic. I might as well go through the proper channels to do it, though, shouldn't I?"

Always a Malfoy.

"I suppose. 'S not like we've anything better to do, anyway." Harry walked over to Draco and stood shoulder-to-shoulder with him. He asked, "Which one's your wand hand?"

"My wand hand?" Draco laughed. "I suppose my right." He held the spoon out in front of him. "All right, then!" Harry exclaimed in his best Ollivander impression. Admittedly, it wasn't particularly good, but it wasn't like Draco would know the difference. "Why don't you give it a little wave?" Draco gave the spoon an enthusiastic - and very over-embellished - wave. Harry stifled a laugh. "Why don't you try it this way?" Harry held his "wand" properly and demonstrated the *swish-and-flick* method that Flitwick first taught him his first year. Draco tried again, but still couldn't help ending with the dramatic flourish.

Right then, Harry decided that if he was to teach, he was going to do it correctly and went to stand behind Draco. It wasn't until he had one hand wrapped around the other boy's wrist and his fist that clutched the fork braced against Draco's hip that he realised he was touching Draco. In more than one place.

"All-all right," Harry stammered. "Why don't you try it this way?" This time, he slowly guided Draco's motions until they were less jerkily following Harry's instruction.

"Mmm," Draco practically purred in response. "Well, the wand waving was more fun my way, but I like having you here better, Professor. Hard to decide which I like more."

Finding his mouth suddenly dry, Harry swallowed hard, stepping back a bit in order to put a little distance between his and Draco's bodies. Hospital gowns weren't exactly known for their furry thickness, even if he was currently wearing a coat, and he felt that with any more of this purring, that fact would soon become problematic.

Draco turned around to face his "professor", not bothering to widen the gap between them any more. "Teach me a spell."

Charms or hexes would be the easiest. They had the funny words to go along with all the wand waving and it wasn't like they'd be able to turn a match into a needle or anything. Harry thought for a moment and said, "All right. This one is to levitate things. Repeat after me. *Wingardium Leviosa!*" Harry pointed the fork at a pillow, half-expecting that it would start rising.

It didn't, of course, but Harry pushed his disappointment away and shrugged. Draco repeated, "*Win-gar-dee-um Lev-ee-oh-sar.*"

"Oh-SA, not oh-SAR. Try again." Harry tried ignoring how much he sounded like Hermione.

"*Wingardium Leviosa!*" Draco pointed the spoon at the pillow. Harry expected Draco to give up because nothing happened, but he merely looked delighted. "So, in your world, I'd make things levitate with that! Brilliant! Show me more."

Over the next hour or so, Harry taught Draco nearly every incantation he knew. When teaching Draco, Harry found it important to use the actual magic words, instead of making up spells. Of course, he knew if he told Draco that "flibbity-gibbet" was a spell, Draco probably would have believed him, so he wasn't sure why he strove for accuracy. Probably as a tie to his other life, or perhaps because he thought Draco deserved the truth.

Harry even taught Draco the incantations for the Unforgiveables, explaining their history and how the death curse had killed his parents, though he did stop short before spilling that he'd once tried the Cruciatus Curse on Bellatrix Lestrange. Seemed too private or painful for now. He hoped he'd get to see his mum and dad and Sirius tomorrow. *If I'm still here, that is.*

Shaking his head, he looked over at Draco. The other boy was wildly slashing through the air with his spoon and shouting "*Aparecium Stupefy Riddikulus!*" The combination of Draco's dramatic actions and the ridiculousness of the spell caused Harry to burst into laughter and he pounded the concrete wall with his fist. Harry slid down the wall to the slightly damp cushions, wondering what that spell would do. He decided it would make a boggart reveal itself, get stunned and turn into Snape in a dress, and started laughing so hard that tears of mirth clouded his eyesight.

Breathless, Draco flung himself down next to Harry. "Are you laughing at me?" he said indignantly.

"Sort of. I was just wondering what would happen if you combined all those spells. Never mind - it's complicated." He observed that Draco was now lying back against the wall, his eyes half-closed, the picture of total relaxation. How could one person change their moods so rapidly? "Tired?"

"Mmm." Draco lazily rested his head on Harry's shoulder.

Harry froze and stared straight ahead, unsure how to behave. Deciding it was best for him to just ignore the surprising - though not unwelcome - action, he said to the other boy, "Tell me about your parents."

Draco sat up, fully awake again, his eyes suddenly cold and narrowed, reminding Harry of the real Draco. Harry cringed and knew he'd said something very wrong. "You don't have to," Harry hastily apologized. "I didn't mean to offend you or anything."

Draco immediately relaxed again. "No, it's all right. It's fair. You taught me about your magic and since it's what landed you in here -"

"Sort of," interrupted Harry.

"Since it's what sort of landed you in here," Draco agreed, "I suppose you should know what landed me in here." Draco looked down at his hands, which were now folded onto his lap.

Harry tried to look both encouraging and sympathetic, but was sure he was failing miserably. *What was it that Hermione said about being emotionally stunted?* He sighed.

Draco sighed, too. "I grew up fairly privileged. My family came from old money. We led what's usually called a charmed life and I attended an expensive, exclusive school. I had everything I could ever want. My parents doted on me and, to be honest, I was quite spoiled. I'm sure I'd probably be quite the brat if that had continued."

At that, Harry let out a very small laugh.

"That all changed when I was ten, though. Father, Mother, and I were returning from a day trip with our driver. It was late, and I was falling asleep, so I don't remember much of what happened. I remember tyres squealing and a loud crunch, and then I must have been knocked unconscious.

"When I came to, I was in hospital, barely able to move. Fifty percent of my body was covered in severe burns and I had a broken leg. My parents were both dead, as was our driver, who'd been drunk out of his mind and missed a bend. Our car collided with a lorry and went up in flames. We were moving so quickly and the impact was so great that the other passengers were all killed instantly." Draco took a great, shuddering breath and Harry raised his hand to his arm, but only hovered over it. He settled for what he hoped was an encouraging nod.

Draco continued, "My body was in a relaxed state and the doctors say that's probably what saved my life."

Harry managed to mumble, "I'm sorry."

Smiling slightly, Draco said, "What for? It's not like your life has been all peaches and cream, right? Anyway, for awhile, I worked very hard at getting better. There was physical therapy, but eventually I felt it fruitless. I had no parents and though two of my grandparents were still alive, I didn't want them. I wanted my mum and dad back."

"I can certainly relate to that... even if I do have them here." Harry hoped that wasn't the wrong thing to say.

Draco barely reacted. He was obviously too wrapped up in dredging up painful memories. "There were skin grafts, but still a lot of scarring. Physical therapy was painful and I hated being in and out of hospital so often. My grandparents took care of me, - they still do, in fact - but after a year, I grew more depressed and sullen than any eleven year old has a right to be and made a decision to end it all. Stole a knife from my grandparents' kitchen and sliced up my wrists."

Draco showed him the scars on his left wrist and Harry drew in a sharp breath. On the inside of the wrist, surrounded by many other scars, was a scar where a faded burn met a faded cut. It looked almost like a snake entwined with a skull.

"S'ok, Harry. It's just what happened," Draco assured him, misunderstanding his reaction. "I did it wrong, obviously, as I'm still here, talking to you. Grandmother found me and an ambulance was called. I was diagnosed as a clinical depressive and put under psychiatric care. It wasn't until I tried almost the same thing four or five other times that I ended up here. You and I have been in the same group ever since. I'm getting better, Harry, but I doubt I'll ever be completely okay on my own." Harry shook off the shock of seeing the scar-equivalent of the Dark Mark on this Draco, Surprisingly, he heard himself say, "Well, we'll just have to make sure you're never on your own then, won't we?" Draco smiled genuinely and said, "That's a nice thought, Harry. But I can tell; if you can keep it together, you'll be out of here soon. When you're conscious, you're just so... normal." Trying to look indignant, Harry retorted, "You say that like it's a bad thing." "Fine. You're strange, but not in the way that keeps you in a mental hospital forever. Better?" "Sort of," Harry said petulantly.

In reply, Draco laughed. It was a full, rich laugh and it made his eyes sparkle and Harry recklessly want to kiss him.

So he did.

To say that birds sang, fireworks erupted and the Earth shook would be a bit of an overstatement. In fact, the kiss was rather awkward. Draco's mouth hadn't completely closed from his laugh and Harry's teeth clacked painfully against his. Harry's eyes were still open, as were Draco's, the latter's alight with shock. Also, Harry had had to lean into Draco at a strange angle, so he was twisted quite uncomfortably.

At least it's not wet. Harry's thoughts flew to his experience with Cho under the mistletoe. A second later, when Draco's tongue pushed its way into Harry's mouth, Harry revised, *Not unpleasantly wet, that is.* It seemed that Draco had found his bearings.

A few seconds later, Draco pulled away, panting slightly. "Well, that was certainly a surprise. Not that you like blokes," he assured Harry. "That's been obvious from the first time you woke up and spoke to me. I'm just surprised you initiated anything."

Harry was taken aback. *Like blokes?* he thought. Draco was certainly male, but Harry remembered the flips his stomach used to make around Cho and he certainly found Fleur fit enough. "Like blokes?" he repeated aloud. "I don't know. I've liked girls before." After a moment, he added, "Maybe I just like you."

Getting better at the emotional honesty thing, aren't you, Potter?

"Fair enough. I'm eminently likeable, after all." Draco guided Harry's chin so they were directly facing one another and stated matter-of-factly, "Now I'm going to kiss you again."

As Draco slowly leaned in, their mouths not quite touching, Harry found enough of his voice to stammer out, "Oh-okay."

Their lips met again, this second kiss much better than the first. Draco's lips were cold from being outside in only the pink coat and hospital gown, but quickly warmed from contact with Harry's. They were thin and soft and probably the nicest things Harry's lips had ever touched. Almost of its own accord, Harry's mouth opened slightly and Draco's tongue darted inside it again, tasting him. Harry had no idea what to do with his own tongue, so he settled for circling it around Draco's, satisfied when Draco moaned softly into his mouth.

Draco pulled away and, just as Harry was about to protest, he leaned in again, nibbling at Harry's earlobe. Harry shut up very quickly. As he felt the rough tongue tickle the outer edge, he whimpered, becoming aware of the rising heat in the lower half of his body.

These hospital gowns are far, far too thin.

As if in answer to Harry's thoughts, Draco arranged his body so he was nearly laying on top of Harry. Harry settled himself into a half-sitting, half-laying position and felt Draco's erection press into his leg through the thin layers of fabric. Harry gasped softly.

"Have you ever done this before?" Draco breathed into Harry's ear.

Being a boy, Harry briefly considered lying. He reasoned that if he had truly been in an imaginary world, he certainly could have done... *this*... before, but decided he'd rather tell the truth. "No," he told Draco, startled that his voice was nearly as breathy as the other boy's. "I've had just a couple of rather boring kisses."

Draco laughed throatily, sending shivers up and down Harry's spine. He then moved his lips along the side of Harry's face, catching his lips quickly once more, before moving down to his neck. Harry groaned appreciatively as Draco sucked on the sensitive flesh, deciding he wanted to return the favour, no matter how inexperienced he was.

When Draco pulled away a bit and looked at Harry, Harry stretched upwards, kissing Draco's jaw and all down his neck. Experimentally, he gave a small lick. Draco tasted salty, but not unpleasantly so. Harry then started sucking and biting Draco's neck lightly. He peered up at Draco and tentatively asked, "Is this all right?"

Draco nodded and Harry thought that might be because he could no longer make any coherent sentences. Harry laughed quietly, pleased with that response, and started claiming every inch of Draco's throat as his own. He tried varying degrees of pressure and flicked his tongue in a few different ways, seeing what kind of reaction each action would elicit from Draco.

Draco's eyes were half-closed and he was making tiny noises, still pressing his body to Harry's. Harry pulled Draco's head down, so they were at eye level again and asked him, "Have you ever done this before?"

Any feigned arrogance gone, Draco managed to whisper, "Just a couple of boring kisses." Harry laughed gently. Draco added, "With other people here. I mean, it's not like I'm getting out a lot. Good thing I like boys, yes?"

"Oh, yes," he replied, kissing Draco again. His Gryffindor mentality of boldly exploring new territory overtook him and he flipped Draco, so Harry was now lying on top of him. Draco gave a little gasp, but didn't look displeased by the arrangement.

Harry leaned down to capture Draco's lips between his teeth, while Draco fumbled with the buttons and clasps of both coats, opening his own first before moving on to Harry's. When the coats finally both fell open, Harry pressed against Draco and let out a little gasp of his own. The gowns were so thin it was almost as though nothing at all separated them.

Again, feeling bold, he lifted the hem of Draco's gown, never breaking their kiss. When his hand landed on Draco's thigh, Draco sighed against Harry's mouth. As the brave feelings grew, he lifted Draco's robe up and caressed his stomach. He asked, "Are you cold? I can stop, if you'd like."

Draco panted, "No. No stopping. Not cold. Just stay near me." Harry readily agreed.

His hand brushed across Draco's chest and he rubbed one of Draco's nipples, hoping that he was doing something right. In reply, Draco's tongue pushed further into Harry's mouth and he moaned a bit louder. His hand also strayed from Harry's lower back to his arse, further encouraging him. Harry moaned appreciatively in reply.

In the furthering adventures of Harry's right hand, he moved down Draco's stomach again, relishing the feel of the soft hair on his belly, before moving to the waistband of Draco's y-fronts. He pulled away and looked into Draco's eyes. Before he could ask a thing, Draco said, "For God's sake, Harry, anything you want to do to me is all right by me. Especially if you plan on putting your hands where I think you do. Just touch me. *Please*." The last plea was more a groan than a word and Harry felt himself grow harder, which he found odd since he hadn't thought that possible.

Harry couldn't restrain himself any longer with a request like that, and put his hands - and later his mouth - in places he'd never figured they'd go. When Draco returned the favour, Harry knew that he'd need to do this again - and soon. The night wearing on, Harry learned just how much a bloke could like another bloke, until both finally collapsed in a sweaty heap.

Afterwards, the two laid around shivering and staring up at the slowly brightening sky. "You know," Draco mumbled into Harry's hair, "we can't lay out here all night."

"Shh. Sleeping."

"You are not. Come on. We've got to return these before the shifts change," said Draco, gesturing at their coats.

Harry sat up and gasped. "Oh God. Someone else has to wear these, don't they?"

Draco raised his eyebrow. "What did you think? That they left coats on hooks so that the patients would have outerwear if they wanted to fool around? Dummy."

"Am not. About this, I suppose I am, though. Who would want to wear these things after... after *that*?" asked Harry, scandalised.

"Well, it's not like we're going to tell anyone. Come on." Draco arranged himself as best he could and pulled Harry up. "Let's get back inside."

Harry nodded and allowed himself to be led.

"Oh. Hmm," said Draco. He looked mildly intrigued.

"What? What is it?" Harry asked, suddenly panicked.

Draco gestured to a tiny blinking red light. "Uhm. That."

Harry's eyes nearly bugged out of his head. "That's a *camera*! Oh God, what if someone sees us?"

Unconcerned, Draco replied, "Then someone has some rather hot surveillance footage."

"Aren't you afraid of getting in trouble?"

"Not particularly, no. First of all, no one was watching it as it happened or else someone would have come to get us. Secondly, what are they going to do? Commit me?" He laughed sharply. "Listen, don't worry about it. Let's just get back to our beds."

Harry relaxed a bit when they got back inside, putting the brown coat back and rubbing his shoulders to warm up. Seemingly content, he suddenly froze up. "Oh *God*, what if my parents see that? I've had parents for a day and I've already done something to make them want to disown me. 'Hi Mum and Dad! I know I've been in trapped in a magical world for the past five years, but I can explain about the tape of me rolling around nearly naked with another *guy* on the balcony of the *mental hospital*!'"

Draco laughed more genuinely this time. Surprised, Harry looked up and Draco lightly kissed his lips. He said simply, "You worry too much. Let's get out of here."

Harry supposed he did worry too much.

The two boys made their way back to the ward and Harry sleepily thought to himself before dozing off, *Holy crap, I had sex. Well, sort of.* He fell asleep with a smile on his face.

When Harry woke up the next morning, Draco was sitting near his bedside, staring at him.

"G'morning," he mumbled sleepily, a smile creeping onto his face.

Draco's face screwed up into one of disgust. "What is *wrong* with you, Potter?" he spat.

Oh. Damn. Harry took in the sights and smells of the Hogwarts Hospital Wing. He propped himself up on one elbow and sighed, "Nothing's wrong with me, Malfoy. I've just woken up with you staring at me for the third time this week."

"Third?" Confusion momentarily replaced the wrath in Draco's eyes.

"Erm. Second. Sorry. Little confused. Just woke up, after all."

Draco rolled his eyes. "I'm fairly sure that you wake up confused quite often."

Suddenly reminded of his Draco, Harry fought down the urge to laugh. He knew that would just further anger this Malfoy and Harry was still sleepy and didn't much feel like getting hexed or punched yet. *Is it wrong to want to kiss him?* Harry wondered. *Yes. Yes, it's probably wrong. I am sick, sick boy. Who got some on a balcony. Outside. In a possibly imaginary universe.* This time, Harry couldn't suppress his grin.

Draco flew into a rage and practically screamed, "What the hell are you laughing about? Nothing funny is happening!"

"Not to you, maybe," retorted Harry. He looked about for his wand, figuring he'd want to defend himself, but Draco just leaned back in the chair again. Harry decided he'd try again and said, "Malfoy, what are you really doing here?"

"I...," Draco trailed off stupidly.

Malfoy, speechless? Harry was more than a little disturbed. Watching Malfoy nervously wring his hands, he remembered the scar he'd seen on Draco's wrist last night. Following a hunch, he peered thoughtfully at Malfoy's face.

"Malfoy? When did you get the Dark Mark?"

Draco's head snapped up and he hissed, "How did you *know* that?" Realising what he said, a look of fear crossed his face and he tried to run out.

"Don't go! I have an idea about why you're here."

Freezing in the doorway, Draco turned to look at Harry. "What would *you* know about *me*?"

"Probably more than you think," Harry said calmly. And Draco, amazingly, made no move to leave.

"The boy with the thorn in his side - behind the hatred there lies a murderous desire for love."
- The Smiths

Chapter 7 - The Boy with the Thorn in His Side

Draco stood in the doorway for a second before growing visibly impatient. "Well, Potter?" he sneered. "Care to tell me why you're so keen on keeping me here?"

"I heard about your father." Harry sighed and shifted a bit on the bed.

Malfoy snapped, "You and every other person in the universe. Don't tell me you're going to offer a heartfelt apology, too."

Harry shrugged. "I'd be lying if I said I thought your father's death was a big loss for me. When a person tries to kill me, they're usually right off the 'Harry's Favourite People' list." Ignoring Malfoy's murderous look, he nonchalantly continued, "I do think that it's a big loss for you, though, and I'm sorry that you lost a parent. I know what that's like, at least."

"Everything always comes back to Potter, doesn't it? Think you're centre of the universe and that every event revolves around you."

"Not usually," Harry said. "But the last few days have been a little weird." He shrugged again and hastily continued, "Never mind that, though. Can I ask you a question?"

Draco scoffed, "When has Precious Potter ever asked permission for anything?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "I'll take that as a yes. Is what *The Daily Prophet* published true? They're not exactly known for their impartial journalism, after all."

