

Phoenix Song
By xylodemon

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Prologue
The Beginning of Summer

Harry twisted around in his seat as the Dursley's car pulled away from Kings Cross station, watching Moody, Tonks, Professor Lupin and the Weasleys shrink into the distance. He waved at them, ignoring the sideways glances he was earning from Dudley. His heart sank into his stomach as they dwindled away; if this summer was anything like last summer, it would be a good two months before he saw any of them again.

It was tense in the Dursley's car; Uncle Vernon was more purple than usual, and Aunt Petunia was sitting bolt upright in the passenger seat, wringing her hands in her lap. Harry knew their discomfort was due to Moody's and Lupin's parting words to Uncle Vernon, and he could not help but think they deserved it.

Harry dared a last glance at Kings Cross Station as Uncle Vernon halted the car at a stoplight. It was now a good ways off in the distance, and Harry was sure no one could see him, but he gave a parting wave in the direction of the platform anyway, mainly because it made Dudley fidgety.

"Daaaad," Dudley whined, "he's waving at the weirdoes."

"Knock it off, boy," Uncle Vernon said brusquely. The stoplight turned green, and he frowned at Harry's reflection through the rear-view mirror before stepping on the gas. "I don't care what those... *people* said," he added, "I will not have to making a spectacle of yourself."

"Yes, Uncle Vernon," Harry said flatly, rolling his eyes at the back of Uncle Vernon's bald head.

The Dursleys' car ambled towards Little Whinging in silence, with Aunt Petunia frowning over her shoulder, and Uncle Vernon glowering at Harry through the rear-view mirror. Harry sighed, and reminded him that summer at the Dursley's was a temporary situation. Eventually, someone from the Order of the Phoenix would come for him.

He could only hope it would be sooner than later.

Harry stretched, snaking his hand under his shirt to scratch at a persistent itch under his ribs. Dudley watched, his eyes following Harry's movements until he caught a glimpse of the slender wand tucked into the waistband of Harry's jeans. He made a strangled sound when he saw it, his eyes widening, and tried to scoot farther away from Harry, although they were already sitting as far away from each other as they could manage.

"What is it, Duddikins?" Aunt Petunia asked. She turned back to look at both the boys, frowning pointedly at Harry.

"He was showing off his...*thing*!" Dudley squawked, gesturing in Harry's direction.

"Boy, what have I told you about that!" Uncle Vernon shouted.

"I was not showing it off!" Harry protested. "I was stretching, is all. I don't know why he was looking in the first place. He knows where I keep my wand."

"Don't say that word!" Uncle Vernon bellowed. He turned around to glare at Harry, and the car swerved dangerously to the right. A car in the next lane honked, and Uncle Vernon corrected himself, but turned to glare at Harry again, only for the car to start drifting to the left.

"The road is that way," Harry observed.

"Don't you take that tone with me, boy," Uncle Vernon growled. But, he did turn around, and went back to scowling at Harry in a safer manner, through the rear-view mirror.

"I don't see why he can't stay at that madhouse of a school, anyway," Dudley groused to no one in particular, his chins wobbling.

"Because," Harry muttered, "the madhouse is closed for the summer, you pillock."

"What was that, boy?" Uncle Vernon demanded. He made to turn around again, but Aunt Petunia stilled him with a firm hand on his fleshy leg.

"I don't care," Dudley pouted, narrowing his eyes at Harry. "I don't care

if it is closed for the summer," he added. "You're a freak, and I don't want to spend the summer with you."

"I don't want to spend the summer with you, either, but you don't see me whinging on about it!" Harry shouted.

He would much rather spend the summer hanging out with a gang of disgruntled Death Eaters, but Dumbledore had said he must return to number four Privet Drive, so there was not much he could do about it.

"Enough," Uncle Vernon shouted. All the talk of wizards and Harry's school was upsetting him as it usually did, and the car was swerving precariously once again.

"You should go stay with your freaky friends," Dudley shouted, ignoring his dad. "Or your murdering godfather."

Aunt Petunia gave a sharp gasp, and Uncle Vernon muttered under his breath, gripping the steering wheel so hard his knuckles went white. A pained expression passed over Harry's face briefly, but he smoothed it away, reminding himself that the Dursleys didn't know Sirius was dead.

But the Dursleys were scared of Sirius, and Sirius was the only reason they treated him halfway decently, so Harry did not plan to tell them. He felt guilty about it, for Sirius' sake, not the Dursleys, but there was nothing else for it. He did not intend to suffer any more this summer than is absolutely necessary.

Aunt Petunia broke the silence eventually. "Was one of those... *people* on the platform your godfather?" she asked, a bit too sweetly.

"No," Harry replied.

"Why didn't he come to see you off, then, if he cares about you so much?" Dudley sputtered.

Because he is dead. Dead because of me.

"He couldn't," Harry said, trying to disguise the bitterness in his voice.

"Why not?" Dudley asked, stupidly. He sneered at Harry, his chins jiggling.

"Did I mention he is a *murderer*, Duddikins? Did I mention he is on the run?" Harry said, more cheerfully than he felt.

Uncle Vernon stiffened, making the car lurch. Aunt Petunia gave another gasp, and Dudley's eyes went wide.

"He is a wanted man, you berk," Harry went on, smiling insolently at Dudley, whose eyes were threatening to engulf his fat face. "Wanted by my kind of people, and by the Muggle police. He couldn't just waltz down to the train station and wave me off."

"Those... *people* at the station, are they in league with him?" Uncle Vernon demanded.

"Oh, yes," Harry said, evenly. His insides were churning with guilt, but he kept a straight face. "They are helping him hide."

"I always knew you would get mixed up with the wrong sort of people, boy," Uncle Vernon growled. "What would your madhouse of a school think about you having about with murderers?"

"The madhouse knows," Harry said in a singsong. "The madhouse doesn't seem overly bothered by it, really." He shrugged. "As a matter of fact, the madhouse arranged for me to meet my godfather in the first place."

"Bunch of loonies, if you ask me," Dudley muttered, glowering at Harry.

"Luckily, nobody did," Harry muttered.

Dudley opened his mouth to retort, but closed it with a snap when Harry lifted his T-shirt just enough to give him a glimpse of his wand. Dudley paled, shrank back against the frame of the car, and the rest of the journey to number four Privet Drive was made in silence.

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The two Death Eaters entered the large, pretentious manse without raising any kind of alarm, under the cover of a spell that disguised them from prying eyes. The perimeter of the property was spelled with

numerous hexes and curses, each designed to kill anyone who tripped them.

But, they did not; the Death Eaters had been told how to disarm the spells by the person who had put them in place.

One of the black-cloaked men tapped his wand on an exterior wall, hissing a spell under his breath, and a small archway widened into existence. It opened into a tunnel, which would lead them inside the house through the basement. Once in the basement, the Death Eaters followed a narrow, slanted tunnel that brought them to the ground floor, then took the wide, sweeping staircase up to the fourth floor.

Past the stairs, they came to a long hallway with two sets of double doors at the end. Inside the room on the right, a young man slept. While he was a potential witness, the Death Eaters' instructions had been clear.

The young man was to live.

One of the Death Eaters raised his wand and aimed it at the young man. He quietly whispered a spell; a charm that would make the young man sleep deeply. It would wear off in a few hours, and he would awake as if nothing had been done to him, but for the next few hours he would sleep soundly, even if the house came crumbling down around his ears.

Silently, they left the young man's room, and moved across the hall.

They had not been expecting what they found. The woman inside was wide awake, despite the late hour. She was sitting up in her bed, propped against the polished, wood headboard with pillows, reading a book. Her eyes widened with fear when she saw the Death Eaters, but nothing in her expression hinted that she was surprised to see them.

Almost as if she had been expecting them.

She made no sound, made no move to alert the young man in the next room or to cry out for the house-elves, nor did she speak to the Death Eaters. She closed the book and set it aside. She did not reach for her wand, even though it was sitting very close by, on the ornately carved stand next to the bed.

Resigned.

One of the Death Eaters moved forward, raising his wand. She lifted her chin almost defiantly, and folded her hands in her lap. The woman's face went stony and strangely calm. She knew what these men were here for, just as she knew who sent them. There was no point in crying, these men would not be swayed by tears.

All she could do was meet the challenge bravely, and hope that counted for something in the end.

Avada Kedavra

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Harry awoke with a start.

Harry was covered in sweat and breathing quickly and raggedly. His eyes darted wildly around the room, as if expecting Death Eaters to be standing in a ring around his bed.

He struggled to sit up, his fingers automatically seeking out his scar. The scar itself did not hurt, but his head did, a painful, dull throbbing behind his eyes. He lay back down, and tried to convince himself he had nothing to worry about.

The bright green light in his dream had been familiar.

I was probably dreaming about my parents, he told himself.

The dream still nagged, but he pushed it away, and eventually he retired to sleep.

I
Into the Fire

Salvation came the very next morning, in the unlikely form of Errol.

Harry was sleeping soundly when he was roused by the sound of an owl pecking at his window. It was a good deal earlier than he had intended to be awake, and he glared blearily at the window.

"I stopped taking the paper," Harry grumbled, half into his pillow, half towards the window. "Go on, then."

The pecking persisted. Growling, Harry sat up, and peered out the window. His mood softened slightly as he recognised the decrepit old owl struggling to stay in the air.

"Come on then, old man," Harry said fondly, as he opened the window. The ancient owl fluttered through the window, then collapsed to the floor with a thump and a shower of loose feathers.

Harry eyed the owl askance, hoping Errol had not chosen this moment to finally give up the ghost. Errol had had one claw in the grave since the day Harry had first laid eyes on him, and that was almost six years ago. When he crouched over the owl to remove the scroll tied to his leg, Harry saw that Errol was still breathing, though he appeared to have lapsed into a coma. Harry wondered if he should just go ahead and buy the Weasleys another owl so Errol could retire.

After pulling the scroll free, Harry noticed that Errol had a small pouch tied to his other leg.

*Harry,
The Muggles' fireplace will be connected to the
Floo Network tomorrow (Sunday), at 11:00 PM,
for a period of fifteen minutes. Enclosed is enough
Floo Powder for one trip to the Burrow, and a pellet
that will make a Muggle fire more Floo-friendly.*

See you soon,

Arthur

Harry read the note three times in disbelief. When the information finally sunk in, he danced around his room with excitement, nearly stepping on Errol.

Tomorrow! I am free from the Dursleys tomorrow! he thought. He paused, glancing at the calendar on his wall. *Wait.... today is Sunday.* Glancing at the comatose owl on his floor, he chuckled. He now understood why Errol had arrived so early in the morning; Mr. Weasley had been expecting Errol to arrive last night.

I am free from the Dursleys in seventeen hours! he thought. He heard a strange noise, and saw that Errol was wheezing. *And I am buying the Weasleys a new owl when we go to Diagon Alley, and I don't care what Mrs. Weasley says.*

He scooped a still wheezing Errol off the floor, and bundled him off to Hedwig's cage. She gave him a look that was most put-upon, and nipped at his fingers when he pulled his hand out of her cage.

"Don't you start," he said, wagging a finger at her. "He won't be able to fly until at least Wednesday, and we are leaving tonight."

Hedwig hooted softly, her tone reproachful.

"Women," Harry said, shaking his head.

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Draco Malfoy stood in the doorway to his parent's room, frozen in a state of shock and horror.

His mother was dead.

She was slumped over strangely on the bed, her head resting on a closed book. The morning light played across her cold, unmoving features as it trickled through the window. It bathed her in a soft, golden glow, giving a warmth to her face that made her almost appear to be sleeping.

Draco knew better, because of her eyes.

Her eyes were open. They were fixed and unseeing, and glassed over until they almost resembled the round, marble eyes of a doll.

He had seen eyes like that before.

Draco's stomach knotted and twisted painfully and a strangled, panicky feeling started creeping across his body. He approached the bed slowly, willing his mother to move, to blink, to breathe, though he knew she would not. Leaning over her, he laid a hand to her cheek, and found her cold.

He had no illusions as to how she died.

Avada Kedavra

He had been raised by a prominent and active Death Eater. Lucius Malfoy had been Lord Voldemort's right hand before Potter had stripped him of his powers, and Lucius had worked mercilessly to keep the faith alive while Voldemort had been off regaining his strength. Given his upbringing, Draco was well aware of what the effects of the Killing Curse looked like. No marks, no bruises, no wounds. The victim appeared to be in perfect health, aside from the fact that they were dead.

He knew he had to do something, tell someone, but he did not know what or who. That debacle at the Ministry of Magic had put his father in Azkaban for life. Most of Draco's relatives were also Azkaban, as well as the majority of his father's close friends. He had a handful of relatives and family-friends who were not in Azkaban, but the more he thought about it, the more he did not think contacting them would be wise.

Draco Malfoy was alone, and he no longer knew who he could trust.

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"What's for lunch?" Dudley asked, grimacing like he did not really want to know.

Harry was quite sure Dudley didn't. Dudley was still on his diet, even though it seemed to be having no lasting effect on his girth. He had shrunk just enough that he was no longer quite as wide as he was tall, but he still took up one whole side of the dining table.

Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia took the diet's failure in stride, returning to their original claim that Dudley was not fat, but big-boned. Harry thought it had a good deal more with Dudley eating everything on hand when he went for 'tea' with his friends, rather than the supposed weight of his bones, but he was not about to share his opinion with his Aunt and Uncle.

"Here you go, Dinky Duddums," Aunt Petunia cooed. She placed a bowl in front of Dudley, and his fat face crumpled. Inside was an over-large, hollowed-out tomato, filled with tuna salad. The tuna salad was a bit dry looking and off-colour. Harry had the suspicion it had been made with that fat-free mayonnaise Dudley hated.

Aunt Petunia slammed a bowl in front of Harry. The tomato was smaller than Dudley's, and held a good deal less tuna salad. Undaunted, Harry smiled widely at Dudley took his fork to the tuna with relish.

"This is wonderful, Aunt Petunia," Harry chirped. It tasted as bad as it looked, and was so dry the fish clung stubbornly to his tongue, but he did not let it show. It had Dudley in such a state of horror that Harry kept his grin in place and gobbled it down like it was a fresh cauldron cake.

"Are you being smart with me, boy?" Aunt Petunia accused, irritation playing across her horse-like face. Uncle Vernon lowered his paper to eye Harry suspiciously.

"Not at all, Aunt Petunia," Harry said, grinning insolently at Dudley.

"He's funning you, I know he is," Dudley said, taking his first bite. He pulled a disgusted face and sputtered, spraying tuna salad on Uncle Vernon's newspaper.

"No, really, I like it," Harry insisted. "I'll have yours, if you don't want it."

Dudley made a sound like a stepped-on cat, and wrapped a protective arm around his bowl. He watched Harry with wary eyes, fork clenched in his hand like he was waiting for Harry to make a sudden move.

"You have plenty. You don't need it," Aunt Petunia snapped. She knew Harry was being smarmy, but with the way he was wolfing down the nasty stuff, she was powerless to prove it.

"No, I don't *need* it," Harry conceded, still smiling like a loon. "But if Dudley doesn't care for it, I'll take his."

"The Hell you will, boy!" Uncle Vernon barked from behind his paper. "I'll not have you taking food out of Dudley's mouth."

"Wouldn't hurt, really," Harry said flatly.

"You mind your tongue, boy, or you'll be in your bedroom until school starts!" Uncle Vernon said, lowering his paper to fix Harry with a dangerous glare.

That's what you think, Harry thought smugly, but he did not reply. He did not want to end up locked in his bedroom, and miss his appointment with the Dursley's fireplace.

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Draco was sitting cross-legged on his parent's bed, just as he had been for the last three hours. He was facing his mother's body, staring at her, though he no longer really saw her. His grey eyes, wet with tears he refused to shed, had long gone unfocused. Her arm rested in his lap, and he was holding her cold hand between the two of his, rubbing and squeezing it as if he thought he could transfer some of his warmth and life back into her.

The shock and horror was beginning to wear off, but it was quickly being replaced by confusion. There seemed to only be one explanation for his mother's death, and it was not the explanation he wanted.

The Killing Curse was dark magic.

Draco knew there were plenty of people who hated him and his family, but he could not reconcile his mother's death as a random act of violence. His mother had not been blasted to oblivion by some tosspot off the street with a bone to pick with his family.

There was a possibility that the Ministry had been after his mother, but this situation did not sit with what he knew of the Ministry. Aurors did not sneak in to houses in the middle of the night, throwing *Avada Kedavra* about. If the Ministry wanted his mother, an army of Aurors would have stormed the Manor in broad daylight and bundled her off to Azkaban.

Whether Draco wanted to accept it or not, the evidence pointed to one thing: Narcissa Malfoy had been killed by Death Eaters.

It was also becoming painfully obvious who had sent them.

Malfoy Manor was Unplottable, and it was one of the most heavily spelled places in the Wizarding World. Slipping into Malfoy Manor undetected was impossible. Anyone trying to enter Malfoy Manor uninvited would have raised nine kinds of alarms, unless someone had told them how to disarm the wards.

There was only one person who could have done that, and that thought was nearly as horrifying as his mother being dead.

Draco shook his head violently, trying to dislodge the thought from his brain. His eyes slipped back into focus once more, and as he looked on his mother's face he squeezed her hand until the small, fragile bones started to crack and rub together. He took a deep, shuddering breath, and began rocking back and forth almost imperceptibly.

It was all just too much. The fact that his mother was dead, coupled with who killed her, and the notion of who had sent them.

He heard a small noise and looked up towards the window, hoping against hope it was an owl.

Three hours ago, he had sent off an owl to the one person he thought might be able to do something, do *anything*. The reasonable part of his brain knew enough time had not passed for him to expect a return owl, but the angry, bitter part of his brain was not expecting a response. Draco knew if the man did not respond, he would be wholly within his rights. He had given this man no cause to love him in the last five years, no cause to even give the slightest whit about him.

The noise was not an owl, but the light wind outside rustling the leaves of the tree near the window.

Draco took another shuddering breath, and lay down to curl up with his mother's body. He nestled his head under her chin, and wrapped a protective arm around her. The shock and horror had given way to confusion, and now his confusion was ebbing away, shifting into desperation.

There was a resounding crack, as a house-elf Apparated to the edge of the bed. Draco did not look up at the sound. He burrowed his head into his mother's chest, and willed the house-elf to leave him alone in his misery.

The house-elf regarded Draco silently with large, wet eyes, nervously fisting the hem of the dish rag she wore as a dress. Narcissa's death had the house-elves in a complete, horrified frenzy. They were all blaming themselves for not knowing there had been an intruder, and were all expecting Draco to dress them, or beat them within an inch of their lives.

"Master?" she asked finally. "Effy is sorry to bother Master, but there is someone here to see him."

"Send them away," he said. He did not look up, or move away from his mother.

"Effy is sorry, but the man says it is important." She cringed, expecting reproach. "He said he must see Master right away."

He sat up enough to see Effy, and fix her with a cool stare.

"In case you did not notice, my mother has just been murdered," he snapped viciously. "I am in no mood for company. I am sure whoever it is will forgive me for not feeling sociable."

"But Master..." she started.

"I said send them away!" he shouted. He sat up completely, turning around to face the house-elf, and dismissed her with a violent wave of his hand.

Effy opened her mouth to speak, but her response was cut off by a melodious, booming voice.

"If you did not want me to see me, Mister Malfoy, why did you send me that owl?"

Recognizing the voice, Draco gasped, and looked over towards the doorway. He slid off the bed, staring at the man with wide, disbelieving eyes. He had spent the last hour convincing himself he would not even receive a return owl, yet unbelievably, the man had come in person.

"Arthur Weasley, you come out of that garage right now!"

"Just a moment, sweetheart," Arthur replied.

He jumped off his stool and scrambled around the workbench, hurriedly shoving things into the cupboards and drawers. The door to the garage sprang open, banging against the wall with a thud. Arthur whirled around to face his wife, hastily hiding something behind his back.

"I know I asked you to fix that clock," Molly said, fixing her husband with a stern glare.

"I was just getting there," he replied, studiously avoiding her gaze.

"What have you got behind your back?" she asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Um, nothing," he answered, sounding very unsure of himself.

"Oh, let's see it, then," she sighed. She approached Arthur and peeked behind his back. He shifted quickly, turning his back away from her.

"Arthur!"

Arthur pulled a sheepish face, then brought his hand out in front of him. In it was a Muggle hair-dryer.

"And just what do you think you are doing?" she asked, tapping her foot.

Arthur opened his mouth to say 'nothing', but the hair-dryer gave away his lie by belching blue and purple fire out of the end.

"So this is what you have been doing all morning?" she demanded.

"Making that... that... *thing*, whatever it is, into a flame-thrower?"

"It's a hair-dryer," Arthur muttered.

"A what?" she asked, frowning at the thing. "Never mind. I don't want to know. Go inside, then, and fix that clock!"

"Yes, sweetheart," he said. He opened one of the drawers and rummaged around a bit. He stuffed a couple of things in his pocket, and followed Molly back into the Burrow.

"I mean, *really*, Arthur," Molly nagged. "I've been at you to fix that clock since you told me Harry was coming, and that was hours. He'll be here tonight, and you have not even looked at it."

"Yes, sweetheart," Arthur said. "I'll do it right now."

"You bet you will, if I have to stand behind you and watch you do it," she threatened.

"Yes, sweetheart," he said, facing the large grandfather clock. Frowning at it, he opened the glass door in front of the face and began to tinker around.

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When Dumbledore looked at Narcissa Malfoy's cold, stiff body, he found he was not surprised.

"Perhaps we should go downstairs, Mister Malfoy," Dumbledore said gently.

At the sound of Dumbledore's voice, Draco gave a start.

"Downstairs?" Draco said. "But my mother..."

"Your mother is not going anywhere, I am afraid," Dumbledore said, evenly. "I need to speak with you, and I think it would be best if we did it some place less unpleasant."

Draco pressed his lips together, but did not argue, and allowed Dumbledore to lead him out of the room. Once Draco was settled in the divan, Dumbledore summoned a house-elf and called for tea. The house-elf, the same one who had informed Draco of Dumbledore's arrival, set about preparing the tea at once. Catching Effy's eye, Dumbledore wiggled a finger under his nose towards the liquor cabinet, and looked the other way as she dropped a healthy tot of brandy in the bottom of Draco's cup.

Dumbledore waited until Draco was finished with his first cup of tea, and halfway into his second (also with a healthy tot of brandy), before speaking.

"If you could, Mister Malfoy, start from the beginning," Dumbledore asked.

"One of the house-elves woke me," Draco said. In truth, the house-elf had accosted him. He had come awake to Effy sitting on his chest, screaming and pulling at his night clothes. "Effy took me across the hall, and I found her."

"Last night, then," Dumbledore mused, partially to himself.

"Yes, last night," Draco replied bitterly. "My mother was murdered, and I was bloody asleep.

"Do not blame yourself for that, Mister Malfoy," Dumbledore said gently. "I am quite sure you were not to know."

"I slept through the whole thing," Draco muttered, sipping his tea. "My mother was killed, while I slept peacefully across the hall."

"I have no doubts that you did sleep peacefully," Dumbledore conceded, nodding his head. "But you cannot blame yourself for that."

"And why not?" Draco looked away from Dumbledore, and buried his face in his teacup.

"Draco, as much as it pains me to think about it, I am quite sure your father has taught you a good deal about the Dark Arts." Dumbledore sighed, shaking his head slightly. "You could probably name me two or three spells that would make someone sleep so soundly they would not notice a parade of dragons stampeding through their bedroom."

"*Drowsis*," Draco said, after a thoughtful pause. He worried his lower lip between his teeth. "*Dormis*, too. Or *Slepanis*."

"Any one of those would have sufficed," Dumbledore said, studying Draco over his half-moon spectacles.

"You think I was charmed, so I would sleep thought it?" Draco asked, his voice incredulous."

"I most certainly do," Dumbledore replied. "This is why I say, you were not to know."

"Probably *Drowsis*," Draco said.

Drowsis was a charm that induced heavy, undisturbed sleep. *Dormis* was also for heavy, undisturbed sleep, but it lasted for a long period of time. If he had been charmed with that, he would still be asleep. *Slepanis* was a cross between *Drowsis* and a Memory Charm. If he had been subjected to that he would be awake now, but he likely would not know who or where he was until Tuesday.

"Dark Sleeping Charms, and the Killing Curse," Dumbledore ventured.

"Death Eaters," Draco muttered.

"Sadly, I would be inclined to agree," Dumbledore said. Draco handed his empty teacup to Effy for refilling. Dumbledore shook his head at the house-elf just slightly, and she filled the cup with plain tea. "Who do you think sent them?"

"Who do you think sent them?" Draco asked.

"It is my understanding that normally, this house is heavily spelled," Dumbledore replied.

"It is," Draco said. He studied Dumbledore for a moment, and his eyes went wide with realization. "How did you get in?"

"Precisely my point, Mister Malfoy." Dumbledore said. "The grounds are completely unguarded. I Apparated right onto the front lawn."

"Someone must have told them how to disarm the wards and alarms," Draco said.

"Yes, someone must have," Dumbledore said. "Someone with intimate knowledge of spells and the layout of the house."

Draco took a shuddering breath, and felt his insides knot. He did not want to think it had been his father, but the more he thought about it, the evidence was giving him no choice.

"Do you think it was my father?" Draco asked softly.

"Do you think it was your father?" Dumbledore asked, in his usual manner of answering a question with a question.

Draco stared at Dumbledore silently for a long time.

"Yes," he said finally. "He is the only person who could have told someone how to disarm the spells, other than my mother or myself."

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Ron Weasley knew his parents were up to something.

His mother had been acting suspicious all day. She was meticulously cleaning the house, something she rarely did. Seven children in one house did not leave much room for a pristine living environment. Even though only four of her children were still living at home, Molly Weasley had long ago given up trying to have floors you could eat off of and walls you could see your reflection in.

She had also been harping at Ron to clean his room all day, something else she never did. The Burrow had more community-use areas than Molly Weasley had time to deal with as it was. She never worried over much about her children's rooms. As long as her children could make it from the doorway to their bed without breaking their neck, she was content.

Ron only grew more suspicious when his father emerged from the garage. He had spent the majority of the morning tinkering with his Muggle things, like he always did on the weekends. But near lunchtime, his mother had gone out to the garage and shouted. A few minutes later, his father swept the porch and the walk, then assisted Fred and George in de-gnoming the garden.

He was finally able to call them on it after dinner, due to the obvious existence of leftovers. There were never, ever, leftovers. His mother always cooked precisely enough to feed the family members to hand, and never a morsel more. Yet there they were, leftovers, sitting plain as day in the pans on the stove.

He watched his mother carefully as he helped Ginny clear the dinner

dishes. Molly Weasley piled the leftovers onto a plate and charmed them to keep them fresh. Then, when she thought no one was looking, she attempted to hide them.

That was enough for Ron. His parents were *definitely* up to something.

"Who is the plate for?" Ron asked.

"What plate?" Mrs. Weasley replied, innocently. She did not look at Ron, but rather at the suddenly interesting stretch of wall over his shoulder.

"That plate you just hid in the cupboard," Ron said, pointing. "It's right there, behind the fancy dishes."

"I don't know what you are talking about," Mrs. Weasley said. She feigned a confused look, and shook her head at her son.

"You are a horrid liar, Mum. Worse than Dad, even," Ron said. "Is someone coming tonight?"

"No," Mrs. Weasley said, just as Mr. Weasley said "Yes."

Molly Weasley gave her husband a furious look. Arthur Weasley smiled at his wife over the edge of his newspaper, and chuckled softly.

"You might as well fess up, dear. He's caught you red-handed," he said.

"Caught me?" Mrs. Weasley choked. "It was your idea not to tell him in the first place!"

"Tell me what?" Ron demanded, frowning at his parents. "Someone is coming. Who is it?"

His parents said nothing. Molly tried to look busy, and Arthur buried his nose back into the *Daily Prophet*.

"Charlie?"

Still nothing. Molly moved some dishes around in the cupboard, then moved them back.

"Bill?"

Again, nothing. Arthur whistled tunelessly to himself, and turned the page of his paper.

Ron was almost tempted to ask if it was Percy, but thought the better of it. He settled for asking *who* again, despite the fact that he was going to start sounding like an owl.

Which reminded him of something else. Errol had gone missing, but conveniently, no one seemed to recall sending out a letter.

"Daaaaad," Ron pressed. He sat down at the table and tried to stare at his father through the newspaper.

"Oh, alright," Mr. Weasley relented, lowering the paper. "Harry."

"Harry!" Ron squawked. No wonder his mother was cleaning. Ron doubted she would bother if it was Charlie or Bill, unless Bill was bringing Fleur. "Harry is coming here?"

"Yes," his father replied.

Ron cracked a smile that threatened to split his face in half. He had been worried Harry would be stuck with the Muggles for another two months, like last summer, or the summer before. That, and Ron was terribly, horribly bored. Fred and George were too caught up in the joke shop to pay any attention to him, and Ginny spent all day writing long, flowery letters to Dean Thomas.

"When?"

"Later tonight," Mr. Weasley said.

"When, later?" Ron asked.

"Sometime between eleven and quarter-eleven," Mr. Weasley replied. He tried to retreat back behind his paper, but Ron pulled it away from him.

"Why so late!" Ron protested. "I'll be asleep when he gets here!"

"I called in a favour with a friend in the Floo Department," Mr. Weasley explained. "He's connecting the Muggles' fireplace to the Floo Network tonight. But, he is breaking about fifty different rules, so he insisted it

be over the weekend, and late at night."

"I'll still be asleep when he gets here," Ron complained.

Arthur sighed. "He wanted to do it at two or three in the morning. I was lucky I was able to talk him around to eleven."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Ron asked.

"For two reasons," Molly cut in, waving a wooden spoon at her son. "One, because I did not want you getting all excited and bouncing all over the house. Two, I did not want you asking me if you could stay up until he got here every five minutes, driving me to distraction."

"Well, can I?" Ron asked, hopefully.

"Can you what?" his mother asked, her tone warning.

"Stay up until he gets here?" Ron smiled widely, and batted his eyelashes at his mother.

"If, and only if, you do something useful between now and then," his mother replied.

"Like what?"

"Finish cleaning your room," Molly quipped. "Would be a shame for Harry Potter to escape from You-Know-Who all those times, only to crack open his skull trying to get to his bed."

::

"But why?" Draco demanded. "Why would he have my mother killed? And why kill my mother, and not me?"

"Those are two separate questions," Dumbledore answered. "As for your mother, your father thought she betrayed him."

"Did she?" Draco asked, unbelieving.

"Indeed, she did," Dumbledore said. "If not for your mother, your

father would not be in Azkaban."

shortly after your father left for the Ministry that night, your mother sent me an owl. Had I not received that owl, I never would have arrived in time."

Draco was dumbstruck.

"Your mother's owl saved many lives that night, and put many Death Eaters in Azkaban," Dumbledore said.

"Including my father."

"Yes, including your father," Dumbledore agreed. "He was clever enough to stay out of Azkaban all those years, only to be fouled up by his own wife. I am sure it is safe to assume he is murderous about it."

"But why?" Draco asked.

"In short, she had had enough," Dumbledore replied.

"But she was on my father's side," Draco argued. He had never had reason to suspect that his mother's loyalty to Voldemort was less than his father's.

"Narcissa Black was young when she married your father. I think she was enamoured by his wealth and power and charm, and I think at the time, she was willing to overlook his darker allegiances," Dumbledore said. "But as years went by, I think she realized what your father was, and she did not want anything to do with it."

"My mother had the Dark Mark," Draco said.

"Of course she did," Dumbledore replied, gesturing with his hands. "She was married to Lucius Malfoy for over twenty years. There would have been no way for her to escape it," Dumbledore shook his head sadly. "And, if your father had managed to stay out of Azkaban, you would have eventually had the Dark Mark as well, whether you wanted it or not."

"Which brings us back to my second question," Draco said wearily.

"What about me? Why didn't he have me killed?"

"Your father still has faith in you," Dumbledore said quietly.

Draco sighed heavily, and rubbed at his temples again. Dumbledore was staring at him, his bright blue eye boring a whole through him. Leaning forward, Draco rested his elbows on his knees and hid his head in his hands. It was no use; he could still feel Dumbledore looking at him.

It was too much information, too much to think about. Everything he had been taught to believe in had suddenly stopped making as much sense as it once had. His mother had been the only thing left to him, and she had been taken away from him by his father.

Draco looked up, and took a deep breath.

"I don't think I want him to any more."

Dumbledore studied Draco for a long time, a slight smile playing across his lips.

"Well, Mister Malfoy, I think you have listened to my wheezing waffle long enough," Dumbledore said. "You should get some rest."

"I can't sleep right now," Draco grouched.

"You can, and you will," Dumbledore chided. "I have a potion that will help you."

"What am I going to do?" Draco asked suddenly. "What's going to happen to me?"

"You will go back to Hogwarts in the fall, of course," Dumbledore said.

"And, in the meantime?" Draco asked.

"Well, with your father in Azkaban for life, and your mother dead, Malfoy Manor is yours," Dumbledore said. "However, in light of recent events, you will forgive me if I am not comfortable leaving you here until the term starts."

Draco pressed his lips together, and knitted his brows. He understood what Dumbledore was on about, but he didn't like the sound of it.

"Where am I going to go, then?"

"You just get some rest," Dumbledore insisted. "Let me worry about that."

::

At five minutes to eleven, Harry crept down the stairs of a very dark and quiet number four Privet Drive. He was terribly excited, his heart was thumping so loud in his chest he was sure it was going to wake the Dursleys.

The electric fire was still in front of the fireplace. The fireplace had been repaired since Mr. Weasley had blown in apart, but thankfully, Uncle Vernon had not boarded it up again.

Quietly, Harry set about starting a Muggle fire in the fireplace. He would have much rather charmed up a fire, but the last thing he wanted right now was angry owls from the Ministry when he was ten minutes from freedom.

The fire was pitiful. He only had a few pieces of wood. He had grabbed a few decent looking branches on an earlier trip to the park, but he had not taken too many. If he had come parading through the door with an armful of firewood, the Dursleys certainly would have been suspicious.

Harry dropped the pellet Mr. Weasley had sent him into the fire. There was a breathy sound, like air being let out of a balloon, and the fire turned a familiar shade of green.

It took him a few minutes to figure out how he was going to get himself and all his stuff up the fireplace at once. The Dursleys fireplace was not designed for Floo trips, and was quite small.

Once he got himself sorted out, he laughed quietly to himself, wondering what the Dursleys would think if they could see him. Standing in a fire, with his trunk trapped between his legs, his broomstick under his arm, and an owl cage (containing two owls) propped on his head.

With his free hand, he dumped the contents of the pouch over his head.

"The Burrow!" He shouted.

The Dursleys' living room slipped out of sight.

II Out of the Fire

Making a Floo trip with a trunk, a broomstick and an owl cage was definitely overrated. Harry landed in the Weasleys' fireplace with a series of thumps and bumps, ending in a final, resounding crash that shocked everyone waiting for his arrival out of their seats.

Several things happened at once.

His trunk tumbled out from between his legs and landed loudly on the floor. The lid sprang open and everything he owned came spilling out. Harry lost the grip on his broomstick and it went skidding across the floor. The owl cage knocked Harry in the head and fell to the floor, bouncing twice before coming to a stop. Errol seemed unaffected by the rough treatment, but Hedwig dissolved into a furious ball of white feathers and disgruntled squawks.

Harry dashed out of the fireplace to collect his belongings, only to trip over the trunk and land face first on the floor. That resounding crash was punctuated by the tinkling sound of breaking glass.

"Harry!" Ron cried. Harry's best friend looked torn between concern and amusement.

"You sure know how to make an entrance," Arthur Weasley commented. Harry, pulling his broken glasses out from under him, looked sheepish.

"He has a Seeker's grace, he does," Fred quipped.

Unable to locate Fred without his glasses, Harry shot a murderous look in the direction of Fred's voice.

"Come on, then," Ron said, offering Harry a hand up. "You've only just got here, don't try and have a lie-in just yet."

Pulling his wand from his waistband, he aimed it at the wreckage of his glasses and muttered '*Occulus Reparo*'. He hugged everyone in the room-- Fred, George, Ron, and Arthur, before sorting out his belongings, which were spread from one end of the Weasley's living room to the other.

"What was the bang?" Molly asked, as she entered the room. She eyed Fred and George suspiciously, as most loud, spontaneous noises in the Burrow usually had something to do with them.

"Harry was trying to slip in unnoticed," George joked.

"Harry, you're here!" Molly said. She ran over to him and proceeded to try to squeeze the life out of him. She released him and eyed him up and down. "You look thinner than before, though I don't know how it is possible. There wasn't much of you to start with,"

"Dudley is still on that diet," Harry explained.

"Come on into the kitchen, then," Molly sighed. "I figured those Muggles were not feeding you proper, so I saved you a plate."

The food on the plate looked like it had just been prepared, never mind that it was several hours old. Harry attacked the food with zeal, starved for real food after a week of carrot sticks, lettuce, and dry tuna salad.

"It's wonderful, Mrs. Weasley," Harry said around a mouthful of ham and potatoes.

"Oh, tosh," Molly said, waving him off. "The way they have been starving you, you'd probably say that about Cockroach Clusters."

After he ate, Molly made to hasten everyone to bed. Everyone grumbled, especially Ron, who thought it was increasingly unfair that they were being bundled off to bed so soon after Harry got there. Molly started in on a lengthy harangue about how Harry would be there in the morning-- as a matter of fact, he would be there all summer, when she was cut off by Arthur clearing his throat.

"Sweetheart, I think we should show Harry that thing I was working on earlier," he said.

"What?" Molly asked. Arthur gave her a pointed look. "Oh, she said,

remembering. "Yes, we should."

"Of course we should, since you in such a hurry for me to finish it before he got here."

Abruptly, Harry was removed from the kitchen table and dragged bodily to the Weasley's large grandfather clock Harry looked at the clock intently. When nothing caught his eye, he looked back over at the Weasleys. Fred, George and Ron looked innocent. Arthur looked pleased with himself, and Molly looked wistful. Other than that, Harry was given nothing else to work with. It was plain no one was going to tell him what had been done to it, so he was going to have to figure it out by himself.

After searching the clock for nearly a full minute, he realised it now had ten hands, instead of the nine it had before. A new hand had been added. It was the same length as Ron's, and was paused between *Travelling* and *Home*. Harry peered at it closely, to read the name etched on it.

Harry

"You put me on the clock?" Harry asked, dumbfounded. Blushing, he looked over to Arthur and Molly, who were beaming. Winking at him, Arthur pointed his wand at the clock.

Harry's hand twitched, then slid down to point to the word *Home*.

Harry's heart was swelling so fast he thought it would burst. He had never had a family (the Dursleys had never counted, as far as he was concerned). He had begun to consider the Weasleys his family after his first trip to the Burrow during the summer before his second year at Hogwarts, but now it was official. The Weasleys considered him to be part of their family right back, and he was so happy about it he could almost cry.

"Well, Molly and I were thinking about it the other day," Arthur said, smiling. "You've gotten the short end of the stick in the family department since your parents died. We figured it was time you have a right and proper family, so if your willing to have us, Mister Potter, you are welcome here any time."

Speechless, he ran over to Arthur and Molly to hug them, and this time he did not complain to himself when Molly squeezed all the air

out of him.

Harry went over to stare at the clock again, unable to stop himself from studying it. He noticed that Percy's hand had not been removed. Apparently Molly was still hopeful that he would stop being an ungrateful pillock and come to his senses. Harry also noticed that two more slots had been added to the clock. One said *Muggles* (ten o'clock), and the other said *Important Business* (four o'clock).

"What's 'Important Business' for?" Harry asked. He figured *Muggles* was for him, when he was off with the Dursleys.

"Grimmauld Place," Arthur said. "I couldn't get 'Off Plotting Against The Dark Lord And His Minions' to fit.

"Enough, now," Molly said sternly. "It's late, and we have much to do tomorrow. It's time everyone went to bed."

"Yes, Mum," The boys chorused. Harry was the loudest of them all.

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"Merlin, it's early," Ron complained, around a mouthful of bacon.

Harry shook his head at Ron, and took another bite of toast. It was half eight, which did not seem all that early to Harry. At Hogwarts he was usually up by half seven, and when he stayed with the Dursleys Aunt Petunia would have him up well before that, so he could make breakfast for everyone.

"Fred and George were up and out of the house an hour ago," Molly pointed out.

"But they *work*," Ron lamented, gulping down juice. "I'm on *holiday*."

Molly whirled around from the stove to give him a withering look, which he ignored.

"It's abuse, is what it is," Ron went on to no one in particular. "Rousing me from bed this early when I'm on holiday."

"Ginny is on vacation," Molly countered. "I don't see her whinging on

about it."

"Ginny is only up because Harry is here," Ron said waspishly. Ginny turned pink, and Harry suddenly found his coffee cup interesting.

"Shut up!" Ginny shouted.

"Ginny has a boyfriend," Harry muttered into his coffee.

"Perhaps if you and Harry had not sat up talking half the night, you would not be so tired," Molly said. "Besides, I have you up this early for a reason."

"And what's that?" Ron asked, dubious.

"We are going to Grimmauld Place," Molly said.

"Why?" Ron asked.

Harry just stared at Mrs. Weasley in stunned silence.

"Order stuff," Molly said, dismissively. "Besides, Grimmauld Place is Harry's now."

"What?" Ron and Harry screeched together.

"Yes," Molly said. "It's Harry's. Sirius left it to him, as well as his vault at Gringotts."

"And we are going there now?" Harry asked.

"As soon as we are done with breakfast."

::

"Headmaster?"

Dumbledore looked over to see Severus Snape's head in the sitting room fireplace.

"Morning, Severus," Dumbledore said. His voice lacked its usual

cheerfulness. "I take it you got my owl?"

"Just now, Headmaster," Snape replied. "Narcissa Malfoy is dead?"

"She is," Dumbledore said. He muttered something unintelligible. A house-elf appeared, and handed him a teacup. "Tea, Severus?"

"No, thank you, Headmaster," Snape said. "If you would be so kind as to tell me how and why.... you'll forgive me for pressing you, but your missive was woefully lacking in detail."

"Indeed," Dumbledore answered. "I had no desire to apt share my opinions with anyone clever enough to intercept that owl, you understand."

Snape nodded. Considering he was a disembodied head, it was more of a wobble.

"It was done in the middle of the night, by the Killing Curse," Dumbledore explained.

"Death Eaters," Snape muttered.

"Indeed," Dumbledore said again. "And considering they sneaked into a house that is normally sealed up tighter than a Gringotts vault, I am inclined to think they were sent by Lucius."

Snape pressed his lips together, but gave no indication if he agreed or disagreed with Dumbledore's assessment.

"And Draco?" Snape asked.

"Young Mister Malfoy was unharmed," Dumbledore replied. "He was subjected to some kind of Sleeping Charm before she was killed, and was unaware of what happened until the next morning."

"If I may ask, how did you become aware?" Snape inquired.

"Mister Malfoy sent me an owl," Dumbledore replied conversationally, as if he and Draco shared regular correspondence.

"Draco sent *you* and owl?" Snape looked incredulous. He and Draco had never discussed the Headmaster, but Snape knew Draco was not fond of the old man.

"Desperate times, Severus," Dumbledore said, unruffled. "His father is in Azkaban, as are most of his relatives. His mother is dead, and there is a good chance any of his relatives that are walking free had something to do with his mother's death."

"How is he handling it?" Snape asked.

"He is quite distraught, especially considering he believes his father had something to do with it," Dumbledore responded. He shrugged. "Though, he is trying to hide it under his usual mask of indifference and perpetual displeasure."

"That sounds like Draco," Snape muttered. "What do you have planned for him?"

"That is a good question," Dumbledore said, with a slight chuckle. "I am kicking a few ideas around as we speak."

"Surely you don't intend to leave him here until school starts?" Snape asked.

"Certainly not," The Headmaster snorted. "That would be most unsafe."

"He is welcome to stay with me, Headmaster," Snape said slowly.

"That is most generous, Severus. I will keep that in mind," Dumbledore said. "Although, I fear it might not be prudent."

"And why is that?" Snape asked sourly.

"I have much for you to do, and I would prefer Mister Malfoy be somewhere where he will not be alone for long periods of time," Dumbledore said. "For his emotional state, as well as his personal safety."

"Do you think he is in danger?" Snape asked.

"War is brewing, Severus," Dumbledore said, almost cryptically. "We are all in danger, Mister Malfoy included."

"Yet, he was spared in this attack," Snape countered.

"He was," Dumbledore conceded, with a slight nod of his head.
"However, I do not know how long Mister Malfoy will remain in his father's favour."

"Really?" Snape said, lifting an eyebrow. "What gives you that idea?"

"As I said, he believes his father was involved in his mother's murder," Dumbledore explained. "I would wager that notion may cause him to question some of his allegiances."

"Understandable," Snape said. "The shift in my allegiances was caused by a similar situation."

"I remember quite well," Dumbledore said softly.

"Apologies, Headmaster, but I must get on," Snape said. "I am to meet with Lupin and Fletcher in a half hour."

"Good old Mundungus," Dumbledore chuckled. "If you would be so kind as to relay a message for me."

"Of course," Snape said, inclining his disembodied head.

"You tell him if he brings any more purloined merchandise into the Order's hideaway, I will personally remove his hide in strips."

::

Grimmauld Place

Harry's heart plummeted into his stomach. Sirius' death was still too fresh a wound, Harry wasn't ready to rub salt in it by poking around his house.

His house, now.

Sirius had left him the house that had been in the Black family for several generations. It was a gesture that made him want to weep with both sadness and love.

"Is the Order meeting today?" Harry asked, trying to keep his tone

conversational.

"Not today, specifically," Molly said, sitting down at the table next to Harry. Now that everyone else was fed, she could relax and eat, as well. "They have been meeting, though, about three times a week or so."

"But not today?" Harry asked. "Why are we going, then?"

"Do you not want to?" Ginny asked.

"Not quite yet," Harry said honestly. "It's just that..." He trailed off, studying his coffee once more.

"You probably don't think you are ready, and I understand that," Molly said, patting his hand reassuringly. "Unfortunately, for your own sake, I am going to have to ask you to be brave."

Harry sighed. "For my own sake," he repeated bitterly. His life continually being in danger was getting very old.

"Yes," Molly said.

"Why?"

The single word hung in the air for a few moments. Ron and Ginny were alternating glances between Harry and their mother. Harry was watching Mrs. Weasley intently, waiting for her to wriggle out of a proper explanation, like adults always did.

Molly remained silent. She sipped her coffee, nibbled her bacon, and studiously avoided everyone's eyes.

"On no you don't, Mum," Ron said finally. "Don't tell us half the story, then pull your it's-grown-up-business-that-doesn't-concern-you face."

Molly ignored Ron and looked at Harry.

"Well, I would like to know," Harry said angrily. "I am right tired of begging adults for information I should have been given from the first."

"Now I know I did right, having Arthur put you on that clock," Molly muttered. "That was a response worthy of one of my flesh-and-blood

children."

Ron grinned widely at Harry and flashed him a look that was the facial-expression equivalent of a thumbs up.

Harry felt slightly abashed for snapping at Mrs. Weasley, but his annoyed expression remained firm. He was well and truly tired of everyone keeping information from him. Everyone always wanted him to deal with everything in the end, but they kept their secrets until right before they pushed him out the door to go do whatever it was he had to do.

Except for that bit with the Prophecy. Dumbledore hadn't bothered to inform him of anything until afterwards.

"I cannot tell you much, because I don't rightly understand it myself," Molly said. Harry almost believed her, but Ron looked like he thought she was wibbling. "Dumbledore could tell you more, though he probably won't, since he hasn't told me much to begin with."

She *was* wibbling.

"Well, what did he tell you?" Harry demanded.

"Little more than war is coming," Molly said. She looked at Harry sadly. She reached up, laying her hand on his cheek, and sighed. "It would be best if you were some place safe."

::

"Are you wake, Mister Malfoy?"

Draco did not answer right away. The potion Dumbledore had given him before bed had done its job. His sleep had been heavy and dreamless. He had been awake for nearly an hour, but had felt disinclined to leave his bed. He wanted to stay in his room, hidden from what was waiting for him.

Staying in his room would change nothing-- his mother was still dead, his father was still probably responsible for it, Dumbledore was still waiting to whisk him away somewhere. But if he stayed in his room,

he would not have to face it. He pointedly ignored the old man standing in his doorway, though it was difficult to do, as the man in question was wearing violently purple robes embroidered with moons and stars in a yellow so bright Draco thought they might glow in the dark.

"Mister Malfoy, I fear you must get up," Dumbledore's voice was gentle but firm. "We have much to do. I trust you will want to pack a few things before we leave."

"What about my mother?" Draco asked, lifting his head to eye Dumbledore curiously.

