

Matters of Influence

By **anathema91**

Pairing(s): Harry/Draco (implied HP/GW, HP/others & DM/BZ along the way)

Summary: Draco should have taken his NEWTs over the summer with Pansy and Greg. Repeating 7th year with Potter fresh off his saved-the-world tour struck Malfoy as the height of stupidity more than once. McGonagall's diabolical plan only made things worse. Or did it?

Rating: Hard R/NC-17

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Warning(s): none, really

Deathly Hallows compliant? Canon compliant up to and including DH. Epilogue-ambiguous. – Action in this story takes place after the main events DH, but before events reflected in the Epilogue.

Word Count: 19,445

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Written for [lire casander](#)'s request, which included: : *I like romance, angst, UST and plotty stories, also songfics. I also like slow paced stories, where the love is developing and the reader can sense it. I love first kisses, sunsets and walks under the moonlight. I LOVE shy!Draco and oblivious!Harry. Auror!Harry and/or Draco is fine too. Two or three prompts: first kiss, night, "Nothing can take me away from you"* I've tried to incorporate as many of these requests as possible. I hope you like it!

The events of the war, and more specifically three events that occurred after the war, had brought about a strange sort of peace between Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy. They were on what Draco liked to call "polite nodding terms" with each other. In those rare occasions when they saw each other in public, they would nod to the other in acknowledgement. If they were within speaking distance, a curt *Malfoy* and *Potter* would accompany it. Draco was surprisingly comfortable with

this new arrangement, particularly as the events that brought it on were rather near and dear to his heart.

Roughly three weeks following the fall of the Dark Lord, Harry Potter, Saviour of the Wizarding World, testified on behalf of Draco at his trial. It was in this moment that he found out about Potter being on the Astronomy tower the night of Dumbledore's death. Draco was surprised and somewhat embarrassed to know that his moment of weakness – or was it just a moment of humanity? – had been witnessed by his biggest rival. Yet at the same time, he couldn't help but be relieved. He knew that Potter's word could make him a free man. Catching his eye when the verdict was announced, Draco nodded and mouthed "Thank you," to Potter, who nodded in return.

Two days later, Draco received a message from none other than the great Dark Lord Vanquisher himself, asking to meet. Draco was too curious not to reply and so the following afternoon he found himself at the Leaky Cauldron, sitting across a table from Harry Potter. The meeting was fairly brief, which was a good thing. Draco really didn't enjoy being the recipient of distrustful glares from the other patrons, especially since he was sure the only reason that they were only glaring and not verbally abusing him was because Potter was with him.

Potter wanted to return Draco's wand to him, and Draco was grateful. After losing his mother's wand in Crabbe's fiendfyre, Draco had been using one that had belonged to his great-grandfather, because he just couldn't face Ollivander. Not after the man had been a prisoner in Draco's home. The two young men stayed long enough to have one drink and some rather awkward, yet civil conversation and then went their separate ways.

Several days later, exactly one month after the Battle of Hogwarts, Draco sat in Courtroom Ten once again, listening to Harry Potter give testimony. This time, it was at the trial of Narcissa Malfoy. He provided the Wizengamot with a detailed account of how she purposely lied to the Dark Lord about him being alive that night in the clearing. He gave her full credit for saving his life, and it was because of this testimony that Draco's mother had avoided a prison sentence. Draco was so relieved that after the trial, he approached Potter and invited him to the Leaky Cauldron for a thank you drink, fully expecting him to decline.

To Draco's surprise and discomfort, Potter accepted the invitation, and the two men once again found themselves sitting across a table from one another, conducting a polite, if somewhat uncomfortable conversation. Now that word of Potter's testimony had spread, Draco was met with fewer glares, and being out and about in the Wizarding world was easier.

Draco thanked Potter for saving his life during the war, and his sanity thereafter by testifying for both him and his mother. Potter shrugged it off and said that Draco had saved him too, by not identifying him at the Manor that day, and so they were even.

"Maybe, but you also saved my mother from going to Azkaban as well."

"And that makes me even with her, too." After a few moments of awkward silence, Potter spoke again. "I'm sorry I couldn't do the same for your father, Malfoy. I mean, I'm not sorry that he's in Azkaban, because, well, I just can't be, not after everything. But I'm truly sorry that you don't have a dad at home."

Draco didn't know how to respond to this, so he just nodded and took a sip of his drink. He loved his father, but he was now old enough to know that his father chose the life that led him to his present state. And he understood Potter's position, even if he couldn't bring himself to be happy about it.

After this point, their conversation turned to small talk, and although it was awkward, they ended their meeting on amicable terms.

Having now had drinks with Potter on two separate occasions, it seemed rather pointless to attempt to revive the old rivalry. Besides, if truth be told, Draco was too tired to work up that much venom toward anyone. Well... except maybe the Weasel. He still had no trouble despising him.

Sitting at the Welcoming Feast for his second attempt at his seventh year, Draco Malfoy was overwhelmed with the desire to leave and never return. Even before the school year began, Draco was filled with the nagging sensation that he'd made a huge mistake. And now, sitting at the Slytherin table, seeing nearly every student in the school staring moony-eyed at Potter like he was the lead singer from the Weird Sisters, there was little doubt in Draco's mind that he'd live to regret his decision to complete his studies. Despite his newfound civility with Potter, he still found the hero-worship thing terribly annoying.

Were it not for the fact that Draco had plans for his life and his career that required him to excel in his NEWTs, he would have sat his examinations in July like a number of his friends had, including Pansy and Goyle. But, the distraction of an insane Dark Lord living in his family home led to a seventh year that could be called patchy at best, and Draco did not trust that enough of his studies had actually sunk in, so his only option was to repeat the year. The Malfoy name did not carry the clout it once

did and Draco knew that from this point forward, anything he achieved in life would have to be on merit alone.

Draco had always had an affinity for magical theory. When his home had been turned into Death Eater headquarters during the war, he'd spent his precious spare moments taking refuge amidst the dusty tomes in his father's library. He enjoyed researching and experimenting with the properties of magic and analyzing the inner workings of spells. He planned to become the foremost authority in this field and eventually head up the team of wizards who studied and developed new spells for the Wizarding world. The research firm Draco wished to work for was universally recognized for its achievements, and Draco knew that to even be considered for an interview, one needed to achieve Outstanding in their NEWTS. Therefore, grin and bear it for another year he must. At least Zabini, Bulstrode and Greengrass had returned as well. Had Draco been the only Slytherin from his year who had returned, he most certainly would have left.

The first week of the year actually passed surprisingly well. Granger was more subdued and less given to fits of superiority and arrogance in class than she had been in previous years. Even the Weasel, who had inexplicably been made Head Boy, was able to keep his obnoxiousness in check. As for Potter, Draco rarely saw him outside of the few classes they shared and the odd meal time. He and the Weaslette had rekindled their romance from sixth year, and if the rumours were true, they were too busy sneaking off to secluded corners and making up for lost time to bother with any other activities.

Of course, Potter was still Quidditch captain, as was Draco, which meant that eventually their paths would cross, so when he found himself in a meeting with Headmistress McGonagall and the other three Quidditch captains, he wasn't particularly alarmed. That is, until McGonagall told them about her great plan.

"I've called you in here today because I want to make some changes to the way we play Quidditch in this school, and I want the four of you to help me do it." McGonagall looked around at their worried faces and continued, "Now before you go into a panic, let me assure you that I have no intention of eliminating the current house teams."

The relief that swept through the four captains was palpable.

"House Quidditch is a time-honoured way for the best players in the school vie for glory for their houses. But there are a number of students whose skill level may not be

quite on par with yourselves. Those who would also appreciate a chance to compete at Quidditch. With that in mind, I'd like to create an intramural league within the school. The league will be open to all students, regardless of skill level, and the number of teams will be determined once we know how many people have signed up. Also, because this is not a house competition, the teams will not be divided along those lines. Given the inter-house animosity that has existed in this school, we need to create an environment that fosters unity between the houses, not just within them."

"That's great professor," said Zacharias Smith, the Hufflepuff captain. "But if this is all separate from House Quidditch, why are you telling us about it?"

"I was just getting to that, Mr Smith. The four of you are going to help me run the intramural league. You'll organize the participants into teams, arrange the schedule, referee the games, recruit commentators, and whatever else needs doing."

"But Professor, we can't do that!" Draco protested. "We have our own teams to think about, plus I have Prefect duties, not to mention the fact that some of us are in seventh year and need time to study for our NEWTs."

"Malfoy's right, Professor," Potter agreed. "We just won't have the time."

"You'll make the time, or you'll step down as captain of your team. This is not a request. You'll work in pairs and share the responsibility, and you can enlist the assistance of your classmates for some of the simpler administrative duties like tracking team standings and whatnot. I'll advise your teachers that they are to be a bit lenient with deadlines for the four of you, and grant extensions when appropriate. Malfoy, Potter, your two houses have always been at odds with one another, therefore it's in everyone's best interest if you work together and set the example for the other students."

Once again, Draco found himself sincerely wishing he'd taken the NEWT exams in July. Life would have been so much easier, even if his results weren't exactly stellar. But he knew a lost cause when he saw one, so he didn't even bother protesting. Sighing aloud, he just listened to Potter as he sputtered and complained to no avail.

Two weeks later, Draco sat beside Potter in the ante-chamber off of the Great Hall, poring over several sheaves of parchment. "I think we've *finally* sussed it out."

Turning to look at Potter, Draco agreed, "I think you're right. Thank Merlin! I was beginning to think we never would."

"Me too," Potter said. "Why did we have to get stuck with the task of sorting out the schedule? Dividing the teams would have been so much easier."

"True. But, there we have our answer, don't we? Can you imagine Smith and Bradley trying to sort out the schedule? Smith is a dimwit, and Bradley would over-think it all like a true Ravenclaw."

Potter laughed and nodded in agreement. "I know! I was half tempted to grab a Beater's bat and use it on Bradley's head in the meeting yesterday, just to get him to stop with the questions. How much information do you need for such a simple task?"

"Well, maybe Bradley's tendency to get more than enough information makes up for Smith's inability to focus on anything other than 'How unfair it is that I'm stuck having to do this tedious shit.' Like the rest of us aren't in the same boat."

Potter laughed, "You do a kick arse Smith imitation, Malfoy."

The two young men spent the next several minutes talking and laughing over the oddities of the other two Quidditch captains before gathering up the pieces of parchment to bring to McGonagall for approval and posting.

By late November, the Quidditch season was well underway, and Draco found himself preparing to face his rival on the pitch. The Slytherin vs. Gryffindor game was in four days' time and Draco was putting his team through a rather rigorous practice.

"Time's up, Malfoy. You're going to have to clear the pitch so a *real* Quidditch team can take their turn at practice."

"Oh Potter, you do have quite the sense of humour, don't you?" Draco drawled. "Lucky for you, I'm in a charitable mood." Turning to his team-mates he shouted, "Alright Slytherins, let's head off. The Gryffindor team needs all the practice they can get, to avoid being utterly humiliated on Saturday." Draco's words lacked the malice they would have possessed in previous years. After nearly three months of working with Potter on intramural Quidditch, the relationship between the two young men had evolved to something bordering on friendship, and their interaction had grown from polite nods to amicable banter.

Laughing, Harry said, "If anyone gets humiliated on Saturday, Malfoy, it'll be you."

"Care to wager on that?"

"Gladly. Name the stakes."

"Loser buys the evening's worth of refreshments at the Hog's Head during next week's Hogsmeade weekend."