Looking annoyed, Draco spat, "My father is indeed dead, Potter. Not that I want to discuss my affairs with you."

"No, not about that. Did Voldemort kill him? Hermione thought that it was possible that it was a Ministry cover-up for an Auror or a prison guard."

"What Granger knows can fit on the head of a pin. No one knows for sure. It's not as though I was at Azkaban and the Dark Lord didn't exactly feel it necessary to sit me down for a heart-to-heart chat about Father's death." Malfoy gave a shiver so small Harry doubted he even realised he'd done it. In a voice barely above a whisper, he added, "Mother seems to think the Dark Lord is responsible, though."

"Why?"

"Because a Dementor was destroyed. Consider the Ministry for a moment. Have you ever heard of them destroying a Dementor?"

Harry shook his head.

"That's because the dunderheads have no idea how to do it. Only someone with a firm grasp of the Dark Arts would be able to wield that much power."

Harry nodded. That did make sense. "And who has a better grasp on the Dark Arts than Voldemort?" At the name, Draco gave another little shiver. "Come on, Malfoy. You work for him now. Try to show a little bravery when you hear his name."

"Foolish bravery is a Gryffindor trait. I may be one of his followers, but I know enough to respectfully fear him," Draco said petulantly.

Harry pushed down the little flare of anger that curled in his belly. "Do you think your father was simply caught in the crossfire or Voldemort really meant to kill him? Getting rid of dead weight or someone he thought may be a threat?" He paused. "Maybe you're next." Draco's face coloured and Harry knew he was getting angry, but Harry didn't care. He thought even Malfoy should be aware of the things Voldemort would do to anyone in his way — including a loyal follower.

In a low, vaguely threatening voice, Malfoy retorted, "I'm not privy to the Dark Lord's private schemes. If he killed my father for a reason, I certainly don't know it. And even if I did, what makes

you think I'd tell you?" Harry was uncomfortably reminded of Lucius or Snape. He wondered if quiet threats were something they taught in Death Eater school.

This was getting Harry nowhere. He decided to change tactics and quietly asked, "Malfoy, do you miss your father?"

"What business is it of yours?" Draco's typically haughty look reappeared.

"Oh, just answer the question, Malfoy." Harry crossed his arms over his chest. "You've been watching me sleep, you're a minion of the Dark Lord, yet you've made no moves to kill me in all that time. Also," he added pointedly, "you've been talking with me somewhat civilly for fifteen minutes. You may hate me, but something's going on with you and I suspect it has something to do with your father. So, do you miss your father or not?"

Draco looked very slightly taken aback, yet still maintained his aristocratic stance. He slowly replied, carefully emphasising each word, "Never forget that I hate you, Potter."

Harry winced slightly, trying to squash his memories of Draco from the night before. *Not the same person*, he reminded himself. "Yes, I'm aware of that, Malfoy."

"Perhaps I've been assigned to spy on you as my first mission."

"Hell of a job you're doing," retorted Harry. "I've caught you in the act twice, found out you took the Dark Mark and had a pleasant conversation with you."

"Maybe I'm here to kill you, then."

"Go ahead, Malfoy." Harry spread his arms out wide. "Hit me with your best shot."

Automatically, Malfoy raised his wand and pointed, his hand shaking slightly. Harry cringed and looked away, momentarily thinking his hunch was wrong. After a second, Draco lowered his wand.

"I *hate* you," he said, still shaking. After a moment, he quietly added, "And yes, I miss my father."

Looking defeated, he sank back into the chair at Harry's side and unconsciously rubbed at his forearm.

Harry gestured towards the place where the hidden mark lay. "Does it hurt much?"

"What?" Draco looked down. "Oh. Sometimes. Not really."

"What does it feel like when you're around Voldemort?" Off Draco's look, he corrected himself, "You-Know-Who, the Dark Lord, Lord Thingy, whatever. Whenever I'm around him this burns." He gestured at his scar. "Sometimes it hurts so much I want to pass out. I always wondered if it did the same thing for his followers."

Draco shook his head and glanced at his arm. "Burns? No, it doesn't burn. I suppose he could make us hurt through it, but it's not as though he doesn't have a thousand different ways of distributing pain. I can feel his presence through the Mark more clearly the closer he is to me, though."

"No offence, Malfoy, but you don't seem like the most enthusiastic Death Eater. Why did you even bother getting the Dark Mark? When did it happen?"

Draco shot Harry a scathing look. "I received the Dark Mark over the summer. I chose our Lord because of *you*. Because you put my father in prison and I wanted revenge. Because I hate every bone in your body. Because I wanted my father to be proud of me and I knew this is what he wanted. He wanted his heir to follow in his footsteps and serve the Dark Lord."

"And now your Dark Lord has killed the man you were trying to make proud. Seems a little worse than putting him into prison when you think about it."

Draco said nothing.

Harry decided now was as good a time as any to drop the subject of Voldemort. After all, he now knew where some of Draco's more interesting moles were, so he felt strange making the other boy uncomfortable, despite the fact that Malfoy had been trying to make his life miserable since he was eleven. He cleared his throat.

"What is it, Potter? Have some more righteous pontificating for me?"

"Not really. Just thought one embarrassingly personal turn deserves another."

"What are you prattling on about?"

"Well, don't you want to know what goes on when the rest of the world thinks I'm in a coma?"

Draco snorted. "Why would I care about what goes on in your perverse little head?"

"Why must you answer every question with another question? Did you learn that in Death Eater school, too?"

"What?"

"Never mind."

Draco leaned on the armrest, propping his face up with his hand. "Fine, Potter." He sighed melodramatically. "Tell me what it's like inside you."

Harry opened and closed his mouth, trying to ignore the implications of that last sentence. He briefly considered performing a Memory Charm on himself due to his extreme attraction towards Draco's unusually relaxed stance. *God, I'm messed up.*

"You know, while your impression of a large-mouthed bass is quite accurate, this isn't exactly the scintillating type of story to which a Malfoy is accustomed." Draco looked peeved.

Pulling himself together, Harry managed a hateful glare for Draco. "Fine. Voldemort has set up shop within my head," he said bitterly. "Every time I pass out, I find myself in the Muggle world and have no idea how to get back here. My parents are still alive, I'm in a mental institution and you're my only friend. We sleep right next to each other!" *And with each other*, he silently added.

For once, Draco had no reply.

"Other than the fact that I have no memory of that life, it's everything I ever wanted. No evil lord wants to kill me and I have my family. I don't have a mortal enemy or even lesser enemies that would love to see my head on a silver platter. There are just a bunch of people who want me to get well."

"That's some dream you're having, Potter," said Malfoy.

"Oh, but here's the *catch*, Malfoy. This might not even be all in my dreams. Sure, that's what I've been told, but things I see happening in that world keep happening in this one. I feel like I might actually be shaping this world, but I have the same feeling about the other one. Hell, maybe neither of them is real and I'm stuck on some other plane of existence. It's all very existential, don't you think?"

"Anyway, when I'm unresponsive there, I'm awake here and when I'm unconscious here, I'm awake there. It's possible that I'll never be able to wake here again and Voldemort will have taken out one of his nemeses without ever laying a finger on me. I'm totally vulnerable when I'm passed out."

Draco just stared at Harry, probably disbelievingly.

"You know what that means, don't you?" Harry continued. "That means if you really want to kill me, you'll have every opportunity to do so. Next time you sneak into the infirmary, you won't even need me to give you a clear shot. Feel free to throttle me in my sleep."

Aghast, Draco replied, "Why am I there? Is anyone else there?"

"Other than dead people and my enemies? No. Not that I can tell, at least. Ron and Hermione aren't there. Dumbledore isn't there."

"Sounds pretty perfect to me."

"Shut *up*, Malfoy," said Harry in a scathing tone. Yet, a small smile still crawled onto his lips.

"Dra- *Malfoy*," he corrected himself, "can I ask you a question?"

"Not like if I said no you'd control yourself."

"Fine. I'll ask, you decide if you want to answer, okay?"

Draco shrugged.

"Do you think you're going to keep following Voldemort? There are always alternative routes, you know."

"You mean switching sides? Working for Dumbledore and your little band of goody-two-shoes?"

It was Harry's turn to shrug. "Maybe that. There's always just staying neutral."

"Little too late for that," retorted Draco, gesturing at his arm. "Besides, Malfoys don't do neutrality very well." Harry thought he was probably right about that. Potters probably didn't do neutrality very well, either.

Almost reluctantly, Harry said, "Just one more thing...."

"Yes?" asked Draco.

"Malfoy, do you think you're evil?"

Draco seemed deep in thought. Finally, he answered, "I don't know."

The two boys sat together in silence for a time. When Draco finally got up and left, he didn't say a word and Harry didn't stop him.

Alone, Harry contemplated the recent developments his life had found.

Fuck. My life just can't be easy, can it?

Another voice joined the first. *Suck it up, Potter. Stop your whining already!*

Harry was struck by how much the second voice sounded like Malfoy. It was unfair, really. Not only did he have Malfoy here at Hogwarts and in the hospital, but now he had to put up with him in the back of his head, too. *St. Mungo's might be relaxing*, he mused. With or without Voldemort's interference, Harry was pretty messed up.

Sighing as he snuggled up to his pillows once again, he looked around for a distraction, but found none. He highly doubted Madam Pomfrey would allow him out of the infirmary so he could find Hermione or Ron. Besides, he wasn't even sure what he would tell them. It wasn't as though either would want to hear the graphic detail of what had happened outside the night before and they probably would be aghast that he sat here having a somewhat civil conversation with Malfoy.

That'd be a fun conversation. *Hi, Hermione and Ron! You'll never guess what happened last night! You know that dream world where Malfoy is nice? Well, now I've seen him starkers! It was really great and I think it's possible that I'm gay. Or maybe bisexual, I haven't given things a lot of thought. Oh, and then I woke up here and Malfoy was staring at me and he's a Death Eater! I told him he could kill me in my sleep! Smashing couple of days, all in all.* Harry rolled his eyes.

He briefly wondered if messing about with a boy in a possibly made-up universe counted. All he knew is it was nothing like any dream he ever had, which tended to be more like a swirl of vague images and feelings. This one was real. He'd felt teeth, after all. Dream people don't act awkward. And Harry had definitely felt awkward. Dream people didn't sheepishly confess their lack of experience and they didn't wear shiny pink coats. Harry knew he could never remember the feeling of hot breath on his neck or fingers entwining his hair when he woke up the next morning. Whatever it was, it had certainly been different. He closed his eyes, relishing the memory.

Frighteningly, Harry realised that there were more and more things calling him back to the other world. He honestly knew he couldn't refer to it as a dream world, whether or not it was fake. It felt as real as the Wizarding World felt and he was quickly adapting to life at St. George's. Surveillance footage aside, Harry's life there felt almost *normal*. He thought about his father's laughing eyes and his mother's kind smile. He could hear Sirius's boisterous laughter.

His thoughts then shifted to the Weasleys and how they had taken him into his family. How Ron was the first friend he'd ever had. Hermione's words about how they needed him here echoed in his head. *If Voldemort can successfully trap me within my head, they'll all die. I'll die, too. It's just a fact. I wonder if I can live in both worlds.*

The thought struck Harry so violently that he had to blink a couple of times, trying to comprehend. If he could live in both worlds, he'd have everything. His parents. Ron and Hermione. His godfather. Magic. A Draco who isn't a Death Eater.

I could pretend it's all stopped. Just have to get around the passing out thing.

Harry was unsure about that part. However, he couldn't dwell on this, as Dumbledore entered the hospital wing, successfully shaking Harry from his trance.

Coming up along Harry's bedside, Dumbledore regarded him carefully. Harry was unsure why the old man seemed so wary of him. Perhaps he thought Voldemort was using him like a telescope and could see right through Harry's eyes. Presently, Harry couldn't sense Voldemort's presence, but it was possible that the bastard had simply become craftier. He couldn't blame Dumbledore for being careful, though he did resent any suspicion being put on him.

"Hello Harry," said Dumbledore, voice void of suspicion or distrust. "I must say I'm quite relieved to see you awake today." The twinkle was firmly in place in his watery blue eyes.

Harry returned the greeting with a serene smile of his own. Two could play the Cover Up Your Emotions game. "Hullo, Headmaster," he returned equally cheerfully. "I'm quite glad to be with you this morning." He wasn't, actually.

"Miss Granger and I have been discussing your...situation. We've devised a plan that may assist in getting you back to us in whole once again. But we will need your help."

Naturally, thought Harry spitefully. A bland smile plastered on his face, he nodded at Professor Dumbledore, encouraging him to continue.

"If you are willing, I believe an Occlumency lesson could provide valuable information with regards to the cause of this separate reality."

Harry appreciated the Headmaster not calling the alternate reality a "dream world". "Would you be giving me the lesson?" he wondered, fully expecting the answer to be no.

Indeed it was. "No, I'm afraid not. I believe since the pathway was opened while you attended your lesson with Professor Snape, we should try to recreate as much of the original scenario as possible."

Fantastic. More Snape. Putting on his most innocent face, Harry asked, "But if this truly is a conduit directly from me to Voldemort, wouldn't trying this put Professor Snape in danger?"

For one of the only times Harry could remember, Dumbledore looked a bit taken aback. "I ask you not to concern yourself with Severus. He and I know what we are doing and he is well-aware of the risks involved."

"I'll do it. When will Snape be here?"

"Professor Snape, Harry. If you feel up to it, I would prefer you have the lesson in his office tomorrow evening, at your usual time. It will be Monday night again, after all," Dumbledore added for Harry's benefit.

We'll do it if I'm not unconscious, you mean. But Harry merely nodded. "Thank you, Professor. I want to figure out what's causing this, too." That much, at least, was true.

Professor Dumbledore patted Harry's shoulder and said, "Of course you do, Harry. This will all be over soon. Good-bye." He then exited the hospital wing, Harry still mulling over the the conversation. If tomorrow was Monday, this ordeal had been going on for two weeks in Hogwarts time. In St. George's, who knew? Less, maybe, but he wasn't positive.

Harry thought about the reason for Dumbledore's message. *Another Occlumency lesson. I'd rather eat glass.* Harry willed himself to think of the reasons to save his sanity. *We're both means used to achieve Dumbledore's ends, aren't we, Snape?*

He wasn't looking forward to the next day at all.

"Well, I wonder, do you hear me when you sleep? I hoarsely cry."

- The Smiths

Chapter 8 - Well, I Wonder

As Harry clomped through the Hogwarts halls, winding his way down to the dungeons, he had to admit that it was nice to wear something other than his pyjamas or a hospital gown. It was also nice to wander around the hallways again, even if the few people he'd met along the way were giving him strange looks. He'd begun to freak out Ron - who was escorting him - by smiling and waving merrily to each person who looked at him cross-eyed.

Yes! Look at me, the Freak Who Lived! Defeater of Voldemort - except when I'm asleep!

Ron sent him a sideways glance as Harry's bright smile successfully scared off a second year Ravenclaw girl. As she scuttled off, he said, "Uh, Harry? What exactly are you doing?"

Harry blinked innocently and replied, "Why, greeting my public, of course!" He smiled to himself, getting a kind of perverse thrill out of reacting in such an unexpected manner.

"Huh," came Ron's reply. Harry winced, realising he'd made Ron uncomfortable.

Suddenly craving some normalcy, Harry decided to be straightforward with his friend, as one thing Ron understood was being blunt. "I'm not crazy, Ron," Harry assured him. "I just can't stand everyone looking at me like I'm a ticking time bomb. Really, what have I done? Spent a couple of days unconscious? Even you're looking at me like I've grown a second head."

Ron started to protest, but Harry held up his hand. "It's okay. Really. I kind of understand why it's happening. Most people see me as a symbol. A symbol for the fight for good - the fight against Voldemort. And with Voldemort back and everyone finally admitting it, it must be scary to have that symbol out of commission for two weeks. Let's just face it; I'm not exactly known for my easy to predict behaviour, either. As for you, I know you're just worried about me."

Nodding, Ron replied, "We are just worried - me, Hermione, everybody. It's not easy thinking about He-Who...V-Voldemort crawling around your best friend's head." Harry must have had an incredulous look on his face because Ron laughed then. "Hermione's been talking to me about emotional honesty."

Harry raised an eyebrow and smirked at his friend.

"What? Oh! No, not like that. Shut up. I mean, she thinks...uh, what was it? Oh yeah." In a voice scarily like Hermione's, he quoted, "Harry's emotional ties to us may help keep him conscious." Then, in his normal voice, "And hell, it's not like it hurts me to tell you that you're my friend. Even if it is a little weird." The two boys reached the door to Snape's office.

Harry took a deep breath and moved to grasp the door handle. "Here goes nothing," he said, trying to maintain an airy tone.

"Yeah. I'll be back for you in two hours to escort you back, all right?"

"All right. Maybe it'll be nice to have someone other than Voldemort crawling inside my head for a couple of hours. Even if it is Snape." Harry shuddered and futilely tried to clear his head of any emotion.

"G'luck, mate."

"Thanks. I'll need it."

When Harry entered the office, Snape was sitting at his desk, head bent, grading papers. He waved his hand indicating Harry should take a seat, never looking up from his work. Since Snape had his head down, Harry didn't fight the urge to roll his eyes.

The two sat in silence, the only sounds coming from the scratch of Snape's quill as it moved across the pieces of parchment. *Scratch, scratch, scratch*, said the quill. Harry desperately tried not to fidget, as he knew moving would only incite Snape's ire.

Harry tried thinking about something to keep his mind occupied, eventually settling for staring off into space.

"Stop doing that."

Startled out of his reverie, Harry stared into Snape's sneering face. "Stop doing what, sir?"

"You have been jostling your foot for the past five minutes. I am sorry that my full attention is not on the great and famous Harry Potter, but I am still a professor to a gaggle of idiotic children and I have work to do."

"I could come back later."

"No, you'll stay right where you are. I believe you could stand to learn the virtue of patience."

Harry scowled. *Ah, how I've missed his magnetic personality*. Really, though, Harry couldn't find the heart to muster as much anger as he usually did. *Either I'm very grateful for the change in scenery or my anger was due to sexual frustration*. Harry pulled a face. *Definitely, definitely the change in scenery*.

Finally, Snape laid down his quill and stared at Harry. Harry stared back, unblinking. Then, without Harry ever seeing him draw his wand, Snape shouted "*Legilimens!*" and Harry felt the all-too-familiar sensation of having his head invaded again.

He tried desperately to fight Snape's invasion, but paused when he realised that Snape was only seeing memories from Harry's time at St. George's. He recognised Dr. Mason and Nurse Bainbridge checking on his vitals and Draco hovering over his bedside. The conversation between Not-Tonks and Harry played again. He saw his parents flanking his sides, then Sirius laughing and enveloping him in a huge squeeze. Then he saw Draco putting on a shiny pink coat.

Oh, shit. Uh-uh. Not getting that one, you old pervert. Harry successfully pushed Snape out of his head, breaking the connection.

"Was that...the place?" Snape asked, trying to look unconcerned, but obviously a bit unnerved.

Harry wondered if it was from seeing a completely different universe, from seeing two of his dead enemies alive or a combination of both.

Harry nodded. "That was St. George's. It's where I go when Voldemort opens the conduit - if that's what's really happening, that is. Started right after our last Occlumency lesson."

Snape gave a curt nod of his own. "The Headmaster informed me of that. He did not inform me that your parents were present. Or Black," he spat.

"I never had a chance to tell him. I told Hermione, though. I'm surprised she never discussed it with Professor Dumbledore."