"The house-elves have readied her," Dumbledore replied. "She will be interred before we leave."

"I take it there will be no service," Draco said flatly.

"I do not think that would be wise," Dumbledore said regretfully. "Besides, most of the people who would want to pay their respects are in Azkaban."

Draco flinched at that, and his eyes flashed with anger. Dumbledore looked at him impassively. The Headmaster had known that comment would get Draco's ire up, but that had been the point. He could not afford to lose Draco to despondency. Oddly, Draco seemed the most at ease when he was angry (aside from when he was being self-important), and Dumbledore was going to use that to his advantage.

Silently, Draco got up and threw a dressing robe over his pyjamas. He showered mechanically, absently going through the motions of soaping his body and hair. He ran a comb through his hair perfunctorily, not bothering to slick it back or set it in any particular fashion. He dressed mechanically as well, pulling on the first articles of clothing he touched when reaching into the wardrobe-- a dark green jumper, faded jeans, and a pair of black trainers, without even paying attention to what he was wearing. He did not look bad, though in his normal frame of mind he never would have left the house like that.

He at first tried to wave off Dumbledore's attempts to feed him. The house-elves had prepared a feast, as if they were expecting an entire cadre of Death Eaters for the morning meal. Dumbledore tried to ply him with bacon, sausage, kippers, and fried tomatoes on toast, all of which Dumbledore was already halfway through before Draco even

emerged from upstairs. Draco was not hungry, he felt like a large, leaden weight was already in his stomach, taking up all the room. He insisted that he was fine with his cup of black coffee, but Dumbledore was unmoved.

Draco finally pacified him with two pieces of plain toast, though he did not really eat them. He made a few compulsory nibbles, then pushed them around his plate so Dumbledore would think he was doing something with them.

"Have you packed yet, Mister Malfoy?" Dumbledore inquired.

"A few things," Draco said. He had packed much the way he had dressed, shoving the first few things to hand into a trunk.

"Very well then," Dumbledore said. "I'll just finish up this kipper, and we'll see to your mother."

Draco did not respond. He sipped at his fourth cup of coffee dutifully. It burned his nearly empty stomach, but he found the pain somewhat comforting; it pierced through the numbness that was overcoming him.

After breakfast, Dumbledore and Malfoy made the journey down the thin, winding gravel path to the mausoleum. Like most pureblood families, the Malfoys were laid to rest on their own property. The mausoleum was on the far corner of the estates, a large, ominous stone building. Draco thought it was beautiful.

As a child he had often crept away from the house to spend time in there, hiding in the cool shadows with no one to bother him but the dead. More than once his father had punished him for leaving the house to wander between the carved, raised headstones of the Muggle cemetery in the nearby town. He knew that most people found gravesites chilling and frightful-- his father had thought there was something mentally wrong with him for wanting to hang out in graveyards.

Draco found them peaceful. The dead, for the most part, were at rest.

He hoped his mother was at rest.

Perhaps it had something to do with the house-elves magic, or maybe Dumbledore knew a charm that would relax frozen bones and fused

muscles.

Silently, Draco stroked her cold cheek gently. He pressed a kiss to her forehead, then turned on his heel and started to leave.

"Farewell, Narcissa," Dumbledore said quietly. "May you find the peace you were searching for."

Draco paused in the doorway as he heard this, overcome by a sudden burst of clarity. When Dumbledore had first told him that his mother had betrayed his father, he had been unable to fathom what had possessed her to do it. Now, he thought he understood.

When she had sent Dumbledore that owl, she had been trying to make peace with herself, for all the years she had sat by idle while her husband had murdered and warmongered and poisoned their son's mind.

Dumbledore wrapped an arm around Draco's shoulders as they returned to the Manor. Draco didn't shrug him off, nor did he wholly accept the gesture. He simply allowed it.

Once inside the Manor, Draco found he felt numb, again. He tried to drown it out with two more cups of coffee, hot and black, hoping it would twist and burn at his insides until he wanted to scream.

"Bring your trunk, Master Malfoy," Dumbledore said, starting a bright green fire in the fireplace. "It was time you were off."

"Only me?" Draco asked. "You are staying here?"

"Oh no, my dear boy," Dumbledore said, cheerfully. "Though, I fear I cannot go with you just yet. There are some matters that need attending to. After that, I will be joining you, hopefully sometime this evening."

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Cold formed in the pit of Harry's stomach as he stepped out of the fireplace into number twelve Grimmauld Place. It was a tight, pulsating ball of ice that threatened to engulf his whole body. He felt Ron grab

his hand and give it a squeeze, and he was suddenly grateful he had not been the first person to Floo over.

The house was just as he remembered, stark and cold and uninviting. It had not fallen back into disrepair in the time since Sirius' death. Harry wondered if the Order had been keeping it up, or if Molly Weasley had been sneaking over to do it single-handedly.

It seemed the house was empty. Harry was surprised at this, he had been expecting to find Remus Lupin. Lupin had stayed with Sirius almost continually, due to his perpetual, werewolf-induced poverty. The only sound in the house was the screeching of Sirius' mum.

She had started in as soon as Harry set a foot out of the fireplace.

Molly was the last through. She set off at once to sort out Sirius' mum, then began barking orders at everyone. It seemed Dumbledore was stopping by later, with Snape and Lupin. Even though Harry thought the house looked liveable, Molly still felt it was unfit for human habitation, and wanted it spotless before Dumbledore returned.

It was nothing near as dire as before. No doxies, no mutant dust bunnies, just dull and boring dusting and wiping. There was a boggart, hiding in an old armoire in one of the bedrooms. Remembering the effect the last boggart had had on Mrs. Weasley, Ron and Harry dispatched it quickly, and decided not to mention it to her.

Eventually, they settled down for lunch. Mrs. Weasley's wand and enchanted chopping knives whipped up a large plate of sandwiches and something akin to Muggle oven chips. She also conjured up a treacle tart, sneaking sideways glances as she did it, like she knew it was Harry's favourite.

"Another tart, Harry?" Mrs. Weasley asked.

"You'll make me fat," Harry joked.

"Doubtful," She said, putting the tart in front of him.

"TRAITORS! HONOURLESS BASTARDS! LEAVE THIS PLACE! HALF-BLOODS! CHILDREN OF FILTH! GET OUT OF THE HOME OF MY FATHERS!"

"Bloody Hell, Mum," Ron snapped. "I thought you sorted her out."

"I thought I did, too, and watch your mouth," Molly said. Sighing, she stood from the table, ready to take on Sirius' mum for the second time that day.

"I'll do it," Ginny said.

Molly opened her mouth in protest, but Ginny was up and halfway down the hallway before anything came out of her mouth.

The next thing they heard was Sirius' mum. She was screaming again, but it sounded like she was terrified.

::

"In you go, Mister Malfoy," Dumbledore coaxed.

Draco stepped into the fire, with his trunk pressed to his chest. He was annoyed with Dumbledore, though he was not entirely sure why. Perhaps because Dumbledore was sending him away, perhaps because he wasn't going with him. Draco didn't really know, he was just annoyed.

Dumbledore shoved a piece of paper into his hand. Before Draco could get a proper look at it, Floo Powder was sprinkled on him. Dumbledore shouted something Draco didn't catch into the fireplace, and he was whooshed up and away.

::

Ron, Harry and Ginny retired to the sitting room for a bit of rest. Harry was reading a dusty, leather bound tome entitled *Wandless Magic: Fact or Fiction*. Ron was trying desperately to play Exploding Snap by himself. They had both spent fifteen minutes trying to get Ginny to tell them what she had done to Sirius' mum, but she was engrossed in her daily letter to Dean Thomas, and wouldn't talk.

There was a thump and an indignant squawk, and a body came

through the fireplace.

"Who is that, then?" Harry asked.

They got their answer soon enough, when an all too familiar figure emerged from the Floo.

"Malfoy?" Harry gasped, leaping to his feet.

"Bloody Hell!" Ron shouted. He jumped up next to Harry, reaching for his wand. "We're being invaded!"

Draco stared at the scene in front of him in shock, disgust and disbelief.

"Where the fuck am I?" Draco demanded.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" Ron demanded right back.

"Bloody Dumbledore handed me a paper and shoved me in the fireplace," Draco snapped. "Now I am here with you freaks, and hell if I know why."

"Paper?" Harry asked, stepping towards Draco. "Let me see it." He held out his hand impatiently.

Sneering, Draco shoved the paper at him. Harry looked at it, and his breath caught. He recognized Dumbledore's loopy handwriting immediately.

*The Order of the Phoenix can be found at
number twelve Grimmauld Place, London*

"Well, he didn't come on accident," Harry muttered, handing the paper to Ron. Dumbledore was the Secret-Keeper for the Order. If he had given Draco that paper, he had meant for him to come here.

"I still don't know where the fuck I am," Draco said furiously.

"It's on the paper, ferret," Ron hissed. "Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place."

"Great. Wonderful," Draco drawled. "But that doesn't help me one bit, Weasel. Who lives here? You?" He snorted. "Did the twins finally sell

enough jokes to buy your tribe a decent house?"

"It's my house," Harry said quietly.

"Pardon me, I must have misheard you," Draco said, nearly choking.
"You said it is *your* house?"

"That's what I said, Malfoy," Harry replied. His hand was itching to reach for his wand, wanting desperately to jinx Malfoy into next week. "I thought ferrets could hear better."

"How did you come by it, if I may ask?" Draco snarled.

"Well, it was my godfather's," Harry snapped. "Now it's mine."

"I've heard your godfather is Sirius Black," Draco said, for once not sneering.

"*Was* Sirius Black. He's dead now, you see, which is how I got the house," Harry growled. "Your Aunt Bellatrix killed him, right in front of my face." Harry's eyes flashed, dark with anger. "I supposed that gives you another thing to be proud of your family for."

Draco's eyes went tight when Harry mentioned his family. They stared at each other for a few moments, glaring hatred. Finally, Draco broke the stare. He sighed wearily, flopped down one of the couches, and buried his head in his hands.

"What's the matter, Malfoy?" Ron asked. "That's not like you, passing on a chance to gloat about your family."

Draco looked up at him, and Ron took a step back. Draco's face was furious-- a cold, icy wrath that was more frightening than the blond's usual ranting, heated anger. Suddenly the anger smoothed away, replaced by his usual cocky, self-important sneer. He eyed Harry, Ron and Ginny for a moment, then gave a self-depreciating snort.

"What's so funny, Malfoy?" Harry asked.

"Me. My life. Everything," Draco said, snorting again. "I don't know any more." He shrugged. "It's so disturbing it's almost funny, really. First my mother gets murdered, then Dumbledore decides to inflict me with you lot."

Ron's face went tight, part of him was regretting that jibe about Malfoy's family. Harry's eyes went wide, and he looked at Draco with something that might have been understanding.

III The Madhouse

An awkward silence enveloped the room, though considering its occupants, it was probably to be expected.

Ginny, who apparently wanted nothing to do with Malfoy, or Harry and Ron, given the way they were behaving, retreated back to her letter to Dean Thomas.

Draco, Harry and Ron continued to stare at each other for a few moments. No words were spoken, though a few curled lips, knitted brows and narrowed eyes were exchanged all around.

Eventually, Draco sighed wearily, like Harry and Ron were a painfully boring zoo exhibit he would pay good money to get away from. He twisted around in the couch so he was no longer facing them, and glared daggers at the very fireplace that had deposited him into this nightmare.

Harry returned to his book, *Wandless Magic: Fact or Fiction?*. Ron glared at Draco a bit more for good measure, then ambled across the room, looking for something to do. He did not return to his futile attempt at solitary Exploding Snap. It seemed he did not want to go out of his way to look like a complete pillock when Draco Malfoy was just across the room.

The silence continued, now punctuated by a thick, suffocating tension that hung so heavy around the room it was almost tangible.

After what was probably the slowest, most painful fifteen minutes of all their lives, the silence was shattered by Molly Weasley entering the room.

"Ron, I was wondering if -- bloody Hell!" Molly gasped, seeing Draco. She dropped the heavy, black crockpot-looking thing she was holding, and it shattered loudly on the floor.

"Bloody Hell, yourself!" Ron shouted, pointing. "You let out the poltergeist!"

"Never mind that," she snapped, as a creature that could have been Peeves brother, (dressed in a loud tie stamped with palm trees and a striped beanie topped with a propeller), wafted out from the wreckage of the crockpot and sailed out of the room, cackling with glee. "What in the name of Merlin is he doing here?" she demanded.

"Dumbledore sent him," Harry said, with a disinterested wave towards the fireplace.

"That's his story, anyway," Ron snipped.

Molly Weasley eyed Draco askance. He was lounging languidly on the couch, pointedly ignoring everyone. She worked her mouth silently for a few seconds. She produced no words, but did manage to make herself look like a landed fish.

Draco, satisfied that everyone was done talking about him like he was not in the room, slid fluidly off the couch and approached Mrs. Weasley, the note from Dumbledore in his outstretched hand.

"My apologies, Mrs. Weasley, for my abrupt arrival. I am sure I gave you quite a start," Draco said. His tone was downright polite, lacking its usual drawling sarcasm.

"Yes, well," Molly said, taken slightly aback. "It's just that Dumbledore usually warns me before he sends people our way."

"I'm sure he does." Draco favoured Mrs. Weasley with a muted, sheepish smile, and handed her the paper.

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"Things at the Manor are a little... unsettled at the moment. The Headmaster just tossed me into my fireplace and sent me along," Draco explained sweetly. "Had I known you were here, I would have come to you straight away."

Harry and Ron were thunderstruck. Who was this polite, well-mannered young man, and what the devil had he done with Malfoy

they all knew and hated?

Mrs. Weasley, however, seemed slightly moved. She was not yet smiling at Draco, but her expression had warmed a bit. It had gone from suspicion and distrust to mild unease.

"Well, they must be right unsettled, for Dumbledore to be tossing people in fireplaces," Mrs. Weasley said. "What happened?"

"My mother died on Sunday night. She was murdered, while I was sleeping across the hall," he said quickly. "You'll forgive me, but I'd rather not talk about it just yet."

"Oh yes, of course," Mrs. Weasley said, covering her mouth with her hand. "Oh, my dear boy, that's horrid. Absolutely horrid. Merciful Merlin, just like Harry, except we was too young to remember it. I tell you, the world has gone mad. Stark, barking mad. Well, I certainly won't make you talk about it until your ready"

She stopped finally, taking a deep heaving breath. When faced with a situation where she did not know what to say, Molly would usually try to cover it up by saying quite a bit all at once.

"Can I get you anything?" She ventured. She winced once the words were out, realizing what she sounded like-- Sorry about your mum. How about a spot of tea?

Draco opened his mouth to respond, but was cut off by Sirius' mum.

"TRAITORS! HALFBREEDS! LOVERS OF MUDBLOODS!"

"Merlin's Balls, Ginny, I thought you fixed her up!" Ron screamed. He ran over and slammed the sitting room door to mute her out, but it only made her rave louder.

"BEGONE FROM THE HOUSE OF MY FATHERS!"

"I think the poltergeist unfixed her," Harry yelled.

"Why did Sirius have a poltergeist, anyway?" Ron shouted, trying to be heard over Sirius' mum. Mrs. Black, however, was determined to be heard all the way back at Hogwarts.

"BEGONE, YOU BASTARDS OF THE WIZARDING RACE!"

"I don't know, why does Dumbledore keep Peeves about?" Harry yelled back. "I don't think it was Sirius', anyway. It was probably his mum's."

"YOU HAVE NO BUSINESS HERE, YOU CHILDREN OF FILTH AND DESPAIR!"

"Well, why not!" Mrs. Weasley shouted, throwing up her hands. "She had a boggart in her writing desk, for Merlin's sake." She frowned at Harry and Ron, since neither of them seemed to be in a hurry to tangle with Mrs. Black. "Come along, then, Ginny. Help me put a cork in the old bat."

"HALF-BLOODS! HOW DARE YOU DEFILE MY HOUSE! TRAITORS! BREEDING WITH MUGGLES AND CALLING YOURSELF WIZARDS! GET OUT!"

"Who is that?" Draco asked, once Ginny and Mrs. Weasley left. He was obviously alarmed, though he was trying to cover it up with his trademark sneer.

"Sirius' mum," Ron said flatly, as if that was all the explanation Draco needed.

"Sirius Black's mum is still alive?" Draco looked incredulous, and raised an eyebrow.

"YOU WILL PAY FOR THIS TREACHERY! I WILL SEE YOU ALL BURN!"

Harry caught Ron's eye and winked, wanting to have a bit of fun with Draco. Ron nodded to him just slightly, saying he would play along.

"No, she'd been dead for quite some time," Harry said, right over her shrieking. "Just, there's a portrait of her in the hallway that is a bit tetchy about visitors."

From Mrs. Black's hallway there was a shout and a couple of thumps. Mrs. Black let out a deafening, blood-curdling scream, then fell silent.

"Oh good, looks like Mum and Ginny sorted her out," Ron said. "Codgy old botherer. She's just like Malfoy, here. Likes the sound of her own voice."

"I wonder what Ginny did to her last time?" Harry mused, ignoring the

way Draco was seething at Ron's comment. Draco's eyes were practically bulging out of his head.

"Must have been fearsome, whatever she did. Didn't hear a peep out of old hag for almost four hours." Ron grinned, proud of his sister.

"Her portrait screams all day?" Draco asked suddenly.

"Quite," Ron said evenly. "She's like a bloody clock. Every hour on the hour, or sooner, if someone puts the wind up her bloomers."

"And what, she kept a boggart as a pet?" Draco put his hands to his temples, rubbing furiously. Even his father was not that insane. "In a desk?"

"That desk, just over there," Harry said, smiling at Draco's apprehension. He pointed, indicating the writing desk in the corner. "That was a while back, but we found one today, in her wardrobe."

"Don't know as they were pets, though," Ron said thoughtfully.

"The poltergeist might have been," Harry put in. "From what Sirius told me about her, I wouldn't put it past her."

"I think that lunatic house-elf is letting them in," Ron commented.

"What, the poltergeists?" Harry asked.

"There is more than one?" Draco squawked. Poltergeists were extremely low-class. If one had shown up at the Manor, Lucius would have had it exorcised immediately.

"No, the boggarts," Ron replied to Harry, ignoring Draco. He could no longer look at Draco, for fear he would burst out laughing. "The one in the wardrobe was new, I think."

"Oh." Harry shrugged. "Maybe."

"Now, that house-elf. He is nearly a poltergeist," Ron commented. "Gone round the bend, that one."

"Where has Kreacher gone off to, anyway?" Harry asked Ron. "I haven't seen him since we got here."

"We're better off that way, if you ask me," Ron said, cringing. "I'd rather hate to catch him snogging Sirius' dad's trousers, again."

"The house-elf was doing what to what?" Draco asked. He was getting a headache, the kind that made you want to stab yourself in the head to let the pressure out.

"Snogging Sirius' dad's trousers," Harry said, as if it was normal house-elf behaviour. "Disturbing sight, that."

"Now I've heard everything," Draco said bleakly. "Is there anything else I should know about, seeing as I am stuck at this funny-farm for the remainder of summer?"

"Mundungus Fletcher is moving shoddy cauldrons out the back door," Harry said dryly.

"Firebolt knock-offs, too," Ron added. "They're really Comet Two-Sixties, with a new paint job and the serial number charmed off."

"Perfectly normal," Draco said tightly, raising an eyebrow. "So that's it, then? No Dementors in the basement or anything?"

"Oh no, Harry's allergic," Ron quipped.

"That's right, I forgot," Draco said, his voice a bit smug. "Dragons on the roof, then?"

"Only when Charlie is in town," Ron said.

"Anything else?" Draco sounded weary.

"A werewolf lives here part-time," Harry said.

"Lupin." Draco pulled a face. "Of course," he sighed. "That it, then? No more surprises?"

"I once caught Dumbledore shagging McGonagall." Ron offered.

"Morgana's Rosy Bum!" Draco swore. "That is the most disgusting thing I have ever heard!"

Draco looked back and forth between Harry and Ron, who seemed totally unaffected.

"You know what, Potter?" Draco sputtered. "This is a madhouse!"

"You know, I think you might be right, Malfoy." Ron said.

"Why is that, Weasel?"

"Well, I must be going off, because I swear you were just polite to my mum."

With that, Harry and Ron exited the sitting room, leaving Draco alone with his thoughts.

::

What a bunch of nutters! Draco thought as they left. He was starting to think he should have stayed in the mausoleum with his mother. It was actually a tempting thought -- just to return to the Manor, lie down on the plinth next to his mother, and will himself to stop breathing. At least he would get some peace and quiet.

As if to make his case, the poltergeist slipped into the sitting room, knocked over an end-table, and slipped back out.

And now I am stuck here for the rest of my summer. Draco thought bitterly. He returned to the couch, and curled himself up into a ball along the arm, tucking his knees under his chin. Complete load of bollocks. I understand why Dumbledore didn't want me to stay at the Manor, but this is ridiculous.

Snape probably would have taken me in. He continued to himself. *Instead, Dumbledore packs me off to spend the summer with the Prat Who Will Not Die and his bloody sidekicks. The only way this could be worse is if the Mudblood shows up.*

As if on cue, green fire flared up in the fireplace across the room. A moment later, Hermione Granger came tumbling out.

"Bloody Hell!" She said when she saw him. "What are you doing here?"

At that moment, Draco decided the next person who greeted him like

that was getting hexed within an inch of their life.

"Believe me, Granger, I am not here by choice," Draco snapped.

"How did you get here?" She demanded.

"The fireplace, same as you," Draco spat.

"But how?" Hermione pressed. "This place does not exactly take drop-ins."

"Dumbledore sent me," Draco explained sourly. "My mother is dead. Dumbledore did not want me staying at the Manor alone. For some reason, he thought inflicting me with Potter and his idiot buddies would improve my mental state."

"Harry's here?" Hermione asked excitedly.

"Unfortunately," Draco muttered. "And the Weasel, and the Weasel's kid sister."

Hermione pursed her lips at Draco, then spun around and headed for the door.

"Oh, sorry about your mum," she said over her shoulder, before walking out of the room.

::

"That was a good one, about Dumbledore and McGonagall," Harry said, once they were in the hall. "I think that's what put him off."

Ron made a non-committal noise.

"What?" Harry asked.

"Nothing," Ron said quickly.

"You were kidding, right?" Harry asked. He sounded desperate. "About Dumbledore and McGonagall?"

"No," Ron said, after a pause.

"Good God, Ron!" Harry choked. "That's foul!"

"Oh, don't you complain, Harry Potter," Ron countered. "You weren't the one that saw Dumbledore's naked arse."

"Shut up," Harry said, covering his ears. He loved Dumbledore like family, but really. "Just shut up."

"I'm traumatised for life, I tell you," Ron lamented.

"Don't tell me, please," Harry said, sighing. "I'm going to have nightmares for a week as it is."

::

Dinner was a surprisingly pleasant affair, considering Grimmauld Place's new house guest.

Harry and Ron ate like starving animals, stuffing food in their mouths like they feared it would disappear if left on the plates too long. They chatted amiably with Ginny and Hermione, eager catch up with each other after a week apart.

Draco said little and ate even less. The only person he actually talked to was Mrs. Weasley, and he only spoke to her if she addressed him first.

There was, blessedly, no commentary from Mrs. Black. Whatever Ginny and Mrs. Weasley had done to her, it had left her feeling rather unsociable.

Mr. Weasley stopped by halfway through dinner. He gave a start when he saw Draco, but he did not greet him with the 'Bloody Hell! What are you doing here?' that Draco had been expecting, so Draco did not have to pull out his wand and subject Mr. Weasley to nine kinds of curses.

Arthur, in fact, did not stay long. After saying hello to everyone, he stuffed a couple of pieces of ham between two halves of a roll, and made to Floo himself somewhere.

"And just where are you off to so soon?" Molly complained.

"Back to the office," Arthur said.

"It's late for that," Ron commented.

"I know," Arthur admitted, a bit tightly. "But, there is plenty to do."

"What happened?" Molly asked, worried. If Arthur had to go back to the office, something had to be horribly wrong.

Arthur paused for a minute. He seemed to look like he was trying to make up a story, but Harry fancied he was eyeing Draco sideways.

"Oh, well. No harm in telling you, I suppose," Arthur relented. "It'll be all over the Prophet tomorrow, anyhow."

"Go on, then," Ron encouraged. "Why make us wait twelve hours?"

"Trouble at Azkaban," Arthur said quickly, as if saying the words in a rush would make them go away. "Earlier this afternoon."

"Someone tried to escape?" Molly breathed.

"Someone was trying to let some people out, more like," Arthur said.

"Sneaked right in with an Invisibility Cloak," he continued. "Of course, an Invisibility Cloak is no good around Dementors. They feel rather than see, you know, so they caught wind of the guy right off. Had a bunch of wands under his cloak when they found him."

"Who was he after?" Harry asked.

Despite himself, Draco was glad for Harry at that moment. He had wanted to ask the same question himself, but coming from him, it would have been worrisome.

"We are not sure of that, yet. The Dementors found him right after he got in, so he hadn't had a chance to do much of anything yet," Arthur said. "Every Auror on the payroll is at Azkaban as we speak, trying to get it all sorted out."

"Do be careful, sweetheart," Molly said.

"Don't worry yourself. Its not like I'm going out to Azkaban," Arthur soothed. "I'm just going in to push some quills around. With all the Aurors out, parchment in the Auror Headquarters is neck deep. Perkins and I are going to try and wade through some of it for them."

After Arthur left, everyone ate in silence. Draco could tell from the way Harry, Ron and Hermione were fidgeting and shooting furtive glances in his direction that they were desperate to start quibbling about who had broken in to Azkaban, and who he had thought he was going to let out. They were plainly in no hurry to do it in front of him.

Draco was curious, too. He wondered if his father had been involved, somehow. He knew that not all prisoners in Azkaban were Death Eaters, but it always seemed to be Death Eaters who tried to do anything about escaping. If the man who broke in had been looking to set Death Eaters free, then Lucius Malfoy more than likely had had something to do with it.

At this point, he would not put anything past his father any more.

::

Harry lay in bed, unable to sleep.

His mind was whirling, trying to make sense of things. Draco's mother was murdered, Draco was sent to Grimmauld Place, then someone breaks into Azkaban. Harry knew that it was possible that the events were not related, but at the same time, his experiences at Hogwarts had forced him to stop believing in coincidences. The last five years had taught him that when strange things happened, they usually had something to do with each other, no matter how unrelated they appeared on the surface.

Harry had no idea who killed Draco's mother. Draco had not offered up anything, and it was not like he and Draco were friends. If he started a conversation with Draco about it, he doubted Draco would be fooled into thinking Harry was concerned about him. Draco would most likely think Harry was trying to pump him for information.

Which, of course, would be exactly what Harry would be doing.

Harry sighed, and turned over. He could hear the even rise and fall of Ron's breaths, and it was irritating him. Not so much because the sound was keeping him awake, but because Ron was asleep and he was not.

He wondered if whoever broke into Azkaban had been trying to let Lucius Malfoy out. His wife had been murdered, so perhaps he had arranged for someone to break him out so he could avenge her death. This was assuming that Lucius Malfoy even knew his wife was dead. Its not like Azkaban prisoners received mail or took the Daily Prophet.

Sighing again, he slid out of bed and left the room he was sharing with Ron. He was not going to get to sleep any time soon, there was no point in lying there listening to Ron breathe.

::

Harry got to the stairs and paused as he saw Hermione coming up.

"What are you doing up?" She whispered, once she reached the top of the stairs.

"Can't sleep," he said. He noticed she had a large bulge in the pocket of her robe, which she was trying to cover with her hand. "You?"

"Can't sleep." She giggled. "Where were you going?"

"Downstairs. I was going to finish a book I started earlier," he said.

"You were reading?" She snorted quietly. "I don't believe it."

"Just because I haven't read Hogwarts, A History doesn't mean I don't read," he said waspishly. "And what's that in your robe, then?"

"Nothing," she said quickly. She smiled at him, and started walking towards her room.

"Bringing Malfoy midnight snacks?" he quipped, following her.

"Oh, stop," she said. "It's a Butterbeer. I thought it would help me sleep."

"There is an idea," he said. "I'll go get one, myself,"

"Don't bother," she said, indicating her pocket. "I've actually got two."

"Aren't we the drinker?" He teased.

"You shush," she said. "I still don't know what you were going downstairs for. You'll forgive me if I don't believe you about the reading."

He rolled his eyes at her, but didn't bother arguing.

"Goodnight, Harry," she said.

"Goodnight, Hermione."

Suddenly, they were kissing.

What the bloody Hell am I doing? He thought to himself.

Hermione's lips were pressed against his softly, her hands resting lightly on his arms. He went stiff briefly, as his mind tried to tell him to walk away, but his body mutinied when her tongue snaked across his lower lip. He melted against her, pulling her close, and walked them into her room, shutting the door with his foot. She ran a hand up to his hair, twining her fingers into the messy black locks, and made a small noise in the back of her throat.

Hermione and I are just friends. He babbled to himself, as his hand pulled at the tie of her robe. We cannot keep doing this!. The robe fell to the floor with a muffled thump, thanks to the Butterbeer. He was shocked to find she was not wearing a whole lot underneath it, just a pair of cotton panties. He moved his hands over her belly and across her back, marvelling at the feel of her. Her skin was impossibly soft and smooth and warm, and she made the most amazing sounds when he touched her.

"You always walk around naked in the middle of the night?" He mumbled against her neck. He slid his hands up to her breasts, toying lightly with her nipples. She made a whimpering noise that made his cock jump and he pushed into her, wanting to feel her against it.

"Not always," she murmured, her tongue tracing the curve of his ear. He dipped his mouth down to take one of her nipples in his mouth, swirling his tongue around it. She shuddered and sighed, and started pulling at the t-shirt he was wearing.

This is a bad idea. He thought, as the shirt was pulled over his head, but when her hands strayed to the drawstring of his pyjama pants, he shoved the nagging thought away. There were more important things happening, now, like the way she was ghosting her fingers up and down his cock. He would have plenty of time to kick himself about it in the morning.

He lowered her down on the bed, pulling her knickers off as he moved on top of her. He kissed her again hard, sliding his tongue against hers, nipping and sucking at her lower lip. He kissed a wet trail down her neck, pausing to suck at the hollow of her throat before continuing down to her breasts. He took a nipple into his mouth and she arched against him, whimpering and breathing raggedly. She raked her nails down his back, clawing at him and pulling him closer.

He could hear the nagging voice coming back, but he didn't want to listen to it any more. Pushing her legs apart, he slid inside her, and all conscious thought fled.

::

Draco yawned loudly and hauled himself off the couch. Thankfully, he was finally felling sleepy.

Sleep had eluded him when everyone else went to bed, and he has spent nearly two hours tossing and turning. Dumbledore had not shown up like he had said he would, otherwise Draco would have asked him for some more of that potion.

With no prospect of sleep and no potion, he had ventured down to the sitting room for a read. Mrs. Black had an impressive collection of interesting books, but Draco had eventually settled on the book Harry had been reading earlier, Wandless Magic: Fact or Fiction?.

As he headed out into the hall he wondered if Harry could do wandless

magic. Draco had not yet managed it himself, though his father had always insisted he would be able to, if he would only try. He wouldn't put it past Harry to be able to, since he was the Boy Who Could Do Everything And Then Some.

"Bloody Potter," he complained to himself. "Bloody Dumbledore. Bloody everything."

He paused at the top of the stairs, trying to remember which room he had been assigned. Mrs. Weasley had the room at the very end of the hall. Potter and the Weasel had one of the rooms on the left side, Ginny the other. He and Granger both had rooms on the right side, but he could not remember if his was the first room off the stairs or the second.

The door to the first room was slightly ajar, so Draco decided to try it. He poked his head in, and nearly had a heart attack.

Potter was shagging the Mudblood.

Draco found himself unable to tear his eyes away from the disgusting spectacle before him. Harry was on top of her, kissing her and pushing in and out of her slowly. Hermione had her legs wrapped around him, and was scratching and clawing at his back and arms.

He wondered distractedly who Potter had stolen that body from, because it could not possibly be his. Harry looked like a wastrel in his robes, and his Muggle clothes were always threatening to swallow him whole. Draco had always figured he was scrawny and stick-like. He was thin, but as Draco watched Potter's body stretch and strain over Granger, it was obvious those robes had been hiding a good deal of muscle.

Part of Draco could not help but wonder if he was dreaming. The notion of Potter having sex was absolutely ridiculous. Yet, there he was, having it, in front of Draco's very eyes. He was apparently doing a reasonable job of it, if the Mudblood's reactions were any marker.

Potter started to thrust faster, and slipped a hand down to rub between Granger's legs. Draco knew he needed to go, he had no desire to watch the Git Who Lived explode inside the Mudblood like a fountain. He wanted to go, but his feet seemed affixed to the floor. Granger arched up and shuddered, burying her face in Potter's neck. Potter gave a couple more thrusts then froze, collapsing on top of her.

Not until Potter had climbed out of bed did Draco move away from the door.

::

The tight, burning heat in Harry's belly uncoiled. Moaning softly, he pushed into Hermione hard and came with a jerk. He took a shuddering breath and collapsed on top of her. He lay there for a moment, trying to remember how to breathe normally, while she traced patterns on his back and toyed with his hair.

"You should go," she said softly.

"Yeah," he agreed. He heaved off her and quickly set about dressing himself. He was dressed in about a minute, but by the time he was done, Hermione was asleep. He pulled the blanket up over her and kissed her forehead.

"Goodnight, Hermione."

She mumbled something and rolled over.

Harry smiled fondly at her, and opened the door. He stepped out, shutting the door quietly. Once he turned around he froze, and suddenly wished he could will himself to die on the spot.

Malfoy was standing across from the door. He was leaning against the wall with his arms folded across his chest, and wearing an irritatingly smug expression.

"Good job, Potter," he drawled. "I didn't think you had it in you."

IV Strange Alliances

Harry went downstairs in the morning with a heavy heart and equally heavy feet, as well as a stomach that was roiling with an unpleasant cauldronful of emotions. He was tackling the usual guilt and self-hatred and emptiness he encountered every time he and Hermione

had one of their 'accidents'. It had only happened a handful of times, but each time he seemed to feel worse about it. Of course, similarly, each time the opportunity presented itself it was harder for him to walk away, because his nearly sixteen-year old hormones had a mind of their own.

Today, the guilt and self-hatred and emptiness were joined by embarrassment and mortification. When he had stumbled upon Malfoy in that hallway he had wanted to lay down and die. Malfoy had not come out and asked what they were doing, but he hadn't needed to. He had caught Harry sneaking out of Hermione's room in the middle of the night, looking guilty as sin and smelling like he had just been shagged. If Malfoy had asked, an answer like 'playing Exploding Snap' or 'plotting Voldemort's downfall' would not have been believed.

He did not, under any circumstances, want to go downstairs. An uncomfortable situation of gigantic proportions was waiting for him. He would have to try and eat with Malfoy leering at him and Hermione looking at him the way she always did *after* and Ron wondering what the shit was going on.

When he got into the kitchen he paused, and had to force himself not to whoop with joy. He silently thanked God-- the very God whose existence he had been debating after bumping into Malfoy last night, because God had sent an intervening force.

Dumbledore.

The Headmaster was sitting at the breakfast table in forest green robes embroidered with big yellow suns, monopolizing the conversation in that way only he could do, whilst shovelling kippers into his mouth.

Harry was saved. He could focus his attention on Dumbledore and ignore everyone else.

"Well, good morning Mister Potter," Dumbledore said cheerfully. "We were just wondering if you were ever going to join us."

"Did you sleep well?" Molly asked.

"Fine," Harry grumbled. Hermione tried desperately to suppress a giggle, and Harry could feel Malfoy leering at him. He could almost hear the drawl in Malfoy's mind: *Bet you slept quite well, Potter.*

"Well, that's good, because you are just the person I wanted to see," Dumbledore said. "Well, you and Mister Malfoy."

Draco's leer slipped so far Harry fancied he heard it hit the table.

"I've got much to do today, so we'd best get on with it," Dumbledore continued. "So if everyone would clear out, I'll have a word with the boys."

::

Hermione's eyes flicked to Harry as she rose from the table, searching his face for any indication that he was hating himself for last night's escapade. She sighed immediately, because she quickly noted the familiar signs.

Averted eyes, check.

Vacant expression, check.

Fidgety and nervous, check.

Permanent blush, check.

Attempting to hide behind beverage container and/or breakfast food, check.

Dark circles under his eyes because he had spent the rest of the night kicking himself in the arse, check.

The only thing missing was 'sitting as far away from her as physically possible'. He had, in fact, taken a seat just on the other side of Ron from her, but she doubted it had been by choice. He had come down for breakfast so late that there had been no place else to sit.

Hermione curled her lip at Harry, torn between laughing at him and hexing him. He always got this way after they did anything remotely sexual-- embarrassed and fidgety and afraid to look her in the eye. It had only happened about a handful of times. Eleven, actually, though they had only truly shagged five, including last night. Each time it was

the same. He avoided her like the plague for at least three days and looked at the floor whenever he talked to her after that for close to a week.

God, he was such a girl sometimes it was ridiculous.

She still giggled whenever she thought about the first time, how random it had been. They had been in the Gryffindor common room alone. It had been quite late, and they had had more Butterbeer than was probably good for them. He had been telling her something Trelawney had said in Divinations, probably her latest prediction of his death, then suddenly he was on top of her.

When he had been able to talk to her again (about four days later), he had given her the prepared 'we're really just friends' speech, followed by the equally prepared 'this can't happen again' speech. The discomfort and embarrassment coming off him in waves had been so sweet it had almost been amusing. She had not bothered to disagree with him on whether or not it would happen again, because she knew the truth. Once you opened a can of worms of that sort, it was extremely difficult to put the lid back on it.

About a month later, when she had found herself pinned to a wall in the Charms Corridor with his tongue in her mouth, she had not really been surprised (it had been bound to happen sooner or later), nor had she complained. Harry was sweet and kind and brave, and he was definitely something to look at.

She thought it was strange, now, how what she had once thought was love had dwindled away to little more than physical attraction. She had most certainly been in love, but not with Harry, not really. She had been in love with the *idea* of Harry.

She had been in love with the Boy Who Lived.

Her reverie was cut short by Mrs. Weasley, who was herding everyone out of the room. Hermione looked over at Harry once more, and caught his eye briefly. He held it for a split second, then blushed and retreated behind a scone.

Oh, really! If I didn't know better, I would think he really is a girl. She thought. *And why the Hell is Malfoy looking at me like that?*

::

Draco watched the silent exchange between Potter and Granger with a bemused expression. He had not been expecting this at all. Granger was regarding Potter openly and without embarrassment, with a slight curl to her lip that said she found the Git Who Lived somewhat amusing. Potter, on the other hand, was a bit twitchy. He seemed very interested in his lap, and in the occasion he did look up, he would try to block Granger from his line of sight with a breakfast pastry. Just as Granger turned to leave the room, Draco had a realization that almost caused him to burst out laughing.

Harry Potter was acting like a bloody girl.

Draco sighed, and sipped at his coffee. If Potter and Granger wanted to bugger each other senseless, it was not his business. He really didn't care where Potter put his wand, as long as he didn't have to see it. He shook his head, trying to dislodge the thought. It would only put him off his meals for the next two weeks.

Besides, he had more important things to worry about, like Death Eaters, or his father, or Voldemort, or whatever Dumbledore was about to bother him with.

It was, however, no use. Images of Potter buried to the hilt in the Mudblood had kept him awake. They had plagued his dreams once he had fallen asleep, and they were continuing to plague him as he sat at the breakfast table. He had not found the display particularly exciting--quite the opposite, but for some reason, he had been unable to stop thinking about it. He was *still* unable to stop thinking about it, and he could not, for the life of him, imagine why.

Disgusting sight, really. The only person Draco had less desire to see naked was the Weasel. Or Crabbe and Goyle, but that went without saying.

Draco sipped his coffee, and took a good look at Potter over the rim of his cup. His lithe frame was swimming in a faded, over-large T-shirt and similarly faded, over-large jeans. He had finally come out from behind the safety of his formidable scone, now that Granger was gone, and was regarding Dumbledore with questioning eyes.

At that moment, Draco decided that the Boy Who Lived was a fraud.

He hid who he was from everyone. He hid the fact that he was the Boy Who Lived under his boring, bland exterior. He hid his scar under that repulsive mop of hair. He hid his wit behind Granger and his strength behind the Weasel. He hid from everyone under that sodding Invisibility Cloak, doing whatever the Hell he wanted, likely with Dumbledore's approval.

He hid that remarkable body underneath yards of baggy, second-hand clothes.

Draco twitched.

Much like he hid his eyes behind those dreadfully tacky glasses.

Draco had really only seen Harry without his glasses once, during a physical tussle on the Quidditch pitch. He had socked Harry in the jaw, and those atrocious glasses had gone flying. After Hooch and McGonagall had pulled everyone apart, he had gotten a proper look at Harry's bright green eyes, without the shroud of glass and black plastic, and he had seen them for what they really were.

Startling.

Draco dropped his coffee cup, and it shattered loudly on the table.

::

Crash

Harry jerked his head towards Malfoy, wondering what the blond was on about. Malfoy was silent, but he looked like he had just been struck by lightning. Dumbledore pulled out his wand and repaired the cup without even batting an eyelash, without even really looking in Malfoy's direction.

Dumbledore might have taken Malfoy tossing crockery about in stride, but Harry was intrigued. He watched Malfoy as he took up the repaired cup, refilled it, and returned to the table. He continued to watch as

Draco took two or three sips of coffee, but Malfoy gave no indication he felt Harry's eyes. Harry opened his mouth to say something, but Malfoy, noticing this, cut him off with a stare so fierce that Harry suddenly decided that Dumbledore was a good deal more interesting.

Harry stared at Dumbledore morosely, and began to once again question the existence of God. Dumbledore wanting to talk to him alone was never a good thing. Every time he and Dumbledore had a private chat, he ended up a part of something he would normally want nothing to do with.

If Dumbledore announced that Voldemort had new plans to kill him, Harry was going to disembowel himself with the margarine knife, and save the Dark Lord the trouble.

"Fix yourself a plate," Dumbledore instructed. "Go on, then. It's not like I have never seen you eat."

Harry obliged, piling kippers, eggs, and fried potatoes onto his plate, next to the half-eaten scone. He felt a bit self-conscious as he tucked in. Malfoy seemed to be breakfasting on just a cup of coffee, but Dumbledore was shovelling food into his mouth, so he decided to follow suit.

"Mister Potter," Dumbledore began, around a mouthful of fried potatoes. "I trust you have been informed that this house now belongs to you?"

"Yes, sir," Harry said.

"Sirius also left you most of his vault at Gringotts," Dumbledore said. "He left a third of his money to Remus Lupin. The rest, my boy, is yours."

"That was very nice of him," Harry said slowly. He didn't want any of it. He wanted Sirius back.

"Yes, it was, though I'll admit, I am not surprised he left it to you. Sirius loved you more than you will ever know," Dumbledore said. He looked at Harry sadly, then smiled, wanting to end on a cheerful note. "Well, he made you a very rich man. You've inherited most of the Black family fortune."

Malfoy choked, coffee coming out of his nose.

"Yes, Mister Malfoy, it is a rather large chunk of change," Dumbledore said, handing Malfoy a napkin.

"Well, I suppose twelve years in Azkaban put a crimp in his spending habits," Draco said dryly.

Harry shot him a murderous look.

"Well, as I said, I have much to do, and I fear I did not come here to discuss Mister Potter's financial status," Dumbledore said, gesturing at Malfoy with his fork. The bit of kipper on the end dangled precariously. "Mister Malfoy."

"Yes."

"It would seem your suspicions about your mother's death are correct," The Headmaster said. "At least, as far as I can tell."

"Death Eaters," Draco said flatly. He was no longer looking at Dumbledore, but off behind his right shoulder.

Harry's mouth dropped open, and a bit of egg fell back onto his plate. Perhaps he had not heard Malfoy correctly.

"Indeed," Dumbledore said, this time handing Harry a napkin. "That much I know for sure."

"And they were sent by my father," Draco said, just as flatly.

Harry choked on his coffee. He really must not have heard Malfoy right. Malfoy's Death Eater father sent Death Eaters to kill his Death Eater wife?

That was lunacy.

"That is the part I cannot be sure of yet," Dumbledore admitted. "My spies cannot pump for too much information at once, or people would start to ask questions. But, from what I have heard so far, they were *most likely* sent by your father."

Malfoy turned his attention from the wall behind Dumbledore to the contents of his coffee cup. He did not speak. He did not even appear to be breathing.

"I have counselled a few people through similar situations," Dumbledore said gently. "That being said, I will not pretend to understand what you are feeling."

"Well," Draco said snidely, more to his coffee than to Dumbledore, "this only affects everything I was raised to believe in."

Harry looked at Malfoy in complete and utter shock, the same complete and utter shock he had experience when Malfoy had been polite to Mrs. Weasley. This was not the Malfoy he knew and disliked. He had never seen the drawling, sarcastic self-important bastard like this.

Melancholy.

Resigned.

Defeated.

"Your father--" Dumbledore started.

"He is not my father. I want nothing more to do with him," Draco said, his tone quiet, but harsh. "He took my mother from me. He can rot in Azkaban for all I care."

Dumbledore smiled softly, with what Harry thought was relief. Then, peering at Malfoy intently, Dumbledore's expression turned to thinly-veiled concern.

"If you are saying what I think you are saying, you must realize you life is in grave danger," Dumbledore said.

"Well, nothing new there, then," Draco said bitterly. "My father has been periodically threatening my life since I started at Hogwarts."

"Why is that, Mister Malfoy?" Dumbledore raised an eyebrow, but he sounded like he already knew.

"Because, despite my father's repeated requests, I never managed to kill Potter," Draco said quietly. "As a matter of fact, he has accused me of helping Potter stay alive, deliberately to annoy him, on several occasions."

"Your father wanted you kill me?" Harry asked in disbelief.

Malfoy had always hated him, but Harry had always figured it was because he had refused his friendship on the train. It had never occurred to him that Malfoy had been tasked with killing him, or that Draco would want to kill him.

"He wanted me to make friends with you at first. He figured Voldemort would be right pleased with him if I convinced to you join our -- *his* side," Draco said. "But, I put you off me right after I opened my mouth, and once you took up with Granger and the Weasel, there was no hope of talking you into joining up with Voldemort." Draco sighed heavily. "So yes, he wanted me to kill you."

"Kill me how?" Harry asked, still incredulous.

"Merlin's Balls, Potter! Don't be any thicker than you have to be," Draco snapped. "My father is a Death Eater, for fuck's sake. I could cast *Avada Kedavra* before I ever left for Hogwarts."

"Didn't work for Voldemort," Harry said flippantly. "Why would it work for you?"

"Trust me Potter, if I had really wanted you dead, I would have managed it somehow," Draco said caustically. "Your mother's grace would not have protected you too well if I had, say, pushed you out of the Owlery."

Dumbledore cleared his throat loudly.

"Mister Malfoy, I assume you are no longer of the mind to kill Mister Potter?" Dumbledore asked.

"Don't see the point any more, really," Draco said.

"Oh no?" Dumbledore asked, somewhat bemused.

"Well, assuming I decide I no longer fancy the life my murdering father chose for me, I would, unfortunately, be on Potter's side," Draco said. He curled his lip and wrinkled his nose like he smelled something unpleasant.

It was Harry's turn to drop his coffee cup and look like he had just been struck by lightning.

Malfoy could not have said what Harry thought he had said. Malfoy wasn't going to be a Death Eater? He wasn't going to follow in his father's pompous, murdering footsteps? He was going to join up with Harry and Dumbledore and the Order? He was going to be a decent human being?

Well, Harry wasn't ready to go that far quite yet.

Once again, shattering crockery did not alarm Dumbledore at all. He repaired Harry's cup and gestured for Malfoy to continue.

"Everyone would be most wroth with me if I did away with their Special Little Hero," Draco said flatly. "So no, I will not be killing Potter." He sipped his coffee. "Unless he does something purposely to vex me, he added quietly.

"Mister Malfoy," Dumbledore warned.

"Even if he does something purposely to vex me," Draco grumbled.

"Mister Malfoy?" Dumbledore said again. This time his tone was more leading than warning.

"Yeah, all right," Draco mumbled. "I'll even try and keep him alive."

The next noise to disrupt their conversation was a loud bump as Harry slid out of his chair.

He had fainted dead away.

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"What's this, then?" Hermione asked, holding up *Wandless Magic: Fact or Fiction?*.

"Oh, Harry was reading it yesterday." Ron said.

Hermione bit her lip, remembering what she had said to Harry about him reading. She dropped the book back on the coffee table, and sat down on the couch next to Ron.

"Codswallop, if you ask me," Ron commented. He fiddled nervously with a Chocolate Frog package.