"Deal," agreed Potter, thrusting his hand toward Draco.

Draco grasped it firmly, sealing the bet. "I can't wait until Saturday," Draco smirked. "You'd best owl Gringotts to make a withdrawal now, Potter, because I have expensive taste in liquor."

"Really, Potter," chuckled Draco. "You're joking, right?" Seeing the expression on Potter's face, Draco realised that he was indeed serious. "Once again you're displaying your complete lack of anything remotely resembling common sense."

"Hey! I resent that! Just because you don't agree, Malfoy – "

"I don't agree, because you're completely, utterly, and irrefutably wrong. The Chudley Cannons are most certainly NOT going to have a break-out season this year. They are going to remain at the bottom of the league, yet again. It's what they do best. And by the way, my drink is nearly empty."

Potter cursed under his breath and waved to the barmaid for another round. They were the last two at the table, as the rest of their friends had long since left. Not having developed as extensive a tolerance for their rival house as Draco and Harry had, both men's friends had stayed for a token drink to prove they were open-minded and then quickly excused themselves. The evening was growing late, and the table was littered with a rather impressive number of empty glasses due to Draco's insistence that they keep count so he could revel in exactly how much Potter had to pay for losing at Quidditch the previous week.

After their drinks arrived Potter continued the debate. "Well, Ron says that with the addition of Sanderson to the team, they actually have a shot this year."

"Wait a minute, Potter. Do you mean to tell me that you're basing that ridiculous prediction of yours on something the Weasel said? Dear Merlin, you're more daft than I thought."

"Hey! Ron happens to know a lot about Quidditch, and stop calling him the Weasel."

Draco sat back to appraise his companion. "How long have you liked the Cannons?"

"Er, I dunno, since first year I guess."

"And before that? Who did you support then?"

"Nobody. I didn't know about Quidditch before coming to Hogwarts. Raised by Muggles, remember?"

Draco shivered involuntarily. "Oh yes, I think I blocked that fact out. So, let me get this straight. You learned about Quidditch in first year, when you got caught flying after being told not to, and as punishment they let you join the House team, then bent the rules again so you could have a broom."

"Not that you're bitter or anything," laughed Harry.

"Not at all. Now, how exactly did you come to be a Cannons supporter?"

Harry pondered the question for a few moments before answering, "Er, not sure really. I guess I just started liking them because Ron did."

"Mmm hmmm."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing."

"It wasn't a 'nothing' type of 'mmm hmmm', Malfoy. It was a something 'mmm hmmm.' So tell me what you meant by it."

"You know my 'mmm hmms' well enough to tell the difference between the two?"

Harry nodded enthusiastically.

"Potter, you'll only take it the wrong way and get mad. We've done such a great job of getting along for the past three months that I really don't see the need to disrupt the peace."

Sighing, Harry promised Draco that he would not start a fight with him, even if he disliked what he was about to say.

"Okay, only I don't really know how to say it. It's just that you seem to have done a lot of things in your life just because it's what the Wea – er – what Weasley liked."

Harry clenched his jaw in obvious annoyance. "Like what? What are you trying to say, Malfoy?"

"You see, I *told* you that you'd misinterpret what I'm saying and get angry with me."

Sighing, Harry replied, "I'm sorry, Malfoy, you're right, I did promise. I'm not angry, I was just...I just want to know what you mean. Could you please explain?"

Draco sized Potter up for a moment before deciding it was safe to continue – a conclusion he would not likely have made if he weren't quite so intoxicated. "Well, in the three months since we've been doing this Quidditch thing, you've revealed that you only took Divination because Weasley did, you support the Cannons because Weasley does, you refused my friendship in first year because Weasley disliked me, and –"

"Hey, wait a minute, you insulted Ron for no good reason, and that's why I didn't shake your hand."

"Yes, I almost forgot, it's perfectly acceptable that he sniggered about my name and mocked me like that, but I had no right to retaliate. My fault entirely."

Harry began to protest but Draco raised his hand to cut him off. "The fact still remains, Potter, that Weasley was the main reason you chose not to be my friend. Now where was I? Yes, so you disliked me because of Weasley. You also told me last week that you specifically begged the Sorting Hat *not* to put you in Slytherin because of what Weasley said and last, but not least, you are practically engaged to his sister because he was pressuring you all summer to...how did you put it... 'stop dicking her around and make a proper commitment to her already.' Isn't that what you said he told you? So, Potter, my question for you is, do you ever actually choose anything for yourself or do you just let Weasley plan out your life for you?"

Harry looked stricken, then seemed to find his drink extremely fascinating and wouldn't look away from it. After a few moments silence, Draco deeply regretted ever bringing the topic up. He was happy that he and Harry had formed a friendship of sorts, and just when Draco was beginning to truly value it, he'd gone and bugged it all up by pointing out the flaws in one of Harry's oldest friendships.

"Potter."

Harry still refused to meet Draco's eyes.

"Potter. Look at me."

Harry rubbed his forehead, but still didn't look at Draco.

"Potter...Harry." The name felt odd on Draco's tongue. "I'm sorry. I was out of line and I'm sorry. I do that. Push things too far. It's one of my less appealing qualities, or so my mother says. Please don't be angry with me."

Harry was quiet for a few more moments, and then in a voice barely above a whisper he said, "I chose to be friends with you."

Draco heard that Harry had spoken, but couldn't make out what he said. "Pardon me? You spoke so quietly, I...I didn't hear."

"I said," Harry cleared his throat and spoke up, "I chose to be friends with you. This time around, I mean. Or at least, I think we're friends, erm, you may disagree on that one though. Wait a second, did you just call me Harry?"

"Yeah, I did," said Draco, a smile forming on his lips. "I think we're friends too. Unless you tell me to bugger off for what I just said, that is."

Harry let out a brief chuckle. "No. You're just being you. I know you sometimes say and do things that are more hurtful than you mean them to be. And you're not entirely wrong, anyway. Ron does hold a lot of influence over me. But not always, you know. I mean, he absolutely *hates* that I speak to you now. We...uh...we even had a row about it the other night."

"You had a row with Weasley about me?"

"Yeah. We're okay now, but for a while there it was pretty heated. He asked me why I insisted on paying our bet, since it meant having to spend the Hogsmeade outing with you. When I told him that I don't mind spending time with you and that when we're working on Quidditch intramurals we sometimes talk or play chess after we're done, he kind of lost it."

"Not surprising, I guess, given our history."

"No, not surprising at all. And then, of course, he reminded me of some of the finer moments in your rich and varied history, like when he almost died because of you in sixth year."

Draco was thoroughly abashed, and couldn't say anything in response.

Staring earnestly at Draco, Harry reached across the table, grasped Draco's hand in his and said, "But then I reminded him that he didn't see you in the bathroom that time. You know, that time that *I* nearly killed *you*."

Draco stared at their clasped hands, feeling oddly light-headed. The power of speech seemed to have escaped him.

Oblivious to Draco's discomfort, Harry continued, "And he didn't see you lower your wand that night on the Astronomy tower. He didn't have a link with Voldemort, and didn't see visions of you being forced to do his bidding. I saw that. And I saw the look on your face when you realised that Crabbe didn't make it out of the Room of Requirement that night. I know you're not the horrible person Ron sees you as, Mal- *Draco*, even though you sometimes say thoughtless things that make me want to hex your bollocks off."

Relief that his newfound friendship was still intact washed over Draco in waves. Although he still felt a strange tingle in his hand where Harry was holding it, he had regained his composure and was able to form a reply. Smirking at Harry, he said, "Point taken. I'll make a mental note to wear my protective cup before badmouthing Weasley in the future."

Harry let out a hearty laugh and removed his hand from Draco's, leaving him with an strange, hollow feeling at the loss.

Harry and Draco sat alone in one of the compartments on the Hogwarts Express, talking and laughing companionably. It was proving to be a much better trip than Draco had expected when he'd boarded the train. Zabini, Bulstrode and Greengrass had all Apparated home and his only goal upon boarding had been to find a nice quiet compartment where he could be alone and maybe get a bit of sleep. Bumping into Harry in the corridor of the train was an unexpected boon.

"Harry, what are you doing here? Why didn't you Apparate home?"

"I was going to. Especially since Ginny and Luna decided to take one last shopping trip to Hogsmeade before doing so themselves. But then I thought that, since it's my last year at Hogwarts, I should savour the experience. Mind you, that was before Ron and Hermione told me that they want some "alone time" before having to spend the holidays apart. Hermione's parents are kind of reluctant to be away from her ever since the war, so she felt it was best for all if they had a nice Christmas together at

home. Anyway, I don't begrudge them their time, but had I known, I probably would have Apparated. I was just about to find a compartment. Care to join me?"

"Sure. I was about to do the same."

"So why didn't you Apparate? I'm sure you're not the sentimental type like me."

"No, it definitely has nothing to do with that." Sighing, Draco continued, "Although I'm perfectly capable of Apparating, I'm not licensed to do so. I didn't really need a licence during the war, and then I was a bit busy with my trial and my parents' trials to take the test over the summer. So, now that I'm trying to remain on the right side of the law, I felt it best to wait until I'm licensed before performing any further Apparating."

"Probably a wise choice," said Harry.

"I'm going to take the test over the Christmas holidays, so I can return to the land of adulthood."

Harry laughed. "Yeah, it is much more convenient to travel as an adult, isn't it?"

"Indeed. So, big plans for the hols, Harry?"

"Well, I'll be home at Grimmauld Place for part of it, but I'm spending Christmas at the Burrow. The whole Weasley family will be there and my godson Teddy, too. It'll be nice to have everyone together. What about you?"

"Mother and I will probably have a quiet morning together, but then in the evening we'll be at the Parkinsons' for their annual ball. It'll be nice to see Pansy again. Don't make that face, Harry, I know you don't like her."

"Well she did want to give me over to the Death Eaters, I think I have cause to dislike her."

"Pansy's a true Slytherin, and unlike you Gryffindors, we have a rather healthy sense of self-preservation. Plus, it's not as if she actually *did* something about it. Anyway, regardless of your dislike, I shall be delighted to see her again. Rumour has it that she's now engaged to Nott, and her parents aren't quite as pleased as she'd expected." Draco rubbed his hands together in anticipation. "Should make for some rather interesting fireworks."

Rolling his eyes, Harry gave Draco's shoulder a playful shove. "You're one sick and twisted bastard, Draco Malfoy." Chuckling he continued, "Sounds like the night is guaranteed to have its fair share of drama."

"Don't you know it." Draco smirked.

Some time later, Harry stood and began rummaging through his rucksack. Turning toward Draco and looking awkward, Harry blurted, "Happy Christmas, Draco." He shoved a small, simply-wrapped present into his hand.

Beaming, Draco accepted the gift and pulled a larger and more elaborately wrapped parcel from his own bag. "Happy Christmas, Harry. I was going to owl this to you, but this is much better. Now we can watch each other unwrap our presents!"

"Okay, you go first!" exclaimed Harry.

Draco carefully unwrapped his present, and gasped when he saw what it was. "Is this what I think it is?" he asked, with a twinkle of delight in his eyes.

"The one and only," confirmed Harry, looking smug.

Reaching into the box, Draco lifted the tiny golden ball in his hand. He smiled as its wings opened up and began fluttering immediately, and then let out an "Oh!" of surprise when writing suddenly appeared on the ball. *'November 28, 1998 – Slytherin 380 – Gryffindor 270'*

"You charmed it to commemorate my victory when it reacts to flesh memory."

"Well, I had to get Hermione's help, but yeah. Do you like it?"