"She may have. I am not privy to all of the Headmaster's conversations," said Snape, a touch of bitterness lacing voice.

"Mmm," Harry replied noncommittally. "Do you want to try this again? Not too much else happened, but it's strange we only saw those memories, isn't it?"

Snape nodded and asked Harry if he was ready, so Harry knew he was definitely a bit off his game. Neither, though, was prepared for what happened next.

"Legilimens!"

Lily Potter sat next to a bedside, crying. James Potter stood at her side, obviously fighting back tears himself. In the background, Harry could just make out a sullen Draco Malfoy staring into space.

Lily said desperately, "Come back to us, Harry! Please. We just found you. We can't lose you again."

Harry could now see that she was patting his own limp hand. He was watching his unconscious form.

James pleaded, "Harry, if you can hear us, please let us know you're all right."

I'm here! Harry tried calling out.

Draco then climbed out of his bed and quietly told the Potters, "This is all my fault." He then ran off, leaving the Harry's parents bewildered.

I'm here, I'm here! he tried again.

Abruptly, the scene ended as Snape broke the connection.

"Potter," he said sharply, "what was that?"

Harry swallowed nervously. "I think that was me in the hospital right now. I pass out here when I'm conscious there, but the reverse works, too. But...why can I see that? It doesn't make any sense!" Snape looked grave, but didn't answer. It was obvious that he was deep in thought, but Harry didn't notice. He was too busy worrying about his parents and Draco. A familiar wave of doubt and guilt washed over him.

Later on, Ron came to escort Harry back to the hospital wing. Harry couldn't remember being more relieved to see another person in his life. Snape and Harry had spent much of the remaining time standing around looking awkwardly at one another. Harry was afraid to have another Legilimency spell cast on him and it didn't seem like Snape was all that eager to have another go himself. Unsurprisingly, neither was interested in making small talk.

"Hello, Ron!" cried Harry when he opened the door to Snape's office. Ron and Snape both looked taken aback and Harry cleared his throat. "Time's up already?" he said in what he hoped was a more casual tone.

Ron nodded and Snape, still somewhat flustered, wished them a somewhat civil goodbye.

When they got into the hallway, Ron asked, "What's got into the two of you? He didn't insult me even once. And I was there for a whole minute! That has to be some sort of record."

Harry shrugged. "Don't want to talk about it. I've been thinking about it for the past hour. I'll just tell you it has to do with the institution and what Snape saw in the lesson."

For a second, Ron stopped moving, obviously curious. When Harry didn't stop with him, he ran alongside him to catch up, but didn't press the issue. Ron told Harry, "Hermione is waiting for you in the infirmary. She has some news - something she's working on with Flitwick, I think."

Indeed, Hermione was sitting on Harry's bed when they returned.

"Oh, Harry! Good. How did your lesson with Snape go?"

Harry shrugged. "It was a lesson with Snape," he said, as though this sufficiently answered the question.

Hermione ignored Harry's tone and continued. "Professors Flitwick and Snape and I have been working on your case. We're trying to figure out exactly how Voldemort is causing the conduit. I have a theory that a combination of protective charms and potions can sufficiently protect you from slipping out of reality. I don't know how it will affect the established connection you have with Voldemort, though."

Ron grinned. "So you think we'll have Harry back full-time then!"

Shocked, Harry sat on the bed. With Flitwick, Snape and Hermione on it, he knew a cure would be forthcoming. He knew how Hermione could be once she put her mind to it. Now Harry would lose the other world forever. He forced a smile onto his face and managed to say, "That's fantastic, Hermione. How close are you to figuring this out?"

"There's still a lot of work to be done. We were hoping that tonight's Occlumency lesson would shed some light as to why this is happening. Did you and Professor Snape get anywhere with that?"

Harry managed a stricken nod. "He saw my memories of St. George's. Then he...he saw my parents crying over my bed. I was unconscious there, yet we could both see what was happening. I don't know why, though." Harry was nearly whispering.

Hermione nodded. "That's very helpful." She glanced at Ron and then back to Harry, concern on her face. "Are you all right?"

"Fine. Just tired. Think I'm going to go to sleep, okay?"

Both of his friends nodded quickly. "We'll come see you tomorrow," said Hermione hopefully.

"All right. Good-night." Harry's tone was quiet, distracted.

When Ron and Hermione left, all Harry could focus on was the almost painful feeling of loss in his chest.

Harry Potter was bored out of his mind. Three days had passed without incident and he was sick of lounging around hospital wings. Since the Occlumency lesson Monday, he hadn't even the slightest voice in the back of his head indicating the existence of another world. He'd had several dreams about his parents and Sirius, along with a number of dreams about Draco coming to him in the night. He knew those were different. They just didn't have the real quality that defined his time at the hospital. Just dreams. Memories. Wisps of what might have been.

Madam Pomfrey bustled in, intent on checking Harry from head to toe. When she was finally satisfied, he cleared his throat. "Spit it out, Mr. Potter," said the nurse cheerfully.

"I was just wondering...uhm, is there any way I can go to class today? I feel fine. I haven't had an incident in *days*, either."

"Mr. Potter, while three may be lend itself to plural words, I don't think the emphasis you place on 'days' is all that accurate." But the stern nurse was smiling. "We'll make a deal. If you promise to have an escort at all times and not to exert yourself unduly, I think it would be all right if you attended your classes today."

Harry grinned. "I promise!" he readily agreed. He couldn't believe he was so excited to attend class, but monotony would do that to a person. "What do you mean by not exerting myself, though?"

"The usual things. No running about, nothing that would make you out of breath and absolutely no flying."

That last bit disappointed Harry, but he still agreed. Smiling slightly, Madam Pomfrey said, "I'll have Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger summoned."

Seeing Ron and Hermione's smiling faces only increased Harry's excitement. The trio returned to Gryffindor Tower to collect Harry's books and he revelled in the warmth of his dormitory for a moment before they headed off to the Great Hall for breakfast.

His good mood was dampened once he faced the entire student population. Oh, the Gryffindor table was fine. Seamus pounded Harry on the back, making him wince, and Ginny smiled so big he was sure she'd hurt her face. It was the mixed reactions of the other tables that worried him. He saw several Hufflepuffs with expressions of mixed fear and discomfort, though Ernie Macmillan waved boisterously. Tentatively, he waved back.

At the Ravenclaw table, Marietta Edgecombe looked at him with pure hatred, but that was nothing new. If anything, her more scathing looks were reserved for Hermione. Cho Chang pointedly ignored Harry completely - surprising him, as he thought they'd been friendlier to one another lately - and he thought several other members had disgust written on their faces. To think he'd have universal support would have been silly, he supposed. Any moves he'd made to ingratiate himself with the student population since last year were probably gone now. He'd just have to accept being seen as odd - probably for the rest of his life.

Most unexpected, however, was the distinct lack of reaction from the Slytherins. He would have expected an "Oi, Scarhead!", at the very least, but other than Crabbe and Goyle urgently nudging Draco Malfoy, there was nothing. Malfoy glanced up, but then became extremely interested in his eggs. Harry sighed and began to eat, willing himself not to glance at Draco again.

Harry was only mildly surprised when Luna Lovegood joined the Gryffindor table, instead of sitting with the Ravenclaws. She didn't normally separate herself from her house, but she seemed rather unconcerned by the confused looks from both the Gryffindors and the Ravenclaws. But, at least outwardly, Luna wasn't usually concerned by what others thought of her.

Luna stared across the table, scrutinising him carefully. "Hello, Harry," she said serenely. "We're very glad to have you back with us."

"I know you are, Luna," he sincerely replied. "Believe me, it's much appreciated."

She smiled dreamily. "You know, Hermione and Ronald have kept me informed about what's going on with you. And of course, I was in the infirmary when you last woke. I find your situation quite fascinating."

"Fascinating? Does that mean you think I'd make an interesting zoo exhibit, too? Everyone come gawk at the Boy Who Lived to Be Unconscious?"

"You know, you sounded a bit like Myrtle just then." Luna sounded a bit amused.

Harry gaped at her. *God, I am whining, aren't I?* He shook his head. "Sorry, Luna. I didn't mean to snap at you. I know you mean well."

"Mean well. What an interesting phrase, don't you think? I don't believe I do mean very well, actually. Maybe I should. It seems like a valuable skill to possess." At this, Ron snickered into his hand. She turned to him and said, "Ronald, do you do mean well?"

"Well enough, I suppose," Ron retorted, unable to control a bit of laughter creeping into his voice. Hermione hit him lightly in the arm.

Ginny butted in, "Ronald does mean quite well. I should know. I've had years of experience with it. He's no match for Fred and George, though." This time, Ron leaned across the table and punched Ginny's arm lightly. She sighed tragically. "You see what I have to put up with?"

Harry smiled slightly and looked to Luna again, interested in where she was going with this.

"Anyway," he said, drawing the conversation back to the topic at hand. "What was it you were saying, Luna?"

"Oh, yes. Your second world interests me quite a bit. You say there's no magic there at all?" She leaned forward slightly.

In case anyone was listening, Harry dropped his voice and said, "Nope, no magic at all. It's just what I thought the whole world was like before I came here. Except I wasn't in a hospital before."

Casually twirling her wand between her fingers, Luna said, "I've always wondered what it would be like to have no magic at all. I find your reality interesting."

"Reality?" retorted Harry. "Don't you mean my dream world? Remember, we're working on the premise that Voldemort created this as a means of keeping me out of the picture."

But all Luna said was "Mmm."

Hermione looked indignantly at her. "Are you saying you don't think our theory is correct?"

"Not at all, Hermione." She smiled in her vague way once again. "I just think there are always more possible realities than the one we're in. I imagine that sometimes if just one choice were made differently, the whole world would change. Also, just because someone wants something to be true, doesn't mean it can't be. Fantasy and reality are such blurred lines, don't you think?"

Philosophical questions like that told Harry that she'd certainly been put in the right house. He'd never given much thought to different possibilities existing all at once. "Luna, you're too smart for your own good," he said after a few seconds.

"Daddy says that all the time," she said brightly. "Did you know we're going hunting for Winged Scrapsons over Christmas holiday?"

As Hermione started to protest the creature's existence, Harry tuned out. *Fantasy and reality can be blurry. The existence of Hogwarts is enough proof of that.* Still deep in thought, he allowed Hermione to hustle him off to class.

For once, class completely grabbed Harry's interest. It wasn't so much that coursework had soared to new and inventive heights; he'd just missed his wand. Performing charms that actually worked was far different than waving a fork in the correct motions. Magic was a relief.

Feeling lighter and happier than he'd felt in ages, Harry felt his rebellious streak returning. He hadn't told Ron and Hermione about the stipulations of his freedom, but Harry suspected Hermione might be able to guess Pomfrey ordered him away from his broom. However, he didn't think Ron would make that connection, so when he grabbed his Firebolt from his trunk, he let Ron know he'd be out flying for a bit.

Mournfully, Ron looked up from the pile of books and parchment surrounding him. "Wish I could join you, mate, but I have a five foot Herbology essay that's already a few days overdue. No one expects you to be caught up yet."

Harry murmured his apologies and dashed out of Gryffindor Tower. Honestly, he was somewhat pleased Ron couldn't join him. He was craving the pure thrill flying gave him and wasn't interested in a pick-up Quidditch match. With days spent either in a world where magic doesn't exist or under Madam Pomfrey's hawk-like gaze, Harry needed the air.

The sky was partially overcast, but it wasn't raining or dark. Not the most ideal conditions, but Harry could make do. He squinted up at the sky and grinned. When he kicked off and started soaring through the air, he relished each loop and swoop. He had to fight the urge to close his eyes; the sensation of flying was pleasurable after such a long period of denial.

Harry found his thoughts drifting to his very first time on a broom. He remembered the ease of flying and how he'd found his first completely natural gift. McGonagall's voice echoed in his head, telling him that his father had been an excellent flyer, too. With a half-smile, he could remember the look of disdain on Malfoy's face when he'd received his Nimbus 2000. The boy's pale features screwed up in frustration and jealousy were still etched in his mind.

Pulling himself out of a dive, he recalled Wood teaching him the intricacies of the game. Briefly, he wondered how Oliver was doing for Puddlemere. The overwhelming joy of successfully catching the Snitch for the first time - even if it had been in his mouth - was still clear, even after all these years. Things had been so easy then.

But no, they hadn't, had they? He still was practically raised in a closet. Bullies plagued his existence and the memories of Dudley's fists connecting with his face were as clear as the joy of holding his wand for the first time. Every good thing was tempered with a bad thing. For every first flying experience, there were two dead parents. For every adventure with a troll, there was a madman trying to plot his death. Two teachers working for Voldemort, actively trying to kill him. A rat in sheep's clothing. A dead classmate. A dead godfather.

Just then, Harry clearly heard Sirius's voice echo in his ears. "Harry!" Sirius called. "Wake up! We're here for you. We need you here. Please."

Harry felt himself getting light-headed, as though he might pass out. Remembering he was still on a broom, he forced himself to land, as the scenery grew dimmer. He could hear other voices now, too, but he didn't pass out. Sitting on the grass, broom at his side, he tried to focus on his surroundings.

The scenery kept fading and Harry felt like an unseen force was pulling him, yet he *knew* he couldn't possibly be moving. It was a sticky feeling, like being pulled through glue.

A light rain started falling on Harry's face, as the clouds finally opened up. Sirius's voice was replaced by James's. He implored his son to come back to them. James said he knew Harry fit in with them. Lily spoke, overlapping with James. "Harry," his mother said kindly. "Harry, my Harry." She kept repeating his name again. James's voice joined the chant.

Harry watched the colour leech from the landscape, feeling a soft caress on his hand. "Harry, Harry, Harry."

With a soft *thud*, Harry fainted on the grass.

"So, hand in glove I stake my claim...If they dare touch a hair on your head, I'll fight to the last breath."

- The Smiths

Chapter 9 - Hand in Glove

When Harry came to, his parents and godfather were still chanting his name. With a gasp, he shot straight up, startling the people surrounding the bed. Lily had tears in her eyes, but a smile played on her lips. James hastily wiped at his eyes with the back of his hand, while Sirius comfortingly patted his friend on the back.

"I could *hear* you," Harry said incredulously. "I was flying by myself and I heard water at the back of my head and then I heard you, Sirius! Mum was crying and Dad was calling for me. And now I'm *here*. It...it was like glue. That's never happened before!" Desperate, he searched the room as though it would give him answers and was relieved when he settled on Dr. Mason's serene but concerned face.

Mason smiled tiredly. "I'm afraid that was my doing, Harry," he confessed. "I believe your connection to your friends are what keeps you rooted there. Now that you know you have connections here as well, you're waking more frequently."

Harry thought of Hermione's kind face, as she told him that she needed him at Hogwarts.

"Maintaining those connections here might help you ground yourself, so I reserved this private room for the day and had you moved here. Your parents wanted your other relatives to help, so they're waiting outside," said the doctor. "I also thought Draco might want to be here for this." At this, Harry finally noticed the blond boy standing next to his bed, looking small and staring at him expectantly. Dressed in a black sweater and grey trousers, Draco apparently was ready to receive company. Harry thought it might be criminal to look that good in something that simple. Before he realised what he was doing, a happy sigh escaped from Harry's lips. Draco smiled sheepishly, relief flooding his eyes.

Then, something occurred to Harry. Stealing a sideways glance at his parents, he mumbled, "How did you know I'd want Draco here?"

Dr. Mason leaned in and said quietly so that only Harry could hear, "We can talk about that later. For now, I'll simply say the hospital lets me have eyes where I normally wouldn't have them." A wave of embarrassment washed over Harry and he took a small gulp, nodding. Mason straightened up and said, "Mr. and Mrs. Potter, I have some other patients to check on, so I'll let you have a little private time with your son. I'll return in a while, but I hope you don't mind Mr. Malfoy staying here. I believe he and your son have bonded." With a wink that temporarily took years off his face, the doctor left. Sirius looked at Draco, then back at Harry and grinned. "Any friend of Harry's is a friend of mine, right Jamesy?" He pointedly looked to his friend.

Harry's father nodded. "Anything that helps keep you here works for me." He affectionately placed a kiss on his wife's temple, then tentatively did the same to Harry. Harry closed his eyes, as unfamiliar warmth filled his belly. "It's all about connections, right?" said James. His father took Lily's hand and grinned. Harry felt a grin spread across his face, too. Their giddiness was contagious.

With her free hand, Lily squeezed one of Harry's and held on. "Connections. You have us and you always will. Never, ever forget that."

Harry honestly answered, "I never have." Before he remembered he was sitting in front of his *parents*, Harry instinctively grabbed Draco's hand. Draco looked surprised, his eyes flying up to meet Lily and James's, but they just directed their beatific expressions at Harry's friend. *Friend? More than that, certainly*, he mused.

Turning his head towards Draco, Harry said, "You look...good," immediately berating himself for expressing himself so stupidly.

Draco chuckled. "So do you. And God, you look so much like your father."

"Yes, good looks tend to run in the Potter family," boasted James. Sirius rolled his eyes, while Lily nodded emphatically. "Speaking of which, there are a couple of them sitting outside, waiting to see Harry."

Harry's eyes lit up. Family was nearly a foreign concept to him, but he certainly could get used to this.

"Not just Potters!" admonished Lily. "My family is here, too. Would you like to see them?"

Overwhelmed, Harry managed a couple of words of assent. Lily and James both left to collect everyone.

When they were gone, Sirius turned to him, looking uncharacteristically grave and said, "The Potters are wonderful people, Harry. You're lucky to have family like them. My home life was never the best and your grandparents have always been a second home for me."

Harry looked at Sirius and insisted, "You're my family, too, Sirius."

Sirius's grin returned, stretching across his entire face. "Course I am," he replied gruffly. "You need me around. James is practically useless, after all."

Draco and Harry both laughed, as Harry's parents returned, framing the doorway. "What's so funny?" James said suspiciously.

"Your face," retorted Sirius. "Now let Harry meet his damned family already!"

James scuttled out of the way, revealing four older people directly behind his parents. "Harry, these are your grandparents," Lily said, linking her arms with two of them. The woman was small, with a smiling, pointed face and well-coiffed blonde hair. The man had the same green eyes as both his mother and him. He was completely bald and for once, Harry was happy to have inherited his father's hair. "This is my mother and father."

"Hi," said Harry, suddenly feeling very shy. He gripped Draco's hand more tightly and, happily, Draco squeezed back. Both of Lily's parents smiled warmly at him. Lily looked like a perfect combination of the two, especially when she smiled.

"And *these* two old coots are my parents," said James jovially, slinging his arms around the two other people.

"James Potter, if you call me old one more time, I will personally whip your hide. Contrary to popular belief, thirty-seven years old is *not* too old for a swat on the bum."

An innocent look plastered on his face, Sirius said, "I couldn't possibly agree with you more, Mrs. Potter."

James doubled over with laughter. "He got you there, Mum."

His grandmother sidled over to Sirius, throwing an arm around his waist. "Sirius is aware he can get me any time he'd like." Sirius laughed loudly.

James tried to look aghast, but he was still grinning. "Dad, you're not going to put up with this, are you? I mean, look at him," he said, gesturing to Sirius. "You don't stand a chance!" The smile on Sirius's face grew wider.