"You don't think it is possible, then?" She asked, smiling at him. Ron was more pragmatic than people gave him credit for.

"Complete load of hogwash," Ron said. "At least, I've never seen it done." He handed the frog to Hermione, and looked at the card.

"Wicked! Its Agrippa. I've been wanting him for ages."

Hermione smiled again, and popped the frog in her mouth. Ron leaned forward to drop the candy wrappers on the table, scooting closer to Hermione in the process.

"If it is possible, Harry could probably do it," Hermione said.

"*If* it was possible, then of course *he* would be able to," Ron griped.

"Harry can bloody do everything."

Hermione's heart went out to Ron. Being the youngest of five brothers, she knew Ron often felt overlooked. Then he had went and made friends with Harry Potter, and was relegated to Harry's faithful sidekick by the end of their first week at Hogwarts. Ron had probably not known what being friends with Harry would mean when he befriended him on the train, and once he figured it out, he and Harry had cared about each other too much for anything to be done about it.

Ron had just tried to learn to be happy as the youngest of five brothers and 'Harry Potter's friend Ron'. He had tried to learn to be happy without any distinguishing characteristics of his own.

That was probably why he had signed up for Quidditch in the first place, why he still prattled on about the one time he stopped the Quaffle. It had been one of the rare occasions where people paid any attention to Ron without Harry doing something to warrant it for him, like the praise he had received for beating McGonagall's chess set.

That also was probably why Ron provoked Malfoy at every opportunity. Popular opinion was that Harry hated Malfoy, but Hermione knew the truth. Harry honestly did not give a whit about Draco either way, and would often walk away from potential altercations, because he really just couldn't be bothered. Ron would never pass up an opportunity to hex Malfoy, or punch him in his pointy, sneering face, because it drew attention to him. Ron looked like the brave one, because the Boy Who

Lived had already walked away. Even if he was dragged to McGonagall's office by the scruff of his neck and handed a week's worth of detention, it was worth it to Ron, because all of Gryffindor House would be cheering him as he went.

Ron had gone quiet, and he mind drifted in the silence. She remembered back to the beginning of last year, when Ron had asked her out. She had told him no. She had not told him that it was because she wanted to be with Harry, but by the look on his face, it was plain he had known.

Hermione looked over at Ron, and was struck with a sudden burst of clarity. What an idiot she had been. She scooted a bit closer to him, and leaned her head on his shoulder.

::

"Oh, bugger," Draco drawled. "I just told you I wouldn't kill him, then I go and do it right off."

"No, no, Mister Malfoy, he is quite alive," Dumbledore said, peering over the table at Potter. "He's only fainted. You probably gave him quite a start."

"Here I was thinking we could be friends, and he starts acting like I'm a Dementor," Draco quipped.

He moved to stand over Potter and nudged him with his toe. Potter did not respond, and Draco clucked his tongue at him. Since Dumbledore seemed to be in no hurry to help, Draco grasped Potter under the arms and hauled him to his feet. For all that muscle Potter had been hiding, he was deceptively light. He dumped him unceremoniously into his chair, and started groping for his wand.

"*Enervate*," Dumbledore said, before Draco had even located his wand. Draco was starting to think Dumbledore's wand was actually part of his hand.

"What happened?" Harry asked groggily.

"Some hero of men you are," Draco drawled. "I tell you I won't try to

kill you, and you start fainting all over the place."

"Shut up," Harry snapped. "I did not faint."

"Oh no? Maybe your narcoleptic, then," Draco chuckled. "I had a cousin like that once, dropping off to sleep at the most inopportune times. Breakfast, dinner parties, Death Eater meetings."

"Mister Malfoy," Dumbledore said.

"I heard he once nodded off while shagging his wife--"

"Mister Malfoy!" Dumbledore cut in.

Draco quieted, but grinned at Harry pointedly.

Potter flushed bright red, then flashed Draco a look that would have given a rampaging dragon pause.

"Well, Mister Potter, it would seem you have a new ally," Dumbledore said.

Potter wrinkled his nose and made a non-committal noise. Draco squawked and feigned hurt when Harry did not jump for joy.

"Do not look so put-upon, Mister Potter," Dumbledore chided. "I dare say that together, Mister Malfoy and yourself could give Voldemort something to worry about."

"Come again?" Draco sputtered.

He had agreed he would not kill Potter. He had even agreed he would try to keep him alive. He did not, however, recall that he had agreed to have one off with the Dark Lord, himself.

"Mister Malfoy, you and Mister Potter are the strongest wizards to come through Hogwarts since a young man named Tom Riddle," Dumbledore said, gesturing to both of them. The Headmaster almost sounded cheerful. "Together, you could manage some impressive things."

Potter had taken on that struck-by-lightning face again. Draco looked like he was being lead to his execution.

"I suggest you to take this time before school starts to get to know each other a little better," Dumbledore started. "If you fail at a reasonable attempt to be friends, at least try and learn from each other."

Now, Draco looked thunderstruck, and Potter looked like he had just been given a death sentence.

"Mister Malfoy, given your upbringing, I am sure you know a thing or two you should not," Dumbledore mused. His eyes were twinkling alarmingly.

"Yeah," Draco said, after a pause.

"While it pains me to say it, I think it is a shame that Mister Potter does not," Dumbledore said. The Headmaster had gone sly, and Potter looked like he found it disquieting. "Considering what he will have to face, in the end."

Draco's eyes bulged. "Are you suggesting --"

"I am *suggesting* nothing," Dumbledore said. He twiddled his thumbs and looked up at the ceiling. "I am simply waffling on to myself, as I am prone to do."

Dumbledore gave Draco a considering look, then rose.

"On that cheerful note, I must leave you," He said. "I make no promises, but I am hoping to be back before the week is out."

With that, he left, leaving Draco and Harry alone.

"What was he on about, then?" Harry asked. "That last bit?"

Draco cracked a thin smile.

"That lunatic old codger just asked me to teach you Dark Magic."

V

A Ridiculous Arrangement

Evidently, Dumbledore had spoken to Mrs Weasley, and his orders had been very specific. Starting sometime the next day -- as soon as Mrs

Weasley could manage it, Harry and Draco were to be left alone. Aside from mealtimes, an hour in the middle of the day and an hour before bed, Harry and Draco were to spend time with only each other, and everyone else was to steer clear of them.

Dumbledore had not explained why, and Mrs Weasley had not asked. Dumbledore had given her an order, and even if she thought he was having one of his mad fancies, she was not about to argue with Albus Dumbledore. Mrs Weasley did not think that Harry and Draco would ever become proper friends, not like Harry and her son were, but regardless, Dumbledore had given her an order, and that was enough for her.

Which was why, on Tuesday, after Dumbledore left, Mrs Weasley spent the majority of the day cleaning out a medium-sized, unused parlour at the rear of the house. It was also why she moved most of the books from the sitting room in there, as well as the extra wizarding chess set and anything else she thought Harry and Draco might find amusing.

It was also why, on Wednesday afternoon, Mr Weasley stopped by Grimmauld Place on his lunch break, and why thumps and bangs and the sounds of heavy things being moved about upstairs could be heard by the people downstairs in the sitting room. Draco had joked (much to Ron and Ginny's disgust), that perhaps Mr Weasley had come home to have a quick one off with his wife. When Mrs Weasley finally came downstairs, she was a bit sweaty and breathless and quite dishevelled, and Harry had been almost inclined to agree with Draco.

What he (or Draco) had not known, was that Mrs Weasley had just moved out of the master bedroom at the end of the hall. When Dumbledore had said Harry and Draco were to spend all their free time together, Mrs Weasley went with the assumption that Dumbledore had meant *all* their free time. So, she and Mr Weasley had moved Harry's and Draco's things into the master bedroom, and Mrs Weasley had taken Draco's bedroom for herself.

When Mrs Weasley made the announcement on Wednesday, precisely two hours after dinner, Ron, Ginny and Hermione laughed themselves breathless and crying at Harry's predicament (they did not seem overly concerned about Draco's feelings on the subject).

Harry and Draco, on the other hand, both went pale and morose like they were headed to Azkaban for the Dementor's Kiss.

Not to be dissuaded by their unhappy faces and pleas for clemency, or Draco's outright demands that Dumbledore be summoned so he could explain himself, Mrs Weasley lead them both to the medium-sized, unused parlour at the back of the house and pushed them through the door.

"Now you two behave yourselves, and try to get on like Dumbledore wants you to," Mrs Weasley said. Despite her chipper tone, she looked a bit dubious.

"We have to stay in here?" Harry asked.

"No, not specifically," Mrs Weasley replied.

Harry looked melancholy and furious at the same time.

"It's your house, Harry. You can go wherever you want," Mrs Weasley soothed. "As long as Draco is with you," she added.

"Then what's with this room, then?" Draco asked. He also looked furious, but seemed more appalled than melancholy.

"This is your sitting room," she said, countering Draco's murderous glare with a sweet smile. "This way, no one will bother you."

"Are you locking us in, then?" Harry asked.

"Of course not," Mrs Weasley said. "I trust that you two will do as Dumbledore asks of you, without me having to force you like errant children."

Mrs Weasley raised a daring eyebrow. She had had enough errant children to last her a lifetime. After Fred and George, these two shouldn't be too hard.

"Yes, Mrs Weasley," Harry mumbled. Draco pulled a face, but nodded.

"Oh, good, then," Mrs Weasley said. "When you're ready for bed, just go on upstairs. You'll both find all your things in the bedroom at the end of the hall."

"I don't believe this!" Draco spat, as soon as the door was closed. "The next time I see Dumbledore, I am going to hex him into next year!"

Harry said nothing. He slumped down into a chair.

"Absolutely ridiculous!" Draco raved. He picked up a vase on a nearby table and smashed it against the wall. "I said I wouldn't try to kill you! I said I would try to keep you alive! I never bloody said he could fucking marry me off to you!"

Still, Harry said nothing. He repaired the vase and floated it back to the table.

"He has lost his sodding mind!" Draco went on. He flushed a rather unattractive shade of magenta. "He is a complete, utter lunatic! That man is stark, barking mad!"

"Merlin's balls, this sucks! I am stuck with you every waking hour for the rest of my bloody summer!"

Draco snarled, and a crystal ashtray hit the floor with a surprisingly delicate tinkle.

Again, Harry said nothing.

"And what the shit are you being so quiet for?" Draco demanded.

"Just waiting for you to finish," Harry replied, repairing the ashtray. "You're done, are you?"

"I most certainly am not!" Draco shouted.

"Don't let me stop you," Harry said, making a circular motion with his hand. "Carry on, then." He started floating the ashtray back to where it had come from, but after considering Draco for a moment, he moved it a table out of his reach.

Draco was about to tell Harry he did not appreciate being cheeked in his current mood, but stopped as he watched Harry moved the ashtray about.

"Do that again," Draco said.

"Do what?" Harry asked innocently.

"That," Draco said, pointing at him.

"I can't do it again, it's already fixed," Harry said flatly. Inside, he bit down on a smile.

In response, Draco pulled out his wand and pointed it to the ashtray. It whizzed quickly past Harry. Once it was in Draco's hand, he smashed it violently on the floor.

"Well, go on," Draco said. "Just like you did it before."

"*Reparo*," Harry said. His finger twitched, and the ashtray fitted itself back together. "*Wingardium Leviosa*." He lifted his hand up from the armrest slightly, and trailed a finger through the air towards the table. The ashtray obliged him immediately.

"I don't believe it," Draco gasped.

"Don't believe what?" Harry asked, unruffled.

"Where is your wand?" Draco demanded.

"In the kitchen," Harry said, shrugging. "I took it out to fix the *Furnunculus* Ginny put on Ron when he took the last treacle tart, and I left it on the table."

"Wandless magic," Draco muttered. "I don't fucking believe it!"

::

"You think they're all right?" Ron asked.

Ron had been pacing the length of the sitting room for the last hour. When his mother had first said that Harry and Draco were to spend all their time together, he had found it quite funny. Harry had looked so stricken and Draco had been so outraged there had really been nothing anyone could do but laugh.

Now, the reality of the situation had taken a hold of Ron, and his mirth had given over to worry, especially once the yelling had started. There had been a good deal of yelling, and things had been broken.

"I am sure they are fine," Hermione said lightly, looking up from her book. "There hasn't been any yelling in nearly a half-hour."

Ron paused to frown at Hermione, then continued to pace.

"They haven't broken anything in a bit, either," Hermione offered.

"There is probably nothing left to break," Ron said bitterly. He reached the end of the room, turned on his heel, and started towards the other side. "All this quiet has got me more worried than the yelling, to tell you the truth."

"Maybe they are talking," Hermione said.

"What the bloody, bugging Hell would Harry and the Ferret be talking about?" Ron demanded. "They *have* nothing to talk about."

He paced.

"Come sit down," she said. "You're making me fidgety."

"I can't sit!" Ron snapped. "Harry's locked in a room with a Death Eater!"

"He's not locked in," Hermione said. She closed her book and set it aside. She could not read with Ron nattering on. "And Draco is not a Death Eater."

"Did you just call him *Draco*?" Ron shouted.

"It's his name, isn't it?" Hermione asked.

Ron snorted.

"Fine. *Malfoy* is not a Death Eater," Hermione said testily. Ron's concern was palpable, but as far as she could tell it was unfounded. "Professor Dumbledore would not have him here if he was."

"His father is a Death Eater!" Ron said.

"That doesn't make him one," Hermione replied. "Besides, his father is in Azkaban."

"That doesn't mean anything, Hermione, not any more," Ron complained, waving his arms about. "Didn't you hear what my dad said the other day, about someone sneaking in to break people out?"

"It didn't work," Hermione said.

"But it could have!" Ron insisted.

"But it didn't," Hermione sighed. "People do not just walk out of Azkaban."

"Sirius did," Ron said. He narrowed his eyes, daring her to argue her way out of that one.

"That was different," Hermione argued. "Completely different."

"How!" Ron said. "He still got out! I am not saying that he shouldn't have, but he did, and that means it can be done."

"I'm telling you, that was different," Hermione said. "Sirius was innocent."

"What's that got to do with anything?" Ron demanded. He had stopped pacing, and was now shuffling about on his feet in one place.

"Weren't you listening when he explained it all?" Hermione asked. "The Dementors make people crazy, make them give up. But they did not have the same affect on him, because he was innocent. His innocence is what kept him sane. His innocence is what saved his soul."

"I'd wager the Dementors don't affect the Ferret's father," Ron said bitterly.

"Why not?" Hermione asked. "Mister Malfoy is far from innocent."

"No, he's guilty as fuck," Ron said. "But I highly doubt he has a soul."

"Wandless magic," Draco said again, furiously. "Unbelievable."

Harry looked at Draco nervously. He had been faffing about with the wandless magic on purpose, hoping it would get Draco's attention. He had figured if Draco caught him at it, he would stop his destructive rant and insist Harry teach him immediately. However, it looked more like Draco wanted to kill him for having the temerity to be able to do it.

"You can do it," Harry said quietly.

Draco's head snapped up, and he glared at Harry like he thought he was mocking him. His eyes flashed dangerously, from their usual grey to a silver that almost glowed.

"I most certainly cannot," Draco spat. "Believe me, I have tried."

"You haven't tried properly, then," Harry said.

Draco's eyes flashed again, and a voice in the back of Harry's brain informed him they were quite striking.

"What do you mean?" Draco demanded. "My father has been trying to beat some wandless magic out of me for years!"

"I tell you, you can do it," Harry insisted. "Wandless magic isn't like being a Parselmouth or a Seer. It's not a talent, or a strange power."

"Then why can't everyone do it?" Draco asked, incredulous.

"In theory, everyone *can* do it," Harry said. Good God, he sounded like Hermione. "It's just that not everyone is strong enough."

Draco chewed at his lower lip thoughtfully. He seemed to have calmed a bit. Harry thought he might be warming up to the idea that he could do it.

"The magic is in the wizard, not the wand, you know that," Harry went on. "Wizards use wands because it channels the magic for them. It makes it easier to control. But if you are strong enough, you can do it without it."

"I told you, I've tried," Draco said, going stubborn again.

"And I told you, you haven't tried properly," Harry insisted, pitting his own stubbornness against Draco's.

"Where did you learn it?" Draco asked suddenly. "That book?"

"Which book?" Harry asked. "The book in the sitting room?"

"That's the one," Draco said.

"No," Harry said, shaking his head. "That book is useless."

"Dumbledore?" Draco asked. His grey eyes were now wide with curiosity.

"No, though I figure he can do it," Harry said, shrugging. "Sirius taught me."

"Sirius Black?" Draco asked, clearly shocked. "I never would have figured."

"He and my dad worked it out between them," Harry said. "He said neither of them should have been able to do it, because they weren't quite strong enough. Almost, but not quite."

"How did he manage it?" Draco asked.

"He told he never did manage it, until after he became an Animagus," Harry replied. "Animagi transform without a wand, so that gave him something to work off of."

"Can all Animagi do it, then?" Draco asked.

"No. He said Wormtail never could do it, even after, because he was nowhere near strong enough," Harry explained. "Sirius and my dad could, after they became Animagi, because they were almost strong enough to begin with. Becoming Animagi is what gave them the extra push,"

Draco sat down on a couch across from Harry, consumed with brooding silence. The fact that Harry could do another thing he could not was obviously eating him alive. Harry watched as emotions warred across Draco's face. He was plainly dying to learn how, but the proud, insufferable part of him was not about to ask Harry sodding Potter how

to do anything.

"You are certainly strong enough," Harry prodded gently. Despite himself, he found Draco's self-depreciation somewhat moving. It made him seem almost human.

Draco made no outward acknowledgement of the compliment, other than a brief flicker of his eyes. Harry continued to watch him, thinking that something was different about him. After studying Draco for a moment, he realized it was his hair. He had neglected to glue it to his head in its usual fashion. It was long, about to his chin, and hanging loose, framing his pale face.

"Well, Sirius is dead," Draco said suddenly. He took a deep breath, and looked like he was about to do something he would sorely regret. "You think you could help me sort it out?"

"If you insist," Harry quipped, moving to sit with Draco on the couch. With a flick of his wrist, he floated the ashtray over to them.

"Now, watch," Harry said, and the lesson began.

::

Dumbledore had to admit, when Severus Snape's head appeared in the fireplace of his home, he was not the least bit surprised.

"Severus," Dumbledore said warmly. "Won't you come all the way in?"

"I fear I can't, Headmaster," Snape said shortly. "I've some place to be, in a manner of minutes."

"Pity," Dumbledore said. "Something I can help you with, then?"

"Perhaps," Snape said. "I put my head over at Potter's place to have a word with Draco, and that Weasley woman told me the funniest thing."

"Did she now?" Dumbledore replied airily. He had never known Severus Snape to have a sense of humour. "Nice woman, that Mrs Weasley."

"If you say so," Snape said. "My point is, she told me Draco was closeted with Potter, on *your* orders, and was not to be disturbed."

Dumbledore paused thoughtfully. "Now that you mention it, I do recall telling her something like that."

"To what point and purpose?" Snape asked. "I can only assume that Draco is not in a good place, emotionally. Inflicting him with Potter will only make it worse."

"Severus, I am not in the habit of explaining my every whim, and I do not intend to start now," Dumbledore said. "If I explained every thought I had to everyone who wished me to, I would to a great deal of talking and very little Headmastering."

"I understand that," Snape said. "It's just that he detests Potter, so."

"He detests Potter, or you detest Potter?" Dumbledore inquired.

Snape sighed wearily. Arguing with Albus Dumbledore was an exercise in futility. He would simply talk in circles until his opponent grew dizzy and gave up.

"I had my reasons, Severus, and I stand by them," Dumbledore went on, opening his hands wide.

"What are you hoping for?" Snape asked. "That they will put everything aside and become friends?"

"I won't hold my breath for miracles," Dumbledore said brightly. "At the very least, I am hoping they can learn to work together."

"Is that necessary, you think?" Snape asked.

"Quite," Dumbledore said. "Mister Potter has a good deal ahead of him. I think it is only fair he have some help."

"Draco?" Snape sputtered. "You think Draco will fight for Potter? Against Voldemort?"

"I have every reason to think so," Dumbledore said. He was nearly smug. "As a matter of fact, he has already agreed."

Snape's eyes went wide, and his eyebrows threatened to invade his

hairline. Yet, he knew Dumbledore was telling him the truth, the old man's self-satisfied smile was unmistakable.

"This puts Mister Malfoy in danger," Snape said finally.

"Much as his mother did, Mister Malfoy put himself in danger, the day he sent me that owl," Dumbledore replied. "And as with his mother, I dare say when Lucius gets wind of it, he will be severely displeased."

"Yet, you put him in more danger," Snape muttered.

"It cannot be helped," Dumbledore said. "War is coming."

"I agree, Headmaster, but it is Potter's war," Snape said. "Not Draco's."

"It is everyone's war," Dumbledore corrected. "And in light of that, I will do what I must."

Snape's disembodied head sighed.

"Have you eaten, Severus?" Dumbledore asked, cheerful again. "Would you like a biscuit to take with you?"

"No thank you, Headmaster," Snape replied. "The Death Eaters will be serving tea."

::

For Draco, it was almost as if Christmas had come early. Not only could he do wandless magic, but according to Potter, he was doing a reasonable job for his first go at it. He and Potter were now facing each other on opposite ends of the couch, moving the ashtray back and forth between them.

"So tell me about you and Granger," Draco said conversationally. He pointed at the ashtray, and it slid about two inches towards Potter.

"There is nothing to tell," Harry said shortly. Draco pointed at the ashtray again. It quivered, but did not move.

"Don't give me that rot, Potter," Draco drawled. The ashtray twitched, then moved about an inch. "You think I don't know what someone looks like when they just got shagged?"

Never mind that I saw you.

"We weren't doing anything," Harry insisted. The ashtray abruptly slid the rest of the way to Harry, bumping into his leg. "*Wingardium Leviosa*" Harry said. The ashtray floated back over to Draco.

"Pillock," Draco snapped. After two hours, he had finally gotten the ashtray to move, but he had yet to make it fly. "Don't show off."

"I'm not showing off," Harry said irritably. "I'm teaching."

"Yeah, all right," Draco snorted. The ashtray moved about four inches, and Draco was quite sure it had left the cushion. "So, you were saying about Granger--"

"I was saying nothing happened," Harry said stubbornly. The ashtray hopped over to him, and he sent it back so violently it landed in Draco's lap.

"That's a fat lie and you know it," Draco said, almost cheerfully.

Draco looked up, taking in Potter's face, and decided Potter was a dreadful fibber. Aside from how everything he thought and felt was written all over his face in letters six inches tall, when he told an outright lie, the left side of his mouth twitched.

"Why are you so sure about that?" Harry asked.

Draco moved his hand slightly, and the ashtray made it to Potter in two distinct hops. Draco looked immensely pleased, and almost smiled from pure glee before he caught himself and bit it back.

"Because you came out of there absolutely reeking of sex," Draco said. "Besides, I saw you."

"What!"

The ashtray careened past Draco's head and smashed against the wall.

Bloody Hell! Draco thought. *What did I go and say that for? Now he*

knows I saw him naked! His trolleys will be in a bunch for a week.

"Nothing," Draco said suddenly. He twisted around in his chair, mainly to get away from Potter's accusing eyes, and attempted to repair the ashtray without his wand. The pieces came together, held true for a moment, then fell apart again.

"Bollocks, Malfoy," Harry growled. "What do you mean you saw me?"

"Don't get all tetchy," Draco snapped. Potter's eyes were very big, and so dark they were almost black. Not that Draco blamed him, really, but he didn't appreciate his tone. "I was trying to get back to my room, and I opened the wrong door."

"And you stood there and watched?" Harry asked.

"Good God, no!" Draco lied, shivering in disgust for effect.

Potter was already wroth enough, he was not about to admit he had hung around until the bitter end. He didn't really understand why, but something about Potter being naked had been perversely fascinating. Glancing up at Potter, he stood by his decision not to mention it, as Potter had never looked so murderous in all his short life.

"Believe me, seeing you on top of the Mudblood was not exactly what I needed right before bed," Draco drawled. *Really, it hadn't been.* He had been tortured with that vision half the night.

"Don't call her that," Harry shouted, his tone warning.

"Oh, how sweet," Draco teased. "Defending your little girlfriend."

"She is not my girlfriend," Harry said.

"Oh my," Draco gasped in mock surprise. "Harry Potter, shagging for sport. Who'd have thought?"

"Sod off, Malfoy," Harry snapped. "You're a fine one to talk."

"I never said I don't shag for sport," Draco replied. Truth be told, that is all he ever shagged for. "But I am not you," he added, tapping Potter on the forehead.

Draco snatched his hand back quickly. *Did I just touch Potter?* He

suddenly had a strong urge to do it again, and maybe give that insufferable scar a poke.

"What's that got to do with anything?" Harry demanded.

"People expect that kind of behaviour from me," Draco pointed out, as if it was obvious.

Harry's murderous, indignant face crumpled, and he suddenly looked like he was about to weep.

"Yeah, all right. I'm a bastard," Harry said, after a pause. "Satisfied?"

Not particularly. Draco thought. "Why would I be?" He asked, arching an eyebrow. "Are you saying I'm a bastard?"

"I've always said you were a bastard," Harry said flatly.

::

Harry stormed from the room with little regard to Dumbledore's orders. He knew the Headmaster wanted him to spend all his free time with Draco, but Harry was positive if he did not get away from him, he was going to pummel his pale, sneering face in.

Arrogant, sodding, self-important bastard! Harry thought angrily.

"*Accio Wand,*" He grumbled as he reached the stairs. He held out his hand, and a moment later, his wand sailed out of the kitchen, smacking into his palm.

He looked at his wand for a moment, taken aback by his own arrogance.

Ever since he had gotten a reasonable handle on wandless magic, his original, ever-present concern about the whereabouts of his wand had lessened. Six months ago, he would not have gone from his bedroom to the bathroom without his wand. Today, he had spent two hours alone in a room with Draco Malfoy while his wand was sitting idle on the kitchen table.

Absolute foolishness.

If the argument had progressed, and things had come down to a duel, Draco would have made short work of him. Harry had no problem with performing small magics without his wand, but anything difficult or intricate was hit or miss, because he never had time to practice. He did not fiddle with wandless magic at school, because if someone saw it, he would never hear the end of it.

It would just be something else for everyone to gawk at him for, something else that would make his schoolmates point and stare, something else for Colin Creevey to take a bloody picture of.

Gripping his wand, Harry headed up the stairs. His anger was ebbing now, slowly fading away to something along the lines of righteous indignation. The idea that Malfoy had seen him with Hermione was mortifying beyond words. It was worse, even, than if Ron had walked in on them.

At this point, he would have rather Mrs Weasley walked in on them.

What right did Malfoy have, anyway, teasing him about it? It was not like Malfoy had room to talk. Far from it. Malfoy had shagged practically every girl at Hogwarts, and rumour had it he had shagged a handful of guys while he was at it. There was also speculation he had had one off with a teacher, though the jury was still out on whether it was Sinistra or Trelawney.

Then, Malfoy had gone and made him feel like an asshole for no reason-- another place where the blond pillock was a fine one to talk. For all the people he had been shagging, there had never been any evidence of Malfoy being in anything that would resemble a decent relationship. Malfoy wouldn't know a decent relationship if it danced naked in front of him, so what did he care if Hermione was not Harry's girlfriend?

He and Hermione didn't like each other like that. Well, Harry did not like Hermione like that, and he was fairly sure Hermione did not like him like that.

Didn't matter, really, as far as Harry saw it, because it wasn't going to happen again. It shouldn't have happened in the first place, and it shouldn't have happened any time after that.

Certainly will not happen again, Harry decided. Especially with Malfoy

waiting around to catch an eyeful.

As he pulled open the door to the master bedroom, he paused, and got angry all over again.

"Bloody Dumbledore!"

The master bedroom only had one bed. Granted, it was a rather large bed, large enough for at least four people to lie on it comfortably. Large enough that two people could sleep on it without coming anywhere near each other. Still, it was one bed. One bed he was going to have to share with Malfoy, unless he fancied sleeping on the floor.

"Oh, fuck that," Harry grumbled. This was *his* house, and he would bloody well have the bed. If Malfoy had a problem with it, he could take the floor.

::

Potter stalked out of the room, slamming the door with enough force to make the walls rattle.

Scar-headed prat called me a bastard, Draco thought, as Potter left. A small voice in the back of his mind (one he did not hear very often) told him he had deserved it, but he shook the voice away.

Left alone, Draco had some time to ponder on the Wizarding World's teenage hero of men. Potter was a bit sensitive, for someone who was supposed to hold the forces of evil at bay. The person who was meant to protect everyone's soul from the Dark Lord and his minions ought to have a slightly thicker skin.

Draco wondered absently if he had hit a nerve, when he had been needling Potter about Hermione.

More than likely, he had. Draco wondered if, possibly, Potter was not at peace with the situation. He and Hermione were not together, and they seemed to have no romantic inclinations towards each other. It was obviously for sport, but shagging for sport seemed dreadfully out of character for Potter. Of course, it seemed dreadfully out of character for Granger, because it was for sport, and because it was with Potter.

Draco had always figured if she was shagging anyone, it was the Weasel.

He could not help but wonder how it had come about. He simply could not picture Potter walking up to Granger in the library and asking her if she wanted to have a go at it in the back of the Restricted Section. Draco burst out laughing just thinking about it -- Potter trying to prop her up against a bookshelf with Madame Pince shouting at them to 'keep it down'.

If anything, it had probably evolved out of mutual need. Everyone knew the Mudblood was in a serious, long-term relationship with her books, which was likely far from sexually satisfying. And Potter was so busy babysitting the Weasel and saving the world he probably did not have much time for a social life. With no dating prospects, and their hormones knocking at the door, they had no doubt turned to each other for a bit of release.

When Draco looked at it like that, it made perfect sense. It was a completely revolting, stomach-turning notion, but it made sense.

Why was he sitting here thinking about it?

Shaking the vision of Potter and Granger out of his head, Draco wondered if he should go upstairs. He was tired, now that he thought about it, and could do with some sleep. He was in no hurry to spend more time with Potter, but he was not about to sleep on this musty, lumpy couch.

He finally decided to go, figuring enough time had passed that, hopefully, Potter would be asleep when he got up there. He could slip into his bed unnoticed, and not be forced to listen to any more of Potter's sparkling conversation.

Bastard, indeed!

On the way to the door he walked past a large mirror on the wall. He paused, as he never passed up an opportunity to have a look at himself. Once he had the look, however, he wished he had kept walking.

"Bloody Hell!" He gasped in horror. "What the fuck do I look like?"

"I was wondering the same thing," his reflection replied, pulling a face.

"Yech."

True, he had had a rough couple of days, but that was no reason to let himself go.

He was wearing clothes he barely recognized as his own. A faded pair of jeans (the same jeans he had been wearing the day Dumbledore stuffed him into the fireplace bound for Hell), and a dull, boring black t-shirt with absolutely no shape to it. His hair was too terrible to think even about. It was flying all over the place, like he hadn't taken a comb to it in a week.

Dumpy clothes and unkempt hair. All he needed now was a pair of big, tacky glasses.

"Merlin's balls, I am turning into Potter," He grumbled.

"Well that's a sad state of affairs" the mirror commented.

Glaring at the mirror, Draco decided he needed to get back to the Manor.

::

Draco was more than displeased to find Granger and the Weasel in the sitting room.

After weighing his options, he had decided Flooing was the easiest way to get to the Manor. He had learned how to Apparate a year ago (his father did not take much stock in Ministry regulations), but Apparating would be a hassle. It would make a good deal of noise, and he did not know if it would be safe. The wards on the Manor would not hinder him entering it, since he was a Malfoy. The issue was the return trip. He didn't know if or how Grimmauld Place was warded, and he did not want to die or splinch himself finding out.

Of course, now that he had a fireplace to hand, Granger and the Weasel were in the room, and staring at him like he had two heads. He wondered distractedly if there was another fireplace in this madhouse.

"What do you want?" The Weasel snapped.

"Where's Harry?" Granger demanded, at practically the same moment.

"Potter went to bed," Draco said, shrugging. "We had a tiff."

"Why did you have a tiff?" Hermione asked, frowning at him.

"Because we did," Draco replied nastily. "Potter and I have had a tiff everyday for five years. Why do you suddenly find it unusual?"

"No, I suppose it's not," Hermione relented.

"What do you want, then?" Ron asked.

He paused, wondering how he should answer that. The truth wouldn't go over very well. If he just walked over and Flooed himself to the Manor in front of them, the Weasel would go screeching to his mother before Draco ever reached the other side. Then, remembering their meddlesome personalities, he decided the truth would work just fine, if he presented it to them properly.

"The fireplace," he said simply. "I need to go back home for a bit. Just to my room, actually."

"What?" Ron screeched, standing up. "No way."

"Absolutely not," Hermione said. "You are not going anywhere."

"Of course I am," Draco said hotly. Giving them a contemptuous look, he started for the fireplace.

"I'm telling my mum," Ron said predictably.

"Go on, then," Draco said, waving his hands about. "I'll be there before she wakes up."

"She'll be awake when you get back," Hermione pointed out, also predictably. She sounded like a snitching five year-old. "And she'll be furious."

"I supposed she will, at that," Draco drawled, unconcerned. After Voldemort and his father, he was not about to lose sleep over the Weasel's mother. "But I figure if I smile and bat my eyelashes a bit, she'll forgive me in an hour or so."

"No, she won't," Ron said stubbornly.

"I guarantee you she will," Draco countered. "Especially when I tell her I was after some pictures of my mother, whom I miss so terribly."

"You're horrible," Hermione said.

"Of course I am," Draco said proudly. "But I wouldn't be me, if I wasn't."

"I told you, you are not going," Ron said. Just as Draco had expected, he moved to block the fireplace.

"We've been through this already, Weasel, and I dislike repeating myself," Draco snapped. "I am going. There is really no point in arguing about it any more."

"You can't go, unless I move," Ron said importantly. He lodged himself in the fireplace's opening, feet apart with his hands on his hips, and put a look on his face he probably thought was fearsome.

Draco sighed dramatically. "Weasel, I really can't be bothered to Apparate right now, so if you would be so kind as move out of the way."

"You can't Apparate," Hermione argued.

"Of course I can Apparate," Draco spat. "What to I look like, a sodding Muggle?"

"You can't Apparate until you are seventeen," Ron pointed out unnecessarily.

"You are not *supposed* to Apparate until you are seventeen," Draco said waspishly. "However, anyone with an ounce of magic can Apparate when they bloody well want. Well, maybe not Longbottom. Poncy git would probably splinch himself right off."

"Who taught you?" Ron asked.

"The same person who taught me everything else handy and forbidden I know that I am not supposed to," Draco said sharply.

"Your father?" Hermione asked.

"That's him," Draco said. Despite himself, Draco was pleased to see Granger and the Weasel go pale at the mention of his father. Even in Azkaban, Lucius Malfoy was a disquieting thought. "Now budge over, you freckle-faced fuck, before I turn you into something more unnatural than you already are."

"We're going with you, then," Ron announced.

It's about bloody time! Draco thought furiously. He had been expecting that, but it had taken longer than was absolutely necessary.

"We are?" Hermione sputtered.

"Of course we are," Ron said. "I'm not letting him Floo himself out of here unsupervised."

"Oh that's rich, from the two people Potter spends all his waking hours supervising," Draco drawled.

The Weasel started a verbal treatise on the numerous times he had supervised Potter, but Draco silenced him by elbowing him into the fireplace. Draco stepped in, and grabbing Granger by the arm, hauled her in after him. It was a tight fit, something The Weasel was none too pleased about, but he quieted once Draco explained that if they went together, he would not have to worry about Draco getting away.

"Black Dragon!" He shouted, and the fire went green.

VI Not His Father's Son

The portkey brought Severus Snape to a dimly light room he did not recognize. It was a large stone chamber, lit only by torches and one large fire in the far corner. The musty smell in the air gave Snape the distinct impression he was underground. After all his years as the Potions Master and the Head of Slytherin House, he had spent a good deal of his life in basements and dungeons, and had grown quite accustomed to it.

The room was nearly full. The meeting would be under way shortly.

As he usually did at these gatherings, Snape remained hidden underneath his hood and kept to himself. No one, not even Voldemort, had reason to believe he was playing for the other team. He had worked out numerous undetectable potions that nullified both Veritaserum and the Veritas Curse for precisely that reason. However, he was Severus Snape, the Potions Master of Hogwarts, and his constant proximity to Dumbledore had made him very suspect in some eyes.

As had his constant proximity to Potter-- who was, despite Voldemort's almost daily demands, very much alive.

Voldemort was quite wroth that none of his minions could do away with a half-trained boy (never mind Voldemort had failed to do it himself about six times), and the recent debacle at the Ministry of Magic had done nothing to improve the Dark Lord's mood. The Boy Who Lived was a thorn in all the Death Eaters' sides, and many did not understand why Snape, who saw him every day for nine months out of the year, did not just kill him and save everyone the trouble.

Just as he had said to Dumbledore, numerous pots of tea and a large array of biscuits and pastries were spread on a table along the back of the chamber. Snape helped himself to tea and a scone, more from a desire to look casual than hunger or thirst. Reflexively, he sniffed at his tea surreptitiously before taking his first, tentative swallow. He had no real reason to suspect poison, but it never hurt to be careful.

The din in the room died down as one Death Eater, Zabini by his size and shape, moved to the front of the room and cleared his throat. Snape could not see inside his hood, but his body language gave him the idea the man was slightly nervous. Snape honestly did not blame him if he was. By heading off this meeting, he was filling in the place that had so long been held by Lucius Malfoy.

"Greetings," the man said. It was Zabini. His gravelly voice was almost warm. "If you could gather round, and pay close attention. We have much to discuss."

::

"Bloody Hell!"

"Ow!"

"You're crushing me!"

"No, the wall is crushing you."

"Budge over, you lump!"

"Can't breathe!"

"Geroff, Malfoy! Get your tentacles off me!"

Draco was more than happy to oblige, as he was a good deal closer to Granger and the Weasel than was good for his digestion. He removed the offending arm, which had gotten itself draped over the Weasel's shoulder, and set about removing himself from the fireplace.

The tall, slender obsidian structure was a personal fireplace, intended to accommodate the comings and goings of one person. When it had been built, it had been assumed this one person would be travelling alone, or in the company of a trunk or suitcase. It was in no way meant for three people, and result of three people trying to come through it at once had been a crushed and twisted tangle of limbs.

"Lumos!"

Draco peered into the fireplace to see the other two still in it, with Granger wedged between the Weasel and the back wall in a rather interesting fashion. The Weasel suddenly seemed disinclined to remove himself from the fireplace, even though he now had all the room in the world to do so. Draco suspected the Weasel was simply in no hurry to dislodge Granger's arse from his crotch, as this was probably the only opportunity the Weasel would get to have any part of Granger that close to his crotch.

Or any part of any female at all, for that matter.

"Now is not the time for that," Draco snapped, hauling the Weasel out of the fireplace by the collar of his shirt.

The Weasel flushed a pink that was very unattractive with his hair, and Granger managed to look relieved and put-upon at the same time.

"I figured you'd have a bigger fireplace, with all your money," Ron commented snidely.

"The fireplace downstairs is roughly the size of your family home," Draco drawled.

"Why didn't we use it then?" Hermione complained.

"Because I thought we would come straight to my room," Draco explained shortly, fishing a trunk out from under an enormous four-poster bed. It was twice the size a Hogwarts bed, and the drapes were black satin and netting. "I didn't see the point of coming in through the Entry Hall and walking up four bloody flights of stairs when I could come directly here."

"Your room?" Ron sputtered, dumbfounded. "You have your own fireplace?"

"All the main bedrooms here have one," Draco said simply. He walked over to a large mahogany wardrobe in the corner of the room, flung the doors open, and began to study the contents. "It's quite common in very old homes."

"Your room is..." Hermione began, looking around in both wonder and dismay.

"Exquisite?" Draco offered snarkily. He was rather fond of his room, now that he thought about it.

"Frightening," she finished, eyeing one of the menacing-looking swords hanging off the wall.

"I'll take that as a compliment from you, Granger," Draco said, almost cheerfully. "I decorated it myself."

Hermione's eyes went wide. Everything in the room was very black, and all the ornaments, wall-hangings and rugs looked like they belonged in a museum, rather than a sixteen year-old boy's room. Obviously, Granger figured it had been decorated by Draco's mother, or a house-elf with very morbid tastes.

"I wouldn't touch that," Draco warned. Hermione was at his desk, lingering over a pewter dragon the size of a Muggle football. She

snatched her hand from it just as silver flames trailed out of its mouth. "It doesn't like anyone but me."

With that, he abandoned Granger and the Weasel for his wardrobe, and hoped they had the sense to keep their hands to themselves. The dragon on his desk was not the only thing in his room that bit, though he did not recall anything that was particularly venomous.

Over the course of a half-hour, Draco piled nearly everything from the wardrobe into his trunk. He did not want to stand there half the night, trying to decide what he would fancy wearing over the course of the summer. It seemed a bit more prudent to have most of what he owned to hand, so it was there if he wanted it. By the time he was finished the trunk was so full he had to sit on it to close it, and it weighed near a ton.

He paused over the photos on his desk, considering them. He decided on two, one of he and his mother, the day he started at Hogwarts, and one of his mother alone, taken shortly before she died. Tucking them under his arm, he started for the fireplace.

"Clothes?" Ron barked, incredulous. "We came here for clothes?"

"Yes," Draco said flatly. He did not see the need for confusion.

"You have clothes at Harry's house," Ron explained.

"I only have a few things at Potter's, and none of it's really worth wearing," Draco said impatiently. "When Dumbeldore sent me off to you people, he neglected to tell me I would be stuck there the whole summer. I did not pack accordingly."

"Pack accordingly?" Ron snorted. "You're a bloody chick, Malfoy. A complete fucking girl!" He looked ready to die laughing, and Granger was snickering.

"Pardon me, if unlike you, I give a shit what I look like," Draco said nastily.

"Who are hoping to impress, anyway?" Hermione asked, with false sweetness.

"I have no one to impress but myself," Draco drawled.

"You packed quite a bit, for only having to impress yourself," Ron quipped, eyeing the trunk exaggeratedly.

"Well in case you haven't noticed, I can be dreadfully difficult to please," Draco snapped. "Now if you don't mind, I would like to get some sleep tonight."

"Where are you putting that trunk, then?" Ron asked. "We barely fit before."

"I was thinking of putting it up your arse," Draco said, shoving him into the fireplace.

That shut Ron up for a bit.

::

Snape listened to Zabini's waffle with undivided attention. As he realized the full ramifications of what Zabini was saying, he could not decide if he was amused or incredulous. Anyone less pragmatic would probably be horrified at what Zabini was saying, but Snape had ever been one to believe in fairy-stories.

According to Zabini, Voldemort was after the Crystal Sword.

The Crystal Sword was not a proper sword, though it was shaped like one and sharp enough to sever a head. It actually functioned as a wand, allowing the wielder to create magic, but it amplified the magic to an unnatural degree. Using the Sword, the wielder could cast a spell five times stronger than with an ordinary wand.

In the hands of someone like Voldemort, it could very well mean the end of the world.

The great and powerful Crystal Sword.

There was much talk about it, especially in scholarly circles. It was the subject of numerous books, many of which went on for several hundred pages. Various Wizarding Museums had paintings and replicas of it.

However, whether or not it existed was up for debate.

The Crystal Sword was a thing of myth and legend. It had been created in very ancient times, by a group of Wizards trying to stop an influx of evil. The evil had been kept at bay, but it was hidden away, because the temptation to use it to gain power was too great. Then it had been found, and had been passed between a few Wizarding families for safekeeping for several generations. Sometime during the Dark Ages, it went missing, much to the panic of the Wizarding Community.

Stories had sprung up to explain its disappearance. Perhaps it would be found when the need for it was great enough. Perhaps it would be found when a certain person came along, a person who would only use it for good. Perhaps it was lying dormant, waiting for its rightful heir to claim it. Perhaps the forces of evil had had it all this time, and were simply waiting for the right moment to lay everything to waste.

For the last thousand or so years, wizards and witches of all ages had searched for it right, left and centre.

Of course, no one had ever come up with anything. Many wizards today had relegated it to nothing more than a fanciful tale from a time out of mind. Some of the older, traditional pureblood families believed it was real, subscribing to the version of the myth where the Sword was lying dormant, waiting for a particular person to claim it. Naturally, they also believed that particular person was in their family.

Gilderoy Lockhart had claimed to know where it was, not that anyone had believed him.

Zabini was still waffling, but Snape tuned him out. Voldemort with the Crystal Sword (assuming it did exist) was a rather dismal prospect. However, Voldemort didn't have it. From what Zabini was going on about, it seemed the Dark Lord wished his Death Eaters to go find it for him.

Snape had a nearly mirthful moment as he pondered this. If he was still a Death Eater at heart, he would have probably felt a bit put-upon, being tasked with this kind of mindless goose chase.

Nevertheless, it would be worth reporting to Dumbledore.

::

Harry had been lying in the large bed for quite some time, too angry to sleep.

Malfoy had not come upstairs, something that had Harry bothered. He was in no particular hurry to spend more time with Malfoy, and in even less of a hurry to share a bed with him, but his absence was frankly worrying. He could not help but wonder what Malfoy had gotten up to.

Part of him toyed with the idea of going back downstairs, to make sure Malfoy wasn't being a tosser to Ron and Hermione. Of course, this would force him to be in the same room with Hermione, something else he was in no hurry to do, especially if Malfoy was with her. Going downstairs would also require that he leave the bed, which really didn't sound like a good idea.

He had to admit, the large bed was quite comfortable, more comfortable than the one he had slept in last night. It was unnecessarily large, though, large enough that he felt like he would get lost in it. This was probably a good thing, however, considering he would be sharing it was Malfoy.

"Bloody Dumbledore," he mumbled to himself.

Yet, something could be said for sharing a bed with someone.

He and Hermione always returned to their own beds after anything untoward happened. Except on one memorable occasion, where he has smuggled her up to bed in the Gryffindor Dorms. She had promptly fallen asleep, after, and she had felt so nice and warm next to him he had been unwilling to toss her out.

In the morning, before the panic ensued (Ron, Dean and Seamus were in the room, and he would have had a bit of explaining to do if they caught her in his bed), he had been quite content. He had lounged in a dreamy, half-sleeping state for nearly an hour, enjoying the warmth coming from the body next to him. He had just been so comfortable and relaxed.

The time he had fallen asleep next to Lavender Brown on the common room floor had been very much the same. It had been quite late, true,

but they had been in the middle of a rather engaging game of Truth or Dare. With all the hooting and hollering and scandalous things occurring, he should have been paying attention, but Lavender had been so soft and warm next to him. He had been so comfortable and relaxed he hadn't cared that Seamus was circling the common room with his pants on his head, and had drifted off to sleep.

Of course, he would be sharing this particular bed with Malfoy, who was far from comforting and relaxing.

Besides, Malfoy was a boy, and boys were not the same.

Harry had bunked with Ron on numerous occasions, and it had been nothing like sleeping near Hermione or Lavender. Ron tossed and rolled and murmured to himself, and breathed loud enough that there should be a law against it. Ron always felt warm enough next to him, but it was just not the same. Of course, cuddling up with Ron was not high on his priorities, because he was not attracted to Ron in the least. The aforementioned game of Truth or Dare had proven that without a doubt. Hermione, in a particularly evil moment, had dared Harry to kiss Ron, and while he loved Ron dearly, he had been close to vomiting before it was all over.

And he was certainly not attracted to Malfoy.

Well, I suppose his eyes are nice enough, he mused sleepily. And his hair's alright, when he doesn't paste it to his head.

He growled to himself, and tried to dislodge that ridiculous thought from his head. What was he on about, anyway? He was finally getting sleepy. Why was he going to go and start contemplating Malfoy's facial features like Malfoy was a girl? It would only upset his stomach, and then he would never get to sleep.

"Bloody Malfoy," he mumbled.

Sighing, he rolled onto his side. He cuddled up with his pillow, and tried to go to sleep.

::

There was no question about it, now. The next time Draco saw Dumbledore, he was going to kill the daft old fogey, and that was final.

He surveyed his new bedroom with narrowed eyes and a curled lip. There was nothing wrong with the room specifically, the décor was not quite to his taste, but it was liveable. The sleeping arrangements, however, left much to be desired. To his horror, there was only one bed, and while it was nearly as large as his bed at the Manor, that did not deflect from the unconscionable idea that he would have to share it Potter.

Furiously, he set about unpacking his trunk, occasionally shooting murderous glances over his shoulder at the sleeping form of the Prat Who Lived, like the situation was his fault. Like it or not, there was nothing he could do about it. He was not about to spend the summer sleeping on the floor, or one of the lumpy, sitting room couches, just because Dumbledore was a poncy loon.