"I love it. How did you manage to get it? I've tried to get some of my game-winning snitches in the past and was told in no uncertain terms that they must be kept for school records or some other such nonsense."

"Yeah, I was told the same thing. I even went before the Hogwarts Board of Governors to plead my case, and they were adamantly against giving it to me. But then..." Harry turned a deep shade of crimson. "Oh, you're really going to have fun teasing me about this..."

"Really? Do tell."

"But then I reminded them that there would be no reason to keep records of Quidditch matches at all if it weren't for me defeating Voldemort. I felt like such a pompous arse doing it, but, hey, it worked."

"Harry Potter used his considerable influence as Saviour of the Wizarding World, all to get a game snitch? For me?"

"Yeah. I mean what else do you get someone as filthy stinking rich as you? I just knew you'd like it. It seemed like the perfect gift, so it was worth feeling a bit of guilt at abusing my position like that."

"I must be rubbing off on you, Potter. That was a much more Slytherin approach to things than I ever would have thought a Gryffindor capable of. I now see what the Sorting Hat saw in you. Well done."

"Thanks," laughed Harry.

"Now open your present."

Harry tore off the elaborate wrapping and carelessly discarded it on the floor, which made Draco roll his eyes. He then lifted the top off the box he was holding to reveal a large, leather-bound book with some sort of crest on the front. At closer examination, Harry noticed that the crest had the word Potter written on the scroll above it. Opening the cover, and skimming through the pages, he soon discovered exactly what his gift was. "It's a family history. Of the Potters. With pictures and everything!"

"Yeah, all the pureblood families have them. And I know you grew up not knowing yours, so I thought you might like to –" Draco's next words were cut off when he suddenly found himself holding an armful of elated Gryffindor.

Draco felt Harry trembling as he held him in a rather tight hug. "Draco, I don't know what to say. Thank you, thank you, thank you!" He loosened his arm, but didn't completely release his grip.

The close contact made Draco's heart pound heavily in his chest. Pulling back enough to look Harry in the eyes, he asked, "So I'm safe in assuming that you like it?"

Harry smiled and leaned his forehead against Draco's. "I love it, Draco. I really, *really* love it." Being this close to Harry made Draco's pulse quicken, and he suddenly found breathing rather challenging, but he knew he'd rather have his wand snapped in two than move away from him. The two men sat there for what felt to

Draco like an eternity and an instant at the same time. Then, suddenly, a deep blush arose on Harry's cheeks, and he jumped away as if Draco was on fire.

Returning to his seat and staring at his feet, Harry muttered, "Sorry...got a bit, er...thanks for the present."

The next several minutes were spent in awkward silence. Harry leafed through his book, and Draco fiddled with his snitch, mulling over the reaction he'd just had to Harry's proximity, and what it meant.

Draco had always been drawn to Harry, even when he thought he hated him, but this felt like much more. He glanced over to Harry, who was absentmindedly chewing on his bottom lip while he read. Draco wanted to lick that lip. To nibble on it. To draw it into his own mouth and...

Oh shit. Draco, you idiot, you spent all those years resenting him for not being your friend, and now that he finally is, you go and fall for him? He's straight, and you're not the Weaslette. Get over it.

Draco continued to silently beat himself up until he could no longer take it and suggested a game of exploding snap. This lightened the mood considerably, and when the train finally arrived at King's Cross station, the previous awkwardness was all but forgotten.

"So, I guess this is where we part," said Harry. "Happy Christmas, Draco."

"Happy Christmas to you too, Harry. I'll see you in January." With a smile, he walked out of the compartment.

The first half of the year had gone so smoothly that Draco returned from Christmas holidays without any trepidation at all, and that was his big mistake. This realization dawned on Draco on his first night back. It was Monday evening, and he was stuck in the first Prefect's meeting of the new year. Weasel – who was chairing the meeting – was in rare form. He began by lambasting Draco for being a minute late and only became more unbearable from there. Had Draco not maintained his focus on future goals and how being a Prefect could help him achieve them, he would have quit on the spot and left the meeting.

As the meeting came to an end, Draco headed to the door, but was stopped in his tracks by the Weasel calling out to him. Turning to face the redhead, Draco raised an eyebrow in question.

"I'd like to have a word with you, if you don't mind."

"Oh, I *do* mind, especially if you think I'm going to listen to you bitch and moan about me being late today."

"That's not what this is about."

"Then what do you want to speak to me about, Weasel? Only do hurry up, I've got somewhere else to be."

"Fine, I'll get straight to the point. What the fuck did you do to Harry?"

"I'm afraid you've lost me."

"Before Christmas hols, Harry and my sister were a perfectly happy couple, well on their way to spending a nice lifetime together. Then, two days after Christmas, completely out of the blue, Harry broke up with her. Left her absolutely heartbroken. And his only explanation when I asked him about it was that a recent conversation he'd had with a "friend" made him realise that Ginny was not the right person for him and that they were together for the wrong reasons. None of Harry's *real* friends would have had such a conversation with him, so I'm assuming it must have been you."

Weasley's information shocked Draco to the core, but, as he was in hostile company, he feigned indifference to the news and focussed on other matters. "First of all, Weasel, I *am* one of Harry's *real* friends. Don't ever kid yourself into thinking otherwise. I know you don't approve of our friendship, but it's not going anywhere and neither am I. Second, any conversations that take place between Harry and me are our business, not yours. So, if Harry isn't inclined to give you any details about his conversation with whatever friend it was – because I am neither confirming nor denying that it was me – then you're not going to get any further by asking me for information. Now, as I'm certain that nothing else you have to say will be of any worth to me, I'm going to leave." Draco turned on the spot and marched out the classroom door without a backward glance.

That night, as Draco lay in his bed, his thoughts were so filled with the news of Harry's break up, that he couldn't fall asleep. He knew that the timing was not a

coincidence, and that their drunken conversation at the Hog's Head was indeed the conversation that Harry alluded to when explaining his reasons to the Weasel.

Thinking about that conversation, Draco couldn't help but remember the warmth he felt when Harry grabbed his hand across the table. This led to him remembering and replaying that strange and exciting moment on the train when Harry pressed his forehead to his.

Ever since that day, and Draco's realisation about his more than friendly feelings for Harry, wanking to images of him had become a regular pastime. With the Weaslette out of the picture, Draco's imagination wandered freely and before he knew it, his hand was moving under the bed sheets toward his rapidly stiffening cock.

At first, Draco just stroked himself slowly and leisurely, imagining it was Harry's hand doing all the work. After a few moments, though, the urge to speed up his hand movements was too much for Draco to ignore. He shoved his pyjama pants down with an impatient yank, and increased his rhythm.

With unfettered access to his cock, bringing himself to orgasm took only a few more moments. Draco came hard and fast, shouting out Harry's name when he did. *Lucky thing I started making my bed curtains imperturbable at night.* Draco smiled as he revelled in his self-induced bliss, then reached over to his nightstand for his wand and cleaned himself up.

The next morning, Draco awoke extra early. He wanted to get down to the Great Hall and observe the dynamics over at the Gryffindor table to see how this new development affected the house.

He hadn't been at his table for long when the Weasel and Granger walked in. He still looked furious, and she looked like she was desperately trying to convince him of something. Whatever she was saying, the Weasel was having none of it, but that didn't stop her from trying. She carried on a steady stream of chatter throughout their meal.

About fifteen minutes before the end of breakfast, the Weaslette arrived, flanked by Thomas and the younger brother of that bloke who stalked everyone with his blasted camera before dying during the battle - Creepy or some such name. Her face was pale and Draco could make out dark circles beneath her eyes. *She must still be upset, even though it's been almost two weeks. Maybe being back at school and having to deal*

with everyone finding out has made it feel like she's re-living the break up all over again. Draco couldn't help but feel an amount of selfish satisfaction at this thought.

Each time the door opened, Draco's attention was drawn away from the Gryffindor table, but each time, he would be disappointed as yet another person who wasn't Harry entered. Draco stayed until the last possible moment, but Harry never arrived.

It wasn't until after lunch, when the seventh years had double Potions, that Draco's need to see Harry was satisfied. Harry entered just as the final bell rang, and made his way to a vacant seat at the back of the room. He usually partnered up with the Weasel, but the daggers being shot in Harry's direction from the redhead's eyes were nearly impossible to miss. Draco half expected Harry to look like someone just kicked his favourite puppy, so the look of determined defiance on his friend's face came as a bit of a surprise.

Catching Harry's eye, Draco motioned for him to move up to the seat next to him. Harry complied immediately, shooting a look of smug rebellion towards the Weasel.

Professor Slughorn noticed Harry's one man game of musical chairs and commented on it. "Harry, my boy, you seem indecisive today. Is something the matter?"

"No, sir," replied Harry. "I've just decided to change my seating arrangement this semester. Get a different perspective on things, you know."

Draco looked at his friend inquisitively for a moment before returning his attention to Professor Slughorn, who had begun giving instructions for the potion they were going to brew.

He had hoped he'd have a chance to ask Harry about the break up while they were brewing, but the potion they were working on was a particularly finicky one that required their undivided attention. After class, Harry scooped up his books and his bag and was about to dash out of the classroom when Draco put a hand on his arm to stop him.

"Hey, are you up for a quick game of chase the snitch? I didn't get any flying time in over the hols and could use the exercise."

"Erm... sure why not? I'll meet you at the pitch in about half an hour, yeah?"

"Sounds good. See you there."

Draco noticed that Weasley had lingered in the classroom, taking an extra long time to put his books in his bag. *Listening in to see if I'm corrupting his precious friend, no doubt.* Draco looked the Weasel straight in the eyes and waggled his eyebrows in a manner that he hoped said, 'I'm corrupting him, oh yes I am, and you can't do a damn thing about it.' Judging from Weasley's reaction, his message was heard loud and clear.

Two hours later, Draco and Harry landed their brooms, exhilarated from the exercise. Draco had wanted to speak to Harry before the game, but when he arrived on the pitch, Harry was already circling lazily. He shouted for Draco to join him in the air and immediately released the snitch he'd been holding to start their game. Now that they were done flying, Draco asked the question that had been burning in his mind all day.

"So, Harry, last night at the Prefect's meeting, your friend Weasley told me that you dumped his sister. What's up?"

"Ron told you? *Ron?*"

"Well it wasn't like we were having a friendly chat or anything. He accused me of having something to do with it."

"Fucking hell. I *knew* he'd blame you. He's such a twat sometimes. I'm so sorry Draco; was he horrible to you?"

"He tried to be, but as with everything else in his life except his height, he came up short."

"Draco." Harry's tone was warning, but there was amusement in his eyes.

He gave Harry his best innocent look, and Harry smiled at him.

"So I guess you also noticed that Ron and I aren't exactly speaking at the moment. He's really angry about the whole Ginny thing. But what am I supposed to do, Draco? You were right when you pointed out that I was basically pressured into getting back together with her. I knew that all along, but it wasn't until you pointed it out that night that it really hit home."

"So, the Weaslette is not the great love of your life?"

"Hardly. When we got back together, I did it in hopes that she'd soon realise how wrong we are for each other and end things herself. But she doesn't see it. She doesn't see me. She's in love with this person she thinks is me, but I've never met the man she loves."

"Yeah, I always thought she had this creepy hero-worship thing for you. So, if you knew all along, why didn't you end it sooner? Why'd you wait until I pointed it out?"