James's father shuffled over to his wife's other side and tiredly said, "Oh, she's always been too much woman for me, anyway." Harry's grandfather ran a hand through his own messy, grey hair. *It seems the hair's a Potter family tradition.*

Lily rolled her eyes. "I can't believe I married into this family." She ushered her parents inside and returned to her son's side. Harry then noticed a few more people in the doorway. His eyes narrowed dangerously. "What are they doing here?" he hissed to his mother.

Looking taken aback, Lily whispered, "Petunia wanted to come. She begged and said...well, I believe her exact words were, 'Our little Dudderkins was absolutely thrilled when he heard the

news! She said he was dying to apologise. They're your family, too, Harry. Please just give them a chance. For me."

Harry looked dubiously at the doorway where Dudley looked bored and not at all happy to see the person he'd put into a coma finally awake. Petunia, on the other hand, was nervously wringing her well-manicured hands, eyes zooming from side to side. She, at least, looked somewhat apologetic. Vernon looked purple and fat.

"Oh, for pity's sake, Petunia, come inside," said Mrs. Evans impatiently.

Petunia anxiously darted into the room, clutching Dudley around the shoulders. "We're so glad that you're feeling better, Harry," said his aunt in a sickeningly sweet tone. Harry noticed that his first name sounded absolutely foreign on her tongue and he wondered if he'd ever heard her say it without raising her voice a decibel and adding "POTTER, GET DOWN HERE RIGHT THIS INSTANT!" He doubted it. Petunia poked Vernon forward. "Go on," she said.

Uncle Vernon nervously cleared his throat and choked out, "Hello, boy. We're all very pleased that you're no longer in a coma or crazy. I do hope your brain isn't permanently broken."

Then, a few things happened very quickly. First, Sirius grabbed, so his father couldn't deck his uncle. Both men glared at Vernon with undisguised hatred. Second, Draco made a little squeaking noise and Harry realised he'd been gripping Draco's hand so hard that he'd hurt him. "I'm sorry," he sincerely said to Draco, with a sheepish smile. Third, Vernon noticed Harry holding Draco's hand and turned such a shade of purple he now mostly resembled a lumpy eggplant. He jumped about a foot back, knocking over a vase in the process because of all the shaking his movement caused. Crossly, Harry told his uncle, "You can't catch coma, you know. Nor anything else you think might rub off on you." He held steadily onto Draco's hand, though this time he was careful not to crush any of his bones. Vernon gave the impression that he was going to retort, but then he eyed James and Sirius, who were both sending death glares in his direction. Instead, he closed his mouth, which reduced his resemblance to a large-mouthed bass, and sat on a chair far, far away from the action. Aunt Petunia also sent a scathing look in her husband's direction, which Vernon returned, equally full of loathing. Harry raised his eyebrows. It seemed as though not having Harry around as scapegoat had forced them to turn on one another.

Petunia then pushed Dudley over. Dudley was still huge and must have boxed in this world, too, because his muscles bulged threateningly. He loomed over the bed and this time Draco squeezed Harry's hand nervously and let out a small noise that sounded very much like "Eep!" This time, Harry rubbed his thumb soothingly along Draco's hand. He had a hunch that his cousin was as stupid in this world as he was in the other. He could handle Dudley.

Dudley casually scratched his nose and said in the cloying tone usually reserved for begging for a fourth dessert or a fiftieth computer game, "Harry, I'm so relieved that you're well and I hope that for the sake of you, your parents and the rest of our family no more tragedy befalls you. I constantly think about the pain I inflicted on you. I was a petty little boy, jealous of things that I could not have. The years that have passed have allowed me to reflect and grow and I hope that you and I can become close. We're family, after all." Dudley's wide face stretched into an awkward, painful-looking smile.

Lily looked placated, Mrs. Evans looked at her other grandson with tears in her eyes and Petunia looked ready to burst. Even James and Sirius had calmed a little. Vernon was still purple.

Harry, on the other hand, narrowed his eyes dangerously. "Did someone write that speech for you, Dudders? Very impressive, but there's no way in hell that I'm buying that tripe." Petunia gasped a little and something flashed in Dudley's eyes. Remorse? Surprise? No, Harry knew this one. It was the same anger that would flash right before he threw a wobbler or used Harry as a punching bag.

He didn't shout, though. Instead, he hung his head, as though he was ashamed, and apologised profusely. "I don't expect you to forgive me so easily, Harry. I just thought you should hear the words I truly feel." Harry forced his expression to soften. Nothing would be accomplished by yelling.

"All right," he said through gritted teeth. "Let's move on from this whole mess." It wasn't as though he'd have to live with the Dursleys here, after all. Christmas hols, maybe a couple of daytrips in the summer and that would be it. He could learn to ignore his cousin.

With a lot of the tension in the room defused, Harry's grandparents started vying for his attention. He found he was enjoying himself immensely. Harry listened as Mr. and Mrs. Evans told stories about Lily and Harry's childhoods. When Lily told Harry she wanted to speak with her parents alone for a bit, he turned to his right, where Draco and Sirius were heatedly discussing Man U's chances. James and Mr. Potter joined them. Harry looked up to his grandfather and asked, "What should I call you? Grandfather? Grandpa? Did I have a special nickname for you? You know, I don't even remember your first name," he said regretfully.

Mr. Potter ruffled Harry's hair affectionately. "That's quite all right, my boy. You've been through a horrible ordeal, after all." Harry was about to state that not everything was horrible, but stopped himself. He didn't want to argue right then. "You've always called Granddad, but my name is Ronald. Most people call me Ron."

Harry blinked at his grandfather, surprised. "That's my best friend's name! Uh...there, I mean. Uhm, where I...was," he finished lamely.

Ron Potter looked shocked himself. "Really? Your parents never told me that. Of course, speaking about your progress has always been a painful thing for the two of them. They're lucky to have each other. I doubt either would have survived alone."

Suddenly sad, Harry looked down at his hands, but James suddenly interrupted, yelling, "Oi! Harry! Are you ready to get back as forward?"

Harry blinked. "Forward?"

"In footie!"

Smiling, Harry confessed that he didn't really know much about football. Dean was a fan, of course, but the Dursleys never really let Harry get involved in sports. Quidditch and running away from Dudley's gang had always been his main sources of exercise.

As it turned out, both James and Ron had played forward, though Sirius heartily expounded the benefits of being a halfback. James told his son he'd been showing a lot of promise before the accident occurred. Briefly, Harry entertained the idea of running up and down the field.

He *could* run fast and Quidditch was similar in some respects. As Harry thought about this, his visitors began forming klatches. Lily and Sirius were speaking with both of Harry's grandmothers. His grandfathers were chatting happily to one another, while Draco and his father spoke animatedly, though Harry couldn't make out what they were saying, but a lot of somewhat lewd hand gestures were being exchanged. Harry felt warm and happy.

In the corner, though, sat the Dursleys. All three stared at him coldly and Harry doubted the sincerity of Dudley's apology even more than before. Since Harry was no longer involved in any conversations, Dudley lumbered over to him and pulled up a chair along his bedside.

"Hello Dudley," said Harry as pleasantly as he could manage. "Did you need something?"

"Yes," said Dudley, in a familiar, callous voice. "I need you to fuck off and die."

Harry stared at Dudley, blinking rapidly.

"I'm *glad* I put you in that coma. For ten years, I was forced to co-exist with you. Oh, look at Harry, he's so smart. He made perfect marks! Oh, Harry has so many friends! Harry's showing great promise at football, Dudley. Do you play any sports? Fucking Golden Boy," he spat. Harry nervously looked around for reinforcement, but no one noticed their conversation. "I've been the only one for

six years now and I'm used to it. Don't you dare think about taking my place again, Potter, or I'll make sure to give you permanent brain damage."

Harry's mouth dropped open as Dudley continued, "Or maybe I'll take it out on that little poufter of a boyfriend of yours." Harry's anger overrode his fear. "Pretty thing, isn't he?" Dudley asked, glancing at Draco. "Bet he's a screamer."

Narrowing his eyes, Harry answered, "Dudley, you ever try hurting me and I'll make you sorry you were ever born. You may be bigger, but I've always been smarter than you and it sounds like I'm better at everything else, too. Think a little thing like a coma's going to stop me? Fuck off, Dudley. I don't want you here and I don't give a shit if I ever lay eyes on your ugly face ever again. Go be the apple of your parents' eyes and get the hell out of my face." He swivelled a bit and called, "Dad, Sirius, can I ask you something?" He smiled winningly at Dudley, who backed off and joined his parents again.

As Harry quickly made up a question about his father and godfather's childhood, he heard Dudley whine that he wanted to leave. Vernon rose immediately, but Petunia looked nervous before nodding her assent. She said her goodbyes to Harry, her parents and Lily. Dudley and Vernon said nothing before they went. When they were gone, Harry breathed a sigh of relief.

A little more time passed pleasantly and before long, Harry's grandparents took their leave. His grandmothers each left kisses on his cheeks. Lily's father bent down for a hug and James's father ruffled Harry's hair again. The familial warmth that had surged through him before Dudley's unwelcome confrontation returned.

Once his grandparents left, Dr. Mason returned. "Draco," the doctor said pleasantly, glancing at his watch, "I believe you have an appointment in a few minutes." Draco nodded and bent down to Harry's side. He and Harry then looked nervously at the four adults still present, all of whom were tactfully averting their eyes. Draco quickly placed a soft kiss on Harry's lips. "I'll see you later tonight, okay?" he said in a voice low enough that no one else would hear him.

Harry nodded and bit his lower lip. Draco pleasantly made his farewells, but glanced at Harry, his eyes darkened by worry or something Harry couldn't quite place. Harry tried smiling encouragingly. Draco smirked briefly and then was gone.

Lily, James and Sirius joined Dr. Mason at Harry's bedside once again. The doctor asked if they enjoyed their afternoon of family time.

"Well, I wasn't too thrilled with the Dursleys, but it was wonderful meeting ~~er~~, seeing ~~er~~ my grandparents. I'm glad you let Draco be here." He smiled slyly. "Plus, these three were here and they're all right, I suppose."

Sirius and James laughed, while Lily rolled her eyes and muttered, "Oh, he's definitely a Potter." Harry grinned.

Dr. Mason chuckled and said, "Harry here is showing amazing progress. He's staying alert for longer and longer periods of time and waking more frequently than he ever has. I think it's only a matter of time before he's here permanently. Once we make sure he's adjusting properly, he'll be able to leave and you can take your son home."

James and Lily's grins were a mile wide. "That will be wonderful, won't it, Harry?"

After a split-second of hesitation, Harry nodded, but really, he was panicked. *Permanently? No more Hogwarts or magic? No more Hermione and Ron?* He'd, of course, considered the possibility of having his parents and Sirius once again, but the final realisation of never seeing the world he knew ever again hit him like a ton of bricks.

Then, he thought of the familial love he'd truly experienced for the very first time today. He thought of Draco and Dudley threatening to hurt him. His temper flared and he nodded with more confidence. "It will be wonderful," he said firmly, still trying to convince himself. "I want to do whatever it takes to get well. I want to be well."

Mason studied Harry's face carefully before replying, "If you truly want to get well, I believe you can, although I think it may be difficult. Are you willing to work?"

Resolutely, Harry said, "This is where I belong." His voice displayed more certainty than he actually felt.

The doctor allowed himself a small smile. "Then I have a theory on what must be done. You and I can speak about it in private during the meeting we have scheduled tomorrow afternoon. I sincerely hope you can make it."

Harry said, "Tomorrow. I'll be there." Harry was surprised at how sure his voice sounded.

Dr. Mason then turned to Harry's parents and Sirius. "Folks, I think it would be best if you left Harry alone now. I need to speak to him about something other than his treatment and I'm sure he'd appreciate some privacy on the matter." He fixed Harry with a meaningful look and Harry blushed scarlet.

Lily bent down and kissed Harry's temple. His father and Sirius settled for more hair ruffling. As he futilely tried to press it back into place, James called, "Think about the footie!" He sadly waved goodbye to them, feeling the loss already, and dreading the conversation he and Dr. Mason were about to have.

Before the doctor could say a word, Harry babbled, "This is about Draco, isn't it? I'm really sorry, but we just got caught up in the moment. I don't want him to get in any trouble and if he is, I want to be in at least as much because it's both of our fault." He cringed, "I'm sorry about the coats. We gave them back, though. And I'm really, really sorry you had to see or hear whatever you did. It won't happen again, I promise."

Dr. Mason quirked his lips. "A pre-emptive strike, Harry? That's a commendable route. I personally usually wait until the other person actually accuses me of doing something, but that might be considered cowardly, right?"

Harry slowly bobbed his head, unsure about how to react.

Continuing fondly, Mason told Harry, "Did you know I knew your father and godfather in school?"

Harry shook his head, but was relieved to finally realise who the doctor at least partially resembled.

"We weren't close - it was damned near impossible to split the two of them up, after all. Still is, from the looks of it. I was too studious for them, anyway. But when your parents were searching for a doctor for you, Sirius remembered what I'd chosen for my career. Ever since you've come here, I've had a vested interest in your case. A lot of people would have written you off, but I couldn't do it. I became immersed in your world and I understand the reasons you'd never want to leave."

Confused, Harry nodded again, hoping for more explanation.

"In other words, I'm going to go light on you because I know what you've been through. I also know that Draco has had things even harder than you, as he's never had an imaginary world to which he could escape. I didn't watch the tape past the first minute or so, once I realised what was happening. Though, I admit, I was kind of shocked."

Harry imagined his skin now resembled a tomato. "I'm sorry, sir," he mumbled.

"As you should be. You sneaked out of the hospital and went somewhere without anyone's knowledge. If anything had happened, no one would have been able to find you. You also stole two of our staff member's coats and though you gave them back, I think it would be in your best interest for you and Mr. Malfoy to donate funds so those could be replaced."

"I'll definitely do that," Harry said, shaking his head up and down emphatically.

Mason smiled. "I know you're basically a good kid and that even in the best of us, hormones can sometimes block out one's brain functions. I just ask that you no longer leave the ward without permission and that you and Draco restrict your activities to more publicly permissible ones. Come on. If we go back to your regular room now, you'll be around when he returns."

The doctor helped Harry out of bed and onto his feet. Clutching at the back of his hospital gown, Harry complained, "I'll never get a hang of these things."
"Oh, come on, Harry. A nice healthy breeze is good for you," said Dr. Mason. Harry laughed and the two walked out of the room and into the hallway.

*"Your humour is as black as them
I look at yours, you laugh at mine
And 'love' is just a miserable lie
You have destroyed my flower-like life
Not once - twice
You have corrupt my innocent mind
Not once - twice
I know that wind-swept mystical air
It means: I'd like to see your underwear"*
- The Smiths

Chapter 10 - Miserable Lie

That evening, Harry lay restlessly in his bed, staring at the unfamiliar ceiling. He had to admit that he missed his bed in Gryffindor tower, with its appearance of safety and warmth, no matter how deceptive those appearances could be. It was the curtains that did it. The red curtains surrounding made him feel hidden, enclosed; wide open spaces made Harry a bit nervous, maybe because of the exposure of the area or, more likely, a side-effect of having spent his formative years in a cupboard. Yet another thing to thank the Dursleys for. Maybe his parents would let him decorate that way when he got home.

A room at home? Harry had never really thought of that. He wondered whether his parents' house was big. Perhaps it was cosy. He believed that wherever they lived would be comfortable because James and Lily seemed like comfortable, wonderful people, but it was interesting to think about having a room that wasn't under a set of stairs, nor primarily decorated with broken down junk. Just then, the door to the ward swung open, startling Harry, but apparently no one else. He supposed they must be used to this type of thing. Propping himself up on his elbows, Harry watched to see who'd interrupted his thoughts. What he saw was Draco walking over to his bed, ashen, a crease of worry between his brows. Concerned, Harry watched him carefully. He hadn't seen Draco since he'd said good-bye to Harry and his parents and now it was nearly eleven o'clock. There was no way he could have been in session all this time.

Harry waved a bit, trying to get the other boy's attention, and feeling a little silly since he was just over an arm's length away. "Draco," he whispered loudly. "Where have you been? Are you all right?" When Draco didn't acknowledge him at all, Harry hopped out of bed and wandered over to his bedside, trying the reliable 'poke him in the shoulder' method of attention-getting.

If it was possible, Draco looked like he'd been physically dragged from his reverie. Blankly staring through Harry, he looked confused for a moment before saying, "Hmm? What? Oh, hello, Harry." By the tone of his voice, Draco was quite distracted. It would seem Harry hadn't been the only one lost in thought.

Harry offered a small smile. "You do realise that it's eleven, don't you? I hear people sometimes get in trouble for wandering the hospital at all hours," he said, joking.

"Oh, that. I was wandering around the nurses' station. Sometimes they don't mind me there, as long as I'm quiet and they're not too busy. It's just too hard to think in here - too many people and everything is so sterile. Not that it's not up front or anything, but the nurses help...I guess I just wanted to be around people."

Unsuccessfully trying to mask his hurt, Harry scuffed his bare feet along the floor. "You could have talked to me, you know," he mumbled.

Surprisingly, Draco smiled at this. "I know that, silly. I just wasn't ready to talk yet and I knew I wouldn't be able to help myself as soon as I saw you. You tend to bring things out of me when I don't really expect it."

Harry hoisted himself onto Draco's bed, kicking at Draco's legs, forcing him to sit cross-legged. Harry mirrored the position, so they were sitting facing one another. "Are you ready to talk now?" "No." Draco smiled again. "But I'll tell you anyway. My doctor told me that she's extremely impressed with my behaviour as of late. According to her, I haven't tried hurting myself in nearly a year. I had no idea it had been that long. I'm 'withdrawing less often' and 'associating positively with others.'" Draco made quote-motions with his fingers. "I suppose she's right, especially if by others, she means the boy who's comatose half the time."

"Well, that's good, isn't it?" Harry shifted closer, so his knees brushed against Draco's. "Besides, it's not just me. My family really liked you."

"They remind me of you," Draco replied, as though this was the most obvious thing in the world. Then, after a pause, he shuddered and added, "Except the nasty, bloated purple ones. Are you sure you're actually related to them?"

"Unfortunately, I'm quite sure." Harry tried squashing the angry flare that accompanied thoughts of Dudley and forced himself to focus on the topic at hand. "You're changing the subject, though. Why is getting along with others a bad thing?"

"I suppose it's not, inherently. But they're taking this as a sign that I'm getting better." He paused and took a deep breath. "Harry, they want to release me."

Harry stared at Draco with wide eyes before letting out the quietest whoop of joy possible. "But that's *brilliant*, Draco! No more hospital! No more of these stupid gowns that like to open at the most inopportune times. No more sharing a room with a bunch of other boys."

"Well," Draco said, reaching over to stroke Harry's cheek. "I rather like that part." Harry knew he was grinning stupidly, but he couldn't particularly help it, especially if Draco's thumb was going to keep moving like that.

"Draco..." Harry closed his eyes, relishing the feel of the skin-to-skin contact, then reached over to grab Draco's free hand and --

Suddenly, a voice called from the corner of the room, "Will you two love birds shut the fuck up already?"

"Stuff it, Nott!" shouted Draco pleasantly. "Jealousy is such an ugly emotion."

Embarrassed, Harry told Nott that they'd keep it down.

Draco cocked his head to one side, jerking it towards the exit. "Want to get out of here?"

Harry shook his head. "No, let's just keep it down. Dr. Mason is kind of keeping a close watch on us and I'm really not interested in annoying him. He...well, he didn't yell, - I don't think he's capable of that - but he just wasn't too happy. Let's just say he had a particularly fascinating video of the two of us, which he was only too happy *not* to watch."