The room had two wardrobes, both of which were empty. Evidently, Potter had not been bothered to put his miserable excuse for clothing away before going to sleep. Since they were both empty, Draco considered them both free for the choosing, and opted for the larger one. He put his clothes away quickly, still grumbling about Dumbledore and frowning at Potter.

Draco was not sure he would be able to sleep so close to someone else. He never had, he did not see why he should have to start now. On the rare occasions when Crabbe or Goyle had spent the night at the Manor, they had taken a guest room. None of his sexual partners had ever been allowed to spend the night. He usually had them out the door the moment they were properly dressed. Even Pansy, his first lover, whom he had nearly had a verifiable relationship with, had never shared a bed with him for longer than it took to fuck.

He fished a hairbrush out of his trunk and cursed, realizing he had neglected to bring his hair gel. Much like the sleeping arrangements, there was nothing he could do about it, now. He was not about to go popping over to the Manor in search of hair gel at his hour. It was at least one in the morning, if not after. If he did not go to bed soon, he was never going to get any sleep.

After putting on his pyjamas, he paused at the foot of the bed, watching Potter irritably. Potter was rolled towards him, and cuddled up with his pillow. He looked alarmingly peaceful and innocent, and

the absence of his glasses made him seem very young. Potter suddenly shifted. His eyelids fluttered a bit, and he clumsily pushed the blanket away from him. Draco noted, with dismay, that Potter was rather under-dressed. From what Draco could see, he was not wearing a pyjama top.

Wonderful. He thought bitterly. *Not only do I have to sleep with the git, but I have to do it while he is half-naked.*

To be honest, however, Potter half-naked was not a thoroughly repulsive sight. Or at least it wouldn't be, if it wasn't *Potter*. Draco didn't particularly fancy boys, the rumours concerning himself and Terry Boot or Justin Finch-Fletchley were, in fact, untrue, but that did not mean he was unaware that some boys were easier on the eyes than others. Draco was sure seeing the Weasel without a shirt would have him in apoplectic fits. Potter, especially in comparison with the Weasel, was all right, as far as boys went.

Now that he thought about it, it was a bit warm. He removed his own pyjama top, figuring if Potter could be half-naked, so could he.

Draco took a hesitant step towards the bed. Thankfully, Potter was quite decidedly on one side of it. Admittedly, the bed was large enough that Draco would have ample room even if Potter was squarely in the middle, but that was not the point.

He took another hesitant step towards the bed, and his foot hit something. His wand. He picked it up and froze, eyeing Potter's sleeping form again.

His mind raced, dangerous things coming to the surface. He thought of all the times his father had demanded he kill Potter. He thought of the Death Eater meeting he had attended shortly before the Ministry of Magic fiasco, because Voldemort had been curious about his right hand man's only son. He thought of how the Dark Lord had hinted to him that the man who killed Potter would be eternally in his favour.

He thought bitterly, of the day Potter had refused his friendship on the train, and he gripped his wand tightly as his mind reopened and salted the old wound.

Merlin, it would be so easy. It would just be so bloody easy.

Two words, and it would be over. Potter would never know what hit

him. Two simple words, and Draco would never be plagued with his presence again. Draco Malfoy would succeed, where many, including Voldemort, had failed. The bane of the Wizarding World would be forever grateful to him, if he would just opened his mouth and said two words.

His mind whirled. He could Floo to Crabbe or Goyle's before anyone was the wiser. He would have to hide from Dumbledore, a task that would not exactly be easy, but it would be worth it in the end. He would be famous. He would be the Man Who Killed the Boy Who Lived. At the next Death Eater meeting, he would stand next to Voldemort, taking the position that had once been his father's.

His father.

Draco shivered, and his wand clattered to the floor. His hands reached up and clutched at his hair, and he took several deep, rasping breaths.

I'll end up a murdering bastard, just like him, if I don't watch myself.

As he stood there, he was overcome by a strange churning and knotting sensation in his stomach, a sickened and repulsed feeling he did not immediately recognize. A moment later he realized why it was so unfamiliar. It was guilt, something he had very little experience with. He instinctively tried to shove it away. His father had always insisted that guilt was for weaklings, something people with money and power and the proper allegiances never had to bother with. Then, thinking of his father, he began to welcome the disgusted, stricken feeling, because he felt he deserved it.

Looking up, the guilt was quickly replaced with horror.

Bright green eyes were open, and they watching were watching him.

"It's pronounced *Avada Kedavra*, Malfoy," Potter said quietly.

He propped himself up on his elbow, and fixed Draco with a cold stare. His green eyes were full of anger, and something else, something Draco knew all too well-- he had always received it from his father in abundance.

Disappointment.

The disappointment coming from Potter in waves gnawed at Draco's

insides worse than the guilt. It had never occurred to him that Potter had put any kind of faith in him in the first place. He had assumed Potter had accepted his arrival only because Dumbledore had ordered he do so, and that Potter was simply biding his time until school started and everything went back to normal. It was now plain Potter had put some kind of stock in Draco, that Potter had believed Draco when he had promised Dumbledore he would not kill him.

Potter had trusted him, and for some unfathomable reason that suddenly meant something to him. Potter had trusted him, and he had ruined it with a fleeting, homicidal delusion of grandeur.

Unable to form words, Draco shook his head.

"No?" Potter questioned, his tone flat. "You looked pretty sure about it a minute ago."

Draco opened his mouth, but nothing came out.

"I see," Potter said. His eyes raked Draco up and down, taking him in. "Is it because I woke up, then? Did that ruin the mood?"

"I'm not going to kill you," Draco managed finally.

"Not tonight?" Potter said coldly. "Tomorrow, then? Next Thursday?" He narrowed his eyes. "Or would you rather it be a surprise?"

"Not now," Draco said. "Not ever."

With a sudden burst of clarity, Draco realized he was telling the truth.

Slowly, Draco retrieved his wand. He climbed on the bed, and moved over to Potter. To Potter's credit, he did not flinch or try to get away. He laid back down, and watched Draco with cold, angry, disappointed eyes. When Draco reached Potter, he sat down next to him and watched him quietly. Potter's expression did not change. He was not worried or apprehensive at having Draco that close to him. He was simply waiting.

After a moment, he leaned over Potter and set his wand on the night stand, right next to Potter's own. As he sat back down his chest brushed against Potter, and he thought he heard a faint humming sound. He looked at Potter curiously, but Potter gave no indication that he had heard it. His expression, however, was different. The anger and

disappointment had gone, and he seemed to have gone thoughtful.

"I'll sleep downstairs," Draco said quietly. He started to move, but Potter caught him by his arm.

"Stay," Harry said. He looked like he did not believe the words coming out of his mouth. Honestly, neither did Draco.

Potter did not let go of Draco's arm.

All of a sudden, Draco succumbed to an earlier temptation. He reached up his hand and gently brushed a finger over Potter's scar. Potter's eyes tightened slightly at the touch, but he did not say anything. He gave Draco a soft smile, and closed his eyes.

Draco smiled back, and watched the Boy Who Lived drift off to sleep.

VII Love is Always Over in the Morning (Part One)

When Harry woke up, was alone.

Yawning, he sat up, wondering where Malfoy was. He had half expected to open his eyes and find Malfoy still sitting on the bed. As he groped for his glasses and wand, he noticed Malfoy's wand was gone from where he had left it last night.

Well, he managed not to kill me on his way down to breakfast.

As he showered and dressed he pondered on the events of the night before. He had gone to sleep alone, and had woken up in the middle of the night to find Malfoy at the edge of the bed with his wand in his hand.

Naturally, Harry had jumped to conclusions.

Now that he thought about it, Malfoy had probably gotten off easy. If Ron had woken to find Malfoy in his room with his wand in his hand and a maniacal gleam in his eye, he would have done more than jump to conclusions. Ron would have jumped for his wand, and cast the first seven hexes that fell out of his mouth. Malfoy would have been a

wandless, swollen, buck-toothed, boil-covered, bat-eared, petrified toad that burped slugs.

Harry, however, had just laid there and watched. Abruptly, Malfoy's maniacal fervor had gone flat. He had stood there a moment, seeming to have an internal argument with himself. Then, his expression went pained, and he had looked overcome with guilt, an emotion Harry had always thought Malfoy would not even know how to describe.

Harry himself had been angry. Not a furious, white-hot, raging anger, but something more cold and bitter, something hurt and betrayed.

Malfoy had told both him and Dumbledore he would not try to kill him. He had even promised to try and keep him alive. Then, just two days later, he had proven himself a liar and it had hurt Harry, hurt him like he had been stabbed with a knife.

He had wanted to believe Malfoy. He had wanted to believe Malfoy had been telling the truth. He had wanted to believe Malfoy had changed. He had wanted to believe Malfoy was not his father's son.

The thing that gave Harry pause was the apparent display of guilt. Malfoy's face had gone stricken and remorseful before he had known Harry was awake, so it had not been an act for Harry's benefit.

Speaking of acts for Harry's benefit, what had possessed Malfoy to suddenly go uncharacteristically caring and gentle?

What had possessed Harry to ask Malfoy to stay after he had offered to go back downstairs?

And, the strangest thing of all, Harry could not believe he had placidly gone back to sleep with Malfoy in the room, with Malfoy sitting so close to him he could have reached out and choked him to death.

But, laying there, with his hand on Malfoy's arm, as Malfoy stared at him, he had just drifted off. He had tried to fight it off at first, something in the back of his mind had been telling him to stay awake, but he had let it go. There had been an odd, faint humming in his ears that had made him strangely content, a sighing, whirling sound that had seemed to make everything else fade away.

As he headed down the stairs for breakfast, Harry discovered he was not angry with Malfoy anymore.

Honestly, the moment Malfoy had brushed his fingers over his scar, he had forgiven him.

~*~

Draco sipped his third cup of coffee silently, ignoring the din around him. He had been having a perfectly peaceful, thoughtful morning, until everyone had come downstairs and ruined it with their food and prattle. He had almost been tempted to spend breakfast in the sitting room, except for the fact that the coffee pot was in the kitchen.

At the moment, he would have willingly traded his left bollock for a house-elf. Then, he could go hide in the medium-sized, unused parlor at the rear of the house while still having coffee on demand.

The noise was nerve-wracking. Mrs. Weasley's enchanted knives and mixers and peelers were making all kinds of racket. The Weasel was talking around mouthfuls of food at an earsplitting volume. He thought he was talking to Granger, but he was really talking to no one in particular, because Granger and the Weasel's sister were giggling with each other like they were in grade school.

And the food! Mrs. Weasley had tried to coax him into eating no less than fourteen times in the last forty-five minutes, never mind he wasn't hungry. He was never really hungry. Actually, he was just not much of an eater, in general. He had explained this to Mrs. Weasley several times, but could not dissuade her from trying to stuff him like a holiday turkey. She simply did not approve of the fact that he existed almost entirely off of black coffee, and occasionally, toast.

He wanted to be alone with his thoughts and his coffee.

Despite the fact that he hadn't slept, he was extremely awake and alert. Sleepless nights were actually not that unusual for him. He had been raised by Death Eaters, and Death Eaters didn't operate during normal business hours. Treachery, torture and murder generally worked out for the best if began after dark, so life at Malfoy manner had never really started until sundown.

He probably would not be able to sleep now, anyway, even if he had a Sleeping Draught. He had too much to think about. He had stopped kicking himself for last night's murderous impulses at about four in the

morning. Not because he didn't think he deserved it, he knew he did, but because other things had been consuming his brain.

Potter. Or rather, Potter's strange behavior.

If Draco had woken to find someone standing over them like they meant to murder him, he probably would have acted a little different than Potter had. He would have been a bit more furious, and a bit less sleepy.

Potter had been angry, yes, but it had been oddly short-lived, considering the circumstances. He had seemed to forgive Draco almost immediately, and had appeared quite content to forget the whole thing. He had gone right back to sleep, as if nothing untoward had happened at all.

Potter had asked him to stay. Draco had offered to sleep downstairs, but Potter had grabbed him by the arm and asked him to stay.

And he had stayed.

He had not expected Potter to fall back to sleep, but he had. Once he had, Draco had thought briefly on going downstairs anyway, but the notion had slipped away almost as soon it came. Potter's hand on his arm had seemed to warm up his whole body. That vague humming had come back, as well, and he had suddenly been very relaxed, almost as if hypnotized, and very disinclined to move.

The strangest thing of all was something Potter probably wouldn't even remember. It had happened at about three in the morning, and Potter had been mostly asleep.

"What'er you doing?." Harry mumbled sleepily. He studied Draco blearily with one half-open eye.

"Watching you sleep." Draco said quietly.

"Why?" Harry asked, almost a whine. The other eye opened.

"I don't know." Draco answered. He really didn't.

"Lay down." Harry said.

"I'm fine." Draco replied. "I'm not sleepy."

Harry eyes slid closed, and he was quiet for a moment. Draco thought he had fallen back to sleep.

"Come here, Draco." Harry mumbled.

Draco was stunned silent. In five years, Potter had never called him by his first name.

"Come here." Harry repeated groggily. He tugged at Draco's arm. "Lay down."

Draco didn't move. Harry tugged on his arm, harder, pulling him down to him. Harry shifted a little, and Draco ended up with his head on Harry's chest. Harry's hand flitted over Draco's hair before coming to rest on his shoulder. Harry sighed softly, and immediately went back to sleep.

Draco had laid there, listening to Potter's heart beat until the sun rose.

All at once, that surprisingly pleasant memory was disrupted by a lump of feathers bowling its way across the table.

"Post's here." Ron said flatly, pulling what was apparently an owl out of his porridge bowl.

"Ooh, who got the Howler?" Ginny asked.

"Malfoy." Ron said, after reading the front. He handed the red envelope to Draco gingerly, the corner pinched between his index and thumb.

"Merlin's balls!" He cursed, eyeing the Howler warily. "What have I done, now?"

He didn't want to open it, but he had to. If he ignored it, it would only erupt, and screech twice as loud. He ripped it open, and waited for the inevitable.

"DO NOT LEAVE AGAIN!" Dumbledore's voice thundered.

"You left?" Mrs. Weasley screeched, nearly as loud as the Howler.

Draco went whiter than normal. Granger and the Weasel became very

interested in their plates. Ginny looked affronted that she had not been invited to whatever-it-was that had been so scandalous it deserved a Howler, from Dumbledore no less.

Quickly, Draco floated the coffee pot towards him, using that as an excuse not to look at Mrs. Weasley as he fed her a cock-and-bull story about going out the front door late last night because he had been curious about the neighborhood.

Mrs. Weasley looked like she was well aware she was being lied to. She was just about to tell Draco about it, too, but she left off because Ron started talking.

"Where is your other half?" He asked Draco loudly.

"Upstairs being a bloody lay-about." Draco replied, just as loudly. For once in his life, he was glad for the Weasel's runaway tongue.

"Perhaps the Boy Who Lived does not feel he has to be up with the rest of us."

"Perhaps the Boy Who Lived should wait out here until you are done talking about him." Came a snarky voice from the hallway.

Draco went stiff, and his face reddened. He got up from the table and left the kitchen through the side door to the sitting room, just as Harry was entering the kitchen from the other side.

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Harry found Malfoy in the medium-sized, unused parlor at the rear of the house. He was sitting on one of the couches, leaned forward with his arms on his knees, staring intently at a glass figurine of a unicorn. He was moving it in circles in front of him without his wand, watching its progress as if his life depended on it.

Malfoy was dressed to kill. Or rather, Malfoy was dressed for his death.

He was wearing heavy, black, lace-up boots that disappeared under the legs of his black trousers, and a black fitted t-shirt with the words love is always over in the morning printed across the front in silver letters. Under the t-shirt he was wearing a tight, fishnet long-sleeve with cuffs that went past his wrists.

The dark clothing made a startling contrast with his pale features, while managing to accentuate his gray eyes. His silvery hair, Harry noticed, was not plastered to his head, but parted in the middle and hanging loose. It was about an inch shy of being even with his angular chin, and framed his face nicely.

Harry stared at Malfoy openly, unable to look away. He was willing to wager Ron had taken one look at Malfoy this morning and nearly died laughing, but Harry rather liked it.

He looks good enough to eat.

That uninvited and rather disquieting train of thought was derailed by Malfoy's voice.

"Good morning, Potter." He said, never taking his eyes from the figurine.

"You weren't at breakfast." Harry managed. That was not exactly true. Malfoy had been at breakfast, but he had left when he heard Harry coming.

"Don't tell me you were missed me." Draco drawled.

He flicked his eyes to Harry quickly, then back to the unicorn. He moved his hand, and it settled softly on the table, looking quite pleased with himself. He glanced back over at Harry, and considered him from a moment. Slowly, he stood, and Harry noticed Malfoy's T-shirt did not quite meet the waistband of his pants, showing off a half-inch of pale, net-covered belly.

"Come on, then." Draco said. He approached Harry, where he was standing in the doorway, and made shooing motions with his hand.

"Where are we going?" Harry asked. With Malfoy standing right in front of him, the uninvited and disquieting train of thought was making a return trip.

"Outside." Draco said irritably. He attempted to turn Harry around by the sleeve of his shirt, but Harry waved him off.

"Why?" Harry asked.

"What's with the questions, Potter?" Draco snapped. "What are you, a

bloody Ministry Official?"

"I'm just wondering..." Harry trailed off. He wasn't really wondering anything. It was just that he suddenly wanted to stay right where he was and stare at Malfoy all day, even though staring at Malfoy was inexplicably making his stomach hurt.

"I'd rather like a look at the backyard. I haven't been outdoors in days." Draco complained. "Can you go in the backyard, or do I need to owl Dumbledore for a day-pass?"

Harry narrowed his eyes at him.

"Don't worry, Scarhead." Draco drawled, his lips twisting in a smile. "I promise Voldemort is not in the gazebo."

He succeeded in hauling Harry around, and pushed him out of the medium-sized, unused parlor in the rear of the house with a hand to the small of his back.

The backyard was fairly large, carpeted with yellowed grass. There was a gazebo in the center of the yard, its white paint peeling in numerous places. Directly in front of the gazebo was what would have been a flower garden, except the bushes and plants were dead and brown from neglect. In the middle of the garden were two stone benches. They were angled at a V, framing what had probably been an impressive rosebush before it gave up trying to survive without attention.

Malfoy ambled around the back yard for awhile, wearing a face that made it clear he did not want to be disturbed. Harry kept his mouth shut, but watched him closely, trying to discern what he was on about. Malfoy was muttering to himself and chewing his lip like he was planning a break-in at Gringotts.

Harry eyed Malfoy up and down, intrigued. Malfoy's clothes fit him well, and did nothing to hide his slenderness. Harry was not surprised he was thin, since he hardly seemed to eat. Harry had only seen food go into Malfoy's mouth three times since he had arrived at Grimmauld Place. He appeared to live purely off of coffee.

His slenderness was not, however, scrawniness. From what Harry could see, Malfoy was well-muscled, the muscle was just compacted into a small amount of space. Malfoy reached out to tug at one of the

branches of the dead rosebush, and Harry watched the muscles in his arm work under the fishnet sleeves.

The netting was quite maddening, really. It highlighted the lines of Malfoy's arms quite nicely. Harry pondered the net-covered strip of belly, and wondered what Malfoy's chest would look like under that damnable fishnet shirt.

Malfoy caught Harry staring and gave him a pointed, questioning look, forcing Harry to abandon the idea entirely. He attempted to look like he had been contemplating the dying hydrangea bush behind Malfoy's right shoulder. Malfoy shook his head at Harry and went back to fondling the rosebush. Harry sighed with relief, and tried to find something other than Malfoy to look at.

As Harry looked around, he noticed that while the houses on either side of Grimmauld Place were visible, they seemed vague and hazy, as if behind a veil.

"It's some kind of Imperturbable Charm, mixed with an Invisibility Charm." Draco said, noting the way Harry was peering at the hazy form of number eleven Grimmauld Place with curiosity. "I can't quite work out how Dumbledore did it."

"They can't see us?" Harry asked. "Or hear us?"

"Nope." Draco said. He took a seat on one of the stone benches. "You should know that, it's your house."

"I've never been out here." Harry admitted. Malfoy gestured for Harry to join him. Harry sat on the bench across from Malfoy, and frowned at him. "What are you on about?"

"I'm trying to be romantic, Potter." Draco drawled. An unreadable expression flitted across his face. "I thought you'd fancy a stroll in the garden. Would you rather we come back when the moon is out?"

"Yeah, alright." Harry said irritably. He was not really in the mood to play.

"Dumbledore wants me to make a Dark Wizard out of you." Draco explained. "I figured we'd best get on with it. It'll take more than an hour."

"But why out here?" Harry asked.

"Are you sure you're not a Ministry Official?" Draco inquired. "You ask more questions than a bloody Auror."

"When have you talked with an Auror?" Harry asked, incredulous.

"Christ, Potter, my father is a Death Eater." Draco said, in long-suffering tones. "I've lied to more Aurors than I really care to think about."

"The Ministry knew about your dad?" Harry asked. "I mean, before..."

"Before he went to Azkaban?" Draco finished. "Oh, they knew. Only, they couldn't catch him at it. Or they didn't want to catch him at it, because they were afraid of him."

Harry's lip curled slightly with annoyance. Lately, he had been wondering what he should do with himself after school. Training as an Auror seemed like a reasonable idea, especially if Voldemort had not been sorted out by the time he left Hogwarts. But, the events of last year, coupled with his experiences with certain Ministry Officials (specifically Fudge and Umbridge), he was starting to think the Ministry was a group of bumbling nitwits.

"So, why out here, then?" Harry asked suddenly. He wasn't sure he wanted to know, but he certainly didn't want to think about the Ministry, anymore. Contemplating the Ministry of Magic any further was going to put him off his lunch.

"You can practice on the plants." Draco said simply.

"Does it work the same?" Harry asked, eyeing the decrepit foliage dubiously.

"Yes and no." Draco replied. "It will not effect the plants the same as it would a human, but it will effect them. If you can make the plants look like I make the plants, then you are on the right track."

"The plants are already dead, Malfoy." Harry said. "I case you hadn't noticed."

Raising an eyebrow at Harry for his cheek, Malfoy raised his wand and muttered something unintelligible. Suddenly, the dead, rosebush in

front of them came back to life-- almost violently so. The brown, brittle leaves rapidly became lush and green, and vivid, full-grown red roses erupted all over it.

Harry looked back and forth between Draco and the rosebush in utter shock. He could not believe what he just saw, and was seriously fighting back a temptation to rub at his eyes.

Draco sodding Malfoy just made flowers bloom.

Draco caught Harry goggling at the bush, and made a funny noise, the kind of noise Dobby usually made before he started bashing himself in the head. He looked embarrassed, his face flushing, then quickly went stern.

"You tell anyone about that, and I'll give you another scar." Draco threatened, gesturing to the rosebush. "You understand me, Potter?"

"I didn't see anything." Harry said airily, looking up at the sky.

"Now, watch." Draco said importantly. "*Disanimus*."

The rosebush immediately began to die. Or at least, it began to look like it was going to die. The leaves faded to a dingy olive color, and the roses started to blacken. It looked almost as bad as it had before Draco had revived it. Almost, but not quite.

"What was that?" Harry asked, his morbid curiosity kicking in.

"The Disanimus Curse. Or as my father calls it, the Nearly Killing Curse." Draco said. "Its partway between *Stupefy* and *Avada Kedavra*."

"Does it kill?" Harry asked, warily. This Dark Magic business was certainly unpleasant.

"Eventually." Draco said simply. To Harry's dismay, he did not seem the least bit uncomfortable. "At first, it puts the victim in a coma, but eventually, it will kill them."

"Is it reversible?" Harry asked.

"Not that I know of." Draco replied. He paused thoughtfully, tucking a lock of blond hair behind his ear. "Of course, if it was, that would be

rather against the point."

"What is the point, then, if you could just use *Avada Kedavra*?" Harry asked.

"Because the Killing Curse is draining, Potter." Draco said. "It's not something that can be cast in rapid succession."

Harry frowned. He didn't want to kill anyone at all, let alone bunches of people, one right after the other.

"Here, let me grow another bloody bush." Draco said. He grimaced, as if he would rather Harry watch him do anything other than grow flowers. "Now, you try."

"*Disanimus!*" Harry said clearly.

The rosebush wilted slightly. There was a noticeable change, but it was not the near devastation that Draco had caused. Harry was both pleased and displeased. He had not really wanted it to work, because he did not really want to be capable of Dark Magic, but at the same time, he was irritated with himself for his shoddy spellwork.

"Potter." Draco complained. "The key to this kind of magic is that you *mean* it. If you don't mean it, it won't do much good."

Draco's words made him shiver. He remembered the night Sirius died, the night he had used the Cruciatus Curse with minimal efficiency. Unbidden, Bellatrix Lestrange's voice rang in his head. *You need to mean them, Potter!*

"I don't want to mean it." Harry mumbled. He *didn't* want to mean it.

"Well, you are going to have to mean it." Draco said. "Otherwise, we are wasting our time."

"But..."

Malfoy sighed heavily, and moved to sit on Harry's bench. He straddled it, facing Harry's side. Harry looked over at him, and immediately forgot about Dark Magic, because his stomach was hurting again.

"Listen, I know you don't like this, but you have to try." Draco coaxed. He gave Harry a face that was almost imploring. "Dumbledore is a daft

old bugger, but I think he's got the right idea, here."

Malfoy's face suddenly went unreadable. Quickly, his hand snaked out, and he brushed his finger over Harry's scar. Just as quickly, he snatched his hand back. He glared at his hand like it had done it of its own volition, and looked like he wanted to chop it off for its audacity.

Harry had heard a strange sound when Malfoy's finger touched his scar. It had been fleeting, but Harry was sure he had heard it-- it had sounded like a bell. Soft and distant, like it was far-off, but unmistakably clear.

"*Disanimus!*" Harry said suddenly. The bush suddenly looked a stiff wind away from disintegrating.

"Very good, Potter." Draco drawled. "I'll make you a murdering bastard, yet."

VII Love is Always Over in the Morning (Part Two)

Potter's face was so expressive it was sheer entertainment to watch. This was especially so if several emotions were attacking his face at once. If was almost as the expressions went to war, each fighting for control of his boyish features.

Right before he cast a spell, his face would go stern and determined. Immediately following the spell he would cringe and wince, afraid of what he had just done. Then he would recover, and watch the rosebush with morbid fascination, curious to see what kind of damage he had done.

"Not bad, Potter." Draco said. "Not bad at all."

Surreptitiously, he studied Potter, wondering who had dressed him this morning. He was wearing faded jeans and a shirt in gray and dark green stripes. There was nothing particularly wrong with the clothes, it was just that Draco had never seen Potter in clothes that fit him. They also appeared to be relatively new, as opposed to his usual fair that looked like it came from a charity shop. He seriously doubted Potter had been clothes-shopping a day in his life. Maybe Granger or the Weasel had given them as gifts.

The green in Potter's shirt brought out his eyes, making them brighter and more startling than usual, even behind his glasses.

"You should rest for a bit." Draco said, noticing the thin sheen of sweat covering Potter's face and neck. "If you drop dead with exhaustion, Dumbledore will be right furious with me."

"It *is* tiring." Harry admitted. He shuffled over the bench across from Draco and sank down on it. He laid across it on his back, looking up at the sky.

The early afternoon sun was hot, beating down on both of them. Draco, in black from head to toe and boots that went halfway up his calves definitely felt it. Potter appeared to feel it to. He hitched his sweaty shirt up to the middle of his chest, letting the slight breeze cool him.

Draco watched Potter's chest rise and fall with interest, the same chest his head had rested on in the early hours of the morning. He wondered if Potter's heart would sound the same if he pressed his ear to it now. He wondered if Potter's hand would brush over his hair and come to rest on his shoulder, as it had before.

He wondered if he would hear that humming sound again.

Potter seemed to feel Draco's eyes on him. He turned over on the bench, so he was on his belly. Draco wanted to look away, he didn't want Potter to see him staring, but he couldn't make his eyes move. Potter propped his chin up on his hand, and returned Draco's gaze.

They watched each other for some time.

"Do you really believe that?" Harry asked suddenly.

"Believe what?" Draco asked.

"Your shirt." Harry said, pointing.

Draco looked down. *Love is always over in the morning.* He shrugged.

"I've never been given any other reason to think otherwise." Draco said. Truthfully, Draco more thought love was over once he rolled off of her, whoever she happened to be at the time.

"You don't believe in love, then?" Harry asked.

"Hardly." Draco said, almost snappishly. What the Hell kind of question was that, anyway? Asking a Malfoy about love-- Potter must be out of his mind. "Do you?" He asked, before he could stop himself.

"I guess so." Harry said absently.

"You're not in love with Granger." Draco's tone was flat. It was more of a statement than a question.

"I love her dearly." Harry admitted. "Not like that, though."

Draco chuckled, and Harry furrowed his brows.

"What?"

"The very idea of you bugging for sport has me tied." Draco said, shaking his head mirthfully. "It just doesn't seem like you."

"You do it all the time." Harry defended.

"Yes. I've only ever done it for sport. But, I am me, and you are you." Draco countered. "We've already been through this."

"You didn't care about Pansy, then?" Harry asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Pansy?" Draco asked, frowning. *What the Hell is he on about?*

"Pansy Parkinson." Harry clarified, as if there were seventeen girls named Pansy at Hogwarts. "I heard you two were together. Together, like a relationship."

Draco shuddered like 'relationship' was a dirty word. "No, we were not *together*. We had sex, yes. Plenty of it, but it was not a real relationship." Draco paused thoughtfully. "More of an arrangement."

"An arrangement?" Harry asked.

"Pansy and I both needed to get our virginities sorted out." Draco explained, as if it was perfectly natural. "So at the beginning of our fourth year, we spent about two weeks shagging each other senseless."

"How the Hell did you talk her into that?" Harry asked in shock. Draco fancied he also looked a bit impressed.

"It was her idea, actually." Draco said, smiling. That was the truth. "She wanted to get her first time out of the way, so when she finally got with someone she cared about, she would not ruin it by whimpering and bleeding all over the place."

Harry wrinkled his nose in disgust. "How..." He searched for the right word.

"Slytherin?" Draco joked.

"Yeah, that's it." Harry agreed. "Is that why you only shag for sport? Because your first time was so... um, businesslike?"

"No." Draco replied. Despite how it sounded, it had been far from businesslike. Those two weeks spent trying to figure out what was supposed to happen and where everything was meant to go had been rather fun. "I've just never wanted to be bothered with feelings."

Potter gave him an odd look that he could not decipher.

"Was Granger your first?" Draco asked, possessed with a perverse need to know.

"Yeah." Harry admitted.

He looked up at Draco, and blushed like a girl. Draco found that funny, and laughed, and Potter immediately became affronted

"Oh, what?" Harry snapped. "It's funny, because my wand hasn't been everywhere like yours has?"

"My *wand* has not been everywhere." Draco defended. "Not quite everywhere, anyway."

"That's not what I've heard." Harry replied in a singsong. His eyes glittered mischievously.

"Oh, and what have you heard?" Draco asked. He could not help but wonder why Potter cared.

"Aside from Pansy..." Harry paused. "Katie Bell."

"Yeah, alright." Draco admitted. He had a feeling Potter was going to harangue him about female he had ever spoken with, but he didn't bother fighting him. Inexplicably, he was feeling rather indulgent, and decided to let Potter have his fun.

"Alicia Spinnet." Harry said.

"No, that was Goyle." Draco said, wrinkling his nose at the memory. "Unfortunately, I was in the room."

"Mandy Brocklehurst."

"Who hasn't?" Draco protested. It wasn't like he been after Mandy or anything, it had simply been his turn.

"I haven't." Harry retorted.

"Yeah, well, you were busy saving yourself for Granger." Draco said waspishly. "Besides, you didn't miss much."

"Angelina Johnson." Harry said, ignoring the jibe.

"Yeah, but I'll have you know, that was *before* she started dating the Weasel's brother." Draco said, shuddering.

"Oh, shut it." Harry said. "You weren't complaining about Ginny being related to Ron when you were snogging her!"

"That." Draco said slowly. "Was an accident."

"An accident?" Harry laughed. "McGonagall caught you two in the Astronomy Tower! How do you walk up nine flights of stairs and lay down for a snog on accident?"

"We'd had quite a bit to drink." Draco tried. Snogging the Weasel's sister had not really been an accident. He was still a bit angry with McGonagall for interrupting them before they got to the main event. The girl was actually quite cute, he just wasn't going to admit it, because she was the Weasel's sister.

"No good." Harry said, feigning disappointment.

"Imperius Curse?" Draco offered weakly.

"Yeah, all right, because Ginny Weasley uses Unforgivable Curses all the time." Harry said sarcastically.

"Never mind the Weasel's sister." Draco said, pointing at Harry. "Its not like you're innocent, there."

"I only kissed her once." Harry said. "And I am not trying to act like she hexed me into it."

"The Weasel would kill you if you said something like that about her." Draco said.

"Ron nearly killed me for kissing her in the first place!" Harry admitted. "Which, I think, is why I never did it again."

"What did you go and tell him about it for?" Draco asked, laughing. "I mean, 'Hey, I was just snogging your sister' is never a good way to start a conversation."

"I didn't tell him." Harry insisted. "He sort of walked in on us."

"I've noticed you have a problem with that." Draco commented. "Where were you two, anyway?"

"On the train." Harry muttered.

"Did you lock the carriage?" Draco asked.

"No." Harry said sheepishly.

"Morgana's tits, Potter! You're hopeless!"

~*~

"Hannah Abbott." Harry said.

"Guilty." Draco said wearily. "Just the once, though."

"Was it really on Flitwick's desk?" Harry asked.

"Binn's classroom." Draco said thoughtfully. "On the floor."

This conversation had been going on for about a half-hour. Harry was expecting Malfoy to call it off at any moment, but strangely, he looked amused. Through the course of this conversation, Malfoy had even smiled a handful of times. Not sneering, sarcastic ones, but real smiles that touched his eyes.

They made his whole face light up beautifully, and Harry was anxious to coax more out of him.

"Susan Bones." Harry asked.

"No."

To Harry's surprise, and oddly, his relief, Malfoy said 'no' almost as often as he said yes.

"Parvati Patil." Harry said.

"Yeah." Draco flashed one of those coveted smiles.

"*And* her sister." Harry said, his tone chiding.

"Well, why not?" Draco asked. His gray eyes went sly. "They look exactly alike, anyway. I'd already kind of done it when I was with Parvati, if you think about it."

He rolled his eyes at Malfoy's ridiculous circular logic. "Lavender Brown."

"Actually, no." Draco said. "But I did hear you were with her."

"I kissed her, yeah." Harry said. He blushed, then kicked himself for doing it. Malfoy was completely unaffected by the topic. He did not seem embarrassed in the least.

"That's it?" Draco asked. He sighed melodramatically. "You're so boring, Potter."

"Fine, I am." Harry conceded, though he secretly hoped Malfoy didn't think so. "But, we are not talking about me. We are talking about you."

"Why are we, then?" Draco asked, as if amazed he had let this

interrogation continue this long.

"Because you are letting me." Harry said honestly. "Millicent Bulstrode."

Draco choked, and turned an unattractive shade of purple.

"Now you are making stuff up." Draco accused, wagging a finger. "Have you actually seen Millicent Bulstrode? Crabbe and Goyle won't even go near that, and they are so desperate they are probably shagging each other."

Succumbing to an intense curiosity, Harry said a name he had been dying to ask since the issue had come up.

"Terry Boot."

"No." Draco said, completely unruffled. "Nor Justin Flinch-Fletcher, before you ask."

"You don't like boys, then?" Harry asked. *Oh Merlin, I can't believe I asked him that.*

Draco paused, then shrugged. "Never thought about it, really." He said.

"Oh." Harry said simply. Draco gave him a curious look, and Harry immediately being thinking of a way to change the subject.

"Of course, if I did, it certainly would not be Terry Boot." Draco said jokingly.

"What about the teacher?" Harry asked. "Was it Sinistra or Trelawney?"

"You mean Hooch, and it didn't happen." Draco said, chuckling. "You shouldn't believe everything you hear. For example, I've heard you're shagging the Weasel."

"What?" Harry asked. "Me and Ron?"

"Well, why not? You spend enough time together." Draco commented. For all his calm tone, he looked ready to vomit. "You've never kissed him?" He asked like he was afraid of the answer.

Harry hesitated. "No."

"I saw that." Draco scolded. Disgust flitted over his face. "You had to think about it."

"Shut up." Harry said, blushing.

"So, you *have* kissed the Weasel." Draco insisted.

"No." Harry said. "Not really."

"Not really?" Draco lifted an eyebrow.

"It was an accident." Harry said lamely.

"Like my 'Astronomy Tower' accident?" Draco asked accusingly.

"Actually, it was 'Truth or Dare' accident." Harry said.

"Oh." Draco said. Harry thought he looked relieved, like he would have found him kissing Ron of his own volition extremely vexing. "I've had a few of those kinds of accidents. Who dared you, then?"

"Hermione." Harry said, curling his lip at the memory. He hadn't quite forgiven her for that yet.

"Granger?" Draco choked. "That's awfully pervy, for her."

"People really think I'm shagging Ron?" Harry asked. He still could not get his mind around that one.

"Only a few." Draco admitted. "Most everyone else is busy thinking you are having it off with Granger."

Harry made a noise like a stepped-on cat.

"Don't go acting like your honor's been tarnished, Potter." Draco drawled. "I mean, you are shagging her."

"Not anymore." Harry muttered. He looked away from Malfoy and studied the ground.

"Really." Draco asked, his tone dripping with disbelief. "Why is that?"

Harry paused. He didn't really know why. He just knew he didn't want to anymore.

"I've got more important things to worry about." Harry said finally.

Several things passed over Malfoy's face, each so quick Harry could not catch them.

"That you do." Draco agreed. "Speaking of which, its time to stop farting around. Disanimus, Potter, and please, try to make me believe it."

~*~

Potter was sitting on the ground, leaning back against the stone bench. Once again, Potter looked exhausted and weak. His face was flushed and sweaty, and his black hair was more of a hopeless mess than usual.

Draco was finding it disturbingly attractive.

"Don't worry, Potter, it only gets easier." Draco soothed. He walked over to Potter, and crouched down in front of him. His treacherous hands made a move for the scar, but Draco stilled it immediately.

"Really?" Harry said hopefully.

"Yeah." Draco said. "Imperius is really nothing more than a stuffed up Memory Charm. Instead of making them forget an event, you make them forget they have free will."

"What about Cruciatus?" Harry asked. Draco noticed his eyes tightened and something pained washed over his features.

"The key to Cruciatus is intent." Draco said. "The more you mean it, the more it hurts. But, it's rather effective, either way. Even a happy, fluffy Cruciatus hurts like Hell."

"So Disanimus is the tough one?" Harry asked.

"Think about it, Potter." Draco said. "Disanimus is one step bellow the Killing Curse, and the Killing Curse is as tough as it gets."

"Leave it to you to start with the hard one." Harry muttered.

"I learned Disanimus first, and I was about thirteen years-old." Draco snapped. "If it didn't hurt me, it certainly won't hurt you."

Harry harrumped.

"Merlin's balls, Potter! Are you the Hero of the Wizarding World, or what?" Draco asked caustically. "You gave Voldemort a run for his money when you were still a drooling brat in nappies. Why should I have to coddle you?"

"I never said that." Harry said quietly.

"Said what, that I have to coddle you?" Draco asked.

Looking over at Potter, he regretted his harsh words. He saw Potter's green eyes were dull with hurt. He righted himself and started walking away, unable to face those eyes.

"That I am the Hero of the Wizarding World." Harry's tone was flat and dull, just like his eyes.

"I never said you did." Draco said. He had never understood Potter's grudging acceptance of his fame. Anyone else would have been lording it up, but Potter seemed to wish it would all go away.

"I don't want to be."

"Well, you are who you are, and that can't be changed." Draco said, surprised by the gentleness in his own voice.

He walked back over to Potter, studying him. His expression was reminiscent of a kicked puppy, and Draco swore at himself for his earlier harsh words. He smiled at Potter, and to his relief, Potter smiled back, and some of the hurt playing over his face started to ebb away.

Grasping Potter by the hands, he hauled him to his feet. That humming had started again, and his hands seemed unwilling to release Potter's. He noticed that Potter's hands seemed unwilling, as well. It struck Draco that he and Potter were now holding hands in the middle of a garden like a bunch of sappy gits.

Suddenly, he didn't care.

"You should have some lunch." Draco said finally.

"We missed lunch. It's nearly dinner." Harry pointed out. "You don't eat, anyway."

"I do eat." Draco said defensively. "I just don't eat night and day like the Weasel."

"You eat coffee." Harry argued.

"No one *eats* coffee, you berk." Draco said. "Are you tired?"

"A little." Harry mumbled. Draco thought he looked ready to keel over.

"You want to go inside?" Draco asked.

Now that he thought about it, he wasn't sure if he really wanted to go inside. Inside, holding hands with Potter like a sappy git would likely be looked down upon. The Weasel would say something crappy to him, Draco would be forced to hex him near to death, then Potter would get upset with him for turning his best friend into a warty, comatose, gelatinous creature, even if it would be an improvement.

Better to avoid the whole thing and stay in the garden.

"No. I want to stay right here." Harry said.

Apparently, Potter would rather stand in the garden holding hands like a sappy git. Draco decided this was the best news he had received in days.

"I should sit, though." Harry said quietly. "Just for a bit."

Draco started to move, but Harry's feet didn't quite cooperate. Draco walked into Harry. Unprepared for this, Harry stumbled. Draco let go of Harry's hands and grabbed him by the waist to steady him. At the same time, Harry's hands moved up to take a hold of him by the upper arms.

The humming was back, persistent to the point it almost had a pitch. Draco gave a start when he realized Harry was talking at him. Draco

hadn't heard a word of it, he had been busy watching Harry's mouth move.

"What?" Draco asked.

His hands seemed to have a mind of their own. They wanted to leave the safety of Harry's waist and slide around him. They wanted to creep up under his Harry's shirt and feel his skin.

"Sorry." Harry said.

"Why?" Draco asked. Harry's hands inched up his arms to his shoulders.

This close, Draco could see Harry's eyes quite clearly, despite his glasses. They were exactly the color of grass, and there were tiny gold flecks around the pupil. They were bright and startling, and Draco thought they were beautiful.

"For being a clumsy git." Harry mumbled, letting his chin drop.

One of Draco's hands left the relative safety of Harry's waist. They did not slide around Harry's back or creep under his shirt as they had threatened, but moved to tip Harry's chin back up.

"What?" Harry asked.

"I can't see your eyes when you do that." Draco said, not believing the words as they came out of his mouth. His hand dropped back to Harry's waist, and he let it slide a bit over Harry's back. The other one joined it shortly.

"Why are you looking?" Harry asked. His arms moved from Draco's shoulders to twine around his neck.

"I don't know." Draco murmured, pulling Harry a little closer. "Because you are letting me."

He pressed a kiss to the scar he had been fondling all day. Harry shivered. The humming changed to more of a quiet ringing, like a bell. It was persistent, but soft and sweet. He wanted to hear it again. He wondered if it would happen again.

He wondered what Harry tasted like.

Draco dipped his head a bit, moving his mouth closer to Harry's.

"What are you doing?" Harry breathed. He didn't move away.

"I want to know what you taste like." Draco said. He cursed inwardly. His mouth was doing that thing he hated where it talked without his permission.

Harry took a hitched breath, and his eyes slid closed. He seemed to lean in a bit.

The next thing Draco knew, he had a mouthful of feathers.

"Ruddy owl!" Harry snapped, trying to extricate himself from Draco and Errol from Draco at the same time. The owl had flown straight into them. When he bounced off Draco's chest he had perched himself on Draco's arm, and the owl's feet were now hopelessly entangled in his fishnet sleeves.

His mind was whirling. He had very nearly kissed Harry sodding Potter, and Harry sodding Potter had very nearly let him. Now that he was thinking properly he realized that would have been a monumentally stupid idea, but at the same time, he was rather agitated that they had been interrupted.

He was also agitated because Potter had woken up something inside of him he had always convinced himself didn't exist.

"What the fuck is he on about?" Draco asked testily, eyeing the scroll in Harry's hand ferociously.

"Dinner." Potter said, almost morosely.

~*~

Malfoy almost kissed me. Harry thought.

He stabbed distractedly at his dinner. He wasn't hungry. He didn't want to eat.

I almost let him.

Now that he was inside, and at the other end of the table from Malfoy, his brain was starting to work properly. It was slowly piecing together the events from outside, and he was having a hard time believing what had nearly happened.

He and Malfoy had been holding hands. He and Malfoy had been wrapped around each other and staring at each other. His mouth had been about an inch away from Malfoy's when they were interrupted by Errol.

He had wanted Malfoy to kiss him, hard as it was to believe. He had felt so warm and calm and happy. The humming had started up again, but it had been louder, like it had been trying to tell him something. Almost as if it had been putting a spell on him.

He looked over and caught Malfoy studying him over the rim of his ever-present coffee cup. He wasn't eating. He had taken some food on his plate to placate Mrs. Weasley, but he wasn't eating it. He was pushing it around the plate enough to keep Mrs. Weasley entertained.

Malfoy had said he wanted to look at his eyes. Malfoy had kissed his scar. Malfoy had said he wanted to know what he tasted like.

He probably didn't mean it. Harry thought sourly. He probably says that kind of rubbish to everybody.

He had heard what Malfoy said. Malfoy didn't believe in love. Malfoy didn't want to be bothered with feelings. Malfoy only shagged for pleasure.

However, Malfoy's stated opinion on love and feelings did not seem to fit with what had happened. The surge of energy and emotion he had felt as Malfoy's lips had inched closer to his had been too strong and intense to only be about lust and hormones. The sense of loss he had felt when the owl's arrival had forced him to move away from Malfoy had been so overwhelming it had been painful.

I wonder if Malfoy felt it, too?

Harry laughed at himself.

Don't be stupid. Malfoy doesn't feel.

He glanced over and caught Malfoy looking at him again. Malfoy let his

coffee cup dip down a bit, and he favored Harry with one of those rare, real smiles that touched his eyes. Malfoy's face lit up like a candle, and Harry was so startled by it he dropped his fork.

Malfoy could not believe in love or feelings all he wanted. Harry didn't care.

He wanted to know what Draco tasted like.

~*~

Draco went upstairs to find Potter already asleep.

Potter, understandably, had been exhausted, and retired to bed shortly after dinner. Draco had wanted to go up with him, but he had known both of them going to bed at shortly before eight would have been suspicious.

He had passed about an hour in the sitting room, half-listening to the Weasel waffle on to Granger about some damn thing or another.

At a little after nine, he had hoped to slip upstairs, only to be dragged back to the sitting room by Mrs. Weasley so he could have a lengthy conversation with Dumbledore's head. Mrs. Weasley had left the room, thank God, because Dumbledore wished to discuss his trip to the Manor, and would not have been fooled by the story he had fed Mrs. Weasley.

Dumbledore had also been curious about Harry's foray into the Dark Arts, and Draco had been forced to give him a detailed account of their day. He had, of course, neglected to mention the near-snog, but part of him had almost thought the old man knew, because he had been looking at him oddly.

Dumbledore's head had been followed shortly by Snape's, and the Potions Master had been in a foul mood. Snape was evidently displeased with Draco's currently living arrangements, and had dithered on about it endlessly.

Now that he was upstairs, Potter was asleep.

Sighing, he put on his pajama bottoms, and crawled into the bed.

"Draco?" Harry mumbled sleepily.

"Yeah?" He replied.

"Where have you been?" Harry asked. He sat up, and rubbed at his eyes.

"Downstairs, talking to various heads." Draco said.

Harry looked at Draco questioningly for a moment, but let it go. He yawned loudly, then crawled across the bed to Draco and curled up in the curve of his arm.

"Goodnight, Draco." Harry mumbled into his chest.

"Goodnight, Harry." Draco said softly.

He twisted a lock of messy, black hair between his fingers, and let the humming in his ears sing him to sleep.

VIII These Sounds Fall Into My Mind (Part One)

Sunlight intruded on the dark interior of the master bedroom of Number Twelve, Grimmauld place, its persistent, golden glow shining through the large window with almost violent intensity. It was a bright, assaulting light, the kind of light that said 'morning' had been underway for some time, and if Draco did not get out of bed soon, he would be having his coffee for brunch rather than breakfast.

It was later than Draco usually stayed in bed. Vanity was a frankly time-consuming deadly sin, and the perpetual battle to maintain appearances did not allow for faffing about in bed until half ten. He was usually up and dressed and halfway through his second cup of coffee before most the denizens of the Slytherin dorms (even the notoriously vain and self-possessed females) had begun waddling to the showers.

From the sun's position, Draco estimated it was closer to quarter of nine, but this still suggested a worrying slothfulness on his behalf. As it stood now, breakfast at Number Twelve Grimmauld Place was slated to start momentarily, and Draco had yet to remove himself from bed.