"I dunno. I didn't want to hurt her, I guess. Or Ron. Or Mrs. Weasley. Merlin, she cried as much as Ginny did, I think. So I just avoided it all. I mean, it wasn't like it was torture being with her. Ginny likes Quidditch as much as I do, so we talked about that a lot. And, like me, she's already been recruited to the Aurors by Kingsley. We make great duelling partners."

"Quidditch and duelling?! You stayed with her to talk about Quidditch and to duel?"

"Well, yeah. Sort of. And sex, of course. We did that a lot too." Harry's eyes took on a far away expression. Sighing, he added, "I'm really going to miss blow jobs."

Shaking his head, Draco said, "Oh Potter. You do amuse me sometimes."

"What?"

"Nothing. Let's go get changed. I have a two foot Charms essay to write by morning."

Draco was sitting on his favourite sofa in the Slytherin common room, reading his Charms text book when Millicent Bulstrode entered the room and sat down beside him. She had a particularly self-satisfied smirk on her face, tinged with just the slightest bit of viciousness. She flung her arm across Draco's shoulders and said in an irritating sing-song voice, "Hey Draco, how are you today?"

"I'm well, Millie, although clearly not delighted with life as you are at the moment."

"Whatever do you mean?"

"You look like the cat that got the cream. Spill it, Bulstrode, what's got you in such a state?"

"Oh, nothing really. I was just wondering if you'd heard the news about your new best friend, Harry Potter."

"Yeah, Millie, I know all about his break up with the Weaslette. You'd think that after a month back in school, you'd have already heard that before now."

"Oh please, Draco, people got bored of talking about that at least two weeks ago. No, I'm talking about the new and rather scintillating little tidbit of info about Potter's love life."

Draco just raised an eyebrow in response.

"Of course, you probably already know, what with the two of you being such close, dear friends, and all."

Rolling his eyes, Draco replied, "Yeah I probably do know, so why don't you just come out with it and I'll let you know if what you've heard is accurate or not." Harry had not mentioned anything about his love life since their talk about breaking up with the Weaslette, so Draco was really not sure what to expect from Millicent, but there was certainly no way he was going to let her know that.

"Hmm. Yeah. " Millicent was not fooled. "Well, it appears that there were some deeper reasons behind Potter dumping the Weaslette. Reasons *nobody* would ever have expected. But the evidence is irrefutable. It's just so surpris—"

"Spare me the dramatic build up and get to the bloody point, Bulstrode."

"Okay. Potter's a poofster! And he's been sneaking around the school for dirty little snogging sessions with Zabini."

"What?! You're so fucking full of shit, Bulstrode. Potter is not shagging Zabini."

"I never said anything about shagging, Draco." Millicent's eyes lit up with glee. "Although I'd bet they probably are." She stared at Draco with interest, evidently hoping for a reaction.

Despite his best efforts not to give Millie what she was hoping for, Draco couldn't help but grind his teeth.

"I'm so sorry, Draco. I know you've been crushing on Potter since first year, and we all thought that with you two being so chummy lately, that you'd be the one who turned him to the dark side, so to speak." With a wink and a nudge Millicent stood up from the sofa and headed toward the girls' dormitories.

Draco could feel his face, ears and throat turning a deep shade of red. "I have *not* been crushing on Potter," he shouted at her retreating form. Draco looked down and realised that he had torn several pages right out of his book. "Oh bugger! Look what she made me do. Bitch."

Draco had expected to hear whispers and murmurs about Harry Potter's supposed tryst with Blaise Zabini, but the rumour mill had been surprisingly silent on that front. By Wednesday afternoon, Draco had decided that Millicent had been lying to him. *I'm going to kill Bulstrode. Clearly she was just having me on to see how I'd react.*

Draco did not want to give in to his temptation to ask Zabini if he really was snogging Harry. He and Blaise weren't exactly on the best of terms lately. The two had been having it off with each other, on and off since sixth year. It was a great stress relief for Draco at a time when he needed it most. When they returned to Hogwarts for their seventh year redux, they did hook up a few times, but Draco found his interest in Blaise had waned significantly.

By late October, he had reached a point where he didn't want to pretend to be hot for the other Slytherin anymore, so just before the Halloween Feast, Draco told him that it was over. Zabini pretended not to be upset, but from that day forth, there was a distinct chill in the air whenever the two were in the same room together. Thinking back on that time, Draco now realised that his decreased interest in Blaise probably had a lot to do with his budding friendship with Harry.

Draco promised himself that he would not, under any circumstances, ask Zabini about snogging Harry. He would not give Blaise the satisfaction of knowing he'd gotten one over on him.

"Zabini, I really don't think I'm comfortable with this whole situation." Draco's resolve not to confront Zabini had lasted less than twenty-four hours.

"Well, Malfoy," replied Zabini with a smirk, "fortunately for me, your comfort level isn't what governs my decision-making process."

Draco was stunned by his housemate's unwillingness to see things his way. "But it's Potter. You can't just go skulking about in the secret passageways and hidden alcoves

of the school snogging the bleeding 'Saviour of the Wizarding World.' It's undignified."

Zabini's only answer was to raise one eyebrow and let out a smug chuckle.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Draco's face was beginning to colour with anger.

Zabini's smirk grew wider. "It means, Draco, that you are painfully transparent." Blaise gave Draco a cheeky wink as he turned around and walked away from his fellow Slytherin.

"What is it *this time*, Millicent?"

Yet again, Draco found himself sitting on his favourite sofa in the Slytherin common room, having his studies interrupted. A rather gleeful Millie sat by his side, just bursting to give him some news that he was pretty certain he wouldn't like. *I knew I should have stayed in bed. Beware the ides of March. Why don't I ever heed that warning?*

"Have you heard the *latest* about Potter?"

"Don't tell me, he's pregnant with Blaise's love child and the two are going to elope to Bora Bora." It irked Draco to no end that he had to find out about Harry's love life through the grapevine. The two spent time together at least three times a week, but he just never felt comfortable broaching the subject.

Millicent gave an enthusiastic laugh. "Oh Draco, you *do* amuse me. But no, not even close. You'll be happy to know that things between Blaise and Potter are very much over."

Draco straightened up in delight at this revelation. "Really?!"

"Yeah. Over. Caput. Fini. Want to know why?" Millicent licked her lips as she said this.

Draco was immediately filled with dread. He knew by the far too cheerful look on Millicent's face that he was really not going to like what she had to say. Unable to form a coherent verbal response, Draco rolled his eyes and prompted her to continue.

"Okay. You're going to die laughing when you hear it. Blaise looks like such a fool. Apparently Potter dumped him last night. And Blaise, being the oh so humble guy that

we know and love assumed that it was just a momentary lapse of judgement on Potter's part. So he sought Potter out to rekindle their big romance, and boy did he ever get the shock of his lifetime."

"Go on."

"Well, Potter wasn't in the Great Hall for dinner just now, so Blaise thought maybe he had gone to one of their favourite meeting spots in hopes that Blaise would be there. And when he got there, Potter actually was there. But he wasn't alone!" She paused for dramatic effect and then continued, "Blaise just caught Harry Potter snogging Terry Boot. You know, that tall fellow from Ravenclaw."

Having dropped her bombshell, Millie again leapt off the sofa and dashed toward the girls' dorms, leaving Draco alone to ponder his bad fortune. "I'm really starting to dislike this sofa," he said, as he stood up and headed to his dorm, having lost the desire to continue with his studies.

The next evening, Draco sat in the ante-chamber waiting for Harry to arrive so they could work on the playoff schedule for Quidditch intramurals. Fifteen minutes after they were supposed to meet up, Harry rushed in to the room, looking more dishevelled than usual, and blurting out incoherent apologies.

Eyeing Harry with suspicion, Draco asked, "So what kept you, Potter? Detention again? And here I thought you were trying to stay on the professors' good sides this year."

Harry evaded Draco's gaze and stammered his response, "No, I was just...er...held up with...er...that is to say I was trying to find a book...er...in the library...er...for an assignment."

"Oh. Did you find it?"

"What?"

Draco chuckled. "The book, Harry. Did you find the book you were looking for?"

"Oh. Er...no. I'll have to go back and check again tomorrow I guess."

Draco just nodded and changed the topic to the work they had in front of them. They spent the next two hours working together, speaking only as related to the task at

hand. When they were finished, Draco asked Harry if he wanted to meet up on Saturday in Hogsmeade, and was met with yet more stammering and avoidance of eye contact. In the end Harry had said that he couldn't meet with Draco, as he had already agreed to meet with Ron and Hermione. And since he and Ron had only just started speaking again, he felt it best not to back out on them.

When Saturday arrived, Draco awoke extra early. He was on a mission to stalk Harry Potter, and nothing was going to stand in his way. Although he claimed to be spending the day with Granger and Weasley, Potter was going to meet Boot, Draco was sure of it. What he wasn't sure of is whether or not he truly wanted to confirm that suspicion. He had flipped back and forth in his mind as to whether or not he actually would follow Harry. In the end, his curiosity won over, and so he made his way to the Entrance Hall, disillusioned himself, and waited for Harry to arrive.

Three hours later, Draco was cursing himself for forgetting that his Gryffindor friend was not an early riser. He could have allowed himself another full hour or two of sleep.

Approximately fifteen minutes after that, Harry came bounding down the stairs alone and headed straight for the doors. Unnoticed, Draco slipped behind him and followed him out the door before it slammed shut.

When they arrived in Hogsmeade, Harry cast a furtive glance from side to side, and then slipped into an alley way next to the Three Broomsticks. Ten minutes later, Terry Boot arrived and did the exact same thing.

Draco watched as the two men greeted each other and then jumped right into a rather enthusiastic snog. Just as he was about to leave in disgust, the two boys broke apart and began talking.

"So, how'd you manage to ditch Ron and Hermione, today?"

"Are you kidding? That was easy. Those two jumped at the chance for some alone time. It was Draco that was the bigger challenge, actually."

"Ugh. Malfoy. I just don't understand why you bother with that riff raff."

Harry tensed up immediately and stepped away from his companion. "Draco is *not* riff raff. He's a good person who had a lot of difficult shit thrown at him. Don't you *dare* judge him."

Draco smiled at how readily his friend jumped to his defence. *Thanks Harry.*

"Well, it's not as if he didn't deserve whatever shit he got thrown at him. Spoiled, stuck up, pureblood-supremacist scum. That's what he and his whole family are."

Without another word, Harry whipped out his wand and threw a rather vicious Bat Bogey Hex at Boot. Draco had to jump out of the way as Harry stormed out of the alleyway. Once in the street, Harry turned on the spot and Disapparated, most likely to the edge of the Apparition wards, just outside the front gates of Hogwarts. Draco waited for a count of twenty, maybe thirty, because he couldn't resist watching Boot struggle to extricate himself from the rather sticky hex. Then he Apparated to the edge of the wards himself.

When he arrived, he saw Harry up ahead, storming his way toward the castle's main entrance. Draco jogged to catch up with his friend, and shouted out his name.

Harry turned around and a look of surprise crossed his face when he saw Draco. He waited for his friend to catch up with him and resumed walking with Draco at his side. "Where are you coming from?"

"Hogsmeade. I...er...Oh Merlin, I may as well just admit it. I saw you and Boot just now. By the Three Broomsticks. I heard what you said." Draco cursed himself for this sudden Gryffindorish compulsion to just blurt things out without thinking it through first. It was so unlike him, but such was the effect that witnessing Harry snogging another man seemed to have on him.

Harry's face turned ghostly white. "You saw us? Just...er...how much did you see?"

"Well, I followed you there." *Damn Gryffindor influence again.* "So I saw everything."

"Oh."

"Oh?"