"What? Ohh," said Draco, momentarily looking confused, then realising what Harry had meant.

"Damn. Yeah, I like him. No reason to make him unnecessarily mad."

"Especially not since we'll both be getting out of here soon." Harry excitedly squeezed Draco's hand.

Draco nodded slowly, still unsure. In a very quiet voice, he asked, "You'll still want to see me...out there?"

Harry snorted and grinned. "Are you crazy?" Pause. "Wait. Don't answer that." Draco smirked, as Harry continued, "Besides the fact that talking to you is more fun than I remember having had in a long time, I also...uh, uhm...want..." Harry stammered, mortified by what he was about to let slip.

"You also want the chance to see me naked again? It's understandable." Draco grinned. "I'm just worried about my reintroduction to the real world. You've really nothing to worry about; I mean, for living in an imaginary world for half your life, you're incredibly well-adjusted."

Again, Harry snorted in disbelief. "Yes, I'm oh-so-very normal."

Draco insisted, "You *are*. Besides, you had social interactions for years without ever leaving your bed. I just had these idiots." He gestured dramatically around the room.

"I heard that!" yelled the same voice as before.

"Shut up, Nott!" Draco yelled back, voice less pleasant this time around.

Nott made kissy noises in reply.

Lowering his voice even further, Draco muttered, "I'm going to wring his neck, I swear to God." He took a moment to compose himself and continued, "Anyway, there's school here, for those of us who can concentrate on it, but it's so individualised. I attended regular classes...before...but it's been years. Look at me; I'm a born outcast! I'm a pale, twitchy, scarred freak."

Harry's mouth dropped open. He couldn't believe Draco thought of himself that way. "I think you're b-beautiful," said Harry honestly, stumbling over his words a bit. "Pale, twitchy, scarred, maybe, yeah, but beautiful, too. And trust me, I *am* looking at you."

Draco's cheeks immediately coloured pink.

"Besides, you're sixteen. Maybe you can get taught at home before you're ready for university if you even want to do that sort of thing."

"Malfoys go to Oxford, Harry," Draco said matter-of-factly. "Only the best for us." He sighed heavily. Harry rolled his eyes. "Ah, but you're not exactly a normal Malfoy, are you? You do whatever's good for you and once I'm out of here, I'll help you. You must live at least somewhere nearby. I doubt your grandparents put you some place clear across the country."

"Malfoys have houses in every region. But true, my parents' main estate was located nearby and my grandparents also own property somewhere around here."

Harry wrinkled his brow and said, "I know my aunt and uncle lived in Surrey? Little Whinging, to be exact? but I'm not sure where my parents live. S'funny not to know where your house is. There are so many things in this life that I have no memory of."

With conviction, Draco said, "I know you'll get it. Whatever's missing...well, you might not remember it ever, but I know you'll get this life down. Plus, I'll help you." Draco, who'd never seemed shy either in this world or the next, was now intently studying his knees.

"Yes, we'll need each other, won't we?" asked Harry, his courage returning. "It's not like I've been in a normal school for the past few years. I'm still adjusting to not having magic surround me. For instance, right now, I just want to grab my broomstick and fly."

"I'll grab your broomstick for ya', Harry!" called Nott.

Draco's eyes looked like they were about to bug out of his head, as Harry reddened considerably.

"Nott, we are trying to have a private conversation here! Either stop listening or bite your tongue before I tie it in a knot!" Draco looked fondly at Harry. "Besides, I saw him and his broomstick first."

Harry grinned. "Maybe some other time, Nott," he yelled back. Draco and Nott both laughed, far too loudly for the late hour.

"You really think I'll be all right once I'm released?" Draco asked tentatively.

"Yes," Harry insisted, suddenly resolute. "You'll have me and I'll have you." He flopped back onto Draco's bed, deciding he wasn't moving ever again.

"Good." Draco crawled alongside him and propped his head up, leaning in for a kiss. Harry closed his eyes and moved towards him, anticipating Draco's mouth, and studiously ignoring the nagging feeling at the back of his head.

As Harry probed the once seemingly willing mouth, it flinched a little before continuing its assault on Harry's tongue and he idly wondered if he'd accidentally bit Draco's lip. Since Draco didn't break the kiss, he decided he'd imagined what had happened and experimentally sucked on Draco's lower lip, eliciting a low moan from the other boy.

Eyes still half-closed, Harry pulled away and snickered. "What's Nott going to say if you keep making noises like that?" He started to lean in again.

"Potter, what the hell do you think you're doing?" A pause, then a confused, "Wait. What does Nott have to do with this?"

Harry's eyes opened all the way and horrified, he flung himself to the opposite side of the bed. Draco was no longer stretched next to Harry. He'd been hovering over the bed and now was settling himself into a chair pulled close to Harry's bedside. The chair Draco sat in happened to be located in the hospital wing of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. "Shit," was Harry's only reply. Malfoy cocked an eyebrow at him, ignoring the profanity. "Rumour has it that you were found passed out on the Quidditch pitch. Alone, at that, unless you count your Firebolt as company. Considering the people you usually associate with, I can't say that that's not an improvement." Desperately trying to regulate his breathing while begging his brain to dispel his quite possibly very obvious, very embarrassing arousal, he managed to say, "What the hell do you think *you* were doing, Malfoy? Why were you leaning over me like that? It's nice that you've taken a step up from just *watching* me sleep. If I didn't know any better, I'd say you think yourself to be my Prince Charming."

Malfoy looked vaguely uncomfortable. "I wasn't watching you sleep. That's daft. I was plotting your death for our Dark Lord."

"Ah. Like another shot at me, would you? I already told you that you had free rein." Harry felt a tiny bit more composed.

Malfoy seemed somewhat nervous. "I really was. I've got an assignment. Tomorrow I'm to let the Dark Lord and his followers past the wards. If you're unconscious, he'll kill you right then. If you're not, he'll fight you, I suppose." Draco leaned over so his forehead was now buried in Harry's mattress. "Not that I care or anything," he said, words muffled by the bedding.

"Why are you telling me this?"

"I don't really know, Potter. Just be glad that I did."

"I think it's because you don't want me to die."

"I *do*," Malfoy insisted unconvincingly. "I just...I just don't know if I can be the one who does it." Bent over the way he was made Malfoy look lost and very young.

Shocking himself, Harry pulled back to the middle of the bed, then reached for the back of Draco's head. After hovering over the skin for a moment, Harry started soothingly rubbing at the nape of his neck. Draco started, but didn't bat away the offending hand or sit up. For a second, he froze, but then relaxed into the movement. Then, to Harry's amazement, he thought he heard Draco moan again softly. Mortified, Harry noticed he was nearly instantly aroused.

I hate being sixteen, he thought dourly.

The two stayed that way for a few moments; Draco with his head bent, occasionally responding favourably to Harry's machinations and Harry desperately willing himself not to get hard. And failing. Spectacularly. Yet, he never removed his hand from Draco's head until Draco suddenly sat up, looking flushed and dishevelled.

Draco allowed himself a small smile and said, "That's a rather weak spot of mine."

"I know," said Harry, before he could stop himself. He remembered the reaction he'd got on the balcony, his hands tangled through Draco's hair.

Lightly, Draco said, "You know? Why, have you been watching me messing around in dark corridors? Maybe I'm not the only one who's been watching someone else in secret. Oh, wait. You're probably trying to kill me, too."

Harry's eyes went wide. "What? No...I-I never! I wasn't..."

"Denial only makes my case stronger, Potter."

Exasperated, Harry said, "Dra- *Malfoy*, I am not following you around the corridors. I *promise* you that."

"Then why would you know something like that? And better yet, let's get back to my original question — why on Earth were you kissing me when you woke up?"

"Well, maybe I have one of those comas where a snog wakes you up!" Harry said angrily, before he could stop himself. "Or better yet, maybe I'd been kissing someone before you so rudely interrupted!"

Malfoy gave a short laugh at Harry's reaction. "Your coma seems kind of fun, Potter. Who were you kissing? Granger? I know...maybe it was the Weasley bint. She's definitely got her... positive aspects." He paused, then taunted, "Or maybe it was the Weasley *boy*. Gangly limbs and a load of freckles do it for you? Never pegged you for a player on the other team."

Harry gave a snort of disgust. "Me, a player on the other team? I'm fairly sure you and I play on the same team, Malfoy."

Momentarily confused, Draco paused before looking taken aback. "I do not! I...I'm quite attracted to women." Another paused, then very quickly, "Are you *sure* you never saw me in a corner anywhere?"

Harry burst out laughing and despite his better judgment asked, "How would you react if I told you I'd been kissing my best worst enemy?"

"What? Wait. Me?"

"No. I was kissing Voldemort. Those red eyes really do it for me. Or wait! It was Snape. He and I were getting randy on the floor of the Potions classroom."

"Potter, you're making me ill."

Harry exploded into hysterical laughter. Draco looked at him like he was crazy, his eyes darting from side-to-side, and probably plotting his escape. Harry, still laughing, wiped the tears from his eyes and said, "Yes. It was you. I was kissing Draco Malfoy and quite liking it. Do you have a problem with that?" He leaned forward until his face was nearly touching Draco's again, daring him.

Draco by closing the distance between them and forcing Harry's mouth open with a full-on tongue invasion. Harry was surprised, but not unpleasantly so, trying to match Draco's frantic movements with his own mouth. Breathless, they parted for a moment, and they stared at each other, that moment passing between them when Harry might skitter away or Draco might flee in terror. Then, Harry reached out, grabbing a fistful of Draco's robes and, pulling the other boy to him, kissing him desperately. Though he knew it wouldn't work, Harry tried pouring every ounce of his frustration, his doubts and his worries into the kiss.

He felt hands tangle through his hair and he moaned into Draco's mouth. Despite having seen Draco Malfoy naked not so long ago, Harry couldn't believe that he and Draco were snogging right now. This was the Draco he hated, after all. The one with the smirk and the maddeningly well-groomed hair and the one that had hated him back as intensely as Harry hated him.

Harry once again ran his hands through the once perfectly groomed hair, deriving a modicum of satisfaction from messing Draco up. *Serves him right*, Harry thought. *Bring him down to my level*. When he pulled away and got a look at Draco, messy hair and all, Harry's breath hitched. Pointy-faced, pale, arrogant Draco Malfoy looked completely debauched and Harry had never wanted something more in his life. Harry shrugged, figuring he had nothing to lose, and pulled Draco on top of him.

Draco, now face-to-face and well, other things-to-other things, pulled back slightly. Harry mourned the loss. "This is crazy," Draco breathed. "You're crazy."

"Yes, well, I've been told I'm not quite right in the head. Do you want to stop?" Harry asked, dreading the answer. "I won't say anything if you do."

Draco mulled this over, while Harry shifted a bit, unintentionally brushing his erection against Draco's. Harry whimpered and Draco's decision was made. "No," he said firmly.

As Draco caught Harry's lower lip between his teeth, while simultaneously unbuttoning his pyjama top, Harry decided that maybe this enemy thing wasn't so bad.

"I'd better go now."

"Probably." Pause. "You don't...you don't have to, though."

"No, I do. I'm probably up to my ears in trouble by now and I doubt Pomfrey would be too pleased to walk in and find me in your bed. I...that was unexpected."

"Was it bad?"

"No. No, whatever that was, it was definitely not bad. Just unexpected."

"Don't worry. I won't tell anyone what happened."

"Thank you. Potter...your secret's safe with me, too."

Laugh. "Oh, it isn't as though my reputation could get any worse. Don't worry about it."

Pause. "I won't help tonight. I can't. Not after..."

"Don't be silly. You'll get yourself killed. I'm right in saying you're not ready to die, right?"

"No. I mean, yes. I'm not ready to die."

"Tell Dumbledore what's happening, so he'll be prepared and can protect everyone, but do your job."

"I don't know if I can do that."

"You can."

"This can't change anything between us."

"I know."

With that, Draco was gone. Sitting up as he slowly buttoned his nightshirt, Harry found he was possibly more confused than he ever had been.

When Harry woke up the next day, he called out for his mother and father, though he immediately recognised his surroundings as Hogwarts. Madam Pomfrey tried soothing him, but he gently pushed her away, inwardly irritated that she still thought him to be a small child. Small children weren't expected to defeat the greatest dark wizard of the age or stay indefinitely in a mental hospital. Nor were they responsible for defiling their beds because they'd done unspeakable things with one of their worst enemies. *Can you really consider him an enemy anymore, Potter?* nagged that irritating inner voice.

Harry didn't want to be treated like a child right now. When he hopped out of the bed and started pacing around, Pomfrey implored him to lay down again.

"I just don't feel like lying down anymore, Madam Pomfrey," he tried explaining. "Everywhere I go, I wake up in a bed. I'm sick of bed. Hell, maybe it's the beds that are making me fall unconscious."

Madam Pomfrey fixed him with such a glare that if looks could kill, Harry Potter would have had a lovely burial ceremony by then. "Considering we last found you on the Quidditch pitch, I somehow doubt the beds are responsible. You may walk around, as long as you stay within the confines of this room. Is that clear, Mr. Potter?"

Sullenly, Harry replied, "Yes, Madam Pomfrey."

Seemingly satisfied, Madam Pomfrey smoothed her apron. "Good. I came in here to tell you that you have some visitors."

"Oh. Really? That's all right then. Is it Ron and Hermione?"

Nodding, Madam Pomfrey bustled off to retrieve them. A moment later, Ron strolled in with Hermione practically bouncing in his wake. *Perhaps my brain really did break this time*, Harry thought, observing Hermione's uncharacteristic behaviour.

Jerking his head towards Hermione, he asked Ron, "What's with her?"

Ron shrugged and replied, "No idea. She won't tell me what it is. Probably a terribly fun piece of homework or a way to add an extra ten study hours to the day. She won't stop bouncing like that," he said, throwing a sideways glance in Hermione's direction. "Not that I mind that particular side effect."

For that, Ron got swatted across the stomach, causing him to double over slightly. "Ronald Weasley, you're a disgusting pig," sniffed Hermione.

"What? I was just appreciating the female form," he said indignantly. Harry laughed. "Now, tell Harry whatever it is you're so excited about."

"Oh yes, of course," said Hermione, now flustered. "I have some good news about your problem."

"Oh?" said Harry, raising an eyebrow. He carefully kept any sign of doubt from his voice.

Hermione nodded, still beaming. "Remember when I told you that I was working with some of the teachers? Well, Flitwick and I think we've come up with a possible solution for you. It involves Snape, too, but..."

Ron looked surprised. Obviously, he'd been told nothing of this breakthrough.

"It's experimental, of course. But we think that if we cast certain protection charms on you, in conjunction with a potion Professor Snape is developing, we may be able to block out fictional realities. The potion...well, this isn't it exactly, of course, but in layman's terms, it's almost a cross between Veritaserum and a Dreamless Sleep Potion. The difference here is the effects would be permanent, especially when combined with additional protective charms."

"So, my other world would disappear," said Harry, mouth going completely dry.

Hermione nodded happily, seemingly oblivious to the fact that her enthusiasm was not shared by all present. "This will be beneficial to you in other ways, Harry. I...I hate to bring this up, but do you remember the dreams that you were having about the door in the Department of Mysteries?"

Harry bitterly retorted, "Not about to forget that, am I?"

Hermione either didn't notice his tone or was still ignoring it. "Well, that was a form of what we think Voldemort is doing now. He'd no longer get to control your dreams, nor create a world that could effectively trap you. However, I don't believe it would do anything to actually stop your link the two of you have. You could still potentially see what he's doing, unless he blocks you out, just like he could possibly see what you do."

"What does that mean, exactly?" asked Harry.

"I'm not sure exactly what will happen, but I suspect you'd need to consider continuing your Occlumency lessons with Professor Snape. There's still potential for him either taking over your mind or gaining information by seeing what you see. He just wouldn't be able to make things up anymore."

Great. Lose my family, keep Snape. Fantastic prospect. Harry plastered a fake smile on his face, determined to look happy because she'd worked so hard, despite the war going on in his head.

"That's great, Hermione. I'm so happy all your hard work paid off." Hermione practically glowed at the compliment.

Ron patted Harry on the back. "It'll be really good to have you back full time, Harry."

Harry softened and tried a more sincere smile. "You're right. It would be nice to not wake up here every couple of days, not quite knowing where I am. I do have a question, though. Will this potion affect my dreams at all? Will I still dream normally, I mean?"

"Oh!" exclaimed Hermione. "Yes, of course. It will only block foreign invasion. Besides Voldemort, no one else should be able to place fake memories in your head."

"This almost sounds too good to be true," said Harry, bitterness creeping back into his voice.

Hermione looked like she was about to reply, but Harry interrupted her. "Can either of you find Dumbledore for me? Or find McGonagall, if you can't find him. It's urgent." Ron and Hermione both nodded and dashed out of the room.

About twenty minutes later, Harry's two friends returned with Dumbledore. The Headmaster peered over his glasses and said, "Harry, you needed to speak with me?"

Harry didn't ask Ron and Hermione to leave, but in a soft voice asked the Headmaster, "Did Draco Malfoy come see you today?"

The Headmaster looked surprised, which Harry took as a no. He felt anger rise in his chest. He really thought he could trust Draco. He supposed that was what he got for confusing his fantasy with his reality.

Sighing, he raised his voice to his normal level, as he warned Professor Dumbledore, "I think there's going to be an ambush on the school tonight. Draco Malfoy's supposed to let down the wards so they can attack. I believe the first order of business will involve killing me as I sleep." Hermione gasped, covering her mouth with her hand, while Ron instantly looked murderous.

"How do you know all this?" asked Dumbledore.

Harry sighed and said, "I...I can't tell you that, sir." If Malfoy hadn't told, Harry wasn't about to say it. Besides, that would only lead to questions Harry wasn't ready to answer. "I'm just sure it's going to happen." Harry wasn't positive, but he thought he detected a little twinkle in Dumbledore's eyes. Dumbledore nodded and said, "You never let me answer your original question. Mr. Malfoy did indeed come see me this morning. We agreed that he should let down the wards and then retreat for safety. The well-being of my students is of my first priority and it would do you well to remember that you're included in that, Harry. Believe me, you will be well-protected tonight." Harry breathed a sigh of relief. Draco had told. He might not be perfect, or even particularly good, but at least Harry could now truly believe that the boy he wanted didn't want him dead. *Regular people don't have these problems*, he thought mournfully.

"Thank you, Professor Dumbledore," he said sincerely.

"Thank you for telling me, Harry. I'm also pleased you and Mr. Malfoy have been getting along so well throughout this ordeal." Dumbledore swept out of the room with a smile on his face. Harry closed his eyes and wished the bed would swallow him up whole. He wondered just how much the Headmaster really knew. *Stupid hormones*.

Opening his eyes, he tried ignoring the shocked expressions on Hermione and Ron's faces. "So. Anything else interesting going on around here?"

"What does he mean you and Malfoy have been getting along so well?" shouted Ron, causing Harry to wince. "*Malfoy*, Harry?"

Harry then clapped his hand to his head and heard Dr. Mason's voice. Again, he was being pulled through glue.

"Harry? Harry, snap out of it. Harry?" He felt a series of light taps along the side of his face. Dazed, his eyes flickered open.

"Yes, I'm here, Prof...I mean, Dr. Mason." Harry tried shaking off the groggy feeling he was having. Dr. Mason smiled kindly. "I'm glad you kept our appointment."