At Malfoy Manor, one was expected to be properly manicured before leaving one's bedroom, and mealtimes were practically a holy call to duty. Had Draco ever wandered down to breakfast at home, late, and wearing his dressing robe and slippers, Lucius Malfoy would have would have been beside himself with embarrassment and shame.

Draco stopped contemplating the sun's progression across the sky and considered the head of messy, inky-black hair pillowed on his chest. Harry's current position was the primary reason Draco was still pointedly abed and in his pajamas. Draco's internal clock had woken him at shortly before seven, as it always did, but he had not risen, using the flimsy excuse that Harry was pinning him to the bed for this blatant variation from his normal routine.

He had told himself, for the last two hours, while absently threading his fingers through Harry's hair with one hand and tracing patterns across Harry's back with the other, that moving would wake Harry, and Harry should get all the sleep available too him after yesterday's harrowing spell-session.

I could get used to this

The hands molesting Harry's sleeping form froze, and he mental called himself nine kinds of idiot.

Gently, he pushed Harry off of him and slid off of the bed. The distinct sense of emptiness he felt at the loss of contact was alarming. The soothing humming that had been pleasantly buzzing in his ears for the last two hours ceased. He was half-tempted to return to the bed and drape Harry across him, but was stilled by a prickling pain behind his eyes. He normally had his first cup of coffee well before this, and his body was beginning to lament the lack of caffeine. If he did not get on with his patented coffee-consumption shortly, he would soon have a migraine that would render him immobile until sometime after dinner.

He showered quickly, then returned to the master bedroom to dress, his eyes continually wandering to Harry as he did so.

I do not care about people. Draco chided himself as he laced up his boots, but his eyes flicked to Harry, and he frowned.

He had been raised to think feelings were a sign of weakness, and that caring about others was a waste of time.

With that in mind, he had shaped his personality accordingly. He regarded everyone and everything with sneering indifference. He never bothered with people unless he thought there was something to be gained from it, and he never had sex for any other reason than gratification.

I do not care about people. Draco chided himself as he pulled his shirt over his head, but his eyes flicked to Harry, and he knew he was lying to himself.

He was certainly starting to care about Potter in an alarming fashion, and in truth, the whole situation had him baffled.

First and foremost, why Potter? The entire notion was ridiculous. He and Harry had been on the opposite end of things, literally from the cradle. Draco had been raised thinking Potter was the enemy, and once Potter had entered the Wizarding World he had discovered his sole purpose in life was to destroy everything the Malfoy's believed in.

They hated each other. Or at least, they had.

When it began, Draco's hatred of Harry had been born of resentment, rather than true dislike. Harry had denied his friendship on the train, an act that had honestly cut him to the core, but at the time, flanked by Crabbe and Goyle and in front of God and Hogwarts, he had not been about to show weakness. He had responded with the only thing a spoiled, privileged eleven year-old could, nastiness and vitriol and spite.

And truthfully, the basis of Draco's hatred had remained resentment, growing worse over the years because it was fed by a raging fire of jealousy. Everyone always praised Potter to the skies, and it had eaten away at Draco, driving him insane. Saint Potter, the Gryffindor Golden Boy, who could say and do whatever he wanted, who could not walk the through Diagon Alley or the halls of Hogwarts without some swooning fan trying to take his picture.

The first day of classes, Potter had been caught ignoring a direct order from a faculty member, and unconscionably, instead of detention, this had resulted in Potter being the first first-year allowed on a Quidditch House Team in over a century.

This had marked the beginning of a rather disturbing and frustrating trend-- Potter would always the exception, not the rule.

Everyone thought anything he did was well done, because the Boy Who Lived could not possibly be capable of doing anything wrong. During their time at Hogwarts, Potter had continually walked into situations that would have gotten any other mortal expelled. But, because he was Harry fucking Potter, and because he always managed to do a good deed while he was breaking rules and trouncing authority, everyone, including Dumbledore, looked the other way.

Except when Dumbledore was giving Potter House Points for it.

The only person who had never seemed choked by Harry's fame or blinded by his importance to the fate of civilized wizardry had been Professor Snape, who had tried his hardest to remind everyone Potter was human, as often as he could manage it. But, since Dumbledore seemed to consider Potter to be something just this side of sacred, Snape could only make him so miserable before he was shut down by a stern look over half-moon spectacles.

To make matters worse, there had never been much Draco could do, either. Try as he might, he never managed to be better than Harry at anything, except for Potions, and that was a very small victory. The desire to hex Harry near to death or bash in his face had often been overwhelming, but more often than not, Draco's hands had been tied. True, Draco had his own bodyguards, but Potter had more, and while his were not as menacing as Crabbe and Goyle, they were not without their uses.

The Weasley twins were barely the size of Crabbe together, but they were quick and bright, and their public call-out with Umbridge proved they were not afraid of anything. The original Weasel was simply an overprotective ball of fury where Harry was concerned. Since Harry would be saving his pathetic soul from Voldemort in the end, the Weasel seemed to think it was only fair he keep a very watchful eye on Harry's back in the meantime. Granger was a walking spellbook. She had to be right furious to forget her mortal fear of being expelled, but the knowledge that she could send someone to the hospital wing for the better part of a month if she wanted to was, in fact, rather off-putting.

Last time Draco had checked, Pomfrey *still* had not figured out how to get rid of those purple things on Marietta Edgecombe's face.

Potter's friends were what had always galled Draco most of all. Not

their personalities, so much, or their lack thereof, but their honest loyalty to Potter. There had been disagreements between the trio over the course of five years, but nothing that had never been smoothed over eventually by time and affection.

They were true friends, and Draco had none to speak of. Crabbe and Goyle were not friends, they were minions. Lackeys. Heavies. They had attached themselves to Draco because he was from a powerful family, and because he had more wit and brains while sleeping than the pair of them had together, awake, not because they valued his friendship.

Harry's friends, however, would cheerfully hold hands with him while walking to the Gates of the Underworld-- and had, on at least five different occasions.

I do not care about people. Draco chided himself as headed for the door, but his eyes flicked to Harry, and he paused.

He knew that yesterday, when his mouth had been an inch from Harry's in the garden, if Harry had asked him to follow him to his almost certain death, he would have agreed, without batting any eyelash.

~*~

As Harry woke, he was overcome by a strong sense of loneliness. It was an ache, like he had woke to find he was missing a limb. He discovered he was cuddled up with his pillow, which brought him to the realization that Draco was gone.

Sighing, Harry sat up, and frowned at the decidedly empty master bedroom.

Draco had still been in the room the first time Harry had come awake. He had been curled up in the curve of Draco's arm, with his head resting on Draco's chest. Draco had been awake as well, and had been toying with Harry's hair and tracing lazy circles up and down his spine.

Part of Harry had wanted to say something to Draco, but Draco's hands had been so comforting and the humming in his ears had been so enchanting that he had just laid there quietly, enjoying the moment. It had almost felt as if a spell had been cast over him, a

wonderful, sweet spell, and in the end he had kept his mouth shut because he had not wanted to sound of his voice to break it.

He had drifted back off to sleep soon afterward. The even rise and fall of Draco's chest, his soothing hands, and the humming in Harry's ears had been more effective than a Sleeping Draught.

Harry found he was still tired, despite the fact he had gotten almost twelve hours of sleep. The continued casting of difficult magic had taken its toll on his body, and his muscles were stiff like he had run up the seven flights of stairs to the Gryffindor common room nine or ten times in a row.

The temptation to fall lay back down was great, but he was eventually coaxed out of bed by the smell of sausage and a fierce desire to see Draco.

Dressing himself took more time than was absolutely necessary. Harry realized, once everything he owned was laid out on the bed, that he was picking through his clothes like he was going somewhere special, not just downstairs to have breakfast with Ron and Hermione and Ginny.

And Draco.

He had never worried overmuch about his clothes, because he'd never had the opportunity to worry. At the Dursley's, his wardrobe had consisted of whatever Dudley had become too wide to wear, and at Hogwarts, Dumbledore had thoughtfully made his lack of fashion-sense a non-issue by insisting everyone wear heavy, black robes that went from neck to ankle.

Normally, he would grab the first clean thing and start his day without even pausing in front of a mirror. Right now, however, his woefully sparse wardrobe and his inability to find two socks that matched without help from Hermione was extremely frustrating.

He did not want to spend the day with Draco looking like a sloppy git.

Harry growled at the clothing strewn across his bed and tried to force himself to pick something and get on with it. Draco wore a lot of black. Harry didn't own very much black, one shirt and two pairs of trousers (one of which had been Dudley's). Draco pulled off the whole angel-of-death thing flawlessly. Harry knew if he tried, he would only succeed in

looking like a poncy git, rather than a sloppy one.

He eventually settled for a medium blue button-down with short sleeves (a Christmas gift from Ron), and a pair of light khaki trousers (a birthday gift from Hermione).

The specter of Draco downstairs at the breakfast table plagued his thoughts as he dressed. His stomach twisted and fluttered nervously. He was both anxious and terrified at the thought of seeing Draco, and wondered idly if Draco felt the same way.

He doesn't care about people. Harry reminded himself, as he buttoned his shirt, and he frowned.

He had no doubts he cared about Draco, or at least, that he was starting to. The fact that he cared was not what was worrying. He had never had anyone to care about until he left the Dursley's, but once he did, he had found he had a surprising capacity to care about people, as if he was trying to make up for the first ten, empty years of his life.

He had attached himself to Ron almost instantly, and by the time they had exited the train, he had found he cared about Ron deeply. He had begged with the Sorting Hat because he thought the Slytherins looked like a dark, unpleasant lot, but mostly it had been because he had not wanted to be separated from Ron, so soon after making the first friend he had ever had.

Once they got past their differences, his feelings towards Herimone had been similar. She was a know-it-all, and she nagged to distraction, but regardless, he loved her beyond measure.

The alarming thing was not so much that he cared about Draco, but the actual nature of the feelings. It was very similar to they way he had always figured he would eventually feel about Hermione or Ginny. Or at least, the way everyone else expected he would eventually feel about Hermione or Ginny.

It was a wonderful, sweet, warm feeling, but at the same time, it was a needy and desperate, and a little bit frightening.

He doesn't care about people. Harry reminded himself, as he headed down the stairs for breakfast, but he mulled over recent events, and wondered if that was entirely true.

The intensity and energy that had been swirling around he and Draco when they were standing in the garden had been plain, and Harry was quite sure it had not been a figment of his imagination.

It had been very different than the physical rush he experienced whenever he was fooling around with Hermione. As Draco's mouth had moved towards his he had felt that physical rush, the same fire in his belly and ice over his skin, but there had been something else as well, something that had been purely emotional. There had been a nagging, fluttery feeling in his stomach, and a throbbing in his chest like his heart was going to burst.

With Hermione, his heart had never come into it.

There had been a look on Draco's face, a light in his eyes, that made Harry suspect he had felt it to, despite his insistence that he was not capable of such emotions. It had been nothing like the look that had been on Draco's face when Harry had seen him emerging from a Potions cupboard right behind Parvati Patil. Draco's face in the garden had been sweeter and softer.

He doesn't care about people. Harry reminded himself, as he walked into the kitchen, but he caught Draco looking at him as he walked in, and saw that same, sweet, soft expression, and he knew that Draco Malfoy was a fraud.

~*~

Harry came downstairs halfway though the Weasel's fifth helping of sausage, eggs and fried tomatoes.

Draco was on his fourth cup of coffee, and was pushing his own breakfast around his plate. Mrs. Weasley had tried to trick him into eating something substantial by not providing toast, which was normally the only thing he could stomach at breakfast, when he ate at all. Draco had settled on one egg fried hard (despite Mrs. Weasley's suggestion he have three or four), but he was mashing it up with his fork rather than putting it in his mouth.

In light of his threatened headache, however, the coffee had been going down the hatch at rapid pace, even for him.

Dear God, he's beautiful. Draco thought to himself, his eyes sweeping

up and down Harry without his permission.

As with yesterday, Potter was not displaying his usual fashion sense reminiscent of a house-elf. Not only did his clothes match (short-sleeved, medium blue button-down with khaki trousers), but they fit him. If Draco had not been watching Granger shovel sausage into her mouth for the last forty-five minutes, he would have suspected she had run upstairs and picked out Harry's clothes for him.

He smiled at Draco from the doorway, something Granger and the Weasel noted with confounded expressions. Then he paused, apparently trying to decide between the empty chair next to Draco and the vacant space between his two best friends. His hesitation was also noted. He quickly recovered himself and sat down between Granger and the Weasel, but once he was settled he cast a glance towards Draco's end of the table.

Draco sipped his coffee, studied the mess on his plate that had been one egg fried hard, and told himself not to stare at Potter. Despite his efforts, his eyes drifted away from what was left of his egg over to Harry, only to find Harry watching him as well. Granger was talking at him, in a tone that said she was well aware Harry was not listening to a word of it and she did not appreciate it, but Harry was not listening, so he didn't really seem to notice.

Harry peered exaggeratedly at Draco's breakfast and made an indignant face at the thought of food being on his plate. Draco responded with an expression that roughly translated into 'Sod off, Scarhead'. Harry rolled his eyes and pointedly sipped his coffee. Draco put a forkful of mashed-up egg into his mouth, then chewed and swallowed dramatically. Harry snickered loudly, making Granger cease her nattering to fix him with a strange look.

"What's so funny?" She asked. She eyed Draco sideways, then focused back on Harry.

"Nothing." Harry said quickly. He recovered by stuffing some fried tomatoes into his mouth. Then, he glanced back over at Draco quickly, and started laughing again.

"What are you two on about?" Ron asked suspiciously. He speared what was probably his twenty-seventh sausage with his fork, then gestured at Draco menacingly with it.

"Why would we be on about something?" Draco asked lazily.

"You two are acting funny." Ron said, frowning.

"Well, I am going to go act funny in the other room." Draco said testily, draining his coffee cup. He headed for the door quickly, and could feel Potter's eyes following him as he went.

He could also feel the Weasel's eyes, and he colored slightly. What would the Weasel have said, if he had come out to the garden and seen Harry and him holding hands like a pair of sappy gits? What would the Weasel have said, if he had seen them practically snogging? What would the Weasel have said, if he had come into the master bedroom this morning, and seen Harry sleeping on Draco's chest, and Draco curling Harry's hair around his fingers?

Draco doubted the Weasel would have said very much at all. The Weasel probably would have hexed Draco in to about four hundred pieces, then buried the pieces in various points throughout the United Kingdom.

As he settled himself in the unused, medium-sized parlor at the rear of the house, his thoughts, predictably, turned to Harry.

The notion that might care for Harry was bothering enough, but these new-found feelings seemed to have a distinct sexual undertone, something that Draco frankly found odd.

What he had said to Harry yesterday was true. It was not that he *did* or *didn't* like boys, he had never really thought about it. Girls had always taken his fancy, and since there had always been plenty of girls willing to sort him out, he had never seen a need to go branching out onto something new.

Although, the opportunity had presented itself. While the rumors about Terry Boot and Justin Flinch-Fletcher were untrue, but they were not without some basis in fact. Both of boys had expressed interest in Draco, and it had been assumed by some that Draco had taken them up on it, due to his active sexual nature.

At a party in the dungeons, a monumentally washed Boot had hit Draco up for a snog. Draco had declined, but at the time, he had been otherwise engaged. There had been a rather accommodating Slytherin girl in his lap, and her hand had been halfway down his pants right

about the time that Boot had decided that then was as good a time as any to see if Draco wanted to have a go. At the time, the Slytherin girl had looked like a rather winning situation, while bumbling off somewhere and trying to figure out what to do with Boot's equipment had seemed like an awful lot of work.

Flinch-Fletchley had been a similar situation. Different party in the dungeons, different (Ravenclaw) girl in Draco's lap, but the result had been very much the same. He hadn't seen the need to go chasing after Flinch-Fletchley when Padma Patil already had him pinned to the couch and had been in the process of divesting him of his trousers.

"You don't like boys, then?" Harry asked.

"Never thought about it, really." He said.

As the handle of the door to the unused, medium-sized parlor at the rear of the house clicked and Harry stepped into the room, Draco decided that, perhaps, it was time he thought about it.

~*~

"They're were acting very odd." Ron commented, biting into his twenty-eighth sausage.

"What do you mean?" Hermione said. She agreed, partially, but Malfoy had fled the room so quickly there had not been enough time for her to come to any kind of conclusion.

"They've hated each other for five years." Ron said. "They spend one day together, and now they are eyeing each other across the table and snickering like a bunch of gits? Odd, if you ask me."

"I suppose you are right." Hermione ventured. "Maybe Malfoy is not really as bad as we thought."

Ron snorted loudly. "Of course he is. He is rotten, and nasty, and I still cannot believe Dumbledore is forcing Harry to hang out with him."

"Dumbledore had is reasons." Hermione argued. "And I still say, he would not have done it if he thought it would put Harry in danger."

Ron snorted again. "I think Malfoy did something to Dumbledore's

brain." Ron said, taking another bite of sausage. "And what the shit was he wearing, anyway? Looked like a mortician's wet dream, that one."

Hermione sighed heavily. Ron was Ron, and there was no changing his mind once he had made it up. Draco Malfoy could rescue her, Ron and Harry from Voldemort single-handedly, and Ron would still think he was up to no good. Hermione, however, could not help wondering if there was something more to Malfoy than his sneering, perpetually displeased exterior.

Since he had come to Grimmauld Place, he seemed a bit less vile than what Hermione remembered of him from school. He was still sneering and taunting, but his expressions were a bit softer, and his voice lacked some of its usual rancor.

She wondered if his mother's death had changed his perspective on things, or if it had something to do with Harry.

"What are you doing today, then?" Ron asked suddenly.

"I don't know." She said. "What are you doing?"

"Whatever you're doing." Ron said simply.

She forced herself not to roll her eyes at him. He had kissed her two nights ago, right before they went upstairs for bed. Ever since, he had been wearing an expression that said he meant to ask her out, but he was bloody well taking his time about it. She had been waiting, patiently, because that is what girls are supposed to do, but part of her was tempted to just ask him and get it over with.

"I'll probably be studying." She said.

"Yeah, all right." Ron said, sounding a bit disappointed. "I guess I'll watch you, then."

~*~

Draco was in the very same place Harry had found him yesterday, doing very much the same thing. He was sitting on the couch, leaning forward and floating a figurine (a crystal frog, rather than the glass unicorn) about without his wand.

Once again, Draco was a symphony in black.

He was wearing the same heavy, black lace-up boots, which disappeared under a slightly different pair of black trousers. His shirt was black and sleeveless, and quite tight. Underneath his shirt he wore a black long-sleeve, but rather than fishnet, it was made from a very thin, sheer material, similar to women's nylon stockings.

Draco set the crystal frog on the table, and regarded Harry with an appraising, somewhat bemused expression.

"Who dressed you this morning?" Draco asked suddenly. He leaned back a bit, and Harry noticed there were darker patches on his nylon long-sleeve, some kind of pattern that twisted around Draco's arms.

"I did." Harry said, slightly affronted.

"Are you serious?" Draco asked, arching an eyebrow. "Granger didn't help you?"

"No." Harry said, narrowing his eyes. "Why? Do I look funny?"

"Quite the contrary." Draco said. He paused thoughtfully. "You look rather nice, which is why I am confused. Normally, you look like a house-elf."

"Sod off, Malfoy." Harry said, though his tone was light.

Draco sighed. "You wound me, Potter." He said. "That was probably the third compliment I have ever given in my life, and you tell me to 'sod off'."

"What's with your hair, then?" Harry asked randomly.

"What's wrong with it?" Draco asked quickly. To Harry's amusement, Draco looked horrified.

"Just, you normally paste it to your head." Harry said. He was tempted to go touch it, and maybe crawl into Malfoy's lap in the process, but he forced himself to stay in the doorway.

"Is it unflattering, Potter?" Draco asked. He looked like the answer to that question was positively dire.

"I rather like it, really." Harry blurted out.

He blushed, his face roughly the color of his Quidditch robes. Draco blushed too, more of a pinkish-color. They stared at each other in a strained, awkward silence for a good while, before Draco finally heaved himself off the couch and started for the door.

"Let's go outside." He said.

"Yeah, all right." Harry said. Merciful Merlin, the garden, the place were all this began. The nervous, fluttery feeling returned to his stomach.

As Draco drew close, he saw there was a pattern on his nylon long-sleeves. Dragons were embroidered into the nylon with shiny, black thread, and they twisted around Malfoy's arms in a way that made Harry gawk with interest. He reached out and ran a tentative finger over the dragon on Malfoy's left arm, and he stiffened visibly at Harry's touch.

"What are we doing, then?" Harry asked. His voice had taken on a strange, breathy quality.

"Oh." Draco said, coming back to himself. "I was thinking of teaching you how to make it rain fire."

"Sorry." Harry said, frowning. "Did you say 'make it rain fire'?"

"Yes." Draco drawled, making a fluttery gesture with his hands. "Little balls of fire, falling from the sky."

Harry nodded, but didn't move. Making it rain fire sounded interesting, but standing there and touching Malfoy's arm a little longer sounded more interesting.

"Well, come on, then." Draco said. "Given the nature of the spell, it think its would be better if we did it outside."

VIII
These Sounds Fall Into My Mind
(Part Two)

"It's rather simple, really." Draco explained, to a dubious-looking Potter. "Yet, quite effective at a distance."

It was very effective from a distance. The spell produced little balls of fire, that rained down like hail. Not only were the balls of fire rather damaging to people, but they would set the ground underneath their feet ablaze very quickly.

"Won't it set the garden on fire?" Harry asked worriedly. He frowned slightly, and his green eyes darkened.

"Not today, though normally, that would be the point." Draco said. He set down on one of the stone benches and gestured around with his wand. "I've charmed most anything important with a fireproofing spell. The fires will go out once they touch anything."

Harry nodded slowly, but he still looked dubious.

"Now, the angle of your wand is just as important of as the spell." Draco explained. "How you direct your wand determines where the fire goes. If you are not careful, you will set yourself on fire."

"Can you fireproof me, then?" Harry asked.

"No." Draco said. "That will just make you lazy. You'll pay attention better if you're life is in danger."

"You're horrible." Harry complained.

"Yes, I am." Draco said cheerfully. "Now watch. *Infernus!*"

There was a deafening noise, and a bright flash of light. Brilliant orange and red balls of fire, about the size of a Knut, started hailing down in the garden. Draco had angled his wand so the spell was centered over the fireproofed gazebo. The little fires hit the gazebo and fizzled out with delicate, poofy sounds and tiny tufts of smoke.

The firestorm lasted a few moments. Draco ended the spell, and looked over at Harry expectantly. Potter looked suitably impressed, and watched the line of the sky where the fire had appeared for some time after it stopped.

"Will they do much damage that small?" Harry asked.

"Surprisingly, yes." Draco said. He too, had been concerned with the size of the fireballs when he had learned the spell. "There is a larger version, however. Fireballs the size of Quaffles."

"Oh, really?" Harry asked. For all his qualms about Dark Magic, Draco thought he looked a bit eager. "Quaffles, you say."

"*Infernus Gigantum!*" Draco shouted in response.

True to his word, orange and red balls of fire, literally the size of Quaffles, appeared after the deafening noise and bright flash of light. They hailed down violently, crashing loudly into the gazebo before extinguishing into heavy clouds of dark gray smoke and a noise like bacon in a frying pan.

"If I hadn't fireproofed the garden, the whole thing would be on fire." Draco said importantly. "Flames four feet tall."

"You're frightening, you know that?" Harry said, to Draco's self-satisfied expression.

"I wouldn't be me if I wasn't." Draco said airily. "Now, you try. The small version, if you don't mind."

"You don't trust me with the big balls?" Harry asked cheekily.

"I rather like living, Potter, thank you very much." Draco drawled. "You are not playing with the big balls until I am sure you know what you are doing."

Harry flushed red and turned back towards the gazebo, suddenly intrigued by the horizon.

Christ, I think I just flirted with Potter! Draco complained to himself. *I did! I just fucking flirted with Potter!*

Potter, thankfully disrupted that musing by causing a burst of fireworks that seemed to emanate from the doorway of the gazebo. He cursed, and tried again. This time they shot out of the top of the gazebo like a fountain.

"Your aim is off." Draco pointed out. "I told you, your wand angle is just as important as the spell."

"Yeah, all right." Harry grumbled. He then produced a shower of fireballs that started about a foot above the gazebo and slightly to the left.

As Potter practiced, Draco let his mind wander. He knew he should be paying more attention to what Harry was doing, but paying attention to what Potter was doing was what was making his mind wander in the first place.

Harry's face was doing that thing it did when he cast spells, where several varying emotions went to war across his face. Draco could not help but stare, taking in the way his jaw set when he was determined, how his brow crinkled when he cringed, or how his eyes lit up like *Avada Kedavra* itself when he saw that the spell had worked.

A loud yelp from Harry brought Draco's attention back. Harry's last spell had created a hailstorm of fire that had originated from practically on top of his head. Sighing heavily, Draco got up from the bench and walked towards Harry, treating him to a verbal treatise on following instructions that would have made Snape proud.

"I did it just like you said!" Harry shouted, his voice dripping with frustration. He looked seconds away from an extremely immature display of petulance.

"Here." Draco said, stepping behind Harry. Reaching around, he grabbed Harry by the wrist and pointed his wand towards the sky. The wand was pointed high, but Harry's wrist was angled in a way that it aimed out as much as up.

Harry's body this close to his was painfully distracting. The sense of loss he had been suffering since he had left the bed this morning left him immediately. He tried to ignore Harry's proximity and the humming in his ears, and tried to make himself pay attention to the task at hand. He tried to remind himself that he did not care about people, but his resolve was quickly slipping away.

"Now try." Draco instructed.

"*Infernus*" Harry shouted.

The spell was nearly perfect. The fireballs were the right size and shape, they hailed down at the right speed, and they started in a

reasonable point in the sky.

"Very nice." Draco said quietly. His free hand strayed to Harry's waist, and Harry leaned back against him slightly.

"Again?" Harry asked. His voice was a bit unsteady.

"Yes." Draco replied softly.

He rested his chin on Harry's shoulder, and tried to focus on the sky, but it wasn't working. Harry was just too close, and it just felt too right. Harry smelled like fire and smoke, and the vanilla and oatmeal soap in the bathroom off the master bedroom, and Draco was once again wondering what Harry would taste like.

"Infernus"

"Beautiful." Draco mumbled against Harry's neck. He wasn't sure if he was talking about the spell, or Harry, or both.

The hand at Harry's waist slipped under his shirt and slid around until Draco's fingers were splayed over his navel. The humming in Draco's ears was insistent to the point of nagging, almost coaxing. Harry took a sharp breath and leaned further back against him.

"Infernus"

Draco didn't see the spell, he didn't even look at the sky. He pulled Harry closer to him, and kissed his neck, right above the collar of his shirt. The humming was vibrant and clear, like the sound of a harp, and the desire to toss Harry onto the ground and snog him until they both screamed was becoming too strong to ignore.

Draco trailed his lips up Harry's neck and kissed again, nipping the skin gently with his teeth. Harry made a small noise in the back of his throat, and seemed to melt against Draco's body. Draco hid a kiss behind Harry's ear, sucking on the spot lightly. The noise Harry made this time was closer to a moan, and Draco desperately wanted to hear it again.

"I can't cast spells with you doing that." Harry breathed.

"Then don't." Draco said.

Harry's wand clattered to the ground.

Harry twisted around to face Draco, wrapping his arms around his neck. Draco looked at Harry for a moment, drowning in grass-green eyes, before burying his face back in Harry's neck. Harry shivered against Draco as his lips and tongue moved over his skin, and threaded his fingers in the soft hairs at the nape of Draco's neck.

The humming in Draco's ears began to shift and sharpen. It had pitch and tune now, but it still sounded distant, like it was coming from high in the sky or inside the house. It was pleading and demanding, swelling each time Draco touched his lips to Harry's skin.

"We shouldn't be doing this." Harry said, in a low, husky tone that made Draco shiver.

"Do you want me to stop?" Draco asked, biting at Harry's neck. He wasn't sure he could stop.

Harry tilted Draco's chin up until their faces were level, and his green eyes flashed dangerously.

"What makes you think I would let you stop?" Harry murmured.

Draco's heart nearly exploded.

And before they could be interrupted by discombobulated owls or Granger and the Weasel or Voldemort Apparating into the gazebo, Draco leaned in, and discovered what Harry Potter tasted like.

~*~

Draco's lips against his caused an eruption of fireworks inside him that rivaled the spell he had just cast. Sparks shot up and down his spine, his body felt like it was burning and freezing at the same time, and his heart nearly seized in his chest. The humming in his ears shifted and changed, becoming something richer and lovelier. It was music, clear and sweet and beautiful, and it made his body feel raw and alive.

He never wanted it to end.

He let his lips melt against Draco's, let himself drown in the sensations that were coursing through his body. Draco's lips were soft and warm

and intoxicating, and Harry was quite sure he would die from it. When Draco's tongue snaked across his lower lip his mouth fell open automatically, and he reveled in the way Draco tasted.

Draco, unsurprisingly, tasted like coffee. Dark and rich and bitter, yet wonderful at the same time. There was a sweetness there as well, cleverly hidden underneath everything else, faint and teasing and seductive.

When they finally pulled away from each other, they were shaking and breathless, and Harry's knees felt watery and unstable. The music returned to a humming sound, still sweet, but dull and bland in comparison.

They stared at each other silently, unable to speak. There was a light in Draco's gray eyes Harry had never seen before. They were bright and silver and beautiful, and Harry could have happily stood there all day and looked at them, except for that he wanted to kiss Draco again.

So he did.

The touch was sweet at first, his tongue just feathering over Draco's lips, but Draco sucked his tongue into his mouth and clutched a handful of his hair. It grew hungry then, and Harry plundered Draco's mouth, running his tongue over Draco's lips and teeth and letting it slide over Draco's own. Draco bit softly at Harry's lower lip and his knees wobbled, and he stayed upright only because Draco was holding him so tightly.

The humming shifted back to a musical sound, and as Draco's hands wandered over his back and shoulders and pulled at his hair it solidified, shaping and forming itself into something Harry recognized. It was sweet beyond words, a sound so pure it could not have come from a human voice or a musical instrument.

It was the most beautiful sound Harry had ever heard, and he had heard it before, echoing off the walls of the Chamber of Secrets.

"Fawkes." Harry said, as his lips left Draco's.

"What?" Draco asked. He trailed a finger over Harry's cheek and across his lips.

"The music." Harry said desperately. "Didn't you hear it?"

"I heard it." Draco said.

"Fawkes." Harry said again. "Dumbledore's phoenix. He sang for me once, and it sounded just like that."

"A phoenix song." Draco said quietly.

Something passed over Draco's face, a kind of shadow that marred his features and dampened the light in his eyes. Then his face went stony and hard, and he pulled away from Harry quickly.

"What?" Harry asked.

"I've got to go inside." Draco said.

"Why?" Harry asked. He wanted to stay out here and kiss Draco until he died from it, and if Draco went inside that was not going to happen.

"I've just...I've just go to go." Draco mumbled.

And with that, he was gone, leaving Harry alone in the garden with his thoughts.

~*~

Draco practically ran from the garden, and crashed through the door into Grimmauld Place. He slammed it shut behind him, and slumped against it, shaking. He stayed there for a while, trying to calm his breathing and collect his thoughts.

Its not bloody possible. Draco thought. It didn't happen.

But it had happened.

I don't believe in that rubbish. Draco snapped to himself. It wasn't real. I was imagining things.

But he had heard it. The music had been there, a sweet and terrible ringing in his ears that had been undeniable. He had heard it, because of Harry Potter.

He stomped through the hallway towards the unused, medium-sized parlor at the rear of the house, but stopped himself. It was probably the first place Harry would go once he came inside, and Harry was the last person he wanted to see right then.

Part of him didn't want to see Harry. The other part wanted to go back out to the garden and kiss Harry until the world came to an end.

I don't fucking care about people! He thought viciously.

His mind grappled with possible explanations, but it all went back to what he did not think was possible, what he did not want to believe was possible. He had heard the tale from his mother more than once. He had half believed the story as a child, but as he grew, and kissed more people than he could probably count, he had decided it was nothing more than a woman's fairy-story.

But it had happened. In the garden. With Harry Potter.

He flung open the door to the first room he came to, which happened to be the everyone-but-Harry-and-Draco sitting room. The sight he came upon might have been amusing, if his brain was not about to explode. Granger and the Weasel were on the couch, looking like they wanted to have a snog, but were unsure how to go about it.

In the back of his mind he thought Harry might be annoyed with this development-- Granger moving from him to his best friend in such a short expanse of time, but he shoved the thought away so he could focus on more important matters.

They studied him as he stood in the doorway, Granger with thinly veiled curiosity and the Weasel with open contempt.

"Granger, can I have a word?" He asked suddenly.

"Why?" She asked suspiciously.

"Just, can I have a word?" He repeated. "Please?"

Grudgingly, she got up from the couch. The Weasel stood to follow her, but Draco shut him down quickly.

"Not you, her." Draco clarified crossly. "If I had wanted a word with you, I would have said 'Hey, Weasel'."

"How do I know you aren't going to do something to her?" Ron barked.

"Because if I was going to kill either of you, I would have bloody done it already." Draco snapped. "When you were at the Manor would have been a perfect time, but I didn't I, so don't worry. I am certainly not going to waste the time now."

The Weasel looked murderous.

"Granger?" Draco pressed. She nodded, and followed him out. Draco could feel the Weasel's eyes on them as they went.

"What?" She asked, once they were in the hallway.

"Shut the door." Draco said.

She shut it with a snap. As soon as she turned around, he pushed her up against the door and shoved his tongue down her throat.

Nothing

"What the Hell are you doing?" She screeched, once he released her.

"Did you hear anything?" He asked.

"What?" She asked furiously. Confusion flitted over her features briefly.

Not liking her uninformative answer, he pushed her up against the wall and shoved his tongue down her throat, again.

Nothing

"Bloody Hell, Draco!" She shouted. "What the Hell is the matter with you?"

"Did you hear anything?" He asked, dodging to avoid the hand that came sailing towards his face.

"What?" She asked again. Her anger fled, and she looked at him like she thought he had lost his mind.

"Did you hear anything?" Draco asked, a bit slower. "Humming? Bells?"

Chimes? Music?" Granger just looked at him blankly. He grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her to punctuate his words. "Bloody singing birds?"

"Oh, Draco." She said quietly. "That's just a myth."

"I know it's a myth." Draco said shortly, stepping away from her. "You didn't hear anything, then?"

"No." She said.

"You never heard it when you kissed Harry?" Draco asked suddenly.

Perhaps it had nothing to do with his mother's ridiculous story. Maybe it was just a side effect of kissing the Boy Who Lived.

"What are you talking about?" She sputtered. "I never kissed Harry."

"Yes you have, and more besides, so don't give me that." Draco said nastily.

"Who told you?" She demanded. She looked as murderous as the Weasel had. "Harry?"

"Nobody told me." Draco said. "I saw you two, the other night."

"Holy fuck!" She shouted, the color draining from her face, and hand flying up to cover her mouth.

"Don't worry, I won't tell the Weasel. Just answer the question." Draco insisted. He took her by the shoulders again and fixed her with a pleading look. "Did you ever hear it when you kissed Harry?"

"No." She said. "I told you, it's just a myth. It doesn't really happen."

"Yes it does." He said quietly, before walking away.

~*~

"What was he on about, then?" Ron asked.

Hermione looked at Ron blankly, because honestly, she didn't know. The entire thing had been extremely bizarre.

"Nothing." She said quietly.

"Yeah, all right." Ron said. "He dragged you out there for nothing."

"You're going to get upset." Hermione warned.

"Tell me." Ron said, narrowing his eyes.

"He kissed me..."

"*WHAT!*" Ron screamed, jumping from the couch. "*I AM GOING TO KILL HIM!*"

"No, it alright." Hermione said. "I think he was just trying to sort something out."

"*I AM GOING TO SORT OUT HIS FACE!*" Ron yelled. He started for the door, but Hermione grabbed him by the arm.

"No, really. I think he was." Hermione said, trying to make him sit. "Because after he kissed me, he asked me if I heard anything."

"He is going to hear plenty when I am through with him." Ron hissed. "His ears will be ringing for days."

"Ron, it's a myth." Hermione explained. "An old fairy-story. Supposedly, when you kiss your soulmate, you are supposed to hear music."

"That's what he was after?" Ron asked, dubious.

"I think so." Hermione said. "He specifically asked if I had heard music."

"Why would Malfoy suddenly want to see if you, of all people, are his soulmate, right now, in the hallway?" Ron asked.

"I don't know." She said. "Maybe him and Harry were out in the sun too long."

Harry. Draco. Draco kissed her. Draco asked about kissing Harry.

Oh, no. Definitely not! That was just too bizarre to even think about.

"Hermione." Ron said quietly. "Can I ask you something?"

"Yes, Ron." She said.

"Well, um, I was... uh, wondering if maybe... well, you see... bloody hell... it's just, um, that I was thinking... and well, I don't know uh, about you, but... if you, well, if you wanted to... oh, bugger, its like this... I wanted to ask you... so, um, yeah... what I was, uh... going to say..."

"Yes, Ron." She said.

Good God, if she had known Malfoy kissing her would make Ron get a move on, she would have attacked him at breakfast.

"Yes, what?" He asked, petrified.

"Somewhere in that waffle you asked me out, right?" She asked.

"Yeah." Ron said, looking pained. "I think so."

"Then, yes." Hermione said.

At least Malfoy is good for something!

~*~

Harry stood outside in the garden for close to fifteen minutes, fighting the urge to cry like a girl.

Draco had kissed him, and it had been sweet and wonderful. Kissing had never felt like that before, like his body was about to catch fire. It had been right and perfect and the music in his ears had been almost too beautiful to bear.

Then, Draco had left.

A strange, fey emotion had passed over his face, and he had run for the house like Voldemort was behind him.

Harry headed for the house, trying to make it all make sense. Why had Draco run away? It was obvious he had enjoyed it, and the light in his

eyes had been unmistakable.

The hurt and devastation breaking Harry's heart started to ebb away as he considered another possibility. If Draco hadn't wanted to kiss him, he would not have been hugging him like that or sucking on his neck. If Draco hadn't wanted to kiss him, he would have struggled or pulled away, not held him and clutched at him like he was afraid they would get separated.

He was scared.

He pulled open the door to the unused, medium-sized parlor at the rear of the house, to find it empty. He frowned at this, and glared at the room like the emptiness was its fault. He wanted to talk to Draco. He needed to talk to Draco. Now that he thought about it, the heat and intensity of the kiss scared him too. It had almost been too much to take, he could understand how Draco had found it disquieting.

He headed up the stairs, hoping Draco had hidden himself away in the master bedroom. Harry found that empty as well, and let out a string of curses that would have made Mrs. Weasley faint. He turned on his heel, and started for the stairs. Grimmauld Place was not that large, and Draco had to be there somewhere.

"Harry?"

Harry looked up to see Ginny Weasley staring at him curiously. She had apparently just had a bath, because she was wearing a dressing robe and had a towel wrapped around her head.

"Hi, Ginny." He said.

"Are you alright?" She asked. "I heard shouting."

"Oh, that. I was yelling at myself." He said.

"Do you always shout at yourself?" She asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Only sometimes." He muttered. He cocked his head to the side, giving her a considering look. "Hey, can I get a favor?"

"Yeah, I guess." She said, looking at him suspiciously. "What is it, then?"

Harry pulled her to him by the belt of her robe, and kissed her.

Nothing

He was not entirely surprised. He had not heard music that time he kissed her on the train.

"Harry." She said sternly, wagging a finger at him. "You know I have a boyfriend. And besides, Hermione would be very upset with me..."

"Hermione?" Harry sputtered.

Then he wanted to slap himself for an idiot. *Of course! Hermione!* He had kissed Hermione two or three days ago, and had not heard a thing.

"Yes, Hermione." Ginny said, a bit crossly. "I know about you two."

"What?" Harry yelped, his eyes going wide. "Hermione and I haven't...."

"Oh, yes you have." Ginny said. Her voice was stern, but it was laced with amusement. "Don't bother lying about it."

"Did Hermione tell you that?" Harry demanded. Women couldn't keep their mouth shut for anything.

"No, but she didn't have to." Ginny said. "It's quite obvious."

"How is it obvious?" Harry asked.

"Because it is." She insisted. "Like the other day. You spent all of breakfast hiding from her behind your scone."

"I was not hiding." Harry defended. He probably had been, but that was not the point.

"Yes, you were." Ginny giggled, and Harry blushed. "And now you are blushing. Like I said, it's quite obvious."

"Ron doesn't know, does he?" Harry asked.

"No." Ginny replied. "But that doesn't surprise me. He's slow like you."

"I am not slow." Harry pouted.

"Of course you are." Ginny quipped. "But you are a boy. You can't help it."

Suddenly, he pulled her back, and kissed her again.

Nothing

"Harry, really!" Ginny complained, giving him a level look. "What are you on about?"

"I'm not sure." Harry babbled. "You didn't hear anything, did you?"

"Hear anything?" She asked, frowning. "I think you and Malfoy were out in the sun too long."

"You didn't hear anything?" Harry asked. "Singing? Or music?"

"Oh, Harry." Ginny said, shaking her head at him. "That is just a myth. It doesn't really happen."

"What?" He asked, dumbfounded. "What doesn't really happen?"

"The Lover's Soulsong." Ginny explained. "It's a myth."

"A myth about what?" Harry asked wearily.

"It's a myth about love."

Harry and Ginny both spun around to see Draco standing at the top of the stairs. He walked over to Harry, stopping a few paces away from him.

"If you two are finished kissing, I'll tell you about it." Draco said wryly. Harry fancied jealousy flitted over his face.

"You saw that, then?" Harry asked sheepishly.

Draco laughed. "I tried it downstairs with Granger. Didn't hear a thing."

"What?" Harry choked, jealously definitely flitting over his own face.

"You kissed Hermione?" Ginny squeaked in shock.

"Well, who was I going to kiss?" Draco asked Harry, ignoring Ginny. "The Weasel?"

"You've got a point." Harry agreed. "I didn't hear anything when I kissed him, anyway."

"*YOU KISSED MY BROTHER?*" Ginny shrieked.

"It's a long story." Harry said, moving closer Draco.

"I'd really rather he didn't talk about it." Draco added, his lips curling slightly.

When Harry reached him, Draco looked at him intently. His eyes lit up again, like burnished silver, and the stoniness left his features.

"Tell me this myth, then." Harry asked.

Draco smiled softly, and brushed a lock of black hair out of Harry's eyes. He started to trail a finger down Harry's cheek, but snatched his hand away when he caught Ginny staring.

Harry looked over at Ginny. She was watching them with an expression that was both shocked and contemplative. It occurred to him that they had already given her enough that she could work it out for herself.

Reaching out, he took up Draco's hand and held it.

"According to the myth, people were created by both the Angels and Gods. The Angels made our bodies, and the Gods made our souls." Draco explained. "When it came time to put the souls into the bodies, it was discovered that there were more bodies than souls."

"The Angels had worked hard on the bodies, and didn't want any of them to go to waste." Draco continued. "They went behind the Gods' backs, and split some of the souls in half, so there would be enough for all the bodies."

"Supposedly, if your soul was split, then the person with the other half is your soulmate." Ginny added. "That's the person you're supposed to fall in love with. The person who you're meant to be with."

"What does that have to do with the music?" Harry asked.

"If the person you are kissing is your soulmate, you will hear music." Ginny said.

"Muggles hear the Angels singing." Draco said. "Wizards hear a phoenix."

Harry was thunderstruck. Draco could not possibly be saying what he was saying. It just wasn't possible. It was a myth. A fairy-story.

Those kinds of things just didn't happen.

Then, arms suddenly slid around his waist and Draco was kissing him again, driving him insane with his lips and tongue. The music rang loud and sweet in his ears, and Harry decided that, maybe, those kinds of things *did* happen.

"We need to talk." Draco said quietly, as he pulled away.

Harry nodded mutely. He leaned up to kiss Draco again, but froze, acutely aware of Ginny's eyes on them. They turned to look at her with wide eyes, but she only shook her head and smiled.

"Don't let me stop you." Ginny said. "That was quite possibly the hottest thing I have ever seen."

IX

Its the End of the World as We Know It (and I Feel Fine)

Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy kissed in the upstairs hallway of twelve Grimmauld Place for the better part of fifteen minutes. They lost themselves to a seductive dance of lips and teeth and tongue, and everything else in the world disappeared. The only thing that matter to Harry was the way Draco's hands felt as they moved over his skin, and the only thing Draco knew was that Harry tasted like cinnamon and vanilla, and toffee-flavored Bertie Botts.

They were completely oblivious to the girl standing a few paces away, even though they had been speaking to her right before they got lost in each other. She watched them for the entirety of that better part of

fifteen minutes, staring at them with glazed-over eyes and gaping mouth. But, when Draco pushed Harry up against the wall and his hands disappeared under his shirt, and Harry made a rather interesting noise and helped himself to a double handful of Draco's arse, Ginny Weasley decided she probably had better be on her way.

She apologized for disturbing them, and mumbled something about needing to 'go be alone'. Harry didn't quite catch what she was on about, but Draco found it extremely amusing.

They forgot her immediately once more. Draco started fumbling with the buttons on Harry's shirt like being half-naked in the hallway was perfectly normal, but Mrs. Weasley started shouting about something downstairs, which in turn made the portrait of Mrs. Black add her two Knuts.

Draco's hands stilled, and they both came back to reality.

"I thought you wanted to talk." Harry murmured, his lips brushing Draco's as he spoke.

"I do." Draco replied, nipping at Harry's lip. "But you keep distracting me with your mouth."

"BLOOD TRAITORS! BEGONE FROM THE HOUSE OF MY FATHERS! HALFBREEDS!"

"I am not." Harry lied, trailing soft kisses from the corner of Draco's mouth to his ear.

"Pull on the curtain Ron! Yes, that's it!"

"FILTH! TRAITORS! DISGRACE TO THE NAME OF WIZARDRY!"

"Shut up, you old bat! On the count of three, Hermione!"

"UNHAND ME, YOU TREACHEROUS MUDBLOOD!"

"Oh, come on!" Draco said exasperatedly, dragging Harry towards the master bedroom. "I simply cannot snog under these conditions."

~*~

Severus Snape glared at the books piled across his desk. Not for the first time that night, he wished fervently he was back at Hogwarts with access to a decent library, instead of his home. Snape's personal collection of books was impressive, but unsurprisingly, they mostly centered around potions. The potions texts were interspersed with a few volumes on the Dark Arts, but he woefully lacked anything substantial that dealt with history, myth or legend.

Mysterious Magical Artifacts of the Dark Ages had three paragraphs on the Crystal Sword, but unfortunately, it did not tell Severus anything he didn't already know. *The Concise History of the Wizarding World* was exactly that-- concise. The text contained numerous chapters on the relevant time-period, but the Crystal Sword was mentioned just four times, and only in passing. *Wizarding Myth and Legend* was a ponderous tome, with several chapters on the Crystal Sword alone. The first chapter seemed to paraphrase the three paragraphs in *Mysterious Magical Artifacts of the Dark Ages*. The remaining four or five, unfortunately, were lengthy diatribes on the possible location of the Crystal Sword so laced with the author's opinion that not a word of it could be construed as historical fact.

"Working hard, I see, Severus."

He glanced up from his desk to see Albus Dumbledore's head floating in his fireplace.

"I was just reading up on the Crystal Sword, Headmaster." Severus said, closing *Wizarding Myth and Legend* and setting it aside.

"Yes." Dumbledore said thoughtfully. "The Crystal Sword."

"I don't have much that is of use, here." Severus said, gesturing to the books. "It either tells me what I already know, or it is pure speculation."

"Indeed." Dumbledore conceded. "The problem with myths, Severus, is that they are myths."

He gave Dumbledore's head a withering look. "Perhaps when I am back at Hogwarts, I can find something a bit more informative."

"Perhaps." Dumbledore's head wobbled as he nodded. "But I fear, the Crystal Sword will have to wait, at least for tonight."

Snape did not like the sound of this one bit. "Why is that?"

"I am calling a meeting of the Order. I will need you to be at the appropriate place within the hour."

"What has happened?" Severus asked. He was positive he did not want to know.

"The Dementors have left Azkaban." Dumbledore said. His tone suggested he was reporting the weather.

Severus swore rather colorfully. Then his eyes went wide.

"What about Lucius?" Snape asked.

"He went with them, of course." Dumbledore said.

"Draco." Severus said quietly.

"Mister Malfoy is quite safe, where he is." Dumbledore said. "You understand, that is why I sent him there in the first place. The Dementors were always Voldemort's creatures. I feared something like this would happen."