"Oh. I well, I really didn't expect you to...er...find out that I was, well, you know."

"Bent?"

Harry ran his hand through his hair, making it even messier than usual. "Yeah. I guess that's as good a word as any. Well, now you know why I couldn't stay with Ginny

anymore." Harry let out a nervous laugh. "She kind of lacks the desired equipment. You're not totally disgusted with me, are you?" Harry seemed unable to look at Draco and instead was staring at the ground in front of him.

Draco smiled and touched his arm. "Harry, have you ever seen me with a girl?"

"Yeah."

"Really?"

"Yeah. You went to the Yule ball with Pansy Parkinson in fourth year."

"And since then?"

"Well, you had your head in her lap on the Hogwarts Express at the beginning of sixth year."

"And since then?"

"Er...no, I haven't, actually."

Draco smirked and raised his eyebrows, urging Harry to finally make the connection.

"Oh! OH! You're...y-you like...that is to say..."

"Eloquent as always, Potter. Yeah, I'm a poof. And you're painfully slow on the uptake."

"Hey. I'm not slow. It's not as if you walk around advertising it with a big neon sign above your head or something."

"It's not as if I hide it either, and what in the name of Merlin's saggy pants is neon?"

"It's a Muggle invention. Colourful lights that you can bend and twist into shapes and letters."

"Oh. How quaint. Anyway, now you know. I'm as bent as they come. Although, even if I weren't, I still wouldn't be disgusted that you are. I should get going now. I'm behind in my studies thanks to Millicent."

"What did she do?"

"Don't ask. See you later, Harry." Having reached the entrance hall, Draco headed off in the direction of the Slytherin dungeons. A large part of him really wanted to stay with Harry, and see what would come of this conversation. But now that everything was out in the open, Draco was terrified of being around him. Harry was gay, and now he knew that Draco was too. If Harry still didn't want him...it was just too unbearable to consider.

Matters of Influence Part Two

Two days later, Draco was walking out of his Arithmancy class when he heard his name being called. He turned to find Harry jogging toward him in the corridor.

"Hey. Why were you following me?"

Draco laughed. "Potter, have you gone 'round the twist? I'm not following you, I just walked out of my class and here you were shouting at me."

"No, no, no. Not *now*. Before."

Draco's let his confusion show in his expression.

"On Saturday, when we talked about the whole Boot thing. You said you'd followed me there. Why?"

Me and my big mouth. I should be thrown out of Slytherin house for that. "Long story, Harry. And definitely not one I want to get into in the corridors between classes. Let's meet after dinner in the ante-chamber and I'll tell you all about it."

Harry agreed and the two parted ways.

That evening, when Draco arrived in the ante-chamber, Harry was already sitting there. The moment Draco sat down beside him, Harry turned toward him. "Okay, Draco, you've left me hanging long enough. Please explain why you were following me on Saturday."

Draco did. In painful detail, from losing interest in Zabini – which, Draco admitted to his friend, was because he had gained an interest in Harry – to Millicent making him

hate his favourite sofa. He didn't recall doing it, but at some point during the telling of his tale, Draco had stood up and begun pacing the floor.

Throughout it all, Harry sat and listened, not saying a single word. When Draco was done talking, Harry stood as well and walked over to Draco.

Draco had to halt his pacing to avoid bumping in to his friend, but he didn't dare look Harry in the eyes.

"Draco." Harry's voice was thick and husky. He tilted Draco's chin up, forcing him to make eye-contact.

Draco closed his eyes in utter embarrassment for having laid out his most personal thoughts and feelings. He felt exposed, vulnerable, and like a complete fool.

"Draco, look at me." Draco felt Harry caress his cheek, and when he opened his eyes, Harry leaned in for a soft, chaste kiss. He then pulled back just far enough that the two could look at each other.

Seeing unmistakable feelings of affection and desire reflected in the green eyes that stared back at him, Draco leaned forward and delivered a kiss to Harry that was soft and gentle, but decidedly unchaste. Every moment of longing that Draco had felt over the past several months was delivered in that kiss. He tilted his head slightly, opening his mouth to deepen the contact, and was immediately rewarded by Harry's tongue plunging within it.

Draco responded in kind, and soon the boys' tongues were locked in a passionate embrace. After several moments, Harry pulled his head back, and just as Draco was about to whimper in protest, he felt Harry's tongue tracing a path along his jaw line and down to his neck. A low and feral moan clawed its way out of Draco's throat, to be met with a similar response from his companion. Tongue was soon replaced with teeth, as Harry nibbled his way along Draco's neck, toward his collarbone.

Harry had just finished unfastening the top clasp of Draco's robes when a loud gasp followed by a muffled thud drew their attention toward the ante-chamber door. Just inside the doorway, stood Zacharias Smith and Aaron Bradley, surrounded by books, quills and parchment that presumably had been dropped upon discovering Harry and Draco.

Smith smirked and was about to say something that Draco knew would tempt him to throw out one of his nastier hexes. When he heard a whispered "*Silencio*" Draco realised that Harry had silenced the Hufflepuff.

"Shut it, Smith. Come on, Draco, let's get out of here." With a glare in Smith's direction, Harry stormed out of the chamber, grasping Draco's hand and dragging him along. Harry didn't stop until they had reached the corridor for the Room of Requirement. He paced back and forth until a door appeared and opened. Then he ushered Draco inside.

The room was an exact replica of the ante-chamber, which made Draco chuckle with amusement.

"Now, where were we?" He heard Harry whisper, as Draco was pulled toward him. The two men resumed their snogging, which lasted for quite some time. Eventually, they needed a break, so they moved to the sofa and sat in companionable silence, arms and legs resting against each other.

After a few moments, Harry broke the silence. "Draco, why didn't you tell me how you felt until now?"

"I don't know, Potter. Maybe it was because you spent the first half of the year practically married to the Weaslette. As far as I knew you were just a straight guy that I was stupid enough to be attracted to. And then when your relationship wasn't even cold in its grave, I find out that not only are you queer, but you're shagging one of my friends. One of my exes! And then did you even blink before moving from Zabini to Boot? Merlin, Harry, you're like a one-man inter-house unity squad. First a Slytherin, then a Ravenclaw; were you planning on shagging Smith next?" Draco was caught off-guard by the heated force of his response, and found himself yet again wishing he'd thought before he spoke. Draco stared down at his feet in embarrassment at his outburst.

Harry laughed and pulled Draco into a warm hug, effectively diffusing his anger. He pulled back enough to lean his forehead against Draco's, reminding him of that day on the train. A sudden realization struck Draco with the force of a stampeding herd of hippogriffs. Harry had felt something back then. That was why things got so awkward until they decided to play exploding snap.

"It was me, wasn't it? That day on the train, when we were just like we are now. That's when you realised. That's why you ended things with her. It was me."

Now it was Harry's turn to look embarrassed. He nodded his head in confirmation but didn't say anything.

Draco smirked. "So, Harry, why didn't *you* say anything to *me* about how you felt before today? You're supposed to be the big, brave Gryffindor, after all."

Harry shoved Draco's shoulder and laughed. "Well, to be honest, I really wanted to wait and see if I could bag Smith before settling down with you."

Draco was completely shocked, and was about to reply when Harry cut him off with a kiss.

"I'm only joking, Draco. Do you seriously think I could be even remotely attracted to Smith, of all people?"

Draco laughed and the two men sat together talking and kissing until well after curfew, then snuck back to their respective dorms.

The next day at breakfast, Draco was so preoccupied with looking across the Great Hall at Harry, that he barely ate anything. He blamed it on the smiles that the other man kept throwing in his direction.

Draco also found it impossible to pay attention during any of his morning classes. His thoughts were filled with Harry, and the incredible kisses they shared. He knew he was probably missing something important in class, but he just didn't care.

Lunchtime brought with it more opportunities for staring at Harry. This time, however, Draco did force himself to look away and eat some food. After skipping breakfast, he was absolutely famished. It was Tuesday, which meant double Potions in the afternoon, and Draco was impatient for lunch to end so he could spend time with Harry.

Draco headed toward the Potions dungeon early, and was pleased to see that Harry had the same idea. The two met up in one of the lower corridors and continued their journey to class together. Every once in a while their hands would brush against each other and Draco's stomach would perform little flips.

When they arrived at the classroom, they were the only occupants, and Draco took advantage of this solitary moment to pull Harry in for a much anticipated kiss.

"Merlin, Draco, I've been thinking about that all day long."

"I know what you mean," replied Draco. "I've been so busy thinking of you that my Arithmancy Professor noticed and commented on it in class."

Harry stifled a laugh. "Oh dear. Was it horrible?"

"A bit embarrassing, but I'll live. I didn't get detention, so it's not a big problem."

"So."

"So?"

"So, I, er... I think we should let our friends know about this. Or I mean, if you don't want to, that's fine, but I think I really should tell Ron and Hermione. Especially Hermione, because she'll know anyway. She's too good at reading people, and when she gets suspicious about something, she doesn't let up until she gets answers."

"Yes, I've noticed that she can be a bit tenacious," replied Draco. "That's fine with me, Harry. If you need to tell them, then do it. I'm kind of looking forward to telling Blaise." Draco could not repress the smirk on his face.

"Okay, good. And Draco?"

"Yes, Harry?"

"You do realise that now that we're more than just friends, you and Ron are going to have to find a way to get along."

Draco grimaced. "You want me to be friends with the Weasel?"

Harry sighed and replied, "No, you don't need to be friends. I'm not foolish enough to expect that of either of you. But please do try to be civil. I'd like us all to spend time together once in a while. You and Hermione are actually more alike than you know, and I think the two of you would enjoy each other's company if you'd just give each other the chance."

"I'll be civil, Harry. I'll engage your friends in polite conversation, and try not to provoke Weasley too much. But you'll have to do the same with Milicent. And when we're out of Hogwarts, with Pansy and Greg too."

Harry groaned in response, but acquiesced. "What about Zabini?"

"You've already been far too friendly with him for my liking. The two of you can be civil. But to be honest, I'm going to put a lot of effort into keeping you apart as much as possible."

Harry seemed about to respond, but the other students began filing into the classroom and their conversation came to an end.

Draco's friends were not remotely surprised about this new development in his relationship with Harry. Zabini started to make a crack about sloppy seconds, but Millicent stomped on his foot and he quickly shut his mouth.

Draco was more concerned about how Harry's friends would take the news, but when the two met up that evening, Harry allayed his worries.

"Ron and Hermione didn't seem shocked when I told them that I'm gay. Ron was a bit more surprised than Hermione, but as I told you, she's sharp. They were both much more supportive than I'd have expected. Ron even told me that his brother Charlie is gay too, which I never knew. And apparently, the fact that I'm not straight makes it easier for Ron to accept my break up with Ginny, so I think any last bits of awkwardness from that whole ugly scene are over, thank Merlin."

Draco was relieved that Harry's friends weren't as narrow-minded as some people in Wizarding society. When Crabbe and Goyle had found out about Draco and Blaise, their attitude toward Draco changed dramatically. It didn't help that the news coincided with his family's fall from grace in the Dark Lord's ranks, but Draco knew that Crabbe in particular was disgusted with both Draco and Blaise. With Vince gone, and no longer a direct influence on Greg, Draco was pleased to find his old friendship had returned to its former comfort level, and during Christmas holidays, the two spent a fair bit of time together.

"So, they're comfortable with you being gay, but what about me? How do they feel about you being with me?"