"Appointment?" *Oh. Right*. Harry recalled his promise from last evening. "Woke up just in time, then, did I?"

Chuckling, Dr. Mason nodded. "I had Vincent and Greg lead you down here because I wanted to see if I could wake you up."

"And you did. How? Same way my parents did?"

"Somewhat, I suppose. With your parents, I had them focus on you and the love they have for you to get your attention. When I was calling your name just then, I was simply calling your name. It's an interesting development, to say the least; I deeply suspect that if I'd just called your name several

times a few weeks ago, you would not have done anything at all. So, congratulations on all your work."

Harry mumbled a thank you. He straightened in his chair and said, "You said you had a theory on my situation yesterday. Can you tell me what that was?"

Mason nodded. "You told me you were ready to work yesterday, right?"

"I am." Harry was more confident now. He wanted his parents and comfort and a home. A Draco that wasn't morally ambiguous — at least, not in ways that weren't wholly pleasant to Harry's person. He didn't want to be sentenced to a life as the saviour of the world, pursued by a madman.

"Do you remember I told you that the work might be painful?" Harry nodded. He was accustomed to pain. "This pain may be emotional, more than physical. Are you still willing to try?"

"What have I got to lose?"

"Well, for one, I believe it would effectively end your fantasies. The world you've known for the past six years will vanish."

Harry had already suspected as much; he'd soon have to choose. "And what do you mean by emotional pain?"

"Well," Dr Mason said gently, "I believe in order for this to succeed, you have to cut your ties to that world while still in that world."

Looking confused, Harry chewed on his lower lip. "I'm not sure if I understand what you mean, Doctor."

"You'll have to concentrate on your life here. Tell yourself that Hogwarts — and everything and everyone inside of it - is make-believe. Tell yourself that this is the real world, not that one." The doctor paused, as though he was unsure how to put what he wanted to say.

"I think I understand that much, Dr. Mason. I'm just not sure how to do it."

"You showed signs of improvement once some of your emotional ties were cut in that world. You've withdrawn somewhat from your friends and your godfather has died." Harry shuddered, not wanting to be reminded. "I think you need to cut that off completely. Cut your emotional ties. Run from the school, do whatever you have to do so your friends no longer associate with you. The more alone you are there, the less alone you'll be here."

Inhaling a shaky breath, Harry agreed.

"You'll have to fight. You'll have to believe you're as strong as I know you are. Are you willing to fight?"

"I am willing to fight," Harry said. Silently, he added, *I'm willing to hurt my friends*. He sighed deeply.

"Good. Take your time with this, Harry. But this will ultimately aid in your complete recovery."

The more alone he was there, the less alone Harry should feel here. Trapped between two worlds, with people who loved him and saw after his well-being on both sides, Harry doubted he'd ever felt more alone.

Once he was back in his room, everyone else was missing. After getting settled on his bed, he *willed* himself back to Hogwarts. He wasn't all that surprised when it actually worked.

"Call me morbid, call me pale. I've spent too long on your trail, far too long chasing your tail. And if you have five seconds to spare, then I'll tell you the story of my life: Sixteen, clumsy and shy - that's the story of my life."

- The Smiths

Chapter 11 - Half a Person

When Harry woke up, Ron and Hermione were still there, peering at him in concern. Judging by their relative positions, he assumed that not much time had passed at all.

"God," Harry spat, trying to sound as angry as possible. "Don't the two of you have anything better to do than sit around watching me? I'm not helpless, you know."

Hermione looked a little taken aback. "We don't think you're helpless! You... you just passed out again; Ron and I were trying to revive you."

"Harry, what the hell is going on with you?" Ron's voice was demanding, a cross expression on his face. "Dumbledore sweeps in and you tell us Hogwarts is under attack, you and Malfoy are apparently best mates, --"

That's one way of putting it.

"-- which is definitely news to me, and then you pass out only to come to five minutes later!"

"So?" Harry asked sullenly.

"So? So, now you're yelling at us and acting as though Hermione and I have offended your delicate sensibilities. Considering you were unconscious, I don't see how that's possible. Tell us what's happening!"

Harry looked down guiltily before remembering his mission. He had to break ties, no matter what the cost, and if that meant acting like an unreasonable git, than so be it. Time to put the plan into action, even if he hadn't the foggiest idea about how to go about that. God, he just needed time to *think*.

"It's nothing, Ron. I... I've got to go."

With that, he hopped out of bed, shoved his feet into his slippers and threw his dressing gown over his t-shirt and pyjama bottoms. He then ran out of the room as though he'd been shot from a cannon, grabbing his wand as he went. Whatever he was going to do, Harry knew he needed to make a stop first.

As he rushed out of the room, Hermione called after him, "Harry, where are you going?"

"The lav," he shouted over his shoulder. Of course, Hermione would quickly work out that he was moving in the wrong direction, and when he heard two sets of footsteps behind him, he knew it was his friends trying to keep up with him. Ron would normally have no problem overtaking him, being so much taller than Harry, but he probably was keeping pace with Hermione.

As he made his way toward Gryffindor Tower, Harry ignored the occasional person witnessing him wandering around in his pyjamas. In his single-minded pursuit of his trunk, Harry got all the way to the sixth-floor entrance before realising he didn't know the password.

"Come on, come on," Harry muttered under his breath, hoping someone would tumble out.

Hermione and Ron caught up with him as he stood there. Hermione was out of breath, doubling over as she gasped for air. Ron still looked put out, putting one arm around her in an attempt to help her regain her composure. "Pomfrey is going to throw a fit when she finds out you left without asking. And it wouldn't have killed you to wait for us."

"What's the password?" was Harry's only reply.

Hermione straightened up and primly - if breathlessly - said, "Manticore jaw." The Fat Lady, raising a concerned eyebrow, nodded at the trio and obediently swung open.

"You don't have to follow so closely, you know," said Harry irritably. There were a fair number of Gryffindors in the common room and several heads swivelled in their direction at the sound of his voice. He imagined his appearance was surprising, given the amount of time he'd been spending in the infirmary.

Hermione, apparently deciding to ignore Harry's words, said, "I hope you're not thinking of fighting Voldemort."

"Don't be ridiculous," said Harry, his tone softening as an idea formed. "I'm going to the Shrieking Shack. Only Pettigrew knows how to get in and he wouldn't guess I was there, especially if I'm supposedly laid up in the hospital wing. Dumbledore told me to go there whenever I need protection."

"Oh," said Hermione doubtfully. "If Professor Dumbledore told you..."

Turning on his heel, Harry charged toward the stairs, Ron and Hermione following closely behind. Bursting into the sixth year boys' dormitory, Harry made a beeline for his trunk and began rustling around in it. No one was there that he could see, for which Harry was grateful since it would lead to fewer questions and explanations. A moment later, Harry made a triumphant noise and emerged with his Invisibility Cloak. "I need this to get to the Shack, just so no one spots me." He clutched his wand, happy to have it back in his hand, relishing what might be the last few moments he had with it.

"Wait," said Ron. "We're coming with you. No reason for you to be by yourself." Hermione nodded emphatically.

"Suit yourself." This was exactly what Harry wanted, but he couldn't let them know that.

"You're still in your pyjamas, you know!" Ron called, hurrying after him.

"Doesn't matter."

The three of them bustled out of Gryffindor Tower as quickly as they'd arrived. Harry flung the cloak over them all when they had passed the entrance. It was awkward, to say the least; the days where they could all fit under the cloak comfortably had long since passed. Ron was hunched so far over he was practically folded in half and several times their feet stuck out, threatening to reveal their presence. Harry was grateful for the cover of darkness because the last thing he needed was to be caught by Filch or, worse, a stray Death Eater.

Finally, the three made their way to the Whomping Willow. The tree lurched threateningly at them until Harry and Hermione both cast freezing charms on it, allowing Ron to press the small knot that would open the path to the Shack. They made their way through the secret passage, the trip through the tunnel oddly quiet, though Harry hardly noticed. His mind was completely focussed on getting to the other side. James, Lily, Sirius, Draco, and Dr. Mason - they were all counting on him - all leading him to a normal life. He couldn't - *wouldn't* - let them down.

Once they got to the rickety shack, the three glanced around the large room that made up most of the Shrieking Shack's first floor. "What do we do now?" asked Ron expectantly, standing close to Hermione.

"We wait until the fighting has stopped," suggested Hermione.

"Actually," Harry said, turning and pointing his wand at them both. "You listen, while I talk. *Expelliarmus!*"

Caught off-guard, Hermione and Ron's wands flew into Harry's outstretched hand.

"Sit," he ordered, gesturing to the floor. "We have a few things to discuss."

Hermione looked scared, while Ron looked at him incredulously. "You're not Harry!" Ron accused.

"What have you done with him?"

Harry gave a short laugh. "Wrong, as usual, Ron. I'm definitely Harry. A Harry that's got rather sick of your faces, but still me." He advanced on Ron, staying carefully just out of easy reach. "You want to know why Malfoy and I are so chummy? Because he's not you. Because he's about the farthest

thing from you I could get and still stay within the human race. You know, since the second I came to this place, I've had to put up with your bumbling and quite frankly stupid wisecracks. I've put up with your jealousy over the fame I never wanted, the money that's worthless to me, while you have *everything* I've always wanted."

Ron looked furious, his brow furrowed and nostrils flared. He looked as though he was going to reply, but Harry kept going, rounding on Hermione. "As for you, you are not my mother. You are not my watchperson, nor my personal saviour."

"Harry," Ron said, a warning note to his voice. Hermione stilled him with a hand to the arm.

"Did it ever occur to you that I might not want saving? That I wouldn't want you swooping in with your potions and protective charms? You're just a bossy little know-it-all who vastly overestimates her powers and your self-righteousness makes. Me. Sick."

When he'd finished his little speech, Ron looked ready to punch him, no matter who had the wands, while Hermione's eyes were brimming over with tears. Harry had to try very hard not to wince; he couldn't believe the things he heard spilling out of his mouth. Hermione might be bossy, but she never overestimated herself and, if Harry had to admit it, he rather appreciated her protective streak. Sometimes she spoke the truth that he needed to hear. As for Ron, his insistence that Harry was normal was usually the only thing that kept him sane. Ron had been his first friend and this was how he was repaying that gift. It didn't matter that they might be figments of his imagination, this *hurt*.

Have to keep going. Remember what's real. Remember what you have to do!

In order to keep the emotion from showing on his face, Harry turned to one side. He watched his friends out of the corner of his eye, just in case they decided to attack him.

Harry spoke again, this time more truthfully, half-trying to convince himself that what he was doing was the correct choice. "How could I think this was the real world? What's more likely? A kid who's had an unfortunate collision with doorknob or a world with magic wands, flying horses and people who turn to animals? A giant comes to my door when I'm eleven and tells me I'm the Boy-Who-Fucking-Lived, that I'm rich and famous, when before I was a little nothing. How on Earth is that *normal*?" he asked, a hysterical note to his voice. "This. Isn't. Real!"

Hermione and Ron exchanged glances, apparently unsure about how they should react. Harry stopped pacing, but still refused to meet either of their faces. It would be impossible to continue, if they kept *looking* at him like that.

When Hermione finally spoke, Harry could hear a slight waver in her tone and he knew she must be crying. "Harry, I don't know what's happening to you, but you have to know that we love you. It's not fake and whether or not you believe the things you're saying, I know I'm never going to stop loving you."

There was a long pause, then Ron gruffly replied, "Me either. No matter what happens, you're my best friend. Never forget that."

This was simply too much for Harry. What they said was true for him, too. No matter what they did, he would love them. He came very close to simply handing back their wands and trudging back to the castle.

But then he thought about his parents and Sirius and Draco. He thought about finally, really having a home and *family*. His resolve strengthened again.

As he wheeled around to face them again, Hermione stared at him and implored, "Harry, don't do this. We're your friends." Ron nodded, clutching Hermione around her middle.

Grimly determined, Harry aimed his wand at Hermione's chest and said, "Friends? I think it's time we see other people. *Stupefy*."

When the stunner hit Hermione, she crumpled to the floor, slipping out of Ron's arms. Face filled with disbelief, Ron lunged at Harry, but Harry had already sent a second stunner in Ron's direction, knocking him out, too.

Crouching at their side, Harry examined their lifeless forms, checking for any physical damage he might have caused. Both looked fine, but Harry knew he'd decisively lost two friends in a matter of minutes. Smoothing their hair off their faces, Harry rearranged Ron and Hermione into less awkward positions and carefully placed their wands back in their robes. *Two connections gone*, he thought sadly. Examining their unconscious forms, he sighed. The thought of physically hurting his two closest friends also hurt him deeply. Harry was struggling not to cry when he heard three soft pops from behind.

Blinking rapidly, Harry slowly got to his feet, now nearly laughing because he was so surprised and distraught. As he turned around, he found himself face-to-face with Bellatrix Lestrange, Peter Pettigrew, and Lord Voldemort. *Damn*, thought Harry, still verging on maniacal laughter. *I suppose I was wrong. Looks like Pettigrew would think to check for me here.*

"Baby Potter, what have you done?" Lestrange laughed and practically skipped over to the seemingly lifeless bodies of Ron and Hermione, clucking her tongue in disappointment. The urge to fling himself over Ron and Hermione's bodies nearly overwhelmed Harry, but he only balled his hands into fists and didn't move.

"Looks like Potter already took away some of our fun. Should I wake them, Lord? Then we might have some fun of our own." While Bellatrix looked positively gleeful over the prospect of torture, Harry noticed Wormtail's eyes darting nervously from the floor to Voldemort.

Remembering that he'd just tucked Ron and Hermione's wands into their robes, Harry prayed that Voldemort would agree. Three to three wouldn't exactly be an even match, but at least it would skew the odds a bit more in their favour.

Of course, that meant that Voldemort said no. "Leave them, Bella. You can have your fun later. Just keep a watch on them for now. Wormtail, join her." Wormtail gave a shaky bow, then began to crouch next to Ron.

"Don't you fucking *touch* him," Harry hissed angrily.

Pettigrew instantly straightened up again, and took a step back, hesitating. "...I-," he stuttered.

"Wormtail, you can't possibly be frightened of him. Would you dare ignore my order to obey a child who's ready for bed?"

Wormtail shook his head forcefully and returned to Ron's side, his hand hovering an inch or two over the slack face, though Harry noticed he never came in contact with Ron.

Voldemort traced a scaly finger along his mouth, where, by all rights, his lips should have been, and regarded Harry carefully. "Right now, young Mr. Potter and I have to have a chat. Don't we Harry?"

Harry considered telling Voldemort that he had nothing to say to a murderer, but was smart enough to shut his mouth for once. If Voldemort wanted to talk, let him talk. The longer he went on, the less likely it was that they'd all be dead, after all. Maybe someone would notice they were missing and would send help. It was a long shot, to be sure, but time was time.

That didn't mean he had to be polite about it, though. Sighing resignedly, Harry took a seat at the round, wooden table in the room's centre. "Sure, Tom. We can talk," he said nonchalantly, belying his terror. He gestured to the empty chair, as though the two were about to settle in for a nice cup of tea, instead of one giving a pompous speech while the other prepared to be tortured and killed.

Bellatrix gasped and advanced on Harry. "How *dare* you?" she shrieked, aiming her wand at him.

"How dare you speak to our Lord that way?"

He's not my Lord, Harry wanted to retort, but for the second time in minutes, he bit his tongue. *That's got to be some sort of world record.* The urge to laugh hysterically returned, full-force.

Voldemort laughed in his usual tinny pitch. "Retreat, Bella. You'll have plenty of time to take your anger out on him." Reluctantly, Bellatrix put down her wand and returned to guarding Hermione. Harry noted that she was practically shaking with rage, her dark eyes wild. With some effort, he stayed put at the table, though all he really wanted to do was run to Ron and Hermione's sides. He couldn't risk that and he couldn't risk reviving them. That would just sentence them all to an instantaneous death. He could feel his wand tucked into his robe, which offered some level of comfort. Not much, but some. Again, he tried gesturing to the chair across from him, but the move was shakier and less collected than it had been a second ago. This time, Voldemort joined him, a smirk stretching his inhuman features into something even more terrifying.

"Well, Potter," said Voldemort, sounding more like a psychiatrist than Harry's captor, "I hear you have been having trouble with your dreams. Isn't that right?"

Harry snorted. "Of course you'd know that already, Voldemort." At the use of Voldemort's name, Bellatrix was instantly enraged again, while Wormtail looked even more terrified than Harry felt. Voldemort didn't react at all. "Just like any other trouble I've had in my dreams, it's been caused by you, hasn't it?"

Voldemort chuckled, low and threatening, which scared Harry even more than his usual laugh. Harry thought that it was the single worst sound he'd ever heard in his life. Leaning across the table and forcing Harry to stare into his terrible red eyes, he said in a voice barely above a whisper, "Yes, rather inspired, don't you think? I sensed you weakening ☹ can you do the same?"

Harry shrugged. He'd felt Voldemort angry or happy, but he didn't think he'd ever felt him weakening. What did resurrected immortals fear?

Continuing, Voldemort said, "I decided to take the opportunity to invade your mind. Exploiting the link between us really has had its advantages. Imagine to my shock to see you and *Severus*, one of my most *loyal* followers practising a method to block your mind from me."

Harry was surprised that Voldemort would admit that Snape was his follower. Of course, Harry was fairly sure he was going to die, so he supposed it didn't actually matter.

"I could have told myself that he was merely following Dumbledore's orders. That he was trying to prove his loyalty, while spying for me. But as certain questions get answered, others spring up. How would Dumbledore know that Severus was such a fine Occlumens? He is, of course; I taught him myself, after all. Also, why would I not be informed of such an *opportunity*?"

Voldemort paused and examined Harry's face carefully, while Harry desperately tried to think of an escape plan, based on what he knew of the layout of the Shack. He could make a run for it and hope for the best, but not with Ron and Hermione in the state they were in and there was no way in hell he would abandon them. He cursed his stupidity.

I never should have left the grounds. I never should have let them come along with me! I never should have believed that stunning them would help anything. And I certainly never should have believed that a life where I have everything I want could be real. This is real. And I'm really, really going to die.

"Understandably, I grew angry. I believe you might have grown angry, as well. You were quite exhausted, which made your mind vulnerable as any kitten's. Severus is well-aware that you have to get worse before you get better, when it comes to Occlumency. I believe I chose quite an opportune moment. If I'd waited until your skills had improved, this spectacular idea would have been wasted. Of course, if you'd mastered the art, I would never have known anything in the first place. My nemesis, a failure. Disappointing, that."

"It's disappointing *my* nemesis couldn't beat a baby," Harry muttered under his breath.

"Oh, Potter, is that the best you've got?"

Harry morosely crossed his arms over his chest.

"What I saw in you was anger and desperation. A strong desire to belong and a sense of loss. I understand that. What did I want when I was abandoned in that god-forsaken orphanage all those years ago? The same things I sensed in your head. Parents, people who cared about me unconditionally. Tell me, Harry. How is your mother, anyway?"

Harry unsuccessfully tried pushing a knot out of his stomach.

"I also felt the typical lusts of a sixteen-year-old boy. Though, in your case, I wouldn't call them *typical*, would you?"

"Shut up!" Harry shouted, but Voldemort only laughed again, the same small, ugly laugh as before.