"Yes, of course." He said. Dumbledore was right. If Lucius returned to the Manor to find Draco missing, Severus' house would be the second place he looked, right after he called on William Parkinson house.

"On that ominous note, I must leave you." Dumbledore said. "I will need to pop my head in a few more fireplaces before the meeting starts. I trust I will see you in an hour."

Severus nodded, and Dumbledore was gone in a swirl of emerald flames.

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Draco leaned against the bookcase and avoided looking at Harry, who was sitting primly on the bed and watching Draco expectantly. Draco had suggested they talk about this, and it was probably best if they did, but now, alone with Harry and without Sirius' mum distracting him, he found he was at a loss for words.

His shirt was partially unbuttoned, and his hair was more of a mess than usual. Draco thought he looked rather edible in his ravished state, which was not allowing Draco to collect his thoughts. The only thing he could really focus on (partially due to Harry's ravished state) was the disgruntled ache in his pants, which was reminding him that he and Harry had not finished what they had started in the hallway.

Snogging seemed like a much more pleasant option, anyway. Talking would involve thinking, and thinking was something Draco didn't want to do just yet, because the entire thing was rather alarming.

Wizards hear a phoenix. He thought.

Alarming was not quite the word for it. Frightening, maybe, or perhaps terrifying. Draco had never really believed in love. He had been raised to think it was a weakness, something only women bothered with. Over the years, he had viewed it as an affliction, a disease you caught if you were not careful. It had never occurred to Draco that it would happen to him. The *possibility* had never even seemed possible.

And certainly not with Mr. Harry Bloody Savior of the Wizarding World Potter.

Completely ridiculous notion.

Not that Draco was versed in the workings of love to begin with, but supposing he did, this was total lunacy. He knew next to nothing about Potter, and while Draco also knew next to nothing about love, from what he had heard from people who could be bothered with it, knowing something about the person you were in love with was apparently required.

Of course, as he looked at Harry, the idea of getting to know him did not sound completely onerous.

I'm losing my mind. Draco thought bitterly.

"So we are meant to fall in love, then." Harry said suddenly.
"Soulmates."

"Are you sure that was a phoenix song we heard?" Draco asked. "It wasn't magpies or nightingales? Pigeons, maybe?"

"No. It was a phoenix song." Harry said. "Fawkes sang for me once,

when he brought Gryffindor's sword to me in the Chamber of Secrets, and what I heard in the garden sounded just like that."

"Then, yes." Draco said. "We are meant to fall in love, if the myth is to be believed."

"What do you think?" Harry asked. His green eyes were bright and clear, and seemed to glow, even though the master bedroom was awash with midday sunlight.

"I don't know what to think." Draco said honestly. He sighed, and moved to sit next to Harry on the bed. "This is quite a bit of information to absorb all at once."

"True." Harry said, laughing softly. He took up Draco's hand and held it between both of his. "Especially for you, I guess."

"Why is that?" Draco asked.

"You don't believe in love." Harry said, frowning slightly.

"I've been reconsidering." Draco said lightly.

"I'm a boy." Harry pointed out needlessly.

"Yes, well. I do suppose the Angels did a number on me, there." Draco drawled. "But I think I am prepared to forgive them."

"Oh really?" Harry asked, raising an eyebrow. "You've only hated me for five years."

"I don't think I ever really hated you." Draco admitted. "I just disliked you. Strongly."

"That makes it better." Harry said sarcastically.

"Besides it could be worse." Draco laughed. "The Angels could have stuck me with Millicent Bulstrode. Or the Weasel."

Suddenly, Harry looked stricken.

"Oh Gods, Ron!" Harry lamented, releasing one of his hands from Draco's to smack himself in the forehead. "He isn't going to like this."

Draco snorted derisively. "I don't intend to ask the Weasel for his opinion." Though, he understood Harry's uncertainty. If Crabbe and Goyle and Zabini only took this development as sourly as the Weasel probably would, Draco would consider himself lucky.

"He'll be giving it, whether you ask for it or not." Harry warned.

"Let him. I've been wanting to charm his mouth shut since I got here. I'll be the perfect excuse." Draco said.

"How am I going to explain it? He'll never understand." Harry said.

"You're getting off easy, with the Weasel." Draco complained. He was well aware that if he showed up in the Slytherin common room with Harry fucking Potter, everyone would not simply shrug it off and go back to their schoolbooks. "You won't have to explain it to a dorm full of children of Death Eaters."

"Yeah, all right." Harry conceded. "But still, Ron is tetchy sometimes. Especially about you."

"Don't tell him, then." Draco said. He brushed a lock of hair out of Harry's eyes, letting his finger trail over the scar. "Not yet, anyway."

"You don't want anyone to know." Harry said flatly, hurt clouding his face.

"No, it's not that." Draco insisted. "I just think we should get ourselves sorted out before we say anything to anyone else."

Harry nodded quietly in agreement, then all at once, his face crumpled and he looked panicked.

"What about Ginny?" Harry gasped. "She is probably telling Hermione right now!"

Draco went thoughtful for a moment, then shook his head. "I don't think so."

"Why not!" Harry asked. "You know how girls are!"

"I do." Draco conceded. "But I also know how Ginny is. She would be most upset if I had a conversation with the Weasel that started with 'So, I snogged your sister this one time'. He'd be too busy yelling at

her to even worry about us."

"Oh, he knows about that." Harry said.

"He knows about the time McGonagall caught us in the Astronomy Tower." Draco said airily. "He does not know about the time before that, or the two times after that, or the time I caught her sneaking out of Zabini's room."

"Zabini?" Harry coughed.

"Gave me a bit of a start, I'll admit." Draco said. "But I caught her, sneaking out of his room, and it was about three in the morning, so I can guarantee you they weren't playing Exploding Snap." His face went sly. "I can also guarantee you the Weasel doesn't know."

"You're evil." Harry said, laughing. "Absolutely evil."

"I am nothing of the sort." Draco drawled. "But I am a Malfoy. At the Manor, blackmail is just another wholesome, family pastime."

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Molly Weasley burst into the sitting room with an extremely worried and anxious look on her face. She still had the scroll she had received from Dumbledore crunched in her hand. She had read it over five times before coming in, trying to figure out what the Headmaster was on about. He was, as usual, infuriatingly vague, but she could only assume if he was calling an emergency meeting of the Order of the Phoenix within the hour, that the situation was positively dire.

"Up! Up!" She shouted at Ron, Hermione and Ginny. "The Order is meeting! They will be here in less than an hour!"

"What's going on?" Hermione asked, looking up from *Hogwarts, A History* to give Mrs. Weasley a curious look.

"I don't know, Dumbledore didn't say." She said, waving the infuriatingly vague piece of parchment.

"What are you taking on for, then?" Ron asked.

"You know how paranoid he is about using the Owl Post for anything

more than greetings and salutations!" Mrs. Weasley screeched. "If he didn't say anything is wrong, that means something is horribly wrong!"

"Whatever you say, mum." Ron said, his tone overly placating.

"Don't you cheek me, Ronald Weasley." Mrs. Weasley shouted. "They will be here in an hour. I need to you clean up this mess, and help me with dinner!"

The three of them were frozen on the spot, gaping at her.

"Now!" She shouted. "And where are Harry and Draco?"

"They are taking a nap." Ginny said, not looking at her mother.

"Together?" Ron sputtered.

"I'll go wake them, then." Mrs. Weasley said.

"No!" Ginny said quickly, standing up from the couch. She had a fairly good idea that now was not a good time for anyone, especially her mother, to go barging into the master bedroom.

"I'm not going to let them have a lie-in when there is so much to be done." Mrs. Weasley said exasperatedly.

"Let them sleep!" Ginny said desperately, wringing her hands.

"Why?" Mrs. Weasley and Ron asked at the same time. Ron still seemed put out over the fact that Harry and Draco were taking a nap together.

"They are very tired." Ginny explained hastily. "They have been working on some nasty, difficult magic." Her mother did not look convinced. "All day." She pressed. "Since after breakfast

Ron snorted loudly. "Yeah, well, if Malfoy was so tired, why did he come down here and...."

"Very, very tired!" Ginny said loudly, right over Ron. "Harry had gone white, and he looked like he was going to fall over."

"Malfoy looked fine to me." Ron grumbled. "Get *his* arse down here, then."

"No!" Ginny insisted. "If you wake him up, you'll wake Harry. He didn't look well, I tell you."

"Hanging around Malfoy is probably bad for his digestion." Ron commented.

"Fine." Mrs. Weasley relented, grudgingly. "They can sleep, but only until the Order gets here. "

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Awkward silence had now enveloped the room. As he sat there, Harry was painfully aware of how close Draco was to him. Their shoulders were touching, just enough contact for the hum of the phoenix song to rumble softly in his ears. He cast surreptitious looks at the blond next to him, running the same snippet of the conversation that had just ended over and over in his head.

You don't believe in love.

I've been reconsidering.

Harry certainly had feelings for Draco, he couldn't really name them or place them just yet, but they were definitely there. He felt drawn to him somehow, in a way he couldn't really explain.

He didn't know if it was love. The sensible part of his brain told him that was not possible, at least not yet. He and Draco had hated each other for the last five years. Earlier, Draco had said he had never really hated Harry, but that did not change certain facts, like how they had been on different sides of things, practically since the beginning.

And they didn't really know anything about each other.

Draco knew that Harry was the Boy Who Lived, the person who was meant to destroy everything his family believed in, and Harry knew that Draco was the sneering, drawling, Slytherin Ice Prince, the son of a Death Eater who hated everyone and everything.

Harry shivered. When he put it like that, it sounded absolutely awful.

According to the myth, they shared a soul, but that didn't change the

fact that up until this point, they had lived very different lives, with very different goals.

Suddenly, all the thoughts piling up in brain made Harry's head feel very heavy. Sighing, Harry leaned his head on Draco's shoulder.

Draco shifted slightly and kissed him, and as Draco's tongue slipped into his mouth and slid against his own, the thoughts fled, and everything else melted away.

"You shouldn't taste that good." Draco murmured.

"What do I taste like?" Harry breathed, tangling his fingers in Draco's hair.

"Cinnamon sticks." Draco said between kisses. "Vanilla custard and toffee Bertie Botts."

"You taste like coffee." Harry replied softly.

"Surprising, that." Draco laughed.

With that, Draco moved so he was lying on the bed, pulling Harry along side him. Draco kissed him again, softly, his tongue barely fluttering across Harry's lips, and the gentleness of it made Harry shiver. Draco pulled him closer, deepening the kiss, his tongue searching and tasting. Harry thought fleetingly of other kisses with other people; with Cho and Ginny and Lavender and Hermione and even Ron, and how they had never made him feel like this, so hot and cold and giddy and wonderful.

The song sang loudly in his ears as Draco kissed and nipped at his neck, his fingers pulling at the buttons of his shirt. Draco complained between kisses that Harry was overdressed for the occasion, like he was one to talk. Draco needed to be unwrapped rather than undressed, but Harry didn't really mind. He found it exciting to pull off Draco's shirt to see him clad in only the nylon long-sleeve. The dark, yet sheer fabric accentuated the delicious contours of Draco's body while still maddeningly covering it.

Once it was off, Harry's hands wandered Draco's chest, and he marveled in the way it felt under his hands. His pale skin was warm, and impossibly soft. He pulled Draco on top of him, wanting him closer, wanting to feel his weight on him. Harry let his hands map out

Draco's body, sliding over his shoulders and down his back and up over his chest. His fingers brushed over Draco's nipples and Draco made a soft, quiet noise in the back of his throat.

Draco kissed him hard as Harry's fingers flitted over his nipples, moaning into his mouth and clutching at Harry's hair. Draco pushed down against him, rubbing their erections together, and Harry's breath caught, bucking up against him, the song loud and sweet in his ears. Delicious heat washed over Harry as Draco moved against him, sparks shooting up his spine that made him gasp and cry out.

He shuddered as Draco's hand trailed fire down his chest, skimming over his belly and circling his navel before coming to rest at the waistband of his pants. He kissed Harry languidly, nipping and sucking at his lower lip, and rubbed Harry's cock teasingly through the material of his trousers until Harry was writhing and raking his nails down his back. Harry slipped a hand between them and teased Draco just the same, his hand cupping and squeezing Draco through the cloth of his pants.

Draco's hands stilled and Harry made a soft, plaintive noise. The loss of contact was almost painful, and the beautiful sound in his ears was relegated to a hum. Draco fumbled briefly with the buttons of his trousers, then pulled them and his trolleys off in one smooth motion. Harry had a fleeting panicked moment when he realized he was naked, but suddenly Draco was as well, his trousers sliding down to reveal slim, pale legs. Harry wondered absently if Draco had charmed his boots off, because they laced up to his calf and would have taken a ridiculously long time to remove.

The boots were forgotten when Draco moved back on top of him, Draco's body pressed against his and Draco's hot, wet mouth around his nipple. He moaned as Draco's tongue flicked over his nipple, and Harry arched up against him, pushing his erection into Draco's hip.

Draco's hand trailed down Harry's body, his fingers first brushing over Harry's cock in a way that was teasing before sliding around it. Harry moaned loudly, clutching at Draco. His body felt hot and cold at the same time. The song roared in his ears, the same sweet sounds he had heard in the Chamber of Secrets, and he felt completely alive, even though part of him was convinced he would die from the sheer pleasure of it.

Harry had a fleeting, nervous moment when his hand first wrapped

around Draco's cock. It felt strange and different in his hands compared to his own, and he wasn't quite sure what to do with it, but as he tentatively slid his hand up and down, Draco made a wonderful noise and kissed him hard, almost desperately, and his nervousness ebbed away.

They moved slowly at first, enjoying the feel of each other and the phoenix singing in their ears. Draco murmured softly to Harry, his breath warm in his ear as he said things Harry couldn't quite believe were directed at him. He told Harry how beautiful he was, and how wonderful his hand felt wrapped around him, and as Harry started to work him harder his voice caught and words left him and he mumbled Harry's name over and over.

All at once, their hands grew fast, erratic and desperate. Draco's free hand clutched at Harry's shoulder and pulled at his inky-black hair, and Harry raked his nails down Draco's back and grabbed at his arse. Draco moaned low in his throat and his cock twitched in Harry's hand. A moment later, Harry came apart as well, crying out Draco's name as heat uncoiled in his belly and the song reached a high, clear pitch that shattered him from the inside.

Draco collapsed onto Harry, breathless, burying his head in Harry's neck. After a moment he kissed Harry's neck lazily, then trailed soft pecks up his neck and over his jaw before settling on his lips. He pulled back, staring at Harry, smiling softly. He opened his mouth to speak, but was rudely interrupted by a knock at the door.

"Good Gods." Draco hissed. "Is there no peace to be had!"

"Let me in!"

"It's Ginny." Harry said.

"She wants to have another look, what?" Draco said crossly.

"Let me in!"

"Now is not a good time, Weasley!" Draco shouted.

"Whatever." She snapped. "*Alohamora!*"

The door sprang open. Draco quickly moved to pull a blanket over them before she came in the room, though he only succeeded

partially. She shut the door, then paused. She gave them an appraising look, her lips quirking in a smile, before explaining herself.

"Weasley." Draco warned.

"Oh, shut it, Malfoy." She snapped. "The Order is meeting downstairs."

"What!" Harry squawked. He tried to sit up, though with Draco on top of him, he failed miserably.

"Yes. They will all be here in a few minutes, and you'll both be wanted downstairs." Ginny said. She gave Draco's naked arse a pointed look. "I suggest you put on some trousers."

X
New World Order
(Part One)

As per usual, the Order of the Phoenix gathered in the kitchen of Grimmauld Place for their meeting. Also as per usual, the 'children' were sequestered in the sitting room, so the 'adults' would not have them underfoot. Mrs. Weasley had herded them into the sitting room herself, instructing them to behave themselves and stay out of the way. She had not said anything outright, but her stern face had made it clear that any kind of ruckus or attempt to intrude on the meeting would be punishable by something just short of death.

So the 'children' now sat in the sitting room, irritated at Mrs. Weasley's admonitions to keep their noses clean and annoyed at the fact that once again, they were being left in the dark to the goings-on, and likely would be, until the Order saw fit to fill them in. Mrs. Weasley had, of course, added insult to injury by flashing them her patented this-is-adult-business-that-doesn't-concern-you expression, right before slamming the door in their faces.

There was also a heavy, suffocating tension in the room, centered mainly around Ron.

The codswallop Ginny had fed her mother about Harry and Draco napping off a spellwork-induced exhaustion had served its purpose, to keep Mrs. Weasley from walking in on something she was definitely better off not knowing about. It had also served to put Ron in a certified conniption fit. The notion of Harry and *Malfoy* taking a nap

together was flat out abhorrent to him, and he was positively seething about it.

Ginny had an idea that Ron's snit really had more to do with Draco kissing Hermione than Draco napping with Harry, but given Ron's current mood, she was not about to say anything.

As the deafening silence continued, Ginny eyed both Draco and Harry sideways.

Draco was lounging indolently in an armchair in the corner of the room, one of his legs draped over the arm. He did not openly look like he had been doing anything untoward in the last hour, aside from a slight brightness about the eyes that one would probably not catch unless they were staring. His usual, trademark sneer of displeasure was in place, but it was lazy somehow, halfhearted, like he had put it back on with the rest of his clothes just because he would feel naked without it.

Harry, on the other hand, looked well and thoroughly snogged, to the point that Ron and Hermione would probably notice if Ron was not busy fuming and Hermione's nose wasn't buried in a book. He was sitting on the couch with Ron and Hermione (though a bit apart from the pair of them), and had a foolishly blissful, giddy look on his face. His hair was a total loss, even by usual standards. Harry rather looked like he had a disgruntled porcupine on his head, and Ginny wondered idly if Draco had been trying to pull it out by the root.

Part of her wished she had seen whatever Harry had been doing to Draco to make him want to pull it out by the root. The sight she had caught in the hallway had been intriguing, to say the least.

At the same time, she could not quite fathom how what she had seen in the hallway had come about. She had stared at them openly in the hallway, partially because the sight of those two incredibly beautiful boys had been exciting, in a pervy kind of way, but mainly because she had simply been too thunderstruck to move.

The sensible part of her brain had insisted she was hallucinating.

Harry had stopped her in the hallway and after acting a bit dazed and confused, kissed her rather randomly. In the middle of that, Draco had appeared in the hallway, announcing he had kissed Hermione, rather randomly. Then, after Draco had prattled on about myth so ancient it

was from time out of mind, he and Harry had started kissing, rather unbelievably.

As she thought it out, she found she was able to reconcile the kissing. Hormones had a miraculous way of making niggling little details like being on completely opposite ends of things seem relatively unimportant at the time. She had very nearly shagged Blaise Zabini, for Merlin's sake. Her and Zabini were two of the most incompatible people on the planet, what with his being the son of a Death Eater and all, but Draco had caught her sneaking out of Zabini's room one night, just the same.

She even partially understood Draco's waffle about the Lovers Soulsong. Harry had kissed her to see if he heard birds singing, and it seemed Draco had kissed Hermione for the same reason. This could only mean that shortly before molesting her and Hermione, they had kissed each other (though *why* was still puzzling), and heard a phoenix song. The fact that the myth was apparently true was a bit shocking, the fact that the myth applied to *Harry* and *Draco* was a bit more shocking, but that was not the most shocking of all.

What Ginny could not wrap her mind around was how Draco seemed content to quietly stand there and presumably fall in love. Draco seemed more the type to take the news that he shared a soul with someone (it being Harry Potter notwithstanding) like he had gotten an owl from the Ministry saying he was to slated receive the Dementors Kiss momentarily. He was notorious for his blatant refusal to have feelings of any kind, for anyone, and Ginny had snogged him precisely for that reason. Each occasion had been after a breakup. Draco had seemed an obvious choice, because she hadn't needed to worry about messy feelings in the morning.

But, as she watched Draco study Harry out of the corner of his eye, and caught the soft smiles Harry was shooting Draco when Ron and Hermione weren't looking, it seemed there were, indeed, messy feelings, and they hadn't waited until morning.

Despite the way they had snogged right in front of her, with complete disregard to the fact they had been in a high-traffic area, they didn't appear to be in a hurry to announce it to anyone. They were sitting separately, and were only looking at each other when they thought no one would notice.

Not that Ginny blamed them, really.

Hermione was usually unflappable about these kinds of things, she hadn't even batted an eyelash when Ginny told her about Zabini, but Ron was another matter, entirely. Ron was fiercely protective of Harry, and thought Draco was Voldemort's own son. If Harry turned to Ron right now and told him the fates would insist he fall in love with Draco Malfoy, Ron would point his wand at Draco and try to get *Avada Kedavra* sorted out on his first try.

That act of greatness would be shortly followed by him bundling Harry off to the mental ward of St. Mungos to be checked for both head trauma and Imperius.

Ginny's eyes traveled from Harry to Draco, and she paused as Draco caught her looking. His reaction was minute, a casual arch of one eyebrow that was almost imperceptible. She nodded her head very slightly in response. His eyes pointedly flicked to Ron and Hermione, and Ginny pressed her lips together and looked at the ceiling.

She was more than happy to let them keep their secrets. She certainly wouldn't be telling Ron, he could easily find this development horrifying enough to justify cursing the messenger. If she told him, she could likely get hexed cleanly in half just for being the bearer of bad news.

As a matter of fact, when they did tell Ron, she would much rather not be anywhere in the area.

She understood Durmstrang was lovely this time of year.

~*~

Irritation at being shut out of the Order's meeting was wafting off Ron and Hermione like smoke from a fire. They were displaying it differently; Hermione simply looked vexed, while Ron appeared moments away from a tantrum. Also, Hermione was focusing her irritation on one thing, the fact that they had been shut out of the meeting. Ron, however, had branched out a bit, and was dividing his time between glaring at the door to the kitchen and scowling at Draco.

Given the thickness and weight of his friends irritation, the wonderful, blissful feeling Harry had enjoyed while walking down the stairs to join the others was quickly ebbing away. The irritation was almost

contagious. Even Ginny was looking rather annoyed. Draco seemed to be the only one who really didn't care.

Harry had tried to stave off the impending bad mood by running earlier, more pleasant events over and over in his head. It had not been a difficult task. He could nearly feel Draco's hands on his skin if he thought about it hard enough.

It had done wonders for his mood. However, it had also given him an erection that could have knocked a Bludger across the pitch, so he had been forced to redirect his thoughts elsewhere.

"Extendable Ears?" Ron asked hopefully.

Ginny tossed a book at the door to the kitchen. It slammed into something invisible about a pace from the door, and bounced off of it.

"Nope." She said. "Its been Imperturbed."

"I don't know why they bother, really." Ron grumbled, to no one in particular.

Hermione sighed, and decided to take the bait. "Bother with what, Ron?" She asked wearily, putting down her book.

"Locking us out of the meetings." Ron explained sourly. "It's not like we are bloody children. They act like we don't know You-Know-Who is out there."

"I seriously doubt they think that." Draco said wryly.

Ron glared at Draco silently. Harry eyed them both furiously. If his best friend and his whatever-Draco-was-to-him were going to have a spat, they could go and do it somewhere else, as far as Harry was concerned.

"I mean, Potter here has a habit of running into Voldemort everywhere he goes." Draco continued. Ron, Hermione, and Ginny flinched. "So, obviously, they know you know Voldemort exists."

"Stop saying that name!" Hermione hissed.

"Why, Granger? Does it bother you so?" Draco drawled. "Do you think he will Apparate into this room if I say his name too many times?"

"It give me the creeps." Hermione said quietly.

Draco sighed heavily and rolled his eyes dramatically.

"Of course it wouldn't bother you, Ferret." Ron snapped. "You're practically a Death Eater yourself."

"You're absolutely right, Weasel." Draco snapped. He swung his leg off the arm of the chair to lean forward and glare at Ron. "Which, of course, would explain why I am sitting in this damnable room with you lot instead of out wreaking havoc with the Dark Lord and his minions."

"Why aren't you, then?" Ron barked. "You're more than welcome to have at it, as far as I am concerned. At least I wouldn't have to look at your ugly, ferrety face all day long."

Harry had to clap a hand over his mouth to keep himself from informing Ron that Draco's face was neither ugly nor ferrety.

"You'll forgive me if I don't rush off and sign up for a vile life of servitude just to make you happy, Weasel." Draco said hotly.

"It would certainly make your father happy." Ron shouted.

"Ron!" Hermione shouted, glaring at him.

"I am a little put out with my father, right now." Draco growled. "In case you forgot, he had my mother murdered."

"Do you really expect me to believe that tripe, Malfoy?" Ron demanded.

Harry had a sudden, rather uncharacteristic urge to smack Ron in the head.

"I personally don't care if you believe me or not." Draco snapped. He flicked a glance at Harry that was almost apologetic.

"Of course you don't, because it is a fat pack of lies." Ron yelled. "Why would your father murder your mother when she was a Death Eater just like him?"

"My mother was not a Death Eater." Draco hissed, jumping out of his

chair.

"Ron, be quiet." Hermione begged. Ron leapt to his feet. Hermione tried to pull him back down, but he shook her off.

"Do you know why he had my mother murdered?" Draco shouted, walking towards Ron.

Ron started to tell Draco he didn't care, but Draco kept right on yelling.

"Think back to that day when you and Potter and all your little friends went running off to the Ministry of Magic." Draco shouted. He was standing in front of Ron, and their faces were inches away from each other. "Do you remember what a hard time of it you all were having, and how Dumbledore and Sirius Black and everyone else arrived just as your little adventure was going tits up?"

"What's that got to do with your mother?" Ron yelled.

"MY MOTHER SENT AN OWL TO DUMBLEDORE, TELLING HIM WHAT VOLDEMORT AND MY FATHER WERE UP TO!" Draco raged, jabbing a finger towards Ron's face. *"AND THAT IS THE ONLY REASON HE ARRIVED IN TIME TO SAVE YOUR USELESS ARSES!"*

"I don't believe that!" Ron shouted.

"He's telling the truth." Harry said quietly.

Immediately, everyone fell silent, gawking at Harry in disbelief, except Ron, who looked both affronted and betrayed.

"You believe *him*?" Ron asked finally, incredulous.

"I believe Dumbledore." Harry muttered. "And Dumbledore told me that his mother sent him an owl that night."

Ron's face crumpled, and he paled visibly. He eyed Draco apprehensively, not wanting to give him an apology even though he knew he deserved one. Draco looked him up and down and snorted loudly, then started for the door to the hallway. He paused at the door to turn back and address Harry.

"Since I am obviously not wanted down here, I am going back to our

room." Draco said quietly. "If Dumbledore asks why I am away from you, kindly explain to him that being cooped up with the Weasel is bad for my digestion."

Draco pulled open the door to the hallway, just as Remus Lupin poked his head in the door from the kitchen.

"Are we all done yelling in here, then?" Remus asked, casting a questioning eye around the room.

"Yes." Harry said stonily, glaring at Ron. "Everyone is *quite* done yelling."

"Dumbledore asked me to come fetch one of you, but I figured I would wait for the ruckus to die down before I came in." Lupin said lightly.

"Yeah, all right." Harry said, heaving himself up off the couch.

"Actually, Harry, he's asking for Mister Malfoy." Lupin said. Harry looked perplexed, as did everyone else in the room, except Draco, who looked mortified.

"Me?" Draco asked.

"Yes." Lupin said, inclining his head back towards the kitchen. "They are waiting for you."

~*~

Nervousness twisted and gnawed at Draco's stomach as he followed Remus Lupin into the kitchen.

The members of the Order were talking quietly amongst themselves when he walked in. Draco's eyes immediately flicked to Dumbledore, partially because of his violently red robes, embroidered with large, ancient Scandinavian runes. He was chatting with Arthur Weasley in his usual, whimsical way, his blue eyes sparkling over his half-moon spectacles.

The idea of a secret society of wizards sworn to oppose Voldemort had never occurred to him. Now that he thought about it, he couldn't imagine why it hadn't, because it made perfect sense.

He found the people in the room, with the possible exception of Snape, and a man Draco had first thought was a pile of rags on a stool in the corner until he spoke, unsurprising. Dumbledore, McGonagall, Lupin, Moody, Arthur and Molly Weasley-- they were exactly the type of people who would vow to rid the world of Dark Lord and his minions.

There were three people in the room he did not recognize. One was a young woman with bright-blue hair who was studying him openly as she talked with Moody. She seemed fairly friendly with grizzled, old Auror, and she didn't appear to find the thrice-damned, wobbling eye off-putting in the least, and Draco wondered if they worked together.

The other two had red hair, freckles, and facial features that immediately named them the elder Weasley sons. One looked quite a bit like the twins, and the other rather resembled an older version of the Weasel with longer hair. They were both studying him openly as well, but their eyes were vaguely disapproving, whereas the blue-haired woman looked at him with more curiosity mixed with apprehension.

He found this did not surprise him either. When Draco was younger, he had looked quite a bit like he father. Over the last year, as his body matured and filled out, he had grown into the spitting image of his father. While he was shorter, and his bone structure was thinner and more angular, he knew it had, at first glance, looked like Lucius Malfoy had walked into the room.

"Mister Malfoy." Dumbledore rumbled brightly. "Please have a seat."

Draco glanced around the table and fought back a grimace. Lupin had already taken a seat, and the only empty one was directly across the table from Mad-Eye Moody. While Draco knew the man who had transfigured him into a ferret and bounced him all over Hogwarts was not *this* Moody, he still found the man disquieting.

Moody, apparently found him just as disquieting, if the way he was looking at Draco was any gauge. Draco was quite convinced that Moody could see right through his clothes with that eye.

"You wanted to speak with me?" Draco asked slowly, as he sat.

"Yes, yes, my boy." Dumbledore said.

Draco half-listened to Dumbledore's introductions and waffle about the

point at purpose of the Order of the Phoenix. His train of thought was derailed by Mad-Eye Moody, who was staring at him. His swiveling eye was spinning at a dizzying rate, and his normal eye was filled with contempt. Dumbledore might be willing to forgive Draco his father's sins, but Moody, like the Weasel, plainly did not think the apple fell too far from the tree.

He tried to ignore Moody by focusing on Dumbledore, but he glanced down the far end of the table to see Snape eyeing him. The Potions Master seemed as sour and displeased as usual, but he was wearing an expression that said he wished to speak to Draco alone at his earliest convenience.

"Are you well, my boy?" Dumbledore's voice was cheerful, but pointed, and Draco gave a start.

My mother is dead, I am stuck here with Granger and the Weasel for the rest of my summer, and I think I might be dating Harry fucking Potter. Draco thought, with a deluded kind of humor. *I've never been better, thanks for asking!*

"I am fine." Draco managed, studiously avoiding Moody's funny eye.

"I understand you were quite upset with me when discovered you will be here until school starts." Dumbledore said warmly. His tone was not apologetic in the least. "And, when you found out I wished you to spend all your free time with Mister Potter."

"I was." Draco admitted. He noticed Snape looked close to a violent outburst.

"Have you forgiven me?" Dumbledore asked hopefully.

"I have." Draco said. He was painfully aware he could only conjure up words of one syllable, but between his stomach knotting, Moody leering, and the Weasley sons glaring, he supposed he should be grateful for that much.

"Are you and Mister Potter getting on, then?" Dumbledore asked.

You don't know the half, old man

"We're making do." Draco lied. Snape was, as usual, wearing his hatred for Potter on his sleeve, and suddenly looked nauseous.

"And everyone else?" Dumbledore asked, his tone leading.

Draco paled slightly. He didn't want to get into his argument with the Weasel in front of his parents and his two older brothers. However, if Lupin had been waiting for them to finish arguing before coming into the sitting room, they probably already knew.

"Not particularly." Draco said, finding his voice. "Certain people in the other room are having extreme difficulty accepting the fact that I am not my father."

The elder Weasleys immediately stopped glaring. The blue-haired young woman suddenly found her lap interesting. Moody was unrelenting, but the gaze from his normal eye was slightly less piercing. Snape, however, looked pleased with Draco's cheek, and nodded his head to Draco slowly.

"Yes, of course." Dumbledore said, nodding just as Snape had. "And, I will admit, I had feared it would be so. However, I do not regret my decision."

Snape blanched.

"I brought you here for two reasons, and I stand by both of them." Dumbledore went on. "Firstly, I had hoped that you and Mister Potter could learn to work together, and it would seem that you two are, in fact, managing to do so."

"Secondly, I had legitimate concerns for your safety." Dumbledore said.

"My father?" Draco asked flatly.

"Precisely." Dumbledore said. He paused, his eyes searching Draco's face. "As you know, if it had not been for you mother, myself and Sirius Black and the others never would have arrived at the Ministry in time."

"Had we not, your father never would have gone to Azkaban." He continued. "I feared for your mother's safety after your father was arrested. I repeatedly asked her to come here, or to Hogwarts." He sighed sadly. "But she refused. She said she was not going to let your father's ghost chase her out of her own house."

"She probably figured she was safe as long as he was in Azkaban." Draco said bitterly. "She should have gone to you."

"Yes, she should have." Dumbledore said. "But your mother, much like you, could be difficult to sway." He smiled softly at Draco. "Which is why I did not give you the choice. If bringing you here unwillingly kept you alive, I figured it was worth the exchange."

"It was my father, then?" Draco asked. "You know this for sure?"

"Yes." It was Snape who answered. "The murder was done by two Death Eaters. They were sent by your father, and he provided them with the information they needed to skirt the spells."

"Who?" Draco hissed. "Which of those spineless bastards killed my mother?"

Snape's expression went tight, and he flicked a glance to Dumbledore, who nodded, before answering. "Parkinson and Goyle."

This declaration hit Draco like a barrellful of bricks over the head, dropped from the roof of Grimmauld Place. He started to shake, and clenched his hands in fist so tight his nails were digging into the palms of his hands.

Parkinson and Goyle. The fathers of two of his best friends. Men who had invited Draco into their homes to play with their children. Men who had visited the Manor for tea and who had exchanged gifts with his mother at Christmas.

Parkinson was his godfather, and Goyle had had a crush on Narcissa his fifth year of school.

They had killed his mother.

Parkinson had been the best man at Lucius and Narcissa's wedding. Parkinson and Lucius had often said that Pansy and Draco should marry when they became of age. They had said it would be the perfect, pureblood marriage, since their families got on so well, and since Draco and Pansy had been friends all of their lives.

Draco had always thought of Goyle as an uncle. The two occasions he had run away from the Manor as a child, he had gone to Goyle's

house. In the summer before fourth year, once he and Pansy had decided on getting their virginities sorted out, he had gone to Goyle for the 'bird and bees' talk. It had never occurred to him to go to Lucius, his father was unapproachable on any subject. He had not been comfortable with the idea of asking his godfather, either. Asking Parkinson and then turning around and using the information on his daughter had seemed underhanded, even to Draco.

They had killed his mother.

"Parkinson and Goyle." Draco repeated. He wondered bitterly why Crabbe had not been invited. That way, all his best friends' fathers would have been involved.

"Yes." Snape said quietly.

"Are they still alive?" Draco demanded.

"Yes." Dumbledore said.

"Why?" Draco shouted. "He's a bloody Auror, for fuck's sake!" He added, pointing at Moody.

"I would be happy to arrest them right now, boy." Moody snapped. "Unfortunately, we do not have proof I can use. At the moment, my hands are tied."

"Professor Snape just said..."

"Exactly." Moody interrupted. "*Snape* said."

"I don't understand." Draco said.

"If Moody and I brought this information back to the office tomorrow, it would raise a lot of questions." Said the blue-haired woman who Dumbledore had introduced as Tonks. "They would want to know who we heard it from, and I am afraid that 'the Potions Master of Hogwarts heard it while at Death Eater gathering, then announced it to us at a meeting of a secret society the Ministry knows nothing about' would not go over very well."

"The Ministry does not know about you?" Draco asked.

"I am afraid not." Arthur Weasley replied. "Many of us work for the

Ministry, and it is good for the Order to know what the Ministry is up to. However, we have not informed the Ministry of us, given their current opinion on Dumbledore."

"Didn't you hand them a pile of unconscious Death Eaters, including my father, in the Ministry building, not to long ago?" Draco asked.

"Indeed." Dumbledore said. "And, that did serve to make the Ministry take note of the fact that Voldemort is still alive. However, I fear Cornelius Fudge still finds me most appalling."

"I know where they live." Draco said hopefully. "I've been to both their houses a hundred times, at least. They're spelled, of course, but they both have Unlisted Floos that can be accessed from Malfoy Manor with no problem."

"That information will be very helpful, boy." Moody said, his swiveling eye slowing down slightly. "We can't go waltzing in their tonight or anything, but the information will be useful, just the same."

"You want me just to go take care of it?" The pile of rags offered, rousing.

"No, thank you, Mundungus." Dumbledore said, his tone affectionate but weary.

Draco curled his lip at the pile of rags in amusement. He realized this was the fellow Harry and the Weasel had said was hocking black-market goods out of the back door of Grimmauld Place.

"Wouldn't be no problem." Mundungus pressed. "A couple of my buddies and I could just pop in there and..."

"Thank you, Mundungus, but no." Dumbledore said firmly. "If you were caught, I would have to explain to the Wizengamot, yet again, why I don't feel it is necessary for you to go to Azkaban, and this would amuse them not at all."

"Azkaban." Mundungus snorted.

"Go back to sleep, Dung." Arthur Weasley offered.

"Right." Mundungus agreed, and did just that, with a raucous snore.

"Azkaban." Dumbledore repeated thoughtfully. "That brings us to our next topic."

Draco did not like the sound of that at all.

"What has my father done now?" Draco asked. "Causing trouble?"

"Something like that." Moody muttered. Dumbledore gave him a flat look.

"Your father has escaped."

Once again, Draco felt like he had been hit by a barrellful of bricks, though this time, it was as if they had come at him from the top of the Astronomy Tower. He made a strangled, sputtering noise, and he felt his nails bite into the flesh of his hand, drawing blood.

I'm a dead man. He thought desperately. *I'm a dead man walking.*

"How?" Draco asked quietly.

"We are not really sure." Tonks admitted. "It seems he just left."

"People do not just walk out of Azkaban." Draco replied, and he was telling the truth. With the notable exception of Sirius Black, people did not just waltz through the front doors of the wizards prison. The Death Eaters that had joined Voldemort at the Department of Mysteries had been sprung out by someone.

"Apparently, your father did," Moody snarled.

"What about the Dementors?"

"It seems those spooky buggers didn't give him any trouble." Moody barked. "Actually, it looks like he invited them to come with him, as well as the rest of the Death Eaters."

"What!" Draco screeched.

"We got word at the office today that the Dementors had left Azkaban." Tonks explained. "Naturally, we went right over there. When we got there, we found that your father was gone, as well as everyone else who was arrested at the Ministry of Magic."

"Since your father was closest to Voldemort, we are assuming he was behind it." Dumbledore said.

"And the Dementors?" Draco asked.

"Well, as much as it galls me to admit it, we have no idea where they have slithered off to." Moody grumbled. "They could be anywhere."

"Harry." Draco blurted out.

Snape raised an eyebrow, and fixed Draco with a very questioning look.

"You are quite right. Mister Potter finds Dementors most disquieting." Dumbledore said airily. "Speaking of which, how is your Patronus, Mister Malfoy?"

"Passable." Draco said, after a pause.

"How soon could it be better than passable?" Dumbledore asked.

"Immediately." Draco replied, ignoring the way Snape was goggling.

"That is good to hear." Dumbledore said, his eyes glittering. "Well, my boy, you are free to go. If you would be so kind to send Mister Potter in on your way out."

Dismissed, Draco stood. He was glad Dumbledore was letting him go. He didn't want to be in that room anymore, listening to bad news while everyone stared at him. He just wanted to go back upstairs. He wanted to lie down, and shut all of this out. Between the idea of who had killed his mother, and the notion that his father was walking around free, he felt very cold and empty.

He paused at the door, as he heard raised voices on the other side.

"He started it!" The Weasel said from the other side of the door, with all the maturity of a tattling child. "He is the one who was cracking jokes about you running into Vol-- You-Know-Who everywhere."

"And you had to finish it by saying crappy things about his mother, who died less than a week ago." Harry replied to him. He sounded angry. "If you had said something crappy about Sirius less than a week after he died, I probably would have taken your head off, too."

Harry was defending him. The emptiness started falling away. Harry was defending him to *the Weasel*.

He stood at the door for some time, listening to the conversation on the other side in disbelief.

"Is there a problem, Mister Malfoy?" Dumbledore asked.

"Not really." Draco said. "I just thought I would let them finish talking about me before I go in there."

"It's been my experience that people are less inclined to talk about you like you are not in the room if you are, well, in the room." Dumbledore said lightly.

Taking the hint, Draco opened the door.

~*~
X
New World Order
(Part Two)

Draco's exit was followed by lengthy, pointed silence-- lengthy to the point of being painful. All the occupants of the room were sighing, fidgeting and drumming their fingers on any flat surface just to hear some kind of noise, even if it was trivial.

Finally, after what felt to Harry like enough time that empires could have rose and fell, Hermione spoke.

"I don't know why they didn't ask for you, too. They always tell you what is going on eventually." She said. Harry suspected this was an attempt to break the raging quiet, rather than start conversation.

"Actually, they usually tell me just enough to do whatever I need to do." Harry said bitterly. "They don't tell me everything until it's all over."

More silence. Long, drawn-out silence. The sighing and fidgeting started up again. Ron whistled tunelessly to himself, and Ginny was twirling her wand between her fingers like a baton.

After a few moments, Hermione sighed with enough force it was almost a growl and got up off the couch. She started for the wizarding chess set on the once boggart-infested desk. Ron started to follow her, but she shut him down with a look that would have made a rabid hippogriff think twice, and gestured Ginny to join her.

"I wonder what they wanted Malfoy for." Ron mused, eyeing Hermione reproachfully.

Harry grunted.

"You're mad at me, then?" Ron asked, frowning worriedly.

"No, I am not mad." Harry lied. Actually, it was not a complete lie. He wasn't mad, he was furious. "I am just tired of you two bickering all the time."

"How was I supposed to know his mother sent Dumbledore an owl?" Ron asked. "He never said anything about that until today."

"Probably because he knew you wouldn't believe him." Harry offered.

"Yeah, all right." Ron conceded. He looked slightly abashed, but not enough to mollify Harry. "He is not exactly easy to believe, that one. He is such a shit all the time."

"Did it ever occur to you that he is a shit to you because you are a shit to him?" Harry asked caustically.

"Are you defending him?" Ron asked shrilly.

"No." Harry said quickly, checking himself. He shrugged, trying to appear nonchalant. "I just think you were both being shits."

"He started it!" Ron said childishly. "He is the one who was cracking jokes about you running into Vol-- You-Know-Who everywhere."

"And you had to finish it by saying crappy things about his mother, who died less than a week ago." Harry snapped, his resolve slipping. Even if him defending Draco would look suspect, Ron had been out of line, and it galled him. "If you had said something crappy about Sirius less than a week after he died, I probably would have taken your head off, too."

Ron opened and closed his mouth like a goldfish out of water.

"Just think about it, Ron." Harry continued. "If, Merlin forbid, your mother was murdered, how would you feel if someone started popping off about her?"

"But Malfoy's mother..."

"Is still Malfoy's mother, whatever you think about her." Hermione added from the corner. "Harry's right, Ron. You can't really blame Malfoy for getting upset with you."

"Oh, this is rare." Ron complained in disbelief, throwing up his hands. "Now you are *both* defending him." Snarling, he rounded on Hermione. "Need I remind you he is the one who calls you 'mudblood' right, left and center?"

"I'll have you know I have not called anyone a 'mudblood', today, not even Granger." Draco said shortly, opening the door. He paused, glowering at Ron. Then, he looked over at Harry, and his face softened. "You're up." He said to Harry, gesturing through the open door.

"What did they say?" Harry asked, stalling for time. Draco's face went flat and expressionless, and Harry could not tell if it had been good news or bad news.

"It would seem my father found the hospitality of Azkaban lacking." Draco said dryly, walking fully into the room. "So he left."

"What?" Hermione shrieked, dropping the bishop she was about to move. It bounced off the desk hit the floor, and rolled under Hermione's chair, screeching as it went.

"What, he just walked out?" Ron asked.

"Pretty much." Draco said. His expression went sour.

"It looks like it gets worse." Harry ventured. Draco's face plainly said another shoe was about to drop.

"It does." Draco muttered.

"How could it get worse?" Hermione exclaimed.

"It would also seem my father felt he needed an entourage, arrogant sod that he is." Draco said, with forced lightness. "He took the other Death Eaters with him."

"Merciful Merlin!" Ginny cursed. She gave a jerk, knocking into the table, and the chess pieces wobbled. One of them, a knight, rolled off the table, the horse whinnying in protest.

Harry suddenly felt cold. Everyone who had been arrested at the Department of Mysteries was now free. Sirius had died for nothing.

"And, he apparently did not find the Dark Lord's cowering minions to be a suitable escort." Draco went on. "So, he brought the Dementors, as well."

Ron and Hermione both gasped. Ginny gave a terrified squeak. Harry looked positively plagued.

"And, they're just walking around, what?" Ron managed finally.

"Actually, Weasel, they float." Draco drawled. His tone lacked its usual bite. "But no, I doubt they are just floating around. I would assume they have gone back over to Voldemort."

"Back over?" Ginny asked nervously.

"When Voldemort first came to power, the Dementors were on his side." Harry explained.

"That makes sense, really, now that I think about it." Ron muttered.

"Don't strain yourself, Weasel." Draco snapped. "You'll only give yourself more freckles."

"They were granted clemency after Voldemort disappeared." Hermione explained, ignoring Draco.

"Why?" Ron said. "They are horrible."

"That was precisely why." Hermione replied. "The Ministry felt it was better to have the Dementors tied to them, rather than just leaving them lying around, given their feeding habits. They set them to guard Azkaban because it had mutual benefits. The Dementors were away

from everyone, with a constant source of souls to feed off of, and the prison would be secure."

"Secure! It can't be all that secure, if his dad just waltzed out of there." Ron scoffed. "And what about what my dad was saying the other day, about the guy who tried to break in with all the wands?" He made a strangled sound. "The Ministry is a bunch of wankers."

This was a point everyone could agree on.

"Dumbledore told me once he still thought the Dementors were Voldemort's creatures." Harry said. "He thought they were just biding their time at Azkaban until Voldemort came back."

"That'll make for a cheerful war." Ron said snidely. "Everyone swooning and reliving their worst memories, while You-Know-Who is faffing about unchecked, *Avada Kedavra*-ing us to a man."

"Whose cheerful, now?" Harry griped. Just thinking about the Dementors roaming about was making him twitchy. Ron certainly did not need to keep going on and on about them.

"What about your dad?" Ron asked Draco.

"Your guess is as good as mine." Draco said sourly. "I am sure he has hidden himself away."

"He wouldn't have gone back to your house, would he?" Hermione asked.

"Doubtful." Draco responded. "He's a murdering bastard, but he is a shrewd, murdering bastard. Nearly every Auror the Ministry has is out looking for him as we speak. He wouldn't go back to his family home and wait patiently for Moody to come ringing the doorbell."

"This is horrible!" Ron complained.

"You should be pleased, Weasel." Draco said nastily. "If he decides to come out of hiding and start killing people, I'll be the first to go."

Ron opened his mouth to say something scathing, but noted Harry's narrowed eyes, and quickly shut his mouth.

Draco sighed, and started for the door. "I'll be upstairs." He

announced, to the room in general.

"Mister Potter?" Came a voice from the kitchen that sounded like Mad-Eye Moody. It dripped with impatience.

"Coming!" Harry said wearily, heading towards the door.

"Dementors! Loose!" Ron moaned, clapping a hand to his forehead.
"But Harry is allergic!"

Harry paused at Draco on his way to the door, and touched his arm fleetingly. Draco's gray eyes uncoiled slightly, and he dropped his mouth to Harry's ear.

"Don't worry." Draco whispered. "I won't let them near you."

He brushed a light kiss over Harry's scar, and strode quickly out the door, into the hallway.

"Did he just kiss your forehead?" Ron sputtered, once Draco was gone.

"No." Harry said stiffly, in spite of the heat rushing to his face.

"Yes he did! That prat just kissed your forehead!" Ron declared. "I saw it!"

"I think you need my glasses." Harry said shortly, as he headed to the kitchen to meet his doom.

~*~

Draco passed the master bedroom restlessly.

He was in no mood to sleep. He had come upstairs mainly to get away from the Weasel. The thought of a lie-down had been attractive, but he had no illusions he would be able to sleep with his mind spinning the way it way.

Parkinson and Goyle had killed his mother.

His father had managed to do the impossible and escape Azkaban.

Harry fucking Potter had argued with the Weasel, his best friend of five

years, about *him*, and had defended him.