"Well," began Harry. "They were certainly quite astonished, and definitely not ecstatic about my choice of partner, particularly Ron, but they both agreed to give you a chance as long as you do the same. I told them that you are willing to be civil for my sake, and that seemed to satisfy them."

Draco and Harry had already been spending a lot of time together, but now that they were officially a couple, the two became inseparable. Although they were always careful to behave strictly like friends, rumours still began to run rampant amongst the other students.

Shortly after returning from Easter break, it became clear that Smith and Bradley had not kept quiet about their discovery in the ante-chamber. Draco and Harry were on

their way to the Room of Requirement when they came upon a pair of third year Hufflepuffs discussing the tale of Smith walking in on them, although by this point, the story had been heavily exaggerated.

Draco walked up to them and grabbed each boy by the collar of their robes. "Bugger off, you brats, and stop talking about things you don't even understand," he said, releasing them with a shove. The two boys ran down the corridor immediately, but just before they turned the corner, one of them turned back and shouted, "Why don't *you* bugger off, you poof!"

Draco was about to set off in pursuit of the insolent whelp, but found his progress impeded by a strong hand grasping his arm.

"Let me go, Harry! Little bastard deserves to be hexed into oblivion."

"Maybe, but not today, okay?"

"Fine. It'll just add more fuel to my fire when I next see Smith. That prick. And he only wishes he'd seen my bare arse that day."

Harry chuckled and gave Draco a quick kiss. "I agree. It is a rather nice arse." After a moment, his face took on a rueful look. "I wonder when all of this will hit the papers."

Unconcerned for the moment about appearing too friendly, Draco took Harry's hand in his and kissed it. "I wonder how many Howlers and death threats I'll receive when it does."

The next day, as Draco and Harry were about to walk into the Great Hall for breakfast, Granger called out to them. When they turned around, she and Ron were standing a few feet away. She motioned them to a nearby alcove, cast a *Muffliato* and handed them the *Daily Prophet* with a look of disgust written across her face.

"Alright, let's have it then," said Harry in resignation. "How has the *Prophet* managed to twist this story?"

Draco read aloud, "*Harry Potter: From Dark Lord Vanquisher to Death Eater Boy-Toy*. Catchy headline, that."

"Yeah, too bad they got it wrong. I'm only the boy-toy of a *former* Death Eater. And it's not like you were a very good one anyway."

Draco gave him a backhanded whack across the chest. "Hey! That may be true, but how about we not say it as if I'm a big pathetic failure, okay?"

"Ouch! Sorry, I didn't mean it like that. I for one am happy that you weren't a very good Death Eater, especially since I know that it's because you were secretly crazy about me, even back then and just couldn't stand the thought of a world without me in it, but – "

"Harry. I really think you should read the article, right now," interjected Granger.

"She's right," agreed Draco. "Shall I continue?"

"Oh definitely. With a headline like that, it's only going to get better."

Draco cleared his throat and began reading.

Harry Potter: From Dark Lord Vanquisher to Death Eater Boy-Toy

By Rita Skeeter, Daily Prophet Staff Writer

Today is a sad, sad day for starry-eyed witches across the nation. If you are a young lady who harbours hopes of winning the heart of the Saviour of the Wizarding World, you may want to skip this article. Actually, no, you'd better just buck up and read it, because it's best that you know the truth.

Harry Potter, Saviour of the Wizarding World, is – like his mentor Albus Dumbledore – a homosexual. This information comes from a most reliable source at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. My source tells me that he himself has witnessed a number of intimate moments between Harry Potter and his paramour. "Oh yes, they've made no effort to hide their relationship. It's a common occurrence to catch the two of them pawing at each other and snogging in broom closets and dusty alcoves. I was even unfortunate enough to catch them in a position much more compromising than a simple snog. One evening, I was minding my own business when I heard an awful racket in the ante-chamber off the Great Hall. Thinking that someone might need my help, I dashed into the room and there he was, Harry Potter, being shagged senseless by another male student right out in the open."

I'm sure, dear readers, that you are all wondering who this mystery male student is. I'm afraid you will not like reading what comes next. I asked my source –who wishes to remain anonymous, as he fears for his personal safety– and he had this to say: "Well it was none other than Draco Malfoy, son of convicted Death Eater, Lucius Malfoy. There he was with his bare arse in the air, rutting against Potter like a wild beast."

That's right, my friends. Harry Potter, our supposed beacon of light has been fraternizing with the enemy in a most shocking manner. You may remember that Draco Malfoy was, himself, charged with a number of crimes related to the war. And do you also remember that the only reason he's not sharing a cell with daddy is because of some rather compelling testimony given at his trial? Testimony given by none other than Harry Potter himself.

That leads one to ask, just how long has this little duo been an item? Have they been working together all along to defeat You-Know-Who in hopes of one day replacing him? Draco Malfoy led Death Eaters into Hogwarts to attack students and teachers. An action that resulted in the eldest brother of one of Harry Potter's supposed best friends being attacked by vicious werewolf, Fenrir Greyback. It has also been rumoured that Malfoy had a hand in the death of Albus Dumbledore as well, although Potter claims it was their deceased Potions Master, Severus Snape who uttered the killing curse. How convenient to place the blame on someone who isn't around to defend himself. Is it possible that Harry Potter was in on all of this as well? Perhaps the student had outgrown the master, and he had to be eliminated?

This is a dark day indeed for the Wizarding World. And the tale only gets darker from here.

Shortly after the war ended, I heard rumours that our Saviour had done some rather unsavoury things in his quest to defeat the Dark Lord. Rumours of Unforgivable curses being thrown about by Harry Potter as if they were nothing more sinister than a jelly-legs jinx. Naturally, I never reported these, as they were only rumours and I don't report anything without solid proof, but now that his relationship with Draco the Death Eater has come to light, I feel it's my duty to inform the public of this potential danger.

The last thing our world needs is another insane Dark Lord tearing apart the very fabric of our society. If that is his plan, he must be stopped.

So, Harry Potter, our so-called Saviour, I challenge you to deny these allegations and prove yourself to be the upstanding citizen you pretend to be!

"What rubbish!" cried Draco when he finished reading. "When I think of all the information I gave her back in fourth year! I snuck that bitch onto the grounds and everything, and *this* is how she pays me back?!" The moment he had said it, Draco slapped his hand against his mouth, once again wishing that he would stop and think before speaking. "Oh, bugger."

"It's okay, Draco, I know you fed all that nonsense to Rita Skeeter about me back then. Clearly I've forgiven you for it."

"Good. Sorry." Draco felt sheepish.

Granger touched Harry's arm. "Harry." She was biting her lip in apparent distress. "Do you think Rita Skeeter found out about Gringotts?"

"No," said Harry. "There's no way she could. She's just grasping at straws, I'm sure of it."

"What about Gringotts?"

Turning back to Draco, Harry sighed and said, "Short answer, I used *Imperius* on a goblin so he'd help us break in to your aunt Bellatrix's vault and steal and steal something Voldemort asked her to hide for him. I honestly can't give you any more details than that. Let's go eat, I'm hungry."

Sensing that this was one thing he wouldn't be able to wrangle out of Harry, Draco dropped the subject and turned toward the Great Hall.

"Harry," Granger grabbed Harry's arm again and turned him toward her. "Are you absolutely sure that Rita Skeeter didn't find out about that? Do you think one of the goblins could have told her?"

"No, I definitely don't. Goblins don't like to get involved with the affairs of Wizards." Harry seemed to grow uncomfortable. Biting his fingernail, he continued, "There, uh, there was another incident, though. One I never mentioned to you. I, er, I also used *Crucio* on Carrow in the Ravenclaw common room because he was attacking Professor McGonagall."

"What?!" Draco, Granger, and Weasley all turned toward Harry in unison.

"Look," began Harry. "It was a desperate measure taken at an incredibly desperate time. Voldemort was on his way to Hogwarts and time was running out."

"Did anyone witness this, Harry?" Granger asked the question that was burning in Draco's mind.

"Professor McGonagall and Luna. But neither of them would have told." Harry paused in apparent thought and continued, "But Carrow very well might have. Maybe in hopes of getting a lighter sentence in exchange for testimony against me or something. Oh bugger, I've really screwed things up this time, haven't I?"

Draco was concerned, but he realised something about what Harry said that could work in their favour. "Skeeter can make all the claims she wants. She has no proof, and it's a convicted Death Eater's word against yours. You've got influence on your side."

"I hate to agree with Malfoy," said Weasley, "but he's got a point, Harry."

"You're right, both of you. I'm not going to worry about it for now." Turning toward the Great Hall, Harry said, "Let's go eat."

"Yes, let's. I'm not going to let that horrid Rita Skeeter ruin my appetite. But Merlin, Harry, she definitely has it in for you. In fourth year, she was just chomping at the bit for any nasty morsels of information we could give her about – Hey, wait a minute. In fifth year she actually wrote something positive about you. There was that article that appeared in the *Quibbler*. What made her turn on you again?"

Granger piped up at that question. "Oh, well, Rita Skeeter didn't exactly write that article of her own free will."

"What do you mean, Granger?"

"Hermione blackmailed her," declared Weasley, beaming at his girlfriend. "She was brilliant."

Granger sighed. "Unfortunately, our agreement was only for one year, and now that it's long since past, I've got no means of controlling her. Particularly as she's now registered herself as an Animagus and I no longer have that to hold over her."

"Blackmail, Granger?" Draco was clearly impressed. "How very Slytherin of you. I think I may have been underestimating some of you Gryffindor types all these years. Not you, of course, Weasley, but there just might be some hope for Harry and Granger yet."

Harry smiled at Draco, and tucked his arm around his waist. Draco put his arm around Harry's shoulder and the two walked into the Great Hall, ready to face the reaction of their fellow students. Every head turned toward the doors as they entered, and an eerie silence fell upon the room. Throwing a resigned look at his boyfriend, Draco straightened his shoulders and strode directly to his seat at the Slytherin table.

Not surprisingly, both Draco and Harry received an exceptionally large amount of owl post that day. As predicted, Draco's mail consisted mainly of Howlers. When he narrowly escaped getting bubotuber pus all over himself after opening one letter, he decided it best to just incinerate the remaining pile.

He noticed that Harry had also received several Howlers, along with a number of regular letters. *The non-howlers are probably from heartbroken witches begging him to change his mind*, Draco thought with a chuckle. When Harry leapt to his feet and shouted profanities before storming out of the Great Hall, Draco was rather surprised. He rose immediately and ran after his boyfriend to find out what was wrong.

Finally catching up with him in the Charms corridor, Draco managed to get Harry to stop and speak to him.

"Harry, whatever some overzealous fan has to say, you know it's just a bunch of rubbish and you shouldn't let it bother you."

"I only wish it was an overzealous fan, Draco." Passing the letter to him, he said, "Here, read it. It's from Kingsley."

"Kingsley? As in Shackbolt? The Minister for Magic?"

"Yep."

"Oh dear. This can't be good." Draco proceeded to read the letter and, like Harry, he finished by expelling a string of expletives.

Shackbolt was informing Harry that the committee which had been assembled to ensure that all policies and procedures implemented during this rebuilding period were fair and above board, had decided that unless they were able to find evidence to contradict Rita Skeeter's latest accusations and diffuse the uproar that it had caused, Harry would be suspended from the Auror Department and not permitted to begin his full-time training in August. Shackbolt assured Harry that he did not agree with the decision of the committee, and would try his hardest to find a way around it but that, until such a point, his hands were tied. The tone of the letter was genuinely apologetic, but that did not lessen the blow at all.