"I created a world for you, knowing you'd want to stay there. Once you saw what you could experience, you'd never want to go. And with more than one loyal follower inside the Hogwarts gates now, --"

Draco, Harry thought desperately. He hoped Draco had played his part and got the hell to safety.

-- I knew I'd be able to crush you whenever I wanted. It seems like a shame to have gone through all of that when you're awake now, though. Of course, you must be here because of the tricks the mind plays, yes? Besides, I must confess to rather enjoying having you face-to-face. It's more...personal...this way. More fitting, don't you think?" Voldemort's eyes raked over Harry's two unconscious friends. "But you'd know all about that, wouldn't you? Cutting your ties, Potter? Did you know that you're the only one who controls when you come in and out of your head? I just gave you the opportunity to see what you truly desire."

Unable to control himself any longer, Harry shouted "LIAR!" and leaped from his chair, pointing his wand at Voldemort. He was shaking. "You have no idea what I want!"

Voldemort stood up leisurely, examining Harry like he was a particularly fascinating zoo exhibit.

"Believe what you will." He pointed his wand at Harry's chest. "It won't matter in a moment anyway. *Cru-*"

"Tom, what are you doing?" Dumbledore stood behind Voldemort sounding tired, resigned. With a casual flick of his wand, Dumbledore knocked Wormtail and Bellatrix out cold, and they collapsed near Ron and Hermione.

"Typical me, typical me, typical me. I started something... and now I'm not too sure."
- The Smiths

Chapter 12 - I Started Something I Couldn't Finish

Voldemort spun around, his wand now directed at Dumbledore instead of Harry, sneer still plastered on his face, though Harry thought he noticed Voldemort's hand shaking a bit. With Voldemort suddenly distracted, Harry took advantage of the situation and rushed over to Hermione and Ron, his stomach churning over what he - their *friend* - had done to them. "*Ennervate*," he whispered twice, pressing his wand once to Hermione's head and then once to Ron's. As Ron struggled to sit up, he let out a groan and Harry was forced to clap his hand over Ron's mouth, struggling not to yelp when Ron bit him in protest.

Frantically pantomiming, he gestured at the action. Ron, now slightly more aware of his surroundings, moved silently and helped a groggy Hermione to her feet. Voldemort and Dumbledore's duel was raging on, though both were less inflicting real damage than simply avoiding the other's spells. Voldemort suddenly whipped his head around and stared straight at Harry, causing a bolt of white-hot pain to rip through his forehead. The sound of rushing water filled Harry's mind and he managed to weakly shout "No!" before hitting the ground, unconscious.

"Hey," said a soft voice, somewhere near his ear. "Awake again, are you?"

"Have to have to get back," Harry said, struggling to sit up. His forehead was sweaty and someone was smoothing back his hair. "I can't be here."

"Course you can." Lips lingered where a hand had been moments earlier.

Harry's eyes opened, focussing as well as they could without his glasses. Draco gazed down on him in a mixture of concern and fondness, and when Harry groped at the nightstand for his glasses, he found Draco already held them, gently slipping them back on his nose. "Thanks," he said softly.

"Anytime," said Draco, squeezing Harry's hand. "Dr. Mason, he's awake!"

Harry was back in the private room it seemed, which he figured was because he was being kept under observation. The door burst open, and his doctor, parents, and godfather rushed in, immediately followed by Nurse Bainbridge and Peter-the-Orderly pushing a cart. Without meaning to, Harry curled into a little ball, moving as far away from Peter as possible, but the orderly didn't touch him. He just handed Bainbridge instruments, while the nurse wrapped a cuff around Harry's upper arm and took his blood pressure.

Draco allowed Lily to take his place on Harry's other side and, once there, soothingly ran her fingers through his hair. "Is it over?" she asked in low tones.

The image of Dumbledore and Voldemort fighting popped back into Harry's head and he shook his head violently. "I have to get back there. My friends are in trouble, and we're all stuck in a cabin. Dumbledore and Volde -" He stopped himself abruptly, since no one present would really understand. Those were all people in his head, weren't they? Just figments of his imagination. He remembered Voldemort glaring at him and he swallowed hard. How did he open the link like that? Voldemort admitted to Harry that it was he who set this all up, so maybe it wasn't all made up and Harry was now laying on the ground, useless damn it.

"I have to get back there," he insisted. "They're going to kill me and this will all go away. I'm going to die. Everyone's going to die!" Harry was breathing hard and he yanked his arm away from Bainbridge's prodding.

Dr. Mason smiled encouragingly at him, which Harry thought was an entirely inappropriate response to his situation. "I know this is hard, Harry, but you're doing the right thing. You won't be

killed; this battle is just your mind's way of making things difficult for you. Remember to sever your ties, remove all attachments to this other world. Be strong."

Harry knitted his brow as he thought this over. He couldn't just *abandon* his friends to whatever the whims of Voldemort happened to be. Lily, looking worried, rubbed his shoulder tentatively. "I believe in you. We all do."

James, nodding, added, "I know you can do this. I know you're a survivor. We'll always be here for you."

"We'll *always* be here for you," Sirius repeated. "No matter what, Harry."

They would be, wouldn't they?

Closing his eyes, Harry smiled and took a deep breath and inched to the edge of the bed, letting his family surround him. He hugged his dad and Sirius, placed a kiss on his mum's cheek, and - after a half-second of silent debate, due to his family's proximity - kissed Draco firmly, lingering there a little longer than strictly necessary. Caressing Draco's jaw, he settled in bed again.

This *was* too perfect.

"I suppose I am a survivor," Harry sighed, raising up one hand and unconsciously tracing his scar.

"And I know you'll all be with me, no matter what. But my battle's still not done." Harry looked down at his hands, ignoring the shocked looks on everyone's faces. "I love you. Always. Goodbye."

Harry closed his eyes, immediately willing himself back to the Shrieking Shack. He knew he'd never wake up in St. George's again.

"Harry!" he heard Hermione shout distantly, then felt a hard slap across his cheek. "Wake up, wake up!"

Harry sat up, rubbing his face, then the back of his head. He winced and looked around him.

Voldemort and Dumbledore were still duelling and Ron and Hermione were crouched over him. "I'm sorry," he whispered, not sure if he was addressing his parents or his friends.

Ron tugged him to his feet. "There's no time for that. We have to get out of here."

Harry nodded, though his head still throbbed painfully.

Spotting Bellatrix and Wormtail unmoving bodies, Hermione asked urgently, "What happened to them? How did they even get here?"

"I'll explain everything later," Harry apologised, frantically looking for a method of escape.

Unfortunately, the way they came in was currently blocked by two powerful wizards and, because of its reputation, the doors and windows of the Shrieking Shack were all sealed. He doubted the boards would be destroyed by a simple Reductor Curse, and he didn't particularly want to draw any extra attention to them.

Luckily, Dumbledore had managed to debilitate Voldemort momentarily. "Harry, take this,"

Dumbledore said, reaching into his robes and throwing a sock to him. "All three of you, hang onto this portkey. In ten seconds, it will activate and bring you directly to my chambers. Wait there until help arrives!"

Ron and Hermione each took an end of the lavender sock, as Harry clutched the middle. The three stared at the prone form of Lord Voldemort for what Harry thought felt like the longest ten seconds of his life. Then, he felt a familiar tug behind his navel, yanking in from the shack.

Harry landed in Dumbledore's office, falling face first and slamming down hard on his knee. He groaned, wondering if travelling gracefully by portkey was even possible.

"Harry, what the hell was *that* all about?" demanded Ron, as soon as he'd recovered. He was gripping the edge of Dumbledore's desk, a deep red flush creeping its way up his neck and onto his cheeks. Whatever anger he'd suppressed back due to the danger back in the Shack seemed to have reappeared, full stop.

Harry blinked, hoping Ron wasn't about to deck him. Not that he didn't deserve it. "Uh. That was Voldemort attacking just after I stunned you both," he mumbled, examining his shoes.

"Yes, I'd gathered that much. Now why, exactly, would you take our wands and stun us?" Ron's voice was low, calm, with only a slight tremor belying his tone. Harry wished that his friend would rage because at least Harry had come to expect that; this voice was a little... scary.

Gaze still firmly locked with the polished wood of Dumbledore's office floor, Harry answered quietly, "Because I was trying to cut ties with this world, so I could exist in the other one. I figured if I got you both mad enough at me, you wouldn't want to be my friend anymore and I'd have no reason to stay." Ron looked confused, but Hermione managed a soft, "Oh!"

"I know I've been sort of keeping you both in the dark about what's been going on, other than telling you that my parents and Sirius are there. Well, there's a doctor there, and he's really helpful; he thought that the more ties I cut with the Wizarding World, - the more isolated I became - the more likely it would be I could permanently stay in their world. So, I decided to cut them."

"By hurting us emotionally and physically," said Hermione. It wasn't a question.

Hesitantly, Harry nodded. "Yes, but during that battle, I realised I was wanting something that was just too good to be true. When I passed out before, I went back there and told everyone that my battle here wasn't done. I don't think I'll be going back there again. I'm really sorry for what I did to you both. I didn't mean what I said." Harry sighed heavily and said, "But I'll understand if you don't believe me... if you never forgive me."

Ron snorted. "For acting like a git, Harry? I would have stopped talking to you over a year ago, if that was all it took to get me to hate you." Harry looked up hopefully; Ron's mouth was still set in a straight line, but the colour was draining from his face again.

There was a loud *pop*, and the three of them turned to see Dumbledore reappear in his office.

Hermione gaped openly. "But you can't Apparate on Hogwarts grounds!" she shouted, before she could stop herself. Realising that she'd just yelled at the Headmaster, she clapped a hand over her mouth.

"Quite right, Miss Granger," Dumbledore chuckled. He didn't offer any other explanation and, as Dumbledore handed Harry back his abandoned Invisibility Cloak, Harry decided he'd never quite figure their Headmaster out.

Harry noticed that Dumbledore looked a little worn from the battle. He hunched over a bit and appeared to be clutching at his side. "Are you all right, sir?" he asked.

"I'll be fine, Harry," smiled the old man. "Nothing some cocoa and a good night's rest won't fix." From his perch, Fawkes trilled loudly, obviously agitated. Dumbledore shuffled to his pet's side, ruffling Fawkes's feathers gently, calming the bird.

"Professor Dumbledore, what happened to Voldemort?" asked Harry nervously. Dumbledore was here, after all, and relatively unscathed. For a few fleeting seconds, he hoped that the stupid prophecy was wrong and that it had all been a mistake. Maybe Dumbledore had torn that bastard limb from li--

"I attempted to magically bind him, but he woke too soon. He Apparated away, taking his indisposed associates with him."

"Damn it," Harry said under his breath, before he could stop himself.

Dumbledore smiled ruefully. "I expect the two of you will meet again another day." Sighing heavily, the Headmaster lowered himself into his chair. "Which brings me to a pertinent question. Knowing about Voldemort's impending attack, why would you think going off school grounds - tonight of all nights - would be wise?"

Wise? Harry had never thought it was wise. It was just another item on the long list of stupid events he'd caused.

He was just about to open his mouth to answer, when Ron interrupted, eyes flashing accusingly. "You said Dumbledore told you to stay there!" he exclaimed.

Harry nodded shakily, feeling as though misery had taken up permanent residence just under his skin. Suddenly feeling the need for catharsis, Harry launched into the whole story of his time in the hospital, trying to give a full account of everything from Bainbridge to the familiar residents to abruptly leaving his family. He did, however, leave out the parts that concerned him and Draco, wanting to keep a little piece of that life just for himself.

Ron, Hermione and Professor Dumbledore said very little throughout, a fact for which Harry was grateful. He doubted that if he'd been stopped, he would have been able to start up again. When the story was exhausted, he noted that Hermione's face was arranged in an expression of great sympathy and even Ron looked deflated, as though any righteous indignation had been ripped from him. "I miss them already," he concluded honestly, unable to keep the anguish he felt completely out of his voice.

Dumbledore regarded Harry carefully. "I believe your story, Harry. It's sometimes hard to separate reality from fantasy, and the lines between the two have the tendency to become impossibly blurred."

Harry nodded, recalling Luna saying something similar to him. "One choice can change the world," he muttered to himself. Then, hesitantly, he met the Headmaster's eyes. "Professor Dumbledore, do you think it's possible that the place where I was actually exists? I know Voldemort was responsible for sending me there, but it was... I mean, it was everything I've ever..." He trailed off. "Oh, Harry. There are many mysteries of the universe that I just can't begin to answer. I suppose it's possible, but I don't believe you could have existed in both at once. Are you sure you've made your choice?"

"Yeah," Harry said softly. This was where he belonged. He knew that now. "Do you think the potion Sn- er, Professor Snape is working on will be complete soon? I don't want to risk having to see them again."

"All right, then," Dumbledore said, sympathy softening his tone. "The potion Professor Snape has been working on has been completed. In fact, that why it took so little time to learn of your whereabouts. As soon as I heard the news, I visited the hospital wing to check to see whether you were awake, hoping to deliver it in person. I must say, it was something of a surprise to find you nowhere near the infirmary. Fortunately, I knew I hadn't missed you by much, as I overheard several students animatedly discussing how Harry Potter was seen tearing down the corridor in his pyjamas toward Gryffindor Tower with two other students in tow." Harry wasn't sure, but he thought he noticed Dumbledore's eyes glimmer at that. "That's how I knew to find you in the Shrieking Shack."

Harry looked confused. "But we didn't tell anyone we were headed there."

"I should mention that I headed to your common room first. In another fortunate coincidence, your friend Neville Longbottom happened to overhear you speaking to Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger. Mr. Longbottom informed me that he'd heard you say you were going to some sort of shack before hurrying off again with your friends."

"Neville?" Hermione interrupted, sharing an uncertain look with Ron. "We didn't see him, did we?"

Ron screwed up his face in thought, then shook his head.

"I gather that he was napping in your room before being roused by some sort of commotion." Harry guiltily remembered making enough noise to wake the dead when they went to get his Invisibility Cloak. "Upon hearing Mr. Longbottom's somewhat bewildered testimony, I quickly deduced you'd gone to the Shrieking Shack. Just in time, I may add."

"I was an idiot," said Harry dejectedly. God! They'd been so close to being killed. "Thank you, sir."

"You're welcome, Harry. Just remember that you can't always survive on luck alone. One day only your skills will serve you."

Harry nodded, looking down at his lap again.

"No need to dwell on this now, Harry. Mr. Weasley, will you please locate Professor Snape? I believe he is currently in his workrooms. And Miss Granger, if you would, please head to the third floor on the west side of the castle and ask the portrait of Leland the Loquacious to summon Professor Flitwick. Do inform him that you are in a bit of a hurry, however, as he has a tendency to chatter on." Ron and Hermione both nodded, looking determined. "When you return, the password to this office is 'fruit pastilles'. I believe we have a protection ritual to perform."

Once Hermione and Ron hurried off, Harry and Dumbledore sat in silence. "Professor Dumbledore," Harry said timidly after a few uncomfortable moments, "may I ask you something?"

"Yes, Harry?"

"Is..." Harry didn't know if he wanted to do this, even with his friends gone. But he had to know. "Is Draco okay? I mean, what happened to the other Death Eaters? I thought they were going to attack Hogwarts tonight, but everything here looks all right." There certainly had been no mass attack on Hogwarts, at least. "Did he, uhm, not do his job?"

Dumbledore shook his head. "No, I am quite sure of that Draco left the grounds at the appointed time. I can only hazard a guess that when Voldemort retreated from us, the attack was prematurely aborted. But," Dumbledore said, rising from his desk, "you can ask him for details yourself. You may enter, Mr. Malfoy!"

Surprised because he hadn't heard anyone approach, Harry swivelled around in his chair. *How the hell does Dumbledore do that?*

Draco, with one eyebrow quirked, was standing at the top of the landing. He appeared as confused over the Headmaster knowing about his presence as Harry. "I've just come to tell you that they've all left, sir."

"Yes, we'd noticed that!" Dumbledore said merrily. "And I've just remembered something I need to take care of in my rooms. I'll return shortly!" Disappearing in a swirl of robes that would have even put Snape to shame, Dumbledore nimbly climbed the short set of stairs at the back of his office.

"Potter." Draco's mouth was set in a straight line, but he was fumbling with his hands, like he didn't know where to put them. "How'd you get yourself in trouble this ti-"

Draco's jibe was cut off by Harry swiftly crossing the room and pinning Draco against the door jamb, kissing him hard. When he was allowed the tiniest breath of air, Draco panted, "This can't keep happening, Potter. It's just too dangerous, and besides," he said, sounding less sure of himself, "I don't like you."

"Shut up," Harry ordered softly. "I know that. Just... I need this." Without waiting for an answer, Harry kissed Draco again, running his hands up Draco's arms, across his neck, then gently stroking his thumbs over Draco's cheeks. Biting lightly at Draco's lower lip, Harry pushed his tongue inside Draco's mouth the moment his lips parted, sighing when it came in contact with Draco's. Noticing that Draco's hands were no longer at his own sides, but rather gingerly pulling and twisting the fabric of the back of Harry's dressing gown, - which, *holy hell*, Harry just realised he'd been wandering around in the entire time - Harry grasped that Draco was either nervous or uncomfortable. But, notably, he wasn't pushing Harry away.

Pressing Draco firmly against the doorway and moving his hands up and up so he could tangle his fingers in Draco's blond hair, Harry pretended that he could pour all of his frustrations into that kiss. Revelling in swallowing each sound Draco made, he explored the inside of Draco's mouth, letting the other boy's tongue battle fiercely with his own. There was nothing tender about this Draco, Harry was forced to remind himself. That Draco didn't exist, not that it mattered much. He wasn't any less attracted to this one.

"I'm glad you're okay," Harry said, breaking the kiss. They were both a bit breathless. Draco shifted uncomfortably. "And I'm glad you're not dead. Though your choice of attire leaves something to be desired."

"Shut up, Malfoy," retorted Harry, not able to put any real anger behind the words. Then he remembered the question he'd asked Professor Dumbledore. "What happened to the attack? Did they all just leave?"

"I'm really not sure what happened, exactly. For a bit, everyone was waiting for the Dark Lord to give orders, but then my Mark burned and Avery told me to go back to the school. Then they all disappeared again."

"Dumbledore and Voldemort fought," Harry explained. "But, really, nothing happened. He got away. They all did."

"All?"

"Wormtail and your auntie. We all had a good time catching up."

Draco's eyes widened. "You were there? But, you weren't supposed to!"

"Yes, I'm a world-class idiot. Don't worry, I'm well-aware of that fact." Harry and Draco were still firmly pressed together; he knew the others would return in a moment and he had no idea how long Professor Dumbledore would be looking for whatever it was that he needed, but Harry couldn't seem to bring himself to move away.

Eyebrows knit together, Draco said, "Dumbledore's asked me to spy for him, you know."

Harry nodded. He was hoping Draco was just going to be under protection, but he'd seen enough to know that Dumbledore was going to take an advantage when he saw it. Especially now that Voldemort knew Snape was a spy.

"So, this will have to stop now."

"I know. We can't keep doing this; it's not safe for either of us." Harry's thumb traced lazy circles on Draco's palm.

Briefly, Draco's fingers tightened around Harry's thumb. "And Headmaster Dumbledore will be returning at any moment."

"True." Harry still didn't move, choosing to examine Draco's pale face for a bit longer.

"Move away, Potter," Draco said with a sneer and shooing motion.

"In a minute."