Listening to Harry berate the Weasel for being a pithy little shit about his mother had made him feel strangely warm. The emptiness that had been washing over him since Dumbledore had dropped both his bombs had started to subside.

He was not entirely comfortable with this warmth and fullness, but at the same time, he was enjoying it. He had a sudden desire to go back downstairs and see Harry, and possibly snog him within an inch of his life, the Weasel be damned.

Upon reflection, he thought maybe he shouldn't have kissed Harry's scar like that in the middle of the sitting room in front of everyone. He wondered idly if the Weasel had noticed, and how Harry explained it away if he had.

"You alright?" Harry asked, coming into the room.

"Yeah, I guess." Draco said quietly. Impulsively, he walked over to Harry and wrapped his arms around him. "What did they say to you?"

"Same thing they said to you." Harry said, pulling a face. "Your father, the Death Eaters, the Dementors, et cetera, et cetera."

"I tell you, not once has the Order given me good news." Harry went on, complaining. "Then Moody went on one of his *Constant Vigilance* tirades. I swear, he thinks I'm a deaf, blind, drooling git. He acts like I walk around with my head up my arse, owling Voldemort directions to my house every hour."

"You know how he is." Draco said. "I understand he has always been dire and tragic and paranoid."

"Paranoid." Harry snorted, leaning into Draco. "One day, you should ask Ron's dad about Moody's dustbins."

"I don't think I want to know." Draco said, shaking his head. "What were the Weasel and them saying when you left?"

"Well, right before I went in, he was taking on about you kissing my forehead, though I can't imagine why." Harry said airily.

"He saw that, then?" Draco said, a bit sheepish.

"Yeah, but I told him he was seeing things. I said he needed my glasses." Harry replied. "I think he forgot about it, though. When I got out of the meeting, he was going on to Hermione about the Dementors."

"He seems more concerned about them than my father or the Death Eaters." Draco said.

"He worries." Harry said, sighing. "Because they bother me."

"Rumor has it you can produce a rather impressive Patronus." Draco said, somewhat proudly. "At least, whatever you sent after me during the Quidditch with Ravenclaw was pretty alarming."

"You deserved it, you prat." Harry chuckled. "Dressing up like a Dementor to make me fall off my broom."

Draco gave him a withering look.

"My Patronus is not the problem." Harry went on. "I can sort out a Dementor, if I see it coming. If it surprises me, I have a hard time of it."

"Well, don't worry about it." Draco said, hugging him close. "I told you I won't let them near you."

"You mean that?" Harry said softly.

"They can't have you." Draco said stubbornly. He buried his face in Harry's neck. "You're mine." He blurted out suddenly, mumbling the words against Harry's skin.

Good Gods, listen to me! Draco complained to himself. *I am getting all wonky and possessive.*

Harry, however, didn't seem to mind, because he was kissing him.

"You think we have time for a nap before dinner?" Draco asked. He wasn't sure he would be able to sleep. It was a nice idea, though, because he was suddenly very tired.

"Probably." Harry said. "Dinner will be late, anyway, since the Order is here, clogging up the kitchen."

~*~

Despite his earlier misgivings, Draco was able to sleep. He hadn't counted on it when he and Harry had first donned their pajama bottoms and crawled into bed, but with Harry curled up in the curve of his arm and the soft humming in his ears, his brain had finally stilled. He had managed to relax, and drift off to sleep.

He had, unsurprisingly, started dreaming. They were first of him mother, his mind had conjured up images of when he had first found her dead. They got worse, however, and predictably, turned to his father.

His father was free. His father was talking to Voldemort, planning and plotting. His father was looking for him, angry over his betrayal. His father had found him, and was going to kill him, right after he killed Harry.

Draco woke partially, vaguely aware of an unfamiliar weight on top of him. His sleep-clogged mind was having difficulty making sense of this development. Nor could his brain reconcile why it felt like lips were sliding over his neck and collarbone and making him shiver.

He decided that he was still dreaming, in spite of the fact that the hardness pressed against his hip felt quite real. He also decided that he should probably settle back into sleep and enjoy it, since what was going on in his head right now was definitely preferable to dreaming about his father.

Hands slid over his chest and slipped under his arms, and the lips that had been nipping at his neck and kissing over his collarbone continued to tease him, and started trailing over his chest. The taunting mouth latched onto a nipple, hot and wet and wonderful as it sucked and teased it. He felt his cock stir as the tongue flicked over his nipple, and he wondered absently if he should wake Harry and coax him into doing something about it.

The lips were at it again, kissing a slow train down his chest, while the hands moved down to rake maddeningly at his sides. Draco moaned and shifted in his half-dreamy state. He was sure he was still asleep, but it felt amazingly real. He could hear the song faintly in his ears, and he knew it was Harry. He was dreaming about Harry.

Dream-Harry's tongue was lapping at his navel, and his clever fingers were tugging at the Draco string of his pants. Wakefulness started to come as those same clever fingers started ghosting over his cock, but he tried to fight it. He wanted to stay in this beautiful dream, where his mother and father weren't and issue and Harry's hot, wet mouth was close to a very good place.

The fingers trailing over his cock were almost torture, light and fleeting and teasing. He growled sleepily in frustration, and felt himself push up against the imaginary hand, desperate for more pressure and contact. Dream-Harry laughed softly at this as he planted wet, nipping kisses down past his navel. Draco's pajama bottoms were pulled down, and he felt fingers tickling and stroking the insides of his thighs.

"Harry." He mumbled groggily.

Hot breath breezed over his cock, chilling his skin while stoking the fire in his belly. A hand stroked his cock softly, and light, horribly taunting kisses were planted on its underside, making a slow path from base to tip. Sleep started falling away and he growled irritably. He was definitely going to have to wake Harry up now and grind against him until they both wept.

That glorious tongue was back, lapping slowly at the head of his cock. He couldn't possibly be asleep, it felt so wet and wonderful and real, but at the same time, he was afraid to open his eyes and find it was a dream. Dream-Harry's tongue felt like velvet, and if he opened his eyes now and ruined it all, it would be incredibly unfair.

Draco tentatively reached a hand down, and his fingers brushed through messy hair. Deciding this was most unusual for a dream, he sat up slightly and opened bleary eyes, trying to make them focus. A head of unruly black hair was, indeed, nestled between his legs. Lovely green eyes looked up at him. They were not bright and clear, but dark with arousal and gleaming wickedly.

He watched as that velvet tongue slid out of Harry's mouth and flicked over his cock.

"I must be dreaming." Draco mumbled.

All at once, his cock disappeared into Harry's mouth. Draco was suddenly very, very awake, and his body felt like it was on fire.

Harry's mouth was sweet and wet and Draco moaned loudly. Harry sucked him softly, moving up and down slowly. He grabbed a handful of Harry's hair, wondering if Harry was deliberately trying to torment him. It was hot and wonderful and too much, but not enough at the same time.

That splendid, velvet tongue dragged along the underside of his cock every time Harry moved up, and fluttered over the head right before he slid Draco back into his mouth. Draco moaned and mumbled incoherently, pulling at Harry's hair and clutching at the blankets. The song was nearly screaming in his ears, loud and insistent, yet sweet and clear. His body felt like it was melting, like every thing in the world but him and Harry had disappeared.

Harry started to move faster, sucking harder, taking him in deeper. Draco shivered, his body freezing and burning at the same time. He cried out, writhing and straining as Harry slid him in and out of his mouth. The fire in his belly raged, and he felt his body rushing for completion. He tried to force it away, not wanting the wonderful sensations to end, but his body mutinied, demanding release.

"Fuck, Harry." He shouted. "I'm going to..."

He felt Harry smile around his cock, then Harry sucked him hard, holding his hips so he couldn't try to pull away. He came with a shout, thrusting into Harry's mouth.

Panting, he tried to catch his breath, which was difficult to do as Harry slowly kissed his way up his body. He pulled Harry to him, kissing him, tasting himself on top of Harry's usual flavor of cinnamon and vanilla and toffee.

Harry ground into Draco as he kissed him, pushing his erection into Draco's hip, his cock still trapped inside his pajama bottoms. Draco tried to shift, wanting to roll Harry over so he could take him in his mouth, but Harry clung to him stubbornly. Harry pushed into him twice, quickly, and came with a shudder, hiding his face in Draco's neck.

"I couldn't..." Harry whispered into his neck. "You were making such wonderful sounds. I couldn't hold it in any more."

Draco couldn't speak. He just held Harry tightly and kissed his hair.

XI
Atomic Dog
(Part One)

Peering downward blearily, Harry decided that waking up with his cock in Draco's mouth was a rather pleasant way to start the day.

"Good Gods." Harry panted, yanking at the fistful of blanket in his hand.

He forced himself not to mimic the motion with the hand that was currently tangled in Draco's hair, distractedly reminding himself that Draco would not be nearly as beautiful if half the hair on one side of his head randomly went missing.

Draco's mouth was sweet and relentless, and Harry was shaking all over from the chills and flashes of heat that were bombarding his senses. Draco's tongue traced lazy patterns along the underside of his cock, and Harry had a brief sorrowful moment as he realized this wouldn't last long. His muzzy, sleep-clouded brain was selfishly demanding release immediately, and Draco was working tirelessly to help the process along.

"Oh, fuck." Harry shouted, his eyes rolling. His body wanted to writhe and thrust, but Draco was mercilessly pinning his hips to the bed.

Draco moved his mouth up slowly, and worked his tongue over the slit on the head before moving back down quickly and very nearly swallowing Harry whole. That was all it took for Harry to explode, and he dissolved into shudders and whimpers and incoherent mumbles as Draco gently sucked and licked him through the aftershocks.

Definitely a pleasant way to start the day, especially since Draco seemed incredibly inclined to wake him up this way.

Draco was routinely awake before Harry, no matter how late they had stay up snogging. He would usually watch Harry sleep for awhile, then grow tired of being alone and wake him up. Since Harry was by no means a morning person, Draco apparently figured he should deliver the horrid news that morning had come as pleasantly as possible. He would either climb on top of Harry and rub against him until Harry could no longer ignore him or the song, or pull of his pajamas and

suck the soul right out of him.

Harry never complained, even if it did mean he would eventually have to get out of bed, because a hot, wet mouth wrapped around his cock was not something he was going to quibble over, even at eight o'clock in the morning.

Suddenly, that evil tongue that had teased and taunted him awake was now plundering his mouth as relentlessly as it had worked over his cock. He wrapped an arm around Draco, pulling him closer, and snaked an arm between them, running his hand over Draco's erection.

Draco shuddered and moaned into Harry's mouth, and Harry smiled, knowing Draco was close. Watching Harry cry out and writhe shamelessly as he came was often nearly enough to make Draco come himself. Harry had discovered that the same was true for him as well. Reducing Draco to a shaking, shuddering creature that could only moan and curse distractedly was almost enough to undo him.

Harry worked his hand over Draco's cock quickly. Draco shuddered and mumbled a few things that would have made Mrs. Weasley faint, making Harry smile. Over the last two weeks, he had coaxed babble out of Draco that would probably make Snape blush, and he loved hearing it. Harry nipped and sucked wickedly at Draco's neck, and slid his thumb over the slit, just as Draco had done to him with his tongue.

Draco gave a jerk, and buried his head in Harry's neck as he came, sinking his teeth into the soft flesh where Harry's neck met his shoulder. Warmth bathed Harry's belly, and Draco collapsed on top of him with ragged, hitched breaths.

"Good morning." Draco said, when he finally found his voice.

"Good morning, yourself." Harry replied softly.

Draco pushed off of him, the separation of their sticky bodies resulting in an unattractive noise.

"You need a shower." Draco said, wrinkling his nose.

"So do you." Harry pointed out.

"I suppose I do, at that." Draco said thoughtfully. "Seeing as I am covered in mess."

"It's your mess." Harry said.

"But it's your fault." Draco teased. "You forced it out of me."

"I didn't complain when you got it all over me." Harry said wryly.
"Besides, no one told you to lay in it."

"If you recall, I was having difficulty operating my limbs." Draco drawled. He slid off the bed and wobbled, proving he was still having difficulty operating his limbs. "Which, was also your fault."

"Whinge, whinge, whinge." Harry said, in mock weariness. He yawned and stretched languidly, then climbed off the bed.

"Shower?" Draco asked brightly. He raised an eyebrow at Harry, and disappeared into the bathroom.

Harry only had to ponder this momentarily. He had discovered that the only hotter thing than Draco in general was a slippery, wet, soapy Draco in the shower.

Smiling, Harry followed, quite thankful that the master bedroom had its own bathroom.

~*~

Kissing Ron, Hermione decided, was very different from kissing Harry.

Ron was soft and gentle and sweet about it, though passionate at the same time, but the gentleness was unexpected, given Ron's energetic and boisterous personality. Harry, who Hermione thought was the quieter, calmer of the two, kissed more forcefully. Not necessarily rough or dispassionate, just more needy and desperate.

Of course, her and Harry had always been in a hurry. Snogging on the couch of the Gryffindor common room or a dusty broom cupboard, where someone could happen along and disturb them at any moment did not leave time for slow, careful seduction.

Ron snogged like he wanted to remember every precious minute of it. Harry fucked like he wanted to forget every single solitary thing in the world, including who and what he was.

She and Ron hadn't had sex yet, and while she wanted to, part of her was in no hurry to get on with it. If they did get on with it, they would have to have *that* conversation. He would ask her if she had done it before, and then he would probably want to know with who (since given their school situation, it would likely be someone he knew), and then she would have to tell him about Harry.

She had her doubts about how receptive Ron would be to that information.

Hermione didn't think it would particularly make him angry, but it would surely make him uncomfortable about dating her, because Harry was his best friend. Awkwardness would ensue, and it would be better to just avoid the whole thing, at least for now.

Of course, she often wondered if Ron knew about her and Harry, because he seemed to be in no hurry to tell Harry, either. Ron was not exactly trying to hide it (Ginny had figured it out over a week ago), but Ron was not exactly dashing off to the unused, medium-sized parlor at the rear of the house to treat Harry and Draco with a formal announcement.

She had been thinking about Harry quite a bit lately. It was not surprising she had been thinking about him, really, because Ron would waffle on about him hanging out with Draco at every opportunity. She understood Ron's concerns, he felt well and truly replaced, but as far as she could tell, Ron didn't have anything to worry about. Harry was spending all his time with Draco because Dumbledore had ordered it, and she was willing to wager that once school started, Harry and Ron would be inseparable once more.

Harry seemed different lately, however. She had been shocked to see that his sequestration with Draco was not wearing him down like she had thought it would. He and Draco had hated each other for five years, but they seemed to be doing a reasonable job of getting along. Unbelievably, they almost seemed cheerful.

Actually, Harry seemed downright happy.

And recently, Harry had been looking well and thoroughly snogged.

She was well aware of what Harry looked like after unseemingly behavior. His face would go kind of goofy, and his eyes would light up

in a rather startling manner. The last few times she had seen him, he was wearing nearly the same expression. It was, however, slightly different than the one she had seen before. His face was more blissful than goofy, softer somehow, and his eyes were so bright they almost glowed.

What really made her curious about it was the fact that it was continual. He seemed to be wearing his I-just-got-snogged face constantly now. From her experiences, that expression only lasted for the first few minutes after his body exploded. Now, he was wearing it all the time.

She wondered absently if he was shagging Ginny.

She shook the thought off almost as quickly as she had had it, because it didn't really make sense. When Ron had caught Harry and Ginny kissing on the Hogwarts train, he had been completely irate. Hermione had never seen Ron that furious. There had been a couple of tense moments when she had thought Ron was going to pull his wand out on him.

Ginny had a boyfriend, anyway, and Harry didn't really have the time, with all the time he was spending with Draco.

Draco was another thing that had been weighing on Hermione's mind.

For some reason, she had been running that strange encounter in the hallway over and over in her mind. It wasn't that she really wanted to think about it, though admittedly, she would have considered Draco a good kisser if she had not been trying to bite his tongue off on general principle. It was more that something about the whole thing nagged at her, like a puzzle she could not solve.

She understood what he was on about. She knew of the myth, she had read it in one of the ponderous tomes she had taken out of the library for light reading. What she did not understand was *why* he had been on about it. He had probably heard the myth long before her, growing up in a wizarding household. She just could not comprehend why he had suddenly felt the need try it out. It was almost as if he had been kissing someone and heard it, and had run off to kiss someone else to make sure he hadn't been imagining things.

But who in the bloody hell had he been kissing, if that was the case?

Ginny was the only other girl in the house, but she doubted that. They had snogged before, so if he was meant to hear a phoenix song with her, he would have heard it then.

Besides, he had been with Harry the whole day, that particular day.

Harry?

She wondered briefly if that was the case, but much like the idea of Harry shagging Ginny, she dismissed it immediately.

It didn't make any sense. Actually, it just didn't seem possible.

Then again, if being best friends with the Boy Who Lived had taught her anything, nothing was really impossible.

~*~

"Is that the post, Albus?"

"Yes, Minerva." Dumbledore said, setting his tea aside to open the window. A large, fearsome screech owl swooped over the dining table, dropped a letter in Dumbledore's lap, and was quickly on his way.

"Who is it from?" Professor McGonagall asked, peering at the letter curiously.

"The Ministry." Dumbledore said, breaking the wax seal.

"Fudge pandering for advice?" McGonagall asked dryly. "For someone who hates you so, he sends you enough owls. You could paper every wall in your house with the letters he sends."

"Indeed." Dumbledore said, scanning the letter. "However, it is not from Mister Fudge. It is from the Department of Birth, Death and Inheritance."

"Whatever would they want with you?" She asked.

"It would seem they are aware of Narcissa Malfoy's death."

"How nice of them to notice." McGonagall said flatly. "And, efficient as always. She's only been dead for near a month."

"Yes, well." Dumbledore said lightly. "I am sure they have much to do. Keeping your head buried in the sand is fearfully time-consuming."

McGonagall eyes the letter askance. "They wasted a half a foot of parchment and that owl's time to inform you that Narcissa Malfoy is dead?"

"Actually, they only mention Mistress Malfoy in passing. The rest is concerning her son." Dumbledore said. "They are informing me Draco will not be attending Hogwarts in the fall, due to the fact that he is deceased."

"They think he is dead?" McGonagall asked.

"Indeed." Dumbledore replied, handing her the letter. "I do suppose it was a logical conclusion. Narcissa is dead, and no one has seen hide nor hair of Draco in weeks."

"Logical conclusion." McGonagall snorted delicately. "Wishful thinking, more like."

"I do hate to disappoint them by producing him, but it must be done." Dumbledore said.

"Why?" McGonagall asked, sipping her tea.

"Otherwise, Mister Malfoy will have no home to go to when he graduates." Dumbledore explained. "Lucius has no legal rights. If they believe Draco is dead, they will seize Malfoy Manor as abandoned property,"

"Ah, yes." McGonagall said. "What are you planning, then?"

"A trip to the Ministry." Dumbledore replied, as if the answer was obvious.

"*You* and Draco?" McGonagall asked, raising an eyebrow. "Both of you in the Ministry building at the same time would attract attention. Not to mention, it would put Cornelius Fudge off his meals for a week."

"At least." Dumbledore said brightly. "Actually, I was thinking of sending him with Severus."

"You were thinking of sending me *where*?" Snape asked. "And, with *whom*?"

"Ah, Severus." Dumbledore said, smiling at the head in his fireplace. "It is early for bad news."

"Why do you think I have bad news?" Snape asked. His expression plainly said he did, in fact, have bad news.

"Because when you have good news, you come all the way in." Dumbledore said.

"Yes, yes." Snape said irritably. "Where am I going, then?"

"I was hoping I could persuade you to take Mister Malfoy to the Ministry, to clear up a misunderstanding." Dumbledore said. "I would take him myself, but that would upset Mister Fudge something fierce."

"If you insist, Headmaster." Snape said. "And what is this misunderstanding?"

"The Department of Birth, Death and Inheritance is under the impression that Mister Malfoy is dead." Dumbledore said.

"They will be most put out to discover they are mistaken." Snape said. "I have a meeting later. Tomorrow, perhaps?"

"Tomorrow will be fine." Dumbledore said. "Now, what of your bad news?"

"It would seem the Dark Lord's loyal minions know where to find the Crystal Sword." Snape said.

"Do they." Dumbledore said. "How thoughtful of them, saving the Order from having to find it themselves. Where do they think it is?"

"Stonehenge." Snape said.

"How fitting." McGonagall said airily. "I never would have thought of that."

"When do they plan to go after it?" Dumbledore asked.

"Sometime next week." Snape answered. "There are plans to make,

and whatnot. I will be getting the details tonight."

~*~

"More Dark Magic today?" Harry said, as they walked out into the backyard. Draco noted a slight tinge of eagerness in his voice.

"Not today." Draco said, sinking down on to one of the stone benches.

His eyes drifted to the large bush between the benches. It had once been a rosebush, the one Harry had used to practice the Disanimus Curse. It was now covered in lilies and narcissus, so white they almost sparkled. He wondered idly if Harry had caught on yet.

"What, then?" Harry asked. He sat down next to Draco, and rested his hand on Draco's leg.

"Dumbledore was thinking I should work on my Patronus." Draco said.

"Was he?" Harry asked dryly. "Conniving old bugger."

"Well, I promised you I wouldn't let them near you." Draco said, kissing him lightly. Spooky floating fucks weren't coming anywhere near Harry, if Draco had anything to do with it. "I might as well figure out how to do it."

"Have you done one before?"

"Not really." Draco slowly.

He had told Dumbledore his Patronus was passable, but that had not exactly been the truth. Once he had found out Harry could make one (actually, after Harry's Patronus had charged him down during the Gryffindor and Ravenclaw Quidditch), he had been incensed at the idea that Harry could make one when he could not, and had given it a go.

His results had been quite sorry. He had produced more than the flimsy wisps of silver smoke that most people made on their first try. Rather, he had produced a large cloud of silver smoke that had solidified into a blob, though it had not formed itself into anything recognizable.

"Well, let's give it a go." Harry said, standing. He went thoughtful for a

moment. "*Expecto Patronum*"

A thick concentration of silver smoke shot out of the end of Harry's wand. It immediately took form, shaping itself into a large, striking whiteish-colored stag. The stag cantered gracefully around the garden for a moment, then suddenly dissipated.

"That was brief." Draco said, frowning. It had been rather impressive, but Draco had figured something meant to ward off Dementors would hang around for a bit.

"Oh, yeah." Harry said. "They just last long enough to do their job. Since there was nothing for it to do, it left."

"Do it again." Draco requested.

"*Expecto Patronum*"

Once again, heavy silver smoke poured out of Harry's wand and took the form of a stag. This time it made a slow half-circle around the garden, stopping to face Harry and Draco. It paused for a moment, considering them, then disappeared.

"Is it always the same animal?" Draco asked.

"I think so." Harry said, thoughtfully. "Least, it has always been a stag for me."

"Why a stag?" Draco wondered.

"Remus and Dumbledore both told me that they take the form of something that is important to you." Harry said. "My dad's Animagus animal was a stag."

"Remus?" Draco asked.

"Professor Lupin." Harry replied.

"Oh, right. The werewolf." Draco said quietly. Lupin had been at Grimmauld Place since the emergency meeting of the Order two weeks ago. He seemed harmless enough, but the idea of a werewolf pottering around the house was somewhat unsettling. "He was friends with you dad at school, right?"

"Yeah." Harry said. "Him and Sirius Black." His lip curled. "And Wormtail."

"I take it your father and Sirius were close, then, if he was your godfather." Draco mused. Draco had never properly met Sirius Black, but Harry was very attached to his memory. Draco could not help but wonder what kind of man he had been, and he doubted Lucius Malfoy's assessments of the man had been anywhere near the truth.

"Inseparable, from what I have heard. All three of them." Harry said, a bit sadly. "That's why Sirius and my dad became Animagi, so they could stay with Remus during the full moon."

"They stayed with him as animals?" Draco asked. Completely daft, hanging around a werewolf, in any kind of form.

"Yes. Wormtail, too." Harry said. "Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot and Prongs. My dad was a stag, Sirius was a big, black dog, and Wormtail was a rat."

"And Lupin wasn't dangerous to them?" Draco asked curiously. From what he had read about werewolves, they were a single-minded destructive source when they transformed.

"No, not when they were animals." Harry said, shaking his head. "From what Remus told me, it actually calmed him, to have them around. Maybe because they were his friends." He paused, chewing at his lower lip. "I wish Ron and I hadn't offed that boggart."

"What?" Draco sputtered, not understanding how those two statements were connected. "What the Hell would you want one of those for?"

"That's how I learned." Harry said. "Remus kept a boggart in one of the cupboards in his classroom."

"Not in his writing desk?" Draco joked. "Or in the wardrobe with his clothes?"

"Shut it." Harry said.

"I have told you that you live in a madhouse, right?" Draco asked.

The poltergeist popping in on them in the shower this morning had

been extremely unnecessary. Mrs. Black shrieking at them on the way to breakfast also could have been done without.

"Repeatedly." Harry grumbled. Draco thought he might still be bitter about the poltergeist making lewd comments about his naked arse. "You ready?"

"I guess." Draco said. "What's the trick to it, then?"

"You have to think of a happy thought, or memory." Harry explained. "A very happy thought, and you have to concentrate on it, hard."

"A happy thought?" Draco asked, incredulously. "What do I look like, a sodding Hufflepuff?"

"Draco." Harry warned.

"Yeah, all right." Draco relented, standing.

Quickly, Draco rummaged through his mind, trying to think of something inordinately happy. He came up with the day he learned he had been accepted on to the Slytherin Quidditch team, and focused on it.

"Expecto Patronum"

Silver smoke trailed out of the end of his wand. It shaped itself into a large cloud, quivered a bit, then vanished.

"Not bad." Harry soothed. "That was better than I did on my first try."

"You were a third year on your first try." Draco said sourly.

"True." Harry agreed. "But you are not supposed to learn this until seventh year Dark Arts, so you are still ahead."

Draco suspected this was just an appeal to his ego, but he let it go.

"Maybe you need a happier thought." Harry ventured.

"It was happy." Draco defended. Harry was probably right, though. Making the House Team had made him happy, for sure, but it had been an empty kind of happiness, because his father had bought his way on.

"Ordinary, boring happy won't work." Harry replied. "You need something very happy."

Draco grumbled about Harry mistaking him for Colin Creevey or Lavender Brown, but Harry gave him a very flat look, so he shut his mouth. He conjured up something from first year, the half and hour or so that he had thought Slytherin had won the House Cup, before Dumbledore ruined it by giving Harry and his friends extra points for that folderol with the Sorcerer's Stone.

"Expecto Patronum"

The silver smoke that wafted out of his wand was a good deal thicker than it had been before, though not as solid as what Harry had made. It once again formed itself into a large cloud. The cloud started to contract, like a large hand was squeezing it, but it dissipated before taking a clear form.

"Better." Harry said.

Draco curled his lip, and cursed himself viscosly. If he did not manage to produce something that did not look like it was about to spout rain, he would never keep the Dementors away from Harry.

Harry

His mind drifted to Harry. He looked over at Harry, taking in his unruly black hair, the infamous scar, and his grass-green eyes. He thought of how his body tingled and his skin pebbled when Harry touched him. He thought about him and Harry naked and kissing under the hot spray of the shower, before the poltergeist had happened along, telling them what naughty, naughty boys they were. He thought about the warm, fluttery, floating feeling he got whenever Harry was around.

He thought about the song.

"Expecto Patronum"

Silver smoke shot violently out of his wand, thick and heavy and substantial. It hung motionless in the air for a split second, then molded itself into something definite. Draco had not gotten a proper look at it, he had been too busy goggling at the end of his wand in shock, and by the time he looked up, it was gone.

"What was it?" Draco asked. "Did you see it?"

Harry regarded him with wide eyes. He was speechless, and looked like he had been slapped by a troll.

Since Harry was obviously not going to be any help, he tried again.

"Expecto Patronum"

Draco's Patronus came out in a cloud, but immediately took shape. It was still not quite as good as Harry's, which seemed to take form right as it poured out of his wand, but it had shape nonetheless.

It looked remarkably like a large, shaggy dog.

The silvery-white dog bounded around the garden. It came to a halt in front of Harry, sitting down and perking his ear just before it faded away.

Draco was expecting Harry to be impressed, but Harry looked nothing of the sort. He actually looked like he had seen a ghost. Draco was in the middle of wondering if this was or was not an improvement from looking like he had been slapped by a troll, when he saw that Harry's eyes were very large, and quite wet.

"Harry?"

A tear slid slowly down Harry's cheek. He caught Draco looking at him, and dropped his chin to his chest.

"Harry." Draco sat, and tipped Harry's chin up.

"It looked just like him." Harry mumbled, averting his eyes. "So much like him."

Draco was confused.

Then it hit him, and he wanted to kick himself in his own arse.

Looking at Draco's Patronus had been like looking at Sirius' ghost.

Silver and white instead of black. Transparent and intangible, instead of solid and real.

It had looked exactly like Sirius. It had been the same size and shape, and it had the same shaggy fur, the same face, and the same curious, piercing eyes. The way Draco's Patronus had sat and studied him had been eerily similar to the time Sirius had watched him on Magnolia Crescent before the arrival of the Knight Bus.

It had hurt to look at it. It had just hurt so much, a gut-wrenching, stabbing, blinding pain that had nearly swallowed him whole.

"Harry?"

Harry did not want to look at Draco, but given the way Draco had his chin in his hand, it was difficult to avoid his eyes. He wasn't really angry with Draco, he knew Draco hadn't done it intentionally, it had just been an extremely horrible, painful shock.

He missed Sirius terribly, and as much as Dumbledore insisted he should not blame himself for his godfather's death, it was very hard for him not to. He and his friends had not needed to go to the Department of Mysteries. He had allowed himself to think he had to go, by listening to the insane ramblings of a lunatic house-elf. Sirius would not have gone there, and would not have gotten killed, if Harry had not been there in the first place.

Over the last months, Harry had tried to mollify himself with the idea that some good had come from the entire fiasco. Hagrid had once told him that Sirius died the way he would have wanted to, fighting, and protecting someone he loved. Harry had clung to that, telling himself over and over that Sirius had died in battle, the way he would have wanted it, and that the battle had resulted in the arrest of Lucius Malfoy, Bellatrix Lestrange, and numerous others.

Of course, Lucius and Bellatrix and the others had escaped, which made it a rather empty victory.

"Harry, I'm sorry." Draco said slowly.

"I know you didn't do it on purpose." Harry mumbled. "They come out

the way they come out."

That was true, but Harry didn't understand why Draco's would look so much like Sirius. As far as he knew, Draco had only seen Sirius as a dog once, briefly, on Platform Nine and Three-Quarters at the beginning of last year. He didn't know Sirius, he had never spoken with him. He hadn't loved Sirius the way Harry had, and still did.

Suddenly, Dumbledore's voice rang in Harry's head, something he had said to Harry the day Sirius rode away from Hogwarts on Buckbeak.

Your father is alive in you, Harry, and shows himself most plainly when you have need of him. How else could you produce that particular Patronus?

Taking a deep breath, Harry looked over at Draco, who was still thoroughly abashed. Harry smiled at him, and squeezed his hand. The violent, stabbing pain started falling away, replaced by a familiar warmth and the soft hum of the song.

Prongs rode again, last night, Dumbledore had said.

Draco had promised to protect him from the Dementors, just as Sirius no doubt would have, if he was still alive. Through Draco's Patronus, Sirius would always be there to protect him when he needed him. Sirius would always be alive in Draco, just as Harry's father was alive in him.

"Do it again." Harry demanded.

"What?" Draco's asked, eyeing Harry worriedly.

"Again." Harry insisted, waving his hand. "I want to see it again."

"Expecto Patronum"

A silver-white dog erupted out of the end of Draco's wand. It ran in a circle around the garden, then trotted up to Harry. It cocked its head to the side, studying him with inquisitive eyes, then was gone.

Harry had seen those eyes, so many times before, and he never thought he would see them again.

"You're not mad?" Draco asked unsteadily.

"No." Harry said, kissing him. "I think it is brilliant."

~*~

Malfoy

Harry swore that he wasn't all that bad, and that somewhere underneath his ugly, sneering, ferrety face was a decent human being. Hermione insisted that his horrible attitude and sour disposition were a product of his less than savory upbringing, and she went on at length about how Dumbledore wouldn't have brought him to Grimmauld Place if he couldn't be trusted.

Ron, however, was not interested. Malfoy was a vile, arrogant, self-possessed shit in his opinion. Whatever Harry and Hermione thought, Malfoy was still an insufferable prat, he was still rotten to the core, and he still dressed like he was the keeper of Voldemort's crypt.

If Harry and Hermione wanted to think he was alright, that was fine, but Ron was not about to jump on the Malfoy-is-really-a-corking-chap bandwagon. Not anytime soon, anyway. It would take more than a few days of Malfoy not calling Hermione a 'mudblood' to fool Ronald Weasley, thank you very much.

And, much to Ron's consternation, Malfoy was effectively stealing his best friend, and selfishly monopolizing all of his time.

Hermione had tried to soothe Ron's fears by saying that they were just playing nice because Dumbledore was making them spend so much time together. Ron was not so sure. For two people who were only playing nice, Harry and Malfoy were doing a rather convincing job of it. They seemed to be getting along swimmingly, and apparently could not see enough of each other. Often as not, they passed up the little amount of free time Dumbledore allotted them, opting to stay hidden away in the unused, medium-sized parlor in the rear of the house, doing Merlin only knew what.

Hermione said they had work to do, and that they were just preoccupied. Dumbledore had given them 'homework'. That was the story going around, and everyone was stubbornly sticking to it. She said Dumbledore had wanted them to learn from each other, whatever that was supposed to mean. Malfoy was so arrogant he had difficulty

taking instruction from Hogwarts professors. Ron could not picture him placidly listening to Harry explain how to make a Patronus.

What the bloody, bugging Hell would Malfoy be able to teach Harry? Harry was the Boy Who Lived, for Merlin's sake, he certainly did not need Charms lessons or Transfigurations pointers from the son of a Death Eater. The only thing Malfoy knew that Harry didn't was Dark Magic, and Ron just could not picture Dumbledore asking Malfoy to teach Harry how to cast *Avada Kedavra*.

And someone, Ron noted, had inexplicably grown flowers all over the place.

The backyard was literally infested with all manner of posies, roses, hydrangeas, and begonias. All the flowers were in unnatural shades of red, blue and purple so dark they were almost black, except for a strange bush of lilies and narcissi growing together, which were so violently white they were almost transparent.

The garden was such a gothic floral nightmare that Ron had almost thought Malfoy had done it. And, Harry and Malfoy *had* been spending a lot of time in the backyard, right about the time the garden started looking like a wedding was about to take place. He eventually decided it must be some kind of fluke. If Draco fucking Malfoy knew a charm that would bloom flowers, Ron would eat his broomstick, cornhusk bristles and all.

Harry and Malfoy

Ron suspected they might very well be becoming friends, as unbelievable as it sounded.

A little a month had passed since Malfoy had inflicted everyone with his presence, and over the course of that month, he and Harry seemed less plagued by the notion of having to spend time together.

They laughed together, sometimes, and they whispered to each other quite a bit. Just five minutes ago, when Harry sat down for lunch, Malfoy had leaned over and whispered something to Harry that made him blush.

Just yesterday, Ron had gone into the unused, medium-sized parlor at the rear of the house to collect Harry and Malfoy for dinner. He had opened the door, only to find Malfoy sitting in Harry's lap. Obviously,

Ron had been horrified, and had started to screech. Harry had at least had the decency to look sheepish. Malfoy, on the other hand, had only lifted his pointy, little chin defiantly and fed Ron some story about how, conveniently, he had stumbled and fell into Harry's lap just as Ron was opening the door.

Grudgingly, Ron had accepted Malfoy's story, only because he could not fathom any other reason for Malfoy to be in Harry's lap. Accident or not, it had still made Ron's skin crawl.

And there was that business with Malfoy kissing Harry on the forehead the other day. Harry could insist Ron's eyes needed checking all he wanted, but Ron had definitely seen what he had seen, not that he had wanted to see it, mind. Ron also noted that both times he had brought it up after the fact, Harry had pointedly changed the subject.

Right at this moment, they were sitting together. Ron did suppose it was not entirely their faults, when they had come in for lunch the only two available seats had been next to each other, but still, Ron didn't like it.

As per usual, Malfoy was having coffee, and Harry was eating enough for both of them. However, in a worrying development, Malfoy was eating, even though he didn't have a plate in front of him.

"So, what have you been up to this morning?" Harry asked, too cheerfully.

"The usual." Ron complained. "Nothing,"

"There is plenty to do, Ron." Hermione chided.

"Even I can only play so much chess." Ron said. "You never want to play, anyway."

"You could read." Hermione suggested, predictably. "There are tons of books in the sitting room."

"Read?" Ron scoffed. "I'm on vacation."

Hermione snorted into her tea.

"I've been trying to talk mum into a trip to Diagon Alley." Ron said to Harry. "I thought it would be a nice break."

"No good?" Harry asked, around a mouthful of corned beef sandwich.

"Nope." Ron said, shaking his head. "She's been as paranoid as Moody."

"Constant vigilance?" Harry asked wryly.

"Really." Ron snorted. "Keeps insisting Malfoy's dad will be hanging around."

"Oh, likely." Draco drawled. He reached over and snatched an oven chip off of Harry's plate. "He is a rather wanted man, right now. I highly doubt he'll be standing around outside Madame Malkins, waiting to get arrested."

"As much as it pains me, I agree with you." Ron grumbled, frowning at Malfoy. He was wearing black linen pirate shirt with puffy sleeves, and Ron thought it made him look like a toff. "But, she's not interested in my opinion."

"That would be nice." Ginny said hopefully. "I'd love to walk around outside for a bit. Maybe get an ice cream."

"There is a backyard here, you know." Draco offered. "And I do believe it is outside."

"The backyard is frightening." Ginny said. "Where did all those bloody flowers come from, all of a sudden?"

Harry and Draco exchanged a glance.

"Diagon Alley would be nice." Hermione said wistfully. "Maybe if we all keep at your mum, she'll come around."

"Doubtful." Ron griped. He took a bite of the hated corned beef and grimaced. "She was acting like the whole sodding Order would have to come with us, just to be safe."

"That wouldn't attract attention, or anything." Draco quipped. He snaked his hand over to Harry's plate and helped himself to another oven chip.

"Because *you* prancing around Diagon Alley with *me* wouldn't attract

attention?" Harry asked, eyeing Malfoy and the lost oven chip sideways.

Malfoy paused thoughtfully. "I could use your cloak." He offered, flashing Harry one of those smiles the girls at Hogwarts thought was dazzling.

"You could." Harry admitted.

Ron very nearly choked, as evidently, the smile worked. Harry never willingly let that cloak out of his sight. Ron couldn't believe he was considering lending it to Malfoy, of all people, just because he had flashed Harry all his teeth.

"Of course, I would look like an complete arse, walking around, talking to someone no one else can see." Harry went on.

"True." Draco said, shrugging.

Ron waited for Malfoy to inform Harry that he always looked like an arse, as he never let an opening like that pass him by, but it didn't happen. Instead, Malfoy nicked the wedge of pickle off of Harry's plate, and took a bite. He chewed thoughtfully for a moment, then set the pickle back down on Harry's plate, ignoring the way Ron was goggling at him the whole time.

"What is with you today?" Harry asked suspiciously. "You're eating."

"No, I'm not." Draco said innocently, the pickle in his mouth notwithstanding.

Harry sighed heavily. Malfoy responded by pulling a sliver of corned beef out of Harry's sandwich and popping it into his mouth.

"I asked you if you wanted any. I asked you." Harry said wearily. "Now stop eating off my plate."

"Why *are* you eating off his plate?" Hermione asked, eyeing Draco curiously.

Draco shrugged. "Because he's letting me."

He reached for another oven chip, but Harry caught him in the act, and pinched his arm. Malfoy didn't yell or rage like Ron had expected,

but laughed. Harry watched Malfoy predatorily for a moment, who was innocently sipping his coffee, then turned back to his plate.

Suddenly, Harry yelped and jerked out of his chair like he had been goosed.

He turned and glared at Malfoy, who was still innocently sipping his coffee. It was obvious Malfoy was to blame, by the way he was studying the ceiling intently and trying not to laugh. Ron wondered how he had done whatever he had done, since his wand was nowhere in sight and both his hands were around his coffee cup.

"Prat." Harry growled.

"Git."

"Pillock."

"Ponce."

Ron thought Malfoy was a fine one to talk, wearing that shirt.

"Tosser."

"Bint."

"Arrogant sod."

"Self-sacrificing, scar-headed hero."

"I hate you."

"No, you don't."

"Oh, yes I do." Harry insisted. His tone was incomprehensibly fond. "I hate you and I hate your face."

Malfoy leaned over and whispered something in his ear. Harry glared at Malfoy, then blushed furiously under his scrutiny. Inexplicably, they both burst out laughing. Malfoy hid his face in his hands, and Harry looked close to tears.

Ron looked around the table to see that Hermione looked as baffled as he felt. Ginny, however, seemed mildly amused.

Once he had regained his composure, Harry threw up his hands, and pushed his plate over so it was halfway between himself and Malfoy. Malfoy popped an oven chip in his mouth, and grinned like an idiot.

Ron glared at them flatly. If he didn't know better, he would swear they were dating.

~*~

Draco frowned at his surroundings like the sitting room itself had done him a personal wrong.

Evidently, Granger had pulled Harry aside after dinner, informing him that the Weasel was pining over the loss of quality time with his best friend. She told Harry that she had tried to make the Weasel understand that Harry was spending all his time with Draco because Dumbledore had insisted he do so, to no avail.

Apparently, the Weasel *did* understand (albeit grudgingly) that they were meant to spend the majority of their time together. However, the Weasel seemed to recall that Dumbledore's orders allowed for Harry and Draco to spend two hours a day with everyone else. But lately, Harry and Draco had been opting to spend this free time alone, a development the Weasel was taking very personally.

The Weasel's insecurities lead Draco to his current quandary. He was now lounging on a couch in the sitting room, surrounded by Granger, the Weasel, and the Weasel's sister.

It was not that Draco begrudged Harry his friends, it was just that Draco had no desire to personally endure their presence. He had offered to spend this hour of free time alone in the unused, medium-sized parlor at the rear of the house, so Harry could fraternize with Granger and the Weasel without him having to witness it. Harry wouldn't hear of it, and had insisted that Draco join them. He seemed to think that one day, Draco and his friends would be able to play nicely.

Draco wasn't going to hold his breath.

At the moment, Harry was playing wizarding chess with the Weasel at the writing desk, and losing horribly. Ginny was sitting in the armchair,

gossiping with Granger, who was dividing her attention between Ginny's prattle and the frightfully thick, ancient-looking book she had propped over the arm of the couch.

Draco was bored out of his mind, and found the company, with the exception of Harry, beyond the pale. He sharply reminded himself not to try and argue a point with Harry when he was not in complete control of his thought processes. If Harry had not broached the topic when his hand had been down Draco's pants, Draco would have had the verbal skills required to put his foot down. He would be in the other room, instead of where he was now, trying to ignore Granger and Ginny's insipid girly-chatter and the way the Weasel was intermittently glaring at him over Harry's shoulder.

And Harry said *he* was the evil one.

"Checkmate!" Ron singsonged.

"Yeah, all right." Harry grumbled.

"You want to have another go?" Ron asked hopefully.

"Not particularly." Harry said, standing. "You'll win, anyway."

The Weasel took a seat on the couch next to Granger. He pointedly left more than enough room for Harry to join him, but Harry didn't really seem to notice, and flopped down on the other couch, next to Draco. His hand twitched in midair, like he meant to hold Draco's hand or rest his hand on his leg, but realizing the audience, thought the better of it.

Draco sighed. While keeping their feelings for each other to themselves for awhile had been his idea, he was finding it dreadfully annoying and difficult. He had to constantly remind himself to snap or sneer at Harry at mealtimes, even though he didn't really want to. He routinely had to stop himself from touching or hugging or kissing Harry anywhere but the garden, the master bedroom, or the unused medium-sized parlor at the rear of the house, in case someone happened along.

The Weasel was glaring at them with a face that would make a Blast-Ended Skrewt nervous.

Draco wondered if they were really fooling anyone. Harry had managed to stop himself before holding hands with Draco like a sappy

git in front of everyone, but Draco was painfully aware that the seating arrangements were suspect. The couch they were on could easily accommodate five, but Harry had sat down so close to Draco that their legs were touching.

That, and there was a rather suspicious-looking red blotch on Harry's neck, peeping over the edge of his shirt-collar.

"What is with you two, lately?" Ron demanded. "Every time I see you, you are practically on top of each other."

"I don't know what you are talking about." Harry said flatly. Draco was pleased to note he didn't move.

"Why don't mind your business, Weasel?" Draco snapped.

"Harry has been my best friend for five years." Ron said testily. "I think that makes him my business."

"So, what did you guys do today?" Hermione interjected loudly.

Well, I sucked Harry's cock first thing this morning. Draco thought with amusement. Then, we snogged rather noisily in the shower. A little bit ago, Harry shoved his hand down my pants and wanked me into agreeing to come sit in this room with you lot.

He doubted Granger wanted to know any of this.

"Patronus Charm." Harry replied, giving them a more acceptable answer.

"You got those sorted out awhile back." Ron said.

"Not me." Harry said. "Draco."

"*Draco?*" Ron goggled. "When did he stop being *Malfoy?*"

"What's your Patronus?" Hermione went on, ignoring Ron.

"A dog." Draco said.

"Don't lie." Ron said nastily. "You know it's a ferret."

"A dog, that's interesting." Hermione said conversationally. "I wouldn't

have expected that. I would have figured a dragon, or a snake."

"I was a bit surprised myself." Draco said simply. A dragon or a snake? Maybe Granger wasn't that bad, after all. At least she gave him some credit, once in awhile.

"I still think it is really a ferret." Ron said, glowering.

"Why don't you show them?" Harry asked, frowning at the Weasel.

"I'm not really having any happy thoughts at the moment." Draco replied tightly. "You know hanging around the Weasel is bad for my digestion."

Harry gave him a withering look.

"Harry, what's that on your neck?" Ron asked suspiciously.

"Freak Charms accident." Draco delivered flawlessly. Harry, however, was rather confused, and was trying futilely to look at his own neck.

He noticed Ginny was smiling at him and Harry with mild amusement. He also noticed Granger was glancing back and forth between the two of them with wide eyes, and regarding them with something that could have been comprehension.

"I think Granger just figured it out." Draco whispered.

"Why?"

"Your neck."

"What did you do to my neck?" Harry asked with narrowed eyes.

"Nothing you were complaining about at the time." Draco hissed.

"What the shit are you two always whispering about?" Ron asked.

"He's trying to convince me not to kill you." Draco drawled. "Though I do wish he would let me get on with it."

"Yeah." Ron retorted. "Like Dumbledore wouldn't get suspicious if I suddenly turned up dead."

"I don't really think he would notice." Draco snapped. "It's not like you are good for anything."

"Here is an idea." Harry groused. "Why don't you both shut the fuck up?"

"Draco." Ginny said sweetly, desperately wanting to change the subject. "Why don't you show us your Patronus?"

"Only if the Weasel promises to keep his mouth closed for a full five minutes afterward." Draco answered.

Ron rolled his eyes.

Draco pulled out his wand. Resisting the temptation to turn the Weasel into something nastier than he already was, Draco focused on more pleasant thoughts of Harry.

"Expecto Patronum"

The large, silver-white dog pour out of Draco's wand. Given the space constraints, it did not do much moving around. It stared and Granger and the Weasel for a moment, turned to look back at Harry and Draco, then disappeared.

"Bloody Hell!" Ron gasped, taken aback. "How did you do that?"

"I pointed my wand, and said *Expecto Patronum*" Draco drawled. "That is generally how the charm works."

"No, you pillock." Ron spat. "It looked just like Sirius. How did you manage that?"

"That's just how it came out." Draco said noncommittally.

He saw that Granger was smiling at them rather strangely, and he realized he and Harry weren't fooling her any longer. The Weasel might be pretty slow on the uptake, but as far as Granger was concerned, the jig was up.

Ron's next pithy comment was cut short by his mother bellowing for him from the kitchen. Grumbling, Ron hoisted himself from the couch and disappeared into the kitchen, a development Draco actually had mixed feelings about. The Weasel was a reprehensible little twat, but

his leaving left the floor open for Granger to start asking questions he was not entirely sure him or Harry wanted to answer just yet.

Granger watched them silently for a good while before speaking, her expression saying she was choosing her words carefully.

"You might as well tell him." Hermione said, gesturing towards the door Ron just disappeared through. "He'll figure it out eventually."

"Tell him what?" Harry said innocently.

Hermione gave Harry a flat look. "About you two."

"Us two, what?" Draco said, deciding to be just as helpful as Harry.

"You two are dating." Hermione said simply.