"What the fuck am I going to do with my life now, Draco? Being an Auror is the only career I really considered. I don't even know what my options are outside of that! Fucking, fucking, FUCK!" Harry punched a nearby classroom door so hard that Draco was worried he had split the wood or broken his hand.

Draco pulled Harry into a close hug. "Oh Harry, I'm so sorry to have brought this upon you."

"No, Draco," said Harry, pulling back to look at Draco's face. "It's not your fault. Not at all."

"Well, maybe not directly my fault, but if it weren't for me, this wouldn't have happened."

Harry shook his head and began protesting, but Draco cut him off.

"Listen, you know how I feel about you. You know that won't change. But maybe we should end things for now. We can deny it all. Skeeter has no proof to back a single claim in her story. We'll come up with plausible retorts for everything she wrote, which shouldn't be too hard since half of it was outright lies, so it's only a few things we'll have to make up our own lies for. Then, you can go to the press with it. People will believe you, Harry. You're still the Saviour of the Wizarding World and your words carry much more weight than you think."

"That sounds great, Draco. Except one thing." Harry had moved out of Draco's embrace and was pacing to and fro in the corridor. "What about us? Let's say we end it for now, how long does "now" last? If we deny everything between us, only to get back together a few months down the road, people will see right through it. Rita Skeeter will be all over that story faster than we can blink. Lying about our relationship isn't the answer, Draco."

Draco knew that Harry was right, and what he said next caused him more pain than he'd felt in a very long time. "Then, maybe we don't just end it for now. I don't want to drag you down, Harry, and that's all I'll be doing if we stay together."

Harry stopped pacing and grasped Draco's arms in a tight grip. "NO! Absolutely not. There's nothing wrong with our relationship, and I'm not ending it just because she's trying to make it look like we've been in cahoots all this time so we can rule the world together. It's the same bullshit she spewed about Professor Dumbledore and Grindelwald, but at least with them she had some questionable letters to back up her claims. Just because Rita bloody Skeeter's lies have caused the committee to have such a strong knee-jerk reaction, doesn't mean it'll be that way forever. You're right,

I'm still the Saviour of the Wizarding World, and I'll use that fact as much as necessary to ensure that *that* woman isn't able to ruin my life. ANY part of my life, particularly the part that belongs to you."

"But Harry..."

"But nothing, Draco. Nothing can take me away from you. Not the committee, not that stupid article, nothing."

Draco leaned over to deliver a deep and passionate kiss to his lover. Smiling he replied, "Point taken. I see there's no persuading you otherwise. I've witnessed your determined side in action dozens of times over the years, but never with quite as much vehemence as right now. I don't know whether to be fiercely proud of you, highly turned on by your forcefulness, or just plain terrified that if we ever break up, you're going to stalk me and make me wish I was dead."

This bit of levity seemed to be exactly what Harry needed to calm down. He smirked up at Draco and said, "Maybe a little bit of each."

Seizing on the opportunity to divert Harry's attention from the Shackelbolt letter before the foul mood could return and take hold of him for the rest of the day, Draco decided upon a tactic that was sure to keep Harry distracted. "I think turned on is winning right now. Want to skive off first class and sneak up to the Room of Requirement?"

Harry's smile was rather salacious as he reached for Draco's hand and began walking toward the seventh floor.

Once inside the Room of Requirement – again set up to resemble the ante-chamber, although the sofa was longer than the original, and was as wide as a double bed – Harry grabbed Draco, spun him around so they were facing each other, and practically slammed his mouth against Draco's.

The kiss was tinged with Harry's still lingering anger, but the intensity and heat of it sent jolts of pleasure searing through Draco's veins. He became hard almost instantly, and pulled Harry's body closer so he could rub against the other man, enjoying the sweet friction his movements created.

Harry responded with equal enthusiasm and backed Draco up to the sofa. Draco felt Harry's grip on his waist tighten, and did the same around Harry's neck, ensuring that neither their bodies nor their mouths broke contact.

Draco's felt the sofa hit the back of his calves and he let his entire body fall backward. He pulled Harry with him and kicked off his shoes while both men's hands got busy working on removing robes and attacking the buttons of the each other's shirts.

Harry's hands deftly unfastened Draco's trousers and pulled them down, together with his pants, then sat back to gaze at Draco's naked form.

Draco found himself getting lost in the depths of Harry's eyes, which had darkened to the colours of the forest at dusk. He felt as if he just might explode if Harry didn't resume touching him immediately.

"Merlin, Draco, you're so beautiful. I could stare at you forever."

Draco reached up and pulled Harry down into a searing kiss. He ran his hands down Harry's lightly muscled back, slipped them around his waist and hastened to unfasten Harry's trousers. He pulled them down as far as he could with his hands, then brought his bare feet up and hooked them into the waistband to complete the task.

Harry lips trailed down Draco's chin, and he moaned at the exquisite feeling of Harry licking and nipping at his skin. Draco reached up to cup Harry's arse in both hands, squeezing firmly. Harry reciprocated by licking, biting, and sucking in turn along Draco's neck, collarbone, and chest.

Draco continued to knead Harry's arse, then his hands slid up Harry's back as Harry moved down Draco's body, his tongue leaving a trail of moisture along Draco's pale chest and stomach. Draco's breathing hitched as Harry worked his way lower and lower. He closed his eyes to savour the feeling, but then noticed that the attentions had stopped.

Draco opened his eyes and peered at his boyfriend. Harry had a distinctly mischievous look on his face as he lifted his head and blew across the trail of saliva that he'd left on Draco's abdomen. The sensation caused Draco to shiver as his flesh came up in goose bumps. "Oh God, Harry. That feels so amazing."

Apparently getting the reaction he was seeking, Harry leaned down and circled the tip of Draco's cock with his mouth. Draco gasped at the warm, moist pressure against his most sensitive flesh. He groaned in ecstasy as Harry's mouth engulfed his cock.

Harry's tongue did things that made Draco incoherent, and after what seemed like only the briefest of moments, Draco came with a shout.

Harry smiled at him and began to lick his way back up his body. Draco couldn't take his eyes off Harry as he paused at the indentation of his left hip, licking, sucking, and biting until a livid red mark rose against pale white skin.

By this point, Draco had regained some composure, so he reached down and flipped Harry over to begin his own exploration of flesh. His busy hands touched and scratched along a smooth, tanned chest.

Harry's skin smelled of citrus and honey, and Draco wanted to lick every inch of it. His inquisitive tongue moved along Harry's torso, pausing for a moment to lick at each nipple. He then took one into his mouth, bit hard, and then quickly licked it to soothe the sensitive flesh. Harry groaned in approval, and Draco continued toying with Harry's nipples for several minutes.

After a while, Draco resumed his journey downward. "Harry," Draco's tongue dipped briefly into Harry's navel. "You're gorgeous." His tongue slithered along a meandering path across Harry's abdomen. "And you're brilliant." He nibbled on the edge of Harry's hip. "And we'll get through anything life throws at us." He licked and nibbled a trail downward and inward, toward his ultimate goal. "And we'll do it together." He took Harry's cock into his mouth as far as he could.

This feverish exploration of each other's bodies lasted the entire morning. Draco considered staying there for the rest of the day, but he knew that as powerful as the Room of Requirement was, it could not take Harry's problems away from him, and the two would have to return to the real world and find a solution before things got out of hand.

As they were leaving the room, Draco suggested that Harry talk to Shackbolt. "You have a fair amount of influence with him, Harry. Use it."

The most ingenious idea came to Draco in his sleep. It was brilliant in its simplicity, and he was surprised that it hadn't occurred to him the moment he read the Skeeter article. Rising early and performing his morning ablutions at lightning speed, he sat at his desk and composed the letter that would surely solve at least part of his and Harry's problem.

He rushed up to the Owlery and summoned his large eagle owl to deliver his post. "Be sure to wait for a response. This is an incredibly urgent matter."

The owl hooted in apparent understanding and took off out the window.

Draco smiled to himself. There were still *some* things about being a Malfoy that worked in his favour.

Later that afternoon, Draco's response came, just as he knew it would. He was sitting by the lake with Harry, relieved to be done with another day of classes, when Ares, his owl returned. Draco's evident glee at the contents of his letter piqued Harry's curiosity, and Draco was bombarded with questions.

"All in good time, Harry. All in good time."

"Draco!"

"Don't whinge, Harry. It's so unbecoming of a hero."

Harry cringed at the last word, causing Draco to smirk widely.

"I tell you what. I can't give you details, but I will say that it has to do with solving the Rita Skeeter problem. So, you can safely leave that with me, and focus your efforts on using your considerable influence with the Minister for Magic to get your suspension rescinded. Sound good to you?"

Harry continued to pout, but eventually agreed. "That reminds me, I've got a firecall scheduled with him in twenty minutes. I'd better run. Meet you later?"

"Sure. After dinner?"

"We can head to our usual spot."

"See you there, Harry." He leaned over to kiss Harry who then dashed off toward the castle, leaving Draco alone to savour his letter once more.

Draco and Harry were on their way to the Room of Requirement to discuss Harry's conversation with Minister Shacklebolt when out of nowhere, the Weaslette appeared and stood right in Harry's path.

"Hi, Harry."

"Ginny. Er...what's up?"

Draco knew that she and Harry hadn't really spoken since their break up, and Harry's discomfort at her sudden appearance was evident. Surprise and apprehension were written all over his face.

"I just wanted to say," she began, sighing, "that although I really wish you'd have told me *why* you didn't want to be with me anymore, now that I know, I understand. And I support you. It actually kind of explains a few things."

"What things?"

"Oh, nothing important. Anyway, I just wanted you to know that I care for you and so does Mum and Dad. I talked to them yesterday. Dad's really upset about the Auror thing, and he's been pressuring Kingsley to overrule the committee ever since he found out."

"Oh. Er. Thanks Ginny. And thanks to your parents too. I hated the thought that we couldn't all be close like we've always been. I really did want to be honest with you, but I just wasn't ready to, you know. But I've missed you. Your friendship has always been important to me, and I hope we can get that back on track."

"Me too. So, with that in mind," she said, and turned to Draco, holding out her hand.

Draco felt hesitant but took the offered hand in his own.

"You seem to genuinely care about Harry, so I'm going to *try* to keep an open mind about you."

"Thanks. Likewise."

"Good," she smiled. "But of course, you know that if you ever hurt him, I'll hex you so bad, you'll be nostalgic for my Bat Bogey hex from fifth year." With that, she turned on her heel and walked away.

Harry laughed and said, "I'd heed her warning. Her hexing has improved dramatically since then."

"I don't doubt it after last year. I remember all that she and Longbottom managed to do with their resistance group."

When they reached the Room of Requirement, Harry paced beside it and once more the door opened to the replica ante-chamber.

"You've got some sort of fetish for this room, don't you Potter?"

Harry laughed. "No, *Malfoy*, I just, I dunno... Since this is where things all started with us, I feel like it's sort of our room. Don't you?"

Draco's only reply was to shake his head and roll his eyes.

Once comfortably seated, Draco turned to Harry and asked what the news from Shackbolt was.

"Well, things do seem a bit better, now that I've talked to him in person. He's really been working on getting the committee to back down on their ruling. But there are still some major hurdles to overcome. He's managed to convince them that if I can get the *Daily Prophet* to run an article that refutes all of Rita Skeeter's claims, then I wouldn't have to produce proof, because Skeeter doesn't have any either, and this way both versions of the story would have been given equal exposure."

Draco wished he could feel relieved by this news, "*All* of her claims? Does that mean he wants you to deny our relationship?"