Harry was just about to chance it, to move in for one last kiss, when they heard Ron's voice complaining loudly at the bottom of the stairs. Harry jumped back and hurried back to his seat near Professor Dumbledore's desk, quite convinced the newcomers would have no doubt about what he and Draco had been up to. In fact, when Ron and Snape reached the top of the stairs a moment later, Ron shot Draco - who'd moved only just enough to comfortably allow others entrance - an accusatory look. However, Harry wasn't sure whether that was just because Draco hadn't been there when Ron and Hermione had left, or because of Draco's dishevelled hair and swollen lips. Harry ran one hand through his own hair in a futile effort at taming it, and crossed his legs, willing himself to control his breathing and look natural.

Snape, carrying a vial of greenish-blue liquid and wearing a dour expression, just looked put out. Harry was relieved when Dumbledore swept back in, right on Ron and Snape's heels. The man had impeccable timing. "Ah, Severus! So nice of you to join us."

"Headmaster, I don't expect to be at this... *boy's* beck and call all hours of the night." Harry slumped down in his chair as Snape gave him the evil eye.

"Severus, it's nine o'clock," said Dumbledore pleasantly. Snape sneered in response. "Also, you know as well as I that this is a one-time process."

"If it works," Harry muttered under his breath. The idea of accidentally having to see the dream again - to see everything he'd given up - filled him with as much dread and horror as the prospect of any future confrontation with Voldemort.

Snape instantly flew into a rage, only reinforcing the lesson that Harry was better off keeping his big mouth shut. "You insolent, stupid, ungrateful brat," he seethed. Harry noticed Draco taking a step toward his Head of House, ready to pull him back. "Are you insulting my ability to brew one experimental potion? The amount of time I've spent on your petty -"

"There are many elements to this ritual, Severus," Dumbledore interrupted, just as Harry had leapt to his feet, hand already flexing around his wand. He shook off the warning hand Ron had placed on his shoulder. "And, as you say, it's experimental. Harry's doubts are not unfounded. Please tell Professor Snape that you weren't insulting his talent."

Harry shot Dumbledore a filthy look. The Headmaster had been right, of course, but apologising to Snape because the git misunderstood Harry was beyond the pale. "I didn't mean anything by it, Professor. Sorry." Harry probably didn't sound as sincere as he might have, but that was the best they'd get out of him.

Luckily, Hermione and Professor Flitwick returned a few moments later, breaking the tension.

Hermione did a double-take over Draco's presence, much as Ron had minutes earlier, while Flitwick looked flushed and nervous, brandishing his tiny wand already.

"Filius, you seem ready to begin! Good, very good. Shall we?" Dumbledore asked Harry, regarding him carefully. Harry swallowed hard and hesitantly nodded.

Flitwick pulled Harry over to the centre of the Headmaster's office, arranging him with his hands at his side. Satisfied over Harry's positioning, he stepped away from Harry, waving Dumbledore and Hermione over. The three of them began reciting a string of Latin so quickly that Harry was only able to catch a couple of words here and there, -"*Clastrum... alucinari... interclusio...*" - while a golden ring began circling the floor surrounding Harry. Out of the corner of his eye, he could make out Ron and Draco inching away.

The chanting came to an abrupt stop, and Snape's hand breached the circle, yanking Harry's arm up to press the potion to his palm. Dazed, Harry blinked a couple of times, looking from Snape to the liquid-filled vial, until Snape let out an exasperated sigh. "Drink, you dim-witted boy."

That shook Harry out of his bewildered state; he tipped back the vial, wincing at the bitter taste. A rush of wind passed through him, roaring in his ears and nearly knocking him to the ground. In the distance, he heard something that distinctly sounded like a door slamming shut, and the golden circle dissolved.

Everyone in the room was looking at him expectantly. Taking a deep breath, and letting his shoulders slump, Harry simply said, "It's over."

"I know it's over, and it never really began, but in my heart it was so real."

- The Smiths

Epilogue - I Know It's Over

Harry, Ron and Hermione sat in the Hogwarts courtyard, enjoying an unseasonably warm late November day. Typically, the grounds might already be covered by an inch or two of snow and the temperature might have already dropped below freezing. Today, though, they survived with only their cloaks draped casually over their shoulders.

The three sat on the ground, Harry picking absently at the dying grass. Hermione was currently berating Ron for falling behind on his homework. "What do you mean you can get it all done over Christmas hols?" she shouted indignantly. Upon hearing Hermione's shrill voice, several other students scattered across the courtyard glanced over at them and started to stare.

Ron winced and stuck a finger in his ear, wiggling it around. "Woman, you'll need to speak up. I think there are a couple people in London that couldn't quite make that out."

Looking around and noticing their audience, Hermione's cheeks flushed. "I'm just concerned for your academic career," she huffed. "The N.E.W.T.s are only..." She stopped, doing some quick calculations on her fingers. "Eighteen months away! You have two fewer classes than me and one less than Harry and you're still behind!"

"Oh no," chuckled Harry. "I'm not getting involved in this. If Ron wants to fail, that's his own business."

"Quite right it is!" Ron shouted triumphantly, puncturing the air with his fist. "Wait a minute! Fail? Who said anything about failing? I'll get you for that, Potter." He punched Harry in the arm; Harry, only too happy to play along, dramatically toppled over to his side.

"You wound me, Ron," he cried, clutching at his heart. After a moment, he pulled himself upright again and rubbed his arm, muttering, "Ouch. That really did hurt, you know." Harry's admission started a fresh wave of laughter from Ron and Hermione.

Then Hermione switched gears, this time swinging around on Harry. "And what of you, Mr. Potter?" she spat, in her best Snape imitation. Harry was impressed. She even had the eyebrow down. "I trust you've completed your Potions assignments? All of the reading? The six-feet of parchment, hmm?"

"If I say yes, do you promise not to yell?"

"Only if you're not lying."

Harry held his hands up in front of his face to protect himself. "In that case, I choose not to answer because I hold a vested interest in my personal well-being." For that, he got swatted in the other arm. "Owww!" Harry complained. "At the rate you two are going, I'll have no working arms left!"

"Yes, that's unfair, Hermione," said Ron, a solemn expression on his face. Both Harry and Hermione looked at him in some surprise. "We all know Harry requires at *least* one hand for his late night activities." That solemn expression was instantly wiped off his face when Harry's fist connected with his upper arm. "Oof. Oi, Harry, that wasn't your *right* hand, was it? I mean, that is your... wand... arm, right?"

"I hate you so much," Harry grinned.

Just then, Hagrid and Fang appeared in the courtyard, conveniently crossing the path of Harry and his friends. Hagrid loomed over them, more or less blocking out the sun. "Ello there!" he boomed, which sent Fang cowering behind his legs. "How are ya doin', Harry? All right, there?"

"Much better than the last time we spoke, Hagrid. Thanks for asking."

"Aye. I spoke with P'ffessor Dumbledore and he told me your whole tale, he did. I came ter see ya a bunch of times in the infirmary whiles yeh were asleep, but I'm glad to have yer with us again!" A

giant hand came down and patted Harry on the back a few times. Despite having all of the air forced from his lungs, Harry managed a wave as Hagrid and Fang continued their way to the school. Wheezing, he told Hermione and Ron, "At this rate, I'm not going to have any functioning body parts left."

Ron laughed, but Hermione suddenly grew concerned. "Were you telling Hagrid the truth, Harry? No more strange dreams or anything? Has your scar been bothering you at all?"

Harry shook his head. "Not a twinge since you did that spell and I took the potion. I expect that Voldemort is just regrouping after I escaped. Again. Dumbledore is right. My luck isn't going to last forever and I need to be more prepared the next time he decides to attack. Though it's something of a relief to know he won't be able to manipulate my dreams anymore."

Shuddering, Ron nodded. "I don't want to think about what it's like to have You-

Know... *Voldemort* walking around your head, deciding what you should and shouldn't see."

"Yeah, now I just have to worry about him and his minions plotting my demise from their secret evil lair." He gazed across the courtyard, spotting Draco Malfoy haughtily ordering Crabbe and Goyle about; Hermione followed his line of sight.

Jerking her head in Draco's direction, Hermione asked, "What happens to him?"

Harry sighed heavily and lowered his voice to a whisper. "It's not that good," he admitted. "Once I told Professor Dumbledore about Dra... Malfoy warning me about Voldemort's attack, he thought Malfoy would be a good way of infiltrating the Death Eaters. And now since we know Voldemort has discovered that Snape's a spy, it's even more important that Malfoy keep up appearances."

"I don't trust him," sniffed Ron.

"Oh, I don't know, Ron," said Harry, deep in thought. "I think he might actually be sincere this time. There's something to be said about avenging the lives of family members." Harry definitely knew something about that.

Draco glanced up at that moment, searching all around him as though he were confused about something. The expression of worry faded when he noticed the trio looking in his direction. That used to mean Draco would barrel over for a barrage of insults and, possibly, a physical fight, Crabbe and Goyle in tow. This time, though, he nervously checked to see if his two cronies were watching him. When he was satisfied they weren't (as they were currently embroiled in a heated battle over a Cockroach Cluster), Draco chanced throwing a small smile in Harry's direction.

Using all effort available to not display the leap his heart made at the smile in his face, Harry returned an equally small smile. He'd be lying if he said being around Draco didn't hurt. He kept thinking of tracing a pale boy's faded pink and white scars with his fingers, his tongue, even knowing firsthand that this Draco wasn't marked in that way. When his thoughts turned to running his fingers through fine strands of blond hair, a shiver ran the length of Harry's spine and he shuddered, forcing himself to look down at his lap. It wouldn't help to think about that. For all intents and purposes, Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy were the bitterest of enemies. Outwardly, Draco was a junior Death Eater. He had the mark and only a handful of people knew he was a spy. Whatever had happened between them had ended pretty much the moment it had started, because Harry refused to do anything that might put Draco in further danger. He didn't need another person's blood on his hands and it was bad enough that it was at least partially Harry's fault that Draco was a spy.

But those were Draco's choices, he reminded himself forcefully.

Sneaking around was also out of the question. The risk was too high, especially since Harry was already aware of any number of people who wandered the castle seemingly unseen. All the two of them had were sneaky smiles across classrooms and courtyards.

"Harry? *Harry*." A hand on his forearm shook him out of his trance.

"Hm?" Harry focussed on the owner of the hand. "What is it Ron?"

"If you'd been paying attention, you'd know I was just *saying* that you'd better be prepared in this match against Ravenclaw. You know, it's damned lucky Ginny was able to step in as Seeker for the Hufflepuff match, and we were able to get a reserve Chaser. I know that we won, but we would have been in better shape for the Quidditch cup with everyone playing their rightful positions." Ron's stern Quidditch Captain face could easily rival Hermione's best have-you-done-your-homework look. "Are you looking forward to getting back on your broom again?"

Harry thought of the freedom of flying and knew that Quidditch would keep him sane. Anyhow, without the risk that he'd faint and plummet to his death, he was feeling much better about the idea of getting onto his Firebolt again. He smiled and said, "We're going to kick Ravenclaw's collective arse."

"Damned right we are!" whooped Ron. Again, several students glanced their way. Ron's face turned bright red at the unwanted attention. "What are you looking at, anyway? Don't you all have lives to lead?"

As the students hurried to return to whatever activity they'd previously been doing, Hermione smirked. "I believe you were saying something about someone in London not being able to hear something...?"

"Oh, I'm going to kill you." Ron lunged and began tickling Hermione around her middle. "Harry, get in on this! This is the most effective method of shutting her up I've found." Hermione laughed helplessly.

Harry shook his head and pulled himself to his feet. "No thanks. I'd rather not get involved in whatever sordid sex games you two have been playing." Both Ron and Hermione froze instantly and stared at him. Harry cracked up. "God, you're both far too sensitive."

"Look who's talking!" Ron retorted.

"Can't dispute that." Harry smiled sheepishly. "I've got something I want to do, though."

Hermione asked, "Do you want us to come with you?"

Harry shook his head. "Nah. This is something I need to do by myself. See you at dinner, all right?" They agreed and Harry walked off.

As Harry wound his way through the castle's corridors, he used the time it took to walk back to Gryffindor Tower for some reflection. It had been two weeks since his ordeal had finally ended. He had to admit that since he'd accepted that the alternate reality had really been a fabrication based on Voldemort's mind manipulations, his resolve to fulfil his destiny had strengthened. A prophecy had foretold that he would kill Voldemort or be killed himself and Harry hadn't come this far to let an evil megalomaniac win.

That wasn't to say he never thought of his time in St. George's. In fact, the truth was quite the opposite. Though he'd been enjoying his renewed friendship with Ron and Hermione, when he was in bed late at night, he couldn't help but think about what might have been. He knew that what he saw was merely a reflection of what he'd seen in the Mirror of Erised in his first year; these were things he'd wanted for as long as he could remember, and he didn't think that would change in the near future. Voldemort had merely seen that wish and exploited it. Tainted it. He still wanted a home, a family and love. The only new bit of information he'd gleaned was his apparent attraction to men, and he figured he would have eventually worked that out, given enough time.

But still, Harry couldn't help thinking about meeting his parents and finally, speaking with and getting to throw his arms around them. Having them both around had been far better than he could have imagined. He thought about seeing Sirius again and how the closest thing to a father he'd ever known was really and truly gone. Harry smiled slightly when he thought of his friendly grandparents, whom he'd never met, nor would he ever see again. Not unless he'd meet up with his loved ones in the afterlife. Harry very much hoped that were possible, but it made him ill thinking about death.

Now, all that mattered was that wherever his family was, he knew they were proud of him and loved him.

Convincing himself for the millionth time that it had all been fake, he walked along, head bent, with his hands stuffed inside his robes. As he approached Gryffindor tower, he willed himself not to cry. In a neutral tone, the Fat Lady droned, "Password?" but her face held an expression of concern. Harry wondered how Hermione would take it if he told her that the Fat Lady had reminded him of her when they both looked like that.

Probably best not to mention it.

Struggling to smile, or at least, look happier, Harry gave her the password and stepped through the open portal.

He trudged up the stairs to the Sixth Year Boys' dormitory. He was a bit dismayed to find Neville already there, reading a thick book that wasn't any of their schoolbooks.

"Hi Neville," greeted Harry, purposefully keeping the glum edge out of his voice.

Neville shut his book and looked up. "Hullo Harry," he said cheerfully, his face instantly falling when he spied Harry's expression. "Are you feeling all right?"

"Oh, I'm all right. I just came up here to think, but I don't want to bother you. Maybe I'll go to the library; it's bound to be quiet on a day like this. Even Hermione is outside." He offered Neville a wobbly grin.

Neville hauled himself off his bed. "Don't be silly, Harry. You're not bothering me. Besides, I was about to go outside, anyway." He held up the book he'd been reading and said, "Advanced horticulture is fascinating, but not exactly designed for pleasure reading. I should enjoy the day before it's over, too." Throwing the book onto his bed, Neville tactfully made his exit before Harry even had time to protest.

Harry walked over to his trunk and started sorting through the contents before finding what he'd been searching for. He settled onto his bed and closed the curtains, desiring as much privacy as was possible in a room shared by five boys.

Slowly, he paged through the photo album Hagrid had given him at the end of his first year. As he stared at his parents' smiling faces, he slowly ran his fingers over the each photograph's surface. A photo of James when he was about Harry's age beamed up at him, skirting out of the way of the path Harry's fingers made.

Flipping forward a few pages, he made his way to his favourite picture: his mum, dad, and Sirius at his parents' wedding. The three ☺ young and beautiful ☺ grinned and waved. Harry needed to take another deep breath in order to stop the tears from falling.

"I'll never forget the time we had together," he whispered. "I know that I'm going to make you proud." His voice more sure, he continued, "I love all of you and I'll avenge your deaths. I know my mission now and nothing will distract me from it ever again. And even though I know it wasn't really you three... there, I know you were telling the truth when you said you'd always be there. Wherever you are, I know you're looking down on me."

Lily and James Potter looked down at the supine form of their son, their last traces of hope slowly trickling away. Dr. Mason, holding a clipboard, began checking Harry's vitals. The electrocardiogram showed standard outputs, and the machine monitoring Harry's brainwave patterns read normally. The doctor couldn't help feeling disappointed; there was no reason his patient should still be in a coma. For lack of a better way of expressing things, Harry had made the choice to trap himself in his own head.

"Is he ever going to wake up?" Lily asked for the thousandth time, a dangerous edge to her voice. It was obvious that the woman hadn't been sleeping, her normally vivid eyes now marred by the dark

circles that she had underneath. She and her husband had been keeping vigil by their son's side for days now.

It took every ounce of will for Dr. Mason to look professional, but the corners of his mouth were turned down and no one could miss the worry lines that were creasing his forehead. "Mrs. Potter, I'm sorry, but you know Harry's no longer showing any signs of improvement. It's been the same every day for two weeks now, and nothing we're doing seems to have any effect." He paused, not wanting to believe the words himself. "When he said good-bye, I believe he meant it."

Dr. Mason flinched as James grabbed his arm and shouted, "What do you mean he meant it? This is our *son*. You told us he was improving! You *promised* we'd have him back." The doctor, jaw clenched, closed his eyes. It wouldn't do to have the parents of a patient slugging him, but Mason couldn't help but think he deserved it.

Sirius forced his way in between the doctor and his friend, pushing James away. "James. Calm down. Screaming this way isn't going to solve anything. It won't..." Sirius bit his lip, almost unable to say the words. "It won't bring Harry back. It's not Dr. Mason's fault."

"What do you mean it's not his fault? Whose is it, then? He promised us our *son*." James's voice was shaky, as though he was on the verge of tears.

"I'm sorry," Dr. Mason said again, wishing he could say something more to reassure the two distraught parents.

James collapsed in a nearby chair, laying his head on Harry's shin. Voice thick, he promised, "Dudley Dursley will pay for what he did to my son. You can count on that."

A few steps from all the commotion, one orderly nudged another as they struggled to change the bedclothes of the next bed over. Vincent screwed up his face, regarding the unmoving blond boy that he and Greg had to keep shifting in order to get any work done. Not wanting to disturb Dr. Mason, he kept his voice low as he asked, "Hey, Greg, do you... uh, think he's gonna start talking to anyone again?"

Draco stared up at the orderly. "I can talk. Just you remember," he said coldly, "never tickle a sleeping dragon." He sat up in bed and started rocking back and forth, laying his head atop arms that now were decorated with four fresh lines of red. "I want him back.

IwanthimbackIwanthimbackIwanthimback. Bring him *back*." The orderlies exchanged glances and shrugged at one another.

There was more commotion in the next bed over.

"Harry?" said Lily expectantly. "Harry, are you there?"

The comatose patient's eyes fluttered open, exposing wide green eyes. Mason began shining a light in the boy's eyes, then snapped his fingers several times, hoping to get Harry's attention as his parents kept repeating his name over and over. Finally, the doctor sighed heavily. "Nothing. I'm sorry—you know that that happens from time-to-time. We've seen it happen before."

Lily was crying openly now, her face buried in James's shoulder. A protective arm around his wife, James looked about ready to break down himself. Harry stared, unblinkingly.

"God," Sirius said, looking at his godson. He felt sick to his stomach. "Just close them again. I can't stand to look at him like that. Don't do this to them."

Without another word, Dr. Mason ran his hand over Harry's face, closing the boy's eyes again. To an impartial observer, Harry Potter looked as though he were sound asleep.

"Harry," Lily sobbed, her voice muffled by James's shirt. "Why didn't you want us?"

END