Harry paled considerably. Draco stiffened for a minute, but seeing Granger's determined expression, knew they were caught. He took a deep breath, and gave up the fight.

"Dating." Draco scoffed, reaching over to take Harry's hand. "You make it sound so trivial, Granger."

Granger looked pleased with herself.

"Why haven't you said anything?" She asked.

"It never came up." Draco drawled. "Why haven't you told us you're dating the Weasel?"

"It never came up." Hermione retorted.

"You're going out with Ron?" Harry sputtered.

"I have been, for a couple of weeks, now." Hermione said impatiently. "You might have noticed, if you weren't so distracted."

"No, he wouldn't have." Ginny added. "He's a boy. He's slow."

"I am not slow." Harry hissed.

"Yes you are, scarhead." Draco said sweetly, patting his leg. "So tell me, Granger. What gave us away?"

"You kissing me in the hallway." She replied. "You kissed me specifically because you wanted to see if you heard a phoenix song, meaning you had heard it with someone else earlier and were testing to see if it would happen again." She smiled. "Harry was the only person you had been with that day, so it had to have been him."

"Go on." Draco insisted.

"The flowers in the garden." Hermione continued. "They are all practically black, except for the white ones on that one bush. Lilies and narcissa, together."

Draco nodded. She was too clever for her own good. He didn't even think Harry had figured that one out yet.

"Your Patronus was what made it all fall into place." Hermione went on. "Ron was right. It looked just like Sirius. If your Patronus is Harry's godfather, someone you never knew, then Harry must be very important to you."

"I suppose he is, at that." Draco said lightly.

"See, it wasn't my neck." Harry defended.

"That didn't help." Hermione said wryly. "I mean, you didn't have it this morning, and you've been with him all day."

Harry flushed a bright red. He mumbled something unintelligible about vampires, and tried to hide his face in Draco's shoulder. Granger and Ginny started giggling at his embarrassment, which in turn, made Draco laugh.

When he had recovered, he retrieved Harry's face from his shoulder and kissed him. It looked like Harry wasn't going to participate at first, but Draco nudged his lips open with his tongue, and Harry gave in, resting his hand on Draco's cheek.

They kissed for quite a few minutes, completely unaware of anything. The song in their ears made everything else melt away, and they didn't notice the two girls staring at them with undivided attention.

They also didn't notice when Ron came back into the room, and probably wouldn't have, if he had not made a noise like he had just

been bashed in the head with something very large and heavy.

"I'm having a thought." Ron said to them slowly. "I'm going to go back into the kitchen, and pretend I didn't see that. Then, I am going to come back through that door, and it will be like it never happened."

"Sod off, Weasel." Draco said lazily.

He kissed Harry again, and made sure the Weasel got a clean view of his tongue sliding into Harry's mouth.

XI.V They've Finally Found a Way to Kill Me

As it turned out, Ron did not pull out his wand and try to get *Avada Kedavra* sorted out on the first try. Although, given his murderous expression, Ginny suspected this was only because his wand was laying about twenty paces from him, next to Hermione on the couch.

"I'm having a thought." Ron said. His eyes were narrowed and his tones were slow and calculated. "I'm going to go back into the kitchen, and pretend I didn't see that. Then, I am going to come back through that door, and it will be like it never happened."

"Sod off, Weasel." Draco drawled.

Draco flashed Ron a completely impudent smirk, then shoved his tongue down Harry's throat.

Ron looked utterly disgusted, but stared at them, gaping. He seemed to be caught in the common phenomenon of being unable to tear your eyes away from a horrifying sight, even though you wanted nothing more than to look at something else, because it was morbidly fascinating and wholly unbelievable.

Draco pulled away from Harry slowly, nipping at his lower lip as he did so. Ron made a thoroughly repulsed noise. Harry's tongue darted out of his mouth as Draco's lips left his, as if trying to draw him back.

That was all it took for Ron to snap back into reality. He had no longer walked in on his worst enemy molesting his victimized best friend for unbeknownst reasons, but rather, his worst enemy kissing his best friend and his best friend willingly participating in it. The confusion and

horror was immediately replaced by cold, seething anger.

"What. The fuck. Are you two. Doing." Ron growled, in harsh, clipped tones.

"We're trying to have a snog." Draco drawled. He gave Ron a pointed look made a dismissive wave. "If you don't mind, Weasel, you are ruining the mood something fierce. Worse than Sirius' mum and that poltergeist together, you are."

Ginny winced, and exchanged a worried glance with Hermione. If she knew her brother at all, and she was fairly sure she did after fourteen years, insolence was going to get Draco nowhere, quickly.

"Ron." Harry said lightly.

"Harry." Ron replied flatly. "Please, in the name of Merlin, tell me why I walked in here to find you kissing Malfoy." Ginny fancied his face looked desperate, as if the answer to this question determined whether or not Ron decided to carry on living.

"Well, you see..." Harry paused, favoring Ron with a sheepish look. Draco opened his mouth to say something that plainly would have been scathing, by his expression, but Harry shut him down with a sharp let-me-handle-this glance.

"No, I don't see." Ron said, glowering. "Well, actually, I suppose I did see, at that, and I rather wish I hadn't, but seeing as I did see, why don't you just go ahead and tell me about it."

Despite the let-me-handle-this face he had given Draco, Harry did not speak. Instead, he made a series of motions with his mouth that made him look like a dying flobberworm. This did not impress Ron in the least, and he started tapping his foot impatiently and looking like he was going to make Draco explode by sheer force of will.

Harry looked over at Draco, who seemed mildly amused at his discomfort. Harry then looked over at Hermione and Ginny pleadingly. Hermione sighed with frustration. Pulling out her wand, she wisely cast a Silencing Charm that could have disguised screams caused by the Cruciatus Curse.

"They're dating." She explained, once it was safe for Ron to start shouting.

"WHAT!" Ron bellowed, obliging her. His face went as red as his hair, then subsequently went a greenish color. "THEY'RE WHAT!"

"Dating." Hermione repeated.

"I told you, Granger, you make it sound so trivial." Draco said. His tone lacked its usual flippancy, and he had one of Harry's hands in his lap, clasped between both of his.

"You and Malfoy are *dating*?" Ron demanded, goggling.

Ron said the word 'dating' like he associated it with beheading babies or sodomizing livestock. Ginny thought he looked like he would have rather Harry announced that he did, in fact, decapitate children or engage in sexual relations with sheep and goats.

"Yes." Harry replied.

"Malfoy is your *boyfriend*!" Ron screeched.

He said 'boyfriend' like it had a more heinous connotation than 'dating'. His face was now a distinctly Slytherin green, and he was pacing a short circuit in front of the couch Harry and Draco were sitting on. On impulse, Ginny Summoned Ron's wand over to her and sat on it.

"Yes." Harry said again.

"But how?" Ron shouted, his anger now battling with bafflement. "Why?" He squeezed his eyes shut like that would make it all go away. Then, they snapped open wide with a thought. "Did you hit your head earlier?"

Ginny not surprised by this at the least, and wondered how long it would be before Ron tried to take Harry to St. Mungos.

"No." Harry said, shaking his head.

"Imperius?" Ron asked, hopefully.

"No." Draco snarled.

Ron looked pained. "But, you're not even gay!" He exclaimed, grasping at straws.

"I've been reconsidering." Harry said, a bit cheerfully. He glanced at Draco and Draco snickered, like it was some kind of private joke.

"Fine! Be gay!" Ron shrieked. "I don't care!" Ron's lip curled slightly, indicating that he would care, if he didn't find other matters more pressing. "Only, not with him! Don't be gay with him!"

Harry's response was cut off by gleeful cackles. Everyone's eyes darted to the hallway door, to see the poltergeist float through it. He bobbed in midair, resplendent in his palm-tree tie and striped, propeller-topped beanie.

"Awwww." He cajoled, leering at Ron and circling him predatorily. "Did Ickle Ronnekins just find out about naughty Harry-Bear and his boyfriend?"

"Now is not a good time, Nigel." Hermione said calmly. Ginny rolled her eyes. Leave it to Hermione to try and be diplomatic with a poltergeist.

Nigel blew Hermione a raspberry, then floated over to one of the cabinets in the corner. He started picking the lock, singing a rousing rendition of 'Harry and Draco, sitting in a tree'.

Ron glared murder at Nigel. Then, he looked over at Harry and Draco and frowned furiously. Draco still had one of Harry's hands in his, and was toying with his fingers.

"Stop fondling him." Ron barked to Draco. "It disturbs me greatly."

"I'd rather he didn't, thanks." Harry said sharply.

"You should have seen how I woke him up this morning." Draco said wickedly.

Ginny blushed, and she noticed that Hermione did to. Ron, however, looked like he was going to be violently ill.

"You should have seen them in the shower!" Nigel added from the corner. "Your Harry-Bear has a lovely bum."

"Shut up!" Ron pleaded, covering his ears. "Please, shut up!"

"And Dracky-Wacky was making quite a bit of noise." Nigel continued, unconcerned with Ron's rapidly crumpling face.

"That's disgusting." Ron muttered, shuddering. "Absolutely vile."

"What's disgusting, then? What's vile?" Harry asked hotly. "Me being liking boys, or me liking Draco?"

"You liking Malfoy!" Ron said, desperately. "I told you, be gay, its fine! Go shag Seamus, then!"

"Seamus isn't even gay." Draco pointed out helpfully.

Ginny wasn't so sure about that. Concerning his sexuality, Seamus had been on the fence for years, but a recent escapade with Blaise Zabini, chocolate syrup and Fizzing Whizbees had given him a whole new perspective.

"Fine! Shag Neville, then!" Ron seethed. Ginny was tempted to point out that Neville was extremely straight, but judging by her brother's expression, she doubted her input would be appreciated. "I don't care who, just don't be gay with him!"

"Being gay with me would be the point of the exercise." Draco said sharply. "Seeing as we are meant to be together, I rather don't see the point of him being gay with someone else."

"....sitting in a tree!" Nigel piped in, having his four go at the song. "K-i-s-s-i-n-g!"

"What the shit are you talking about, meant to be together?" Ron inquired, thoroughly ignoring the poltergeist.

"Will you shut up and listen?" Harry asked.

Ron considered this. "Yes." He said finally, though his face said he would rather keep raving.

"...first comes love." Nigel went on, loudly. "Then comes marriage..."

"Will you shut up or get out!" Harry yelled. "Or better yet, both!"

Nigel thumbed his nose at Harry, and continued the nursery rhyme in a fairly tuneless hum.

With that, Harry told Ron all about the Lovers Soulsong, with occasional interjections from Draco. Hermione and Ginny piped in as well, explaining how Harry and Draco had accosted them to make sure they hadn't been imagining things. There was also some commentary from Nigel, and he didn't seem to care that no one wanted to hear it.

Ron said nothing through the whole thing, and his face was blank and unreadable. He stared unblinking at Harry for a few moments after he stopped speaking, completely flabbergasted. Draco took this opportunity to kiss Harry again, and that was what did Ron in. Completely at wit's end, he went boneless, sinking down to sit on the floor with his knees tucked under his chin.

"Unbelievable." He managed finally. "Completely sodding unbelievable."

"He is an evil little shit." Ron went on, wearily. "From a long line of bigger, more evil shits."

Draco snorted derisively.

"He'll kill you, Harry. He'll fucking kill you." Ron muttered.

"I'd don't think I will, thanks. I am rather attached to him." Draco said nastily. "However, if you keep going on, I might kill you."

"See what I mean?" Ron said loudly, his temper returning. "He was born to be a ruddy murderer!"

"He is not going to kill you." Harry said, frowning at Draco. Draco looked very put-upon.

"You are out of your mind, you are." Ron insisted. "You've gone completely round the bend. His father is..."

"Yes, Weasel." Draco interjected. "My father is a murdering bastard, we have established this."

"And you will grow up to be just like him!" Ron said.

"If we are going to start in about fathers, I suggest you wait until yours has more than just a herd of children than he can't afford to show for himself." Draco said snottily. "At least until he gets a decent

job, or leaves off his love-affair with Muggles."

Ginny didn't have time to wonder if Ron could Summon his wand out from under her, because he did not waste time with such details. Suddenly finding strength in his legs, he jumped to his feet. He leapt at Draco, nevermind that Harry was practically in his lap, and punched him square in the jaw.

"What the fuck is the matter with you!" Harry shrieked, shoving Ron off quite forcefully. He looked well and truly irritated, both with Ron and Draco.

"What the fuck is the matter with *you*!" Ron gave back, getting back up on his feet. "You're dating Malfoy, for fuck's sake. Don't act like *I* am the one with the problem."

"You just hit my boyfriend!" Harry raged. Ginny noted that despite Harry's wrath, he was holding Draco down to keep him from returning the favor. "You *are* the one with the problem!"

"You have lost your mind, I tell you!" Ron shouted. "You kissed him and you heard some bloody birds singing, and now you think you have to fall in love with him!"

"I am in love with him." Harry said simply, unapologetic.

Ron was floored, Hermione gasped, and Ginny blinked at Harry like an owl. Draco seemed as surprised by this declaration as everyone else.

"No, you aren't!" Ron declared, with an air of certainty that said he had just proved water was wet. "He's got you Charmed!"

"You still on about the Imperius?" Draco sneered.

"It's not Imperius, but you still have him Charmed!" Ron insisted. "Bewitched! Enchanted!" He waved his hands about vigorously. "Ensorcelled!" He paused, apparently running out of big words he could barely pronounce.

"How so?" Harry asked crossly, eyeing Ron expectantly.

"Merlin's balls, Harry, he's a bloody veela!" Ron spat, trotting out an ancient rumor that had died out sometime in the second half of their first year at Hogwarts, based solely on Draco's alarmingly pale good

looks.

"I am not a veela." Draco said, in long-suffering tones. "Not really, anyway."

"Then how do you explain how you have shagged practically every thing that moves at school?" Ron asked.

"Wealth, charm and dazzling good looks." Draco said, with a lazy shrug.

Ron made a false cough that sounded suspiciously like 'bollocks'.

"You said 'not really'." Hermione asked, confused. "Are you or not?"

"Well, I supposed I am, but only a little." Draco explained, shrugging. "My mothers grandmother was a veela, so that would make me an eighth."

"Ah-ha!" Ron said, pointing at him in triumph.

"Wouldn't matter, you git, even if I was half. It doesn't work the same for men." Draco hissed. "All it did was make me scrawny and pale."

"You're not scrawny." Harry offered.

It was Ron's turn to snort.

Draco seemed pleased with Harry's declaration, and kissed him. He went about it a bit sloppily, a display Ginny figured that was for Ron's benefit.

"Oh, Good Gods!" Ron spat, cringing. "Don't start that, again."

"You'd best get used to it, Ickle Ronnekins." Nigel warned in a singsong. "They do it constantly. And usually with far less clothing, naughty boys that they are."

"That's what did it, then." Ron decided.

"What?" Harry asked.

Ron gave him a pointed look, or rather gave Draco's hand resting on his leg a pointed look, and Harry's face went angry.

"If you are trying to tell me that I think I am in love with him because his hand has been in my trolleys, I will..." Harry started.

"You'll let me kill him?" Draco asked eagerly, fishing for his wand.

"No, I'm not going to let you kill him." Harry snapped. Draco's face went flat. "But I might let you knobble him dizzy, if he keeps on."

Worry passed over Ron's face, but he kept on talking, anyway. "I will keep on, because that is exactly what I am telling you!"

"So that's it, then?" Harry said slowly. "You think that I *think* I am in love with him because he gives good head, or some rubbish like that?"

"I DIDN'T NEED TO KNOW THAT!" Ron shouted.

Ginny wished she had seen it, and she thought Hermione looked like she wished she had seen it, too. From the way Nigel was giggling, it looked like he *had* seen it, and Ginny found herself contemplating the incongruity of being jealous of a poltergeist.

"I am just confused, then." Harry asked crossly. He clearly did not like appreciate Ron's assessment of his mental functions.

"Its not like you have spent a lot of time snogging." Ron said, matter-of-factly. "All this sudden attention from someone could easily be confusing."

"Well, its not." Harry snapped, edging closer to Draco. "I know exactly what I want."

Ron harrumphed.

"You're a fine one to talk, at that." Harry retorted. "It's not like you have a vast catalogue of experience."

"At least I've had sex." Ron said meanly.

"I don't think that accident you had with Lavender in the Gryffindor Changing Rooms counts." Harry replied.

"That was not an accident." Ron defended.

"She thought you were me." Harry groused.

"That's not the point!" Ron insisted. He frowned furiously at Draco, who was laughing so hard Ginny thought he was going to cry.

"What is the point?" Harry asked irritably.

"That you are a virgin." Ron said. "Which is why you've gotten yourself confused."

"I am not a virgin." Harry said quietly.

Ginny did not like the way this conversation was going. Apparently, Hermione didn't either, because her face had gone as white as Draco's normally was.

"Oh, Gods." Ron said, looking at Draco in horror. "You two haven't..."

"No, we haven't." Draco announced a bit sorrowfully. He looked more than willing to rectify that lack immediately, right there on the couch, perhaps, if Ron would only get out of the room.

Ron looked slightly relieved. Then he narrowed his eyes at Harry. "Who have you been shagging, then?"

"Don't worry about it." Harry said lamely. "It's not important."

"Because it didn't happen." Ron replied, rolling his eyes. "You'd have told me."

"Maybe I wouldn't have." Harry gave back.

"Yes, you would have, but you didn't, so it didn't happen." Ron repeated, sounding like he was trying to convince himself.

"Yes, it did." Harry said defiantly, lifting his chin.

"Who was it, then?"

Harry opened his mouth, but snapped it shut. His eyes flicked fleetingly to Hermione, whose face was about as expressive as a stone statue and roughly the color of non-fat milk. Ron whirled around and froze, as once she saw Ron looking at her, she paled even more. Ron made a funny kind of strangled noise as realization set in, and went a

few shades lighter than was probably healthy, himself.

"*YOU!*" Ron bellowed, furious once more. "*YOU FUCKED HIM!*"

Hermione nodded silently.

"My, my." Nigel added. "Harry-Bear has been a busy, busy bee, hasn't he?"

Ginny suddenly didn't want to be in the room anymore. Durmstrang, once again, was sounding lovely this time of year.

Ron rounded on Harry, and called him a series of names that made even the imperious Nigel uncomfortable. This also served to infuriate Draco, who once more went fishing for his wand, muttering something about having had 'enough of the Weasel's mouth'.

Harry growled at Draco and snatched his wand out of his hand. Draco gave him a withering look and pointed his first two fingers at Ron.

"*Repelinus*" Draco said.

All at once, Ron grunted and bent double like he had been hit in the stomach with an invisible fist, and sailed through the air. He landed unceremoniously on the couch, next to Hermione, who was busy goggling at Draco for casting a spell without a wand.

"You've been practicing." Harry observed, raising an eyebrow at Draco. "Only, I would rather you didn't demonstrate on my best friend."

"Am I, then?" Ron demanded. "You fuck Hermione, and then you take up with him!"

"If anyone should be complaining, I think it should be Granger, seeing as she got shagged and dumped for a boy." Draco pointed out. "Funny, I don't hear her whinging on about it."

"You can't be mad about it, anyway." Ginny added. "It was before you were together."

"I am not mad at Hermione." Ron said, though Ginny thought that was a big, fat, smelly lie. Especially since when he looked over and saw he was sitting next to her, he gave a start and scooted away. "I am mad at him!"

"Why?" Harry asked.

"You knew I liked her!" Ron shouted. "You knew it, and then you went and shagged her!"

"I did not know." Harry defended. "If I had known, I wouldn't have."

"You did know!" Ron insisted.

"No, I didn't!" Harry said. "As a matter of fact, I asked you if you liked her!"

"And what did I say?" Ron asked.

"You started waffling on about Quidditch." Harry snapped. "I don't read minds, Ron. How was I supposed to know that you waffling on about the Wrongski Feint meant you liked Hermione?"

"You know what?" Draco asked suddenly. "This is the lamest conversation I have ever had the misfortune of hearing."

Ginny could only agree.

"I think you are right, and I think I am done being a part of it." Harry said, disentangling himself from Draco so he could stand.

"You are just going to leave, then?" Ron asked, looking both angry and hurt.

"Ron, you are my best friend. You are a prat sometimes, but I love you dearly." Harry said quietly. "But, I love him, too, and I am not about to argue with you over it, because it's not going to change. All I can do is hope you come to accept it."

"Where are you going?" Ron asked, frowning.

"Upstairs." Harry said curtly. "Since you don't like him, and I *know* you don't like him, I figure I can go fuck him without you getting shirty about it."

"Yeah, all right." Draco said, standing. "I won't argue with that."

~*~

Draco and Harry headed upstairs in silence.

The Weasel's conniption fit had been completely unnecessary in Draco's opinion, but at the same time, it had given him plenty to think about.

First and foremost-- if the Weasel's reaction was any indication, it was obvious that the public as a whole was not going to simply take he and Harry's relationship in stride.

Draco knew that reactions among the Slytherins would only be worse. The Weasel (and the rest of his house) hated Draco for personal reasons. The Slytherins hated Harry for personal reasons, but they also hated him for what he represented. Most of them were lying in wait to receive their Dark Mark, and Harry was the scourge of the man they intended to swear fealty to.

As they reached the staircase, Draco wondered idly if it was too late to as the Sorting Hat for a recount. He could grit his teeth and spend the next two years as a Ravenclaw if it meant he wouldn't have to sleep with one eye open.

The other thing, which was decidedly more worrying, was that Harry had just blithely announced to all and sundry that he was in love with him.

Once inside the master bedroom, Draco was tempted to bring it up, but decided, upon reflection, to leave it alone for now. If he said something about it he would be forced to have a reaction, and he was not entirely sure he had one just yet.

While he was willing to admit that he had feelings for Harry, he was not entirely at peace with them. They were delicious and wonderful feelings, but they were frightening at the same time, and he was not quite ready to hang himself declaring that he was in love.

Draco had the distinct suspicions that he very well could be, but he was not about to prattle on about it until he was sure.

Harry, thankfully, did not appear to be in the mood for talk of love, of for any kind of talk, for that matter. Draco studied Harry as he stripped out of his clothes. He looked like he had every intention of

going to bed, never mind that it was barely seven in the evening. His face was tight and pinched and his eyes cold and hard, and Draco got the impression that he should just keep his mouth shut until Harry said something to him.

Watching a rather naked Harry climb into bed, Draco suddenly recalled that Harry had also announced to all and sundry that they were coming up here to have sex. Draco had half-thought he had said that just to get the Weasel's hackles up, but looked now like he might have been serious.

Nervousness flooded over him, as this was uncharted territory, but Harry was looking at him now, his grass-green eyes bright and piercing, and Draco shoved his misgivings away climbed onto the bed.

"He'll come around." Draco said softly, as he crawled over to Harry.

Harry was quiet, and his face went slightly vulnerable. Draco was moved by this, overcome by an urge to take care of him.

He studied Harry, taking him in from head to toe. He truly was beautiful, even though he never seemed to believe it, no matter how many times Draco told him. His skin was soft and smooth, his body perfectly muscled and his eyes were intoxicating.

Draco ran his hand over Harry, the song humming softly in his ears as his fingers trailed up Harry's arm and over his shoulder. He slid his hand over Harry's collarbone, across his neck and over his jaw, reveling in the feel of him.

He moved his hand down, tracing lazy circles over his chest. He teased Harry's nipples with soft touches, and Harry arched into his hand and made a quiet noise in the back of his throat. Draco moved closer to him, teasing a nipple with one hand and mapping out Harry's chest with the other, smiling at the way Harry's skin prickled and pebbled.

His hand roamed over Harry's belly, slipping downward to wrap around his cock. He watched Harry's face as he did this, enjoying the small noise he made and the way his eyes widened slightly. He stroked it softly, teasingly, running his thumb over the head each time his had slid up.

Harry moaned and pulled Draco to him, claiming his mouth gently, and the hum shifted to soft, sweet singing. Draco flicked his tongue over

Harry's lips, nudging them open, and Harry melted into him, moaning again and sucking Draco's tongue into his mouth. Draco explored the inside of his mouth, tracing the line of his teeth and marveling in the taste of him.

Draco moved his mouth away, kissing over his jaw and down his neck. Harry gasped, shivering and writhing against him, pushing into his hand. Draco smiled at that, loving the wonderful sounds Harry made, and kissed and nipped at his neck harder. Harry pulled at him, clutching him, trying to draw him closer.

Still stroking Harry slowly, Draco kissed a hot, wet trail down his neck to his chest. He latched on to a nipple, making Harry arch up off the bed, crying out softly. Draco licked and sucked the nipple teasingly, wanting to coax more of those sounds from Harry, wanting the song to ring louder in his ears.

He wanted Harry to forget everything, to lose himself in the song.

Draco's mouth roamed Harry's chest and belly, licking and tasting and savoring. He nipped and licked around Harry's navel, then dipped his tongue in, making Harry gasp and squirm. Harry's hands were tangled in his hair, moonlight-colored strands slipping through his fingers.

The song swelled as Draco took Harry's cock in his mouth, the lyrical tones mingles sweetly with Harry's moans and incoherent words. He worked his lips and tongue over Harry languidly and teasingly, making Harry curse and thrust into his mouth. He released his hold on Harry's hips, letting him thrust deeper, wanting to take Harry in father.

"Draco." Harry moaned helplessly. "Please, Draco."

Draco stopped teasing and sucked him hard, tracing pattern along the underside of Harry's cock as it slid in and out of his mouth. Harry moaned loudly, pulling at his hair and begging for more. Draco gave him more, sucking even harder and swallowing him down as far as he could. Harry's body convulsed and he came, shouting Draco's name over and over.

He moved up his body, kissing and nuzzling Harry as he caught his breath. Harry sought out his mouth, kissing him hard, his hand slipping between them to take a hold of Draco's cock. As his hand slid over it he whispered to Draco, telling him he wanted Draco inside him. Draco's nervousness returned, but Harry continued to coax, breathing

words in Draco's ear that made his cock throb painfully.

He Summoned a bottle from one of the dressing tables, a bottle of oil Harry had used to run the knots out of Draco's shoulders a few days earlier. Draco poured some into his hand, and it was slick and slippery and smelled faintly of vanilla.

He watched Harry's face carefully as he pressed a finger into him. Harry made no noise, but his eyes widened slightly and Draco felt his body clench. He stilled, waiting for Harry to relax, then worked the finger in and out of Harry's body slowly. When Harry's body seemed to warm and melt around him he gently added a second finger.

Harry made a face that could only have been caused by pain, and Draco cursed. He started to pull his fingers out, but Harry refused to let him, moving his body against Draco's hand in an attempt to impale himself further. Draco relented, pushing his finger in again, and Harry gave a sharp gasp as he brushed against a spot deep inside him.

Tentatively, Draco repeated the motion, and Harry went boneless, moaning and crying out. Seeing that Harry was enjoying it, he did it again and again, until Harry was shaking and twitching and begging Draco to be inside him. He brushed his fingers over the spot one more time before pulling out and rubbing the slick oil over his cock.

Draco took a deep breath, and slid all the way into Harry in one slow, smooth motion, and was overcome by a feeling so complete and perfect and wondrous Draco was sure he would die from it.

They've done it. Draco thought, as he felt Harry surrounding him.
They've finally found a way to kill me.

The song was no longer the voice of one phoenix, but the sweet, mingled voices of many, singing so loudly that Draco was convinced it could be heard downstairs.

The sensations that assaulted Draco were overwhelming. Harry was hot and wonderful inside, and so tight it was almost painful. He remained motionless at first, partially to allow Harry to adjust, but partially because he feared it would be over immediately if he so much as breathed.

Harry rocked up against him and he started to move, thrusting in and out with gentle, delicate strokes. He moved slowly, carefully, searching

for the spot that made Harry break apart. He found it almost immediately, and angled his motions to hit it with every stroke, loving the way Harry bucked and writhed whenever he hit it.

Wonderful, delicious feelings coursed through him, and the song swelled into something chordal and harmonic. He found himself thrusting faster, torn between wanting it to last forever and needing his release. He began thrusting harder and deeper, unable to stop himself. He was afraid he was hurting Harry, but Harry was rocking up to meet his movements, encouraging him.

He saw that Harry was hard again, and he wrapped his hand around Harry's cock and stroked him in time with his thrusts. The song reached a fever pitch, hundreds of phoenixes singing a beautiful, intricate harmony and counterpoint that made Draco want to weep. Harry came immediately, yelling Draco's name and bathing both of them with warmth. His muscles contracted around Draco, squeezing and swallowing and drawing him in and Draco tipped over the edge into oblivion, screaming Harry's name as he went.

Draco collapsed onto Harry weakly, thunderstruck. He had had sex more times than he could count, but every instance together had been nothing compared to this. It had always been mindless and cold, and it was painful to think about, in contrast with this sudden feeling of perfection and emotional completeness.

You're falling in love A nagging voice in his head warned.

Draco shoved the voice away, and captured Harry's lips in a soft kiss.

XII The World According to Draco Malfoy (Part One)

Severus Snape was not a morning person.

Not that he was an afternoon or evening person, for that matter. He generally suffered from the same state of disgruntlement throughout the day, because it was just easier to hate everything all the time. Today, however, he had dragged himself out of bed at half five, something that had put him in a worse mood than usual.

He was, unfortunately, up this early with a purpose. Dumbledore had tasked him with taking Draco to the Ministry of Magic, to clear up the misunderstanding about him being dead. Severus had no doubts they had a long day in front of them, talking to idiots and shuffling paperwork about.

Severus was not in any particular hurry to spend the day at the Ministry of Magic, but he had thought it best if they got an early start. The Ministry of Magic was no different than a Muggle government agency. As a rule, civil servants were unhelpful at best, inefficiency reigned supreme, and anyone with business there could expect to be there for the better part of the day.

It would also be swarming with people. He had learned through experience that anytime he needed to be at the Ministry, everyone else in the Wizarding World conveniently needed to be at the Ministry, as well. Everyone else also needed to be in the very line he was in, and needed to talk to the very same Ministry Official he needed to speak with.

It was going to be a very long day.

As much as he did not want to do this, he understood why Dumbledore had asked him, of all people. For all his whimsical, unconcerned attitude, Dumbledore was no fool. Lucius was free, and he probably had as many Death Eaters looking for Draco as Voldemort had looking for the Crystal Sword. It would simply not be safe for him to go alone.

It would not be prudent for him to be accompanied by anyone else in the Order, either. It was best if no one paid Draco's visit to the Ministry any mind. Him showing up with Dumbledore or Moody would be a strange enough occurrence that people might start to speculate where he has been, or what he has been up to. Him showing up with Severus, however, would not cause too much comment. Severus had been close with the Malfoys for many, many years. Since his father had been in Azkaban when his mother died, people would just assume he had been staying with Severus, and they would hopefully go back to their day without giving it a second thought.

Bloody Dumbledore He thought bitterly, as he headed up the stairs. Just because he understood, it didn't mean he was happy about it.

Severus paused outside the master bedroom door, dreading what was on the other side. In his current mood, he had absolutely no desire to

see Saint Potter, even for a handful of minutes. He could barely stomach exchanging banter, witty or otherwise, with the Brat Who Was Martyred Just Because He Hadn't Die When He Plainly Should Have on days when he was only feeling reasonably foul. Today, the prospect of speaking with, or even looking at Potter made an afternoon under Cruciatus sound pleasant.

He seriously wondered how Draco was managing to put up with Potter, insufferable, sanctimonious, goody-goody, supposedly self-sacrificing hero that he was.

Steeling himself for the inevitable, he knocked on the bedroom door. Long, painful moments passed, but nothing happened. Cursing, he knocked again, louder, and again, nothing happened. No one called out, no one opened the door. He began hammering on the door in such a manner that the door shook and the sound bounced off the walls. He was repaid for his effort by nothing more than a sore hand, because either Potter or Draco could not hear him, or they didn't care.

Pointing his wand at the door, he cast a Message Spell, intending to broadcast his voice through the door. He never got the chance to send the message, because the spell reverberated off the door and sailed over his head. He pressed his ear to the door and heard nothing; no snoring, no talking, no sound of someone dressing or walking around, which confirmed his suspicion.

There was a Silencing Charm on the door.

He found this odd, however, given the nature of Silencing Charms. Average, ordinary Silencing Charms meant to disguise a normal conversation or a mild argument only worked one way; they kept sound from going out, which prevented eavesdropping. Only the stronger, more advanced ones that bordered on an Imperturable Charm would keep sound from coming in. This charm was obviously doing just that, since neither Draco nor Potter had heard him pounding on the door.

Whoever had cast the Silencing Charm on the door had evidently meant to veil a fearsome amount of noise.

He mentally called Potter a collection of unsavory things. There was no reasonable explanation for a Silencing Charm of *that* strength, even if Potter feared Death Eaters were hanging around outside his door at night, listening to him sleep.

Insufferable, paranoid prat! Severus thought furiously. *Its bad enough he thinks everything is about him, there is no call for him to start acting like Moody!*

Seeing no sense in being bothered with courtesies when Draco and Potter were unaware of his efforts, he decided to just let himself in. He pressed the latch on the handle and pushed firmly on the door. The door did not budge, nor did the latch. It was locked, though Severus could not fathom why. If Potter was safe anywhere, it was at Grimmauld Place. Why would he lock his bedroom door?

He waved his wand and muttered *Alohamora*. The tumbler jiggled in its chamber, but did not slide free.

Severus stared at the door in irritated disbelief. *Alohamora* was specifically meant to unlock manually locked doors. It never failed, even if the lock was intricate or rusted firm, or if the door had several different locks at once.

Apparently, someone had also cast a Locking Charm.

Bloody Hell, Potter! Severus thought angrily. *Were you expecting the Dark Lord to pay you a visit before breakfast, or did you do this deliberately to annoy me?*

He cast *Admitimante*, a spell meant to disarm simple Locking Charms, and swore viscously when the lock did still not budge and the door still did not open. He tried a *Abiortus*, a similar, slightly stronger charm, also to no avail. He then cast a different spell, a Dark Arts spell that would divulge the way a door was warded. When he saw the results, he threw up his hands and began cursing in earnest.

Someone had not cast a Locking Charm on the door. Someone had cast no less than seven Locking Charms, two of which were designed to recast themselves if not disarmed properly.

The Silencing Charm could easily have been Potter, if he was taking Moody's 'constant vigilance' rubbish to heart, but the Locking Charms, and the manner in which they had been cast, had to have been Draco. It was not something learned at Hogwarts, but rather, something learned from Lucius Malfoy.

Keeping everyone out! Don't want anyone to hear you! Severus

muttered to himself. *What are you two up to in there?*

He had a sudden, horrifying idea, but shoved it away, as it was too disgusting to think about.

I realize Draco is lonely, but he cannot possibly be that lonely!

It took Severus ten whole minutes to get the door unspelled, and he was well and truly irate by the time he done. Snarling, he threw the door open with such force it bounced off the wall with a thud and reeled back, nearly hitting him as he walked into the master bedroom.

Once inside, he found Potter still in bed, asleep. Draco was goggling at his abrupt entrance from in front of one of the dressing tables, where he had presumably been combing his hair.

This was a sight that only incensed him further.

While Severus had been charming his way through spells a few shades shy of the security measures at Azkaban, Potter had been asleep, and Draco had been vainly preening himself, instead of doing something sensible, like opening the door.

"Professor Snape!" Draco gasped, surprised. "I was not expecting you so early!"

"I was not expecting to use half my magical knowledge simply to open your bedroom door!" Severus growled. "What's with the wards, then? Was a legion of Vikings scheduled to rape and pillage you both before breakfast?"

"Sorry about that." Draco said, a bit sheepishly. "I forgot about them."

"You're a bit young be having such memory lapses." Severus snarled. "You set them what, six or seven hours ago?"

"They've been up for two weeks." Draco said simply.

Severus opened his mouth to ask why such drastic precautions had been up for two weeks, but decided, upon reflection, that he did not want to know.

"Are you ready?" Severus asked irritably.

"Yes, sir." Draco replied. "I just need to put on my shoes."

Severus snorted, hoping fervently that Draco was not going to don those ridiculous boots he favored, the ones that laced halfway up his calves. If that was the case, it could easily be another half-hour before Draco got them tied. By that time, Potter could be awake and Severus would have to acknowledge his presence.

Given his current mood, he would also have to force himself not to claw Potter's eyes out, merely because Potter was looking at him.

He was quite relieved to see Draco's selection. They were boots, in the exact same style as the ones Severus had been fearing, but they only went up a bit above the ankle. The rest of his outfit, Severus decided, left much to be desired. He was wearing tight pants in black velvet, and a tailored, black silk long-sleeve with silver dragons embroidered on the collar and cuffs.

For someone about to convince an office full of people that he was alive, he was dressed remarkably like he was attending his own funeral.

Severus decided he should probably consider himself lucky, as Draco had not opted for any of the netting, webbing or capes he usually infested himself with. He had seen Draco in his everyday clothing on numerous occasions, and knew full well the boy had the uncanny ability to make himself resemble the next thing to a Dementor when he felt like it.

As he waited for Draco to finish up with his boots, he found himself glowering sourly at Potter's sleeping form. He had not wanted to look at Potter, but as always happened when a thoroughly grotesque sight was lurking in your periphery vision, it became impossible to not look, and once you did look, it was equally as impossible to look away.

To make matters worse, Potter was half-naked, lounging on his back with a blanket clumsily pulled up to about his navel. This was certainly enough incentive to make Severus look away, as the thought of Potter shirtless was enough to put him off his meals for the rest of the day. However, Severus did not look away, and in fact, continued to stare, because he caught sight of something that both intrigued and repulsed him.

Potter had a rather impressive collection of love-bites on his neck and

chest. They were a bright red color, indicating that they were fresh. Apparently, Potter had managed to get himself snogged up one side and down the other (literally, since two of those marks were at bit too far south for Severus's peace of mind), as recently as last night.

Either Potter had gotten himself on the wrong end of a Vacuuming Charm, or the rumors about him and Hermione Granger were true. Unless, of course, the rumors about him and Ronald Weasley were true.

Severus shuddered, remembering why he tried desperately to stay ignorant of his students' love lives.

Unfortunately, he had learned over the years that true ignorance was nearly impossible, because no matter how hard he tried to avoid it, the rumors came to him, anyway. If he didn't catch them at it (and for some reason, people thought a Potions cupboard was a good a place for a snog as any), they would write notes about it in class, which he would intercept and read aloud. It was a useful form of punishment, but it also made him privy to more information than he needed.

If he didn't see it, or read about it, he would eventually hear about it, whether he wanted to or not. McGonagall, Sinistra, Vector, Hooch and Pomfrey gossiped about as much as a group of first years, and since the faculty goings-on were rather dull and drab, they were forced to waffle on incessantly about the students.

Last he had unwillingly heard, McGonagall, Sinistra and Hooch thought Potter was shagging Hermione Granger. Vector and Pomfrey thought he was shagging Ronald Weasley. Severus would rather not think about Potter shagging anyone. At all. Ever. But, since Potter's neck had brought the subject up, Severus was inclined to think it was Weasley.

Another thing he had learned over the years was if there was more than one rumor on a particular subject, the most ridiculous, disgusting and unbelievable of the lot was usually the one that was true.

"You ready, then?" Severus barked. He had quite a bit more imagination that people gave him credit for, and the more he looked at Potter, the more he could picture Weasley chewing on his neck. If he did not get out of that room soon, he was going to vomit.

"Yeah, alright." Draco said. "Only, let me tell him I am leaving."

"Oh, good Gods!" Severus grumbled. "Will your stalwart protector worry overmuch if he wakes to find you gone?"

"Something like that." Draco muttered, walking around to Potter's side of the bed.

"Well, hurry up!" Severus said impatiently.

Severus expected Draco to shout, or poke him, or kick the bed, but Draco did none of these things. Instead, he touched Potter lightly on the shoulder and shook him gently. Potter made a sleepy noise of protest, but did not wake. Draco trailed his fingers down Potter's arm, and squeezed his hand.

"Harry?" He asked softly.

Harry? Severus thought with confusion.

"Draco?" Potter mumbled groggily.

Draco?

Potter opened an eye and frowned. "What time is it?"

"Half seven." Draco said. Severus thought Draco was toying with Potter's fingers. It was a ridiculous notion, though, so he squeezed his eyes shut and tried to convince himself that lack of sleep was making him hallucinate.

"It's too early." Potter whinged. Severus thought he almost sounded petulant. "Come back to bed."

Come back to bed?

"I can't." Draco said. "Professor Snape is here."

"Snape?" Potter croaked. He opened his other eye, and seeing Severus, frowned. "Why?"

"Because I have nothing better to do than watch you sleep!" Severus grouched.

"We have to go to the Ministry." Draco explained. "I'll be back later."

"Ministry." Potter repeated thickly. "Yeah, all right." He yawned. "I'll miss you."

Severus choked.

"I'll miss you, too." Draco said.

Severus choked again, louder. He could not possibly have heard what he thought he heard.

"Will you be up here when I get back?" Draco went on.

"Probably." Potter said, his expression going sour. "I'm not going down there to get mocked."

"I don't blame you. I wouldn't go today, if I didn't have to." Draco said. "Get some sleep. I'll be back soon."

"Promise?" Potter asked, screwing his face up into a pout.

"Oh, for Merlin's sake!" Severus snapped. "He's going to the Ministry for the day, Potter, not leaving for war. I am sure you can muddle through without him for one whole day."

Potter insolently rolled his bleary eyes at him.

Severus started to say something scathing to Potter, but cut off and froze as Draco moved away from the bed. He tucked his hair behind his ears, and Severus caught a glimpse of something that made him want to gag. He knew with searing, painful, crystalline clarity who had given Potter those love-bites.

Draco had one to match.

~*~

The London Underground, unsurprisingly, was infested with Muggles.

Neither Draco nor Snape had wanted to travel this way, but they had really had no other choice. The Ministry had a ridiculous number of fireplaces, but they were reserved for Ministry workers. Visitors were require to Apparate into the entryway, or use the Visitor's Entrance.

Draco could Apparate, but he was not of age to do so legally, so their only other option was to use the Visitor's Entrance, which was, unfortunately, on the Muggle side of town.

Draco detested Muggles under any circumstances, but being packed in a stuffy train with a large group of them like sardines was doing nothing to improve his opinion of them.

Muggles were a loud, smelly, uncouth lot, and seemed utterly incapable of civilized behavior.

A horribly obese man sitting across from him was eating, shoveling a packet of crisps into his mouth at an alarming speed. He was crunching each crisp noisily, then wiping the crumbs on his pants before loudly swilling and slurping a beverage out of a disposable cup.

A few seats down from the fat man, and thin, older woman was having a go at her nose. She was not simply rubbing at it, or discreetly swabbing at it with a kerchief. Her index finger was brazenly inserted as far as it would go, and she was digging around like she expected to find something spectacular. Draco was quite sure he did not want to know what she would do with what she was looking for when she found it.

There was a rather disquieting bloke sitting by himself at the far end of the carriage, having an animated conversation with the empty seat next to him. He was dressed a good deal like Mundungus Fletcher, and seemed to be carrying a large amount of rubbish about with him in bags. Draco had the sneaking suspicion the bloke sat on the train all day long while it traveled up and down the rail, with no concern to where it was going, and no thoughts of getting off.

Muggles were apparently dependent on gadgets. They had no discernable use that Draco saw, but the Muggles seemed to need them desperately.

A fellow directly next to Draco had started beeping unexpectedly. Draco had thought this was cause for concern, but no one else on the train had seemed to notice. The fellow hadn't seemed too worried, either. He had calmly fished a small, square object out of his pocket and pushed at the top of it with his thumb. Draco could only assume the object had been making the noise; it had gotten louder when the man pulled it from his pocket, and had stopped as soon as he pushed on it, but Draco could not, for the life of him, figure out what its

purpose was.

Draco had first thought a good handful of people in the carriage were of the same, debatable mental state as the bloke sitting by himself, because many of them were talking to themselves-- or rather, talking into the palms of their hands with their fingers over their ears.

Eventually, Draco discovered they were talking *into* something they were holding in their hands. A woman on the other side of Snape had started ringing. It was not a persistent beep like the other fellow, but more like music. She had pulled a long, rectangular thing out of her purse and pushed on it. Then she had put it to her ear and started talking.

He decided it was some kind of Muggle communication device, but he didn't understand why they didn't wait until they got back home or to the office to do their gabbing, instead of making everyone else listen to it.

There was a young man at the other end of the carriage from the odd bloke with a big object in his lap. It made music; loud, boisterous music that sounded like a man shouting in time to the banging and whirling in the background. This thing at least seemed to have a function, though Draco thought it was right rude of the man to make such a ruckus in an enclosed space.

Especially since most the people on the train were trying to have private conversations into their hands. Loud private conversations, with no regard to the fact that the person next to them might not want to know what they were doing in the alley behind the pub last night.

To make matters worse, Muggles stared.

As reluctant as he was to admit it, Draco supposed he understood why they were staring. While he secretly thought he did it with a bit more style and class, Draco was not dressed too much differently than many of the people his age he had seen in the Underground station. Snape, however, stuck out like a sore thumb. Snape did not own a single piece of Muggle clothing, so he had opted for black robes. They were plain, unassuming robes, with no insignia or embroidery, but they were still robes, and a far cry from the business suits or jeans and T-shirt ensembles everyone else was wearing.

Snape, of course, was responding to their stares by scowling at them.

This didn't make the Muggles stop staring, they just did it less openly. They eyed him sideways or over their newspapers or from behind their hands. This only made Snape scowl harder, which made them stare more. Draco began to worry that the people on the train would mistake Snape for one of those Muggle nutters he had heard about, the ones that ran through public places brandishing knives, or waving those metal Muggle wands that shot things out of the end.

Snape caught the fat, crisp-eating fellow staring, and shot him a glower that looked downright murderous. The fat fellow's face went nervous, and there was a break in the steady rhythm of the hand putting crisps in his mouth. Draco frowned at Snape exasperatedly. If Snape did not leave off, he was going to make one of the Muggles nervous enough to contact one of their please-men on those hand-talking thingies.

"How much longer?" Draco asked suddenly, hoping to distract Snape with conversation.

Snape glanced above the fat fellow's head, checking the map above the window and the light-up sign that indicated the next stop.

"Two more stops." Snape said gruffly, shooting Draco a look that said he was not interested in small talk.

Draco sighed, and stretched his legs. The seats were small and uncomfortable, and sitting for such a long time in the same position was making his legs cramp. He rolled his head about on his neck, trying to work out a knot, but froze when Snape made a loud, displeased hissing noise.

"What?" Draco asked. Snape was frowning at him in a rather disconcerting manner.

"Nothing." Snape grumbled. He eyed Draco up and down derisively.

"What, then?" Draco said, a bit snappishly. Snape was famous for his winning charm, but he usually saved it for Gryffindors, and was rarely this foul with Draco.

"I am tempted to ask you something." Snape said slowly.

"Then, ask." Draco replied. He had honestly been expecting this.

Snape had looked on the verge of asking him something since they had left the master bedroom of Grimmauld Place. Draco just wished he would get on with it, since it was obviously driving him to distraction.

"I don't think I want to." Snape went on. "Because if I do, and you give me the answer I think you are going to give me, I will be forced to stab myself in the ears for hearing something so vile."

"All right, then." Draco said, shrugging. "Don't ask."

The train stopped. Muggles got off, and more Muggles got on. After a bit, the train gave lurch, and started down the rail again. Draco watched as the light-up sign went dark, then flashed brightly with the name of the next stop.

One more stop to go. He thought, idly toying with a lock of hair.

"Stop doing that!" Snape hissed.

"Stop what?" Draco asked, confused.

"Showing it off." Snape replied. "It disturbs me greatly, especially if you got it where I think you got it."

"What?" Draco asked. Snape gave his neck a pointed look, and Draco groaned.

Last night, Harry had discovered a spot just below his left ear that made him squirm like a girl, and he had chewed on it rather persistently. Since he was rather pale, any resulting mark was probably glowing against his nearly-white skin like the train's light-up sign.

"Bloody Hell." Draco complained, trying to smooth his hair down over it. "I told him not to...."

"Him." Snape said flatly. His lip curled slightly. "So, it was Potter." He added, just as flatly.

Draco grunted. He didn't want to talk about it, not with Snape, at any rate, but he was dead in the water and he knew it.

"Are you and Potter..." Snape paused, disgust passing over his face. "Involved?" He offered finally.

"You could say that." Draco said slowly.

"How involved?" Snape inquired.

"Involved." Draco replied unhelpfully, staring at the suddenly interesting map of the Underground.

"Just physically?" Snape asked.

Snape looked like he was going to be violently ill, but at the same time, he also looked vaguely hopeful. Maybe he could reconcile the idea if he thought Draco was just using Harry for sex as a means to keep himself occupied while he was stuck at Grimmauld Place.

"No, not just