"Well, at first, Kingsley did say all of them, but I fought him on that. He personally doesn't have a problem with my sexuality, but some members of the committee don't seem quite as open to the concept. Anyway, after I was adamant that I would never deny what we have together, he relented and said that as long as I can show that we weren't together and working in secret when Professor Dumbledore died, that he would get the committee to accept a gay Saviour of the Wizarding World as an Auror. He said he'd remind them of the need to boost morale amongst the Aurors and how having someone who defeated the most fearsome Dark Wizard that ever existed in their ranks will do just that."

Sighing in relief, Draco replied, "That's great news, Harry!"

"Well, not really. I still have to convince the *Prophet* to listen to, and then *print* my side of the story. They have a history of trying to drag my reputation through the mud, so what's to make them switch gears now? And if I do, I still have to tell my side of the story with enough detail to be believable, yet somehow leave out an awful lot of information. I don't really want to give the rest of the world the intimate details of Professor Dumbledore's death, and I'll have to find out exactly what Rita knows

about the Unforgiveables, then find a way to explain it. And of course, there's still going to be people who believe Rita's version over mine."

Draco gave Harry a knowing smile and assured his boyfriend. "You worry too much, love. Concentrate on what you *can* do and we'll work out the details when the need arises. It'll all work out in the end. Trust me."

"Draco..."

"Before you ask, yes, I do have a plan. And I *will* tell you about it. Soon."

A few nights later, Draco received an owl advising him that his plan had come to fruition.

The next morning, he sat at the Slytherin table, anxiously awaiting the arrival of the post owls. It seemed like an eternity before they appeared, and when the barn owl swooped down over his table to drop a copy of the *Daily Prophet* on his plate, Draco let out an enthusiastic whoop that caused his housemates to give him strange looks. His hands were shaking with excitement and he could barely keep the paper still enough to read the headline.

He peered anxiously over at the Gryffindor table while another owl dropped a copy of the paper on Harry's plate. Draco's excitement turned to frustration when Harry merely picked up the newspaper and pitched it over his shoulder to the floor.

He stared at Harry, silently willing him to look up so he could gesture to him to read the news. Not having any luck, he finally stood up and walked over to Harry's table, planning to smack him across the head with his own copy. Just as he arrived, a shout from Granger told him there would be no need. Sure enough, she had not failed to notice a certain article that appeared on the front page. Her face became almost comically animated as she read it aloud to her companions.

Harry Potter: From Maligned Saviour to Promising Auror

By Rita Skeeter, Daily Prophet Staff Writer

The quill in my hand feels heavy as I write this, my dear readers. But I, Rita Skeeter, ace reporter and (usually) excellent judge of character have been duped. It seems my 'reliable' source at Hogwarts was using me and my

venerated column as a tool for seeking vengeance against two undeserving and innocent victims.

Everything my source told me about Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy has been grossly exaggerated. Now, before all of you single witches out there get your hopes up, I'm afraid this article still does not bring good news to anyone who has been harbouring hopes of one day marrying the Saviour of the Wizarding World. It turns out that the one thing my source was truthful about was Mr Potter's sexual orientation. Harry Potter is indeed a homosexual, and he is very much involved with Draco Malfoy.

Evidence has recently come to light which refutes my earlier supposition that the two young men were involved at the time of Albus Dumbledore's murder. Sources confirm that, at the time of his Headmaster's death, Mr Potter was involved with Ginevra Weasley, youngest daughter of Arthur and Molly Weasley.

Furthermore, Draco Malfoy has produced proof that my source is smitten with him to an obsessive degree. As a reporter, I am not able to reveal my sources, even when they prove to be unreliable. So, for simplicity's sake, I shall refer to him as Mr S. Mr Malfoy provided me with 'love' letters addressed to him, written in Mr S's hand. "When he discovered that Harry and I were together, I think he just snapped and decided to get revenge in the most malicious of ways," said the charming young Malfoy heir. "He did indeed walk in on a private moment between us, but it was nothing so intimate as he claimed. It was our first kiss, and [Mr S] nearly ruined it."

I have also been given irrefutable proof that Draco Malfoy was not a Death Eater. "He was a loyal son who was forced to choose between doing You-Know-Who's bidding or watching his parents be tortured and murdered. While he did, in fact, allow Death Eaters to enter Hogwarts in his sixth year, he did so under extreme duress. He was a sixteen-year-old boy, trying to protect his family from a madman," says Minister for Magic, Kingsley Shacklebolt, who was an Auror at the time of the incident.

Earlier this week, Hogwarts Headmistress, Minerva McGonagall was kind enough to allow this reporter to converse with the portrait of the late Albus Dumbledore. He also confirmed that Mr Malfoy had agreed to accept his offer of assistance against He Who Must Not Be Named, and was in the process of coming to Dumbledore's aid when a number of Death Eaters stormed the Astronomy Tower and overpowered him.

Dumbledore also stated that the late Severus Snape did indeed utter the Killing Curse, but that he did so on Dumbledore's orders. The late Headmaster would not elaborate any further on that fact, but we now have confirmation that Draco Malfoy is innocent and that there was no elaborate plot hatched between him and Harry Potter to eliminate their Headmaster.

As for claims about Harry Potter casting Unforgivables, it has now come to my attention that my (now former) research assistant received this "information" from an unreliable source: convicted Death Eater, Amycus Carrow. Neither Headmistress McGonagall, nor Minister for Magic, Kingsley Shacklebolt would confirm Mr Potter's use of the illegal curses.

Of Harry Potter's wartime activities, Minister Shacklebolt had this to say: "Mr Potter was working on standing orders from Albus Dumbledore. I have been made aware of his activities throughout the war, and have seen no proof of Harry Potter using Unforgivable curses. Having said that, I'd also like to remind the public that during the war, the Ministry was being run by the "Magic is Might" regime under Minister Thicknesse. And you may recall that one of his first orders of business was to make Unforgivables, as well as a number of other Dark spells, legal. So, even if Harry Potter had used an Unforgivable, he would not have been breaking any Wizarding law."

The Minister later went on to say that Harry Potter is an extremely talented young wizard and has already been recruited to join the Aurors. "Harry will begin his training in August, and I have great plans for this very promising young man. I foresee him being an integral part of our team."

But before Harry Potter is made to endure the rigors of Auror training, I understand that he has some fun and relaxation in store for him. Mr Malfoy tells me that the day after the two young men complete their NEWT exams, he plans to whisk Harry away on a romantic holiday in the Mediterranean.

Bon Voyage, Mr Potter.

When Granger finished reading, Harry looked up at Draco with absolute glee in his features. The smile on his face was worth every single galleon that Draco had spent.

Harry rose from his seat and gestured for Draco to head outside, so he followed the messy mop of dark hair through the castle's front doors.

The moment he stepped through the doors, he was nearly knocked down by Harry's enthusiastic hug.

"Draco, this is the best news ever. Tell me how you managed to get Rita Skeeter to write a retraction!"

Draco smirked. "Well, Harry, the Malfoy name may not be as widely accepted as it once was, but you'd be amazed at how willing people are to embrace the Malfoy fortune."

"You paid her to write it? Draco, are you crazy? She'll only come back for more money in the future."

"Oh no, Harry, I didn't pay Skeeter. That's the beauty of this whole plan. Skeeter didn't see one extra knut." Draco held up his copy of the *Prophet* to Harry. "Read that notation right there. The one that says who the publishers are."

"N.A.B. Enterprises. What's N.A.B. Enterprises?"

"Funny you should ask, Harry. N.A.B. just happens to be the initials of my mother and her two sisters. Narcissa, Andromeda, Bellatrix. It's a holding company that mother opened years ago. Before she and father ever married, in fact. Smart woman, my mum. She knew that father's activities had the potential for problems, so she set up her own company, and is the proud owner of several vineyards in Italy, a small fashion house in France, and now a newspaper in Britain as well. Ironically enough, there really isn't much profit to be had from the *Daily Prophet*, which is why mother never made a move to buy it in the past. But, since the Malfoy fortune is still intact, even despite father's imprisonment, I was able to persuade her to give it a try this time around."

"So you own the *Daily Prophet*?"

"No, not really. I'll inherit it if mother doesn't sell it off some time down the road, but for now, it's in her business' name, so it's all hers."

"But, how'd you get her to change her mind?"

"Oh, well, that's the part that you're really going to appreciate. You see, my mother went to school at the same time as Rita Skeeter. Skeeter was a few years ahead of mum, and apparently she was just as much of a vicious bitch back then as she is now. She once turned mother's hair acid green for a full week, because she was jealous that my father preferred mum to her. Suffice to say, Mum never did forgive her for that little stunt, so when I pointed out how wonderfully delicious an opportunity this would be to exact her revenge, she didn't hesitate for a second. Of course, it also helped that I agreed to foot half the costs."

"Draco, you're brilliant. Thank you! And I just love that your mum forced Skeeter to write the retraction!"

"Not forced so much as *persuaded*. You see, with the *Daily Prophet* being the only major publication in Britain that actually reports news, mother pointed out that Rita would either have to do as she's told, or be reduced to writing conspiracy theories for the *Quibbler* or worse, beauty tips in *Witch Weekly*. The rest, as they say, is history."

Harry leaned over to kiss Draco. "Absolutely brilliant." .

Harry glanced through the article again, evidently pondering something for a few moments, then asked, "So, these letters from Smith. Why didn't you tell me about them before? Has he really been obsessed with you all this time?"

Draco smiled mysteriously. "Maybe."

"Draco!"

"Okay, okay. No, not that I know of. Actually, I think he might even be straight. But anyway, getting the letters was easy. All I needed was a piece of parchment filled with his writing and I was able to rearrange it in whatever manner I wanted. It's an old Slytherin trick that we torment the first years with. The results can be very entertaining."

"I bet they can. But can't somebody test it and find out that it's a fake?" Harry asked.

"Of course they can, but Skeeter really isn't in a position to question these things." Draco smirked, revelling in his victory.

"You're a bit evil, Draco Malfoy," said Harry, moving in for another kiss.

"Yes I am, but you love me for it."

"I do. Hey how did you get McGonagall and Kingsley involved?"

"Yet again you underestimate the power of your influence. All I did was ask McGonagall if she'd help me clear your name. She may be a stern old bat, but she's genuinely fond of you, and was more than willing to help. She really seemed amused by my plan to have mum buy the *Prophet* and make Skeeter's life just a little bit less pleasant. I'd say there's no love lost."

"Okay," interrupted Harry. "So you got McGonagall to help, but how'd you get Kingsley involved? You don't know him personally."

"No, we haven't met yet, but Headmistress McGonagall has a very strong rapport with him, and she was able to enlist his assistance. Like McGonagall, the Minister was only too happy to help out. I think he realised that the plan would make his work in getting you reinstated much easier."

"Draco, this is perfect. I've been going insane trying to figure out how to get the *Prophet* to print my rebuttal of Rita Skeeter's article. And now she's gone and refuted it herself." Harry paused, and Draco saw the realization dawn on his face. "Kingsley actually announced that I'd be starting training in August! I guess that means that the committee has reversed their decision!"

Harry flung his arms around Draco and drew him in for a warm hug that neither man was willing to break away from.

"I told you that we'd solve this, Harry." Draco pulled back far enough to deliver a quick kiss. Smirking, he continued, "Now all we need is for you to use that considerable influence of yours to convince Shackbolt that you'll perform much better in training if your significant other is allowed to live on campus with you."

Harry laughed. "I'll see what I can do. But before I do that, let's talk about that fabulous holiday you said you were taking me on."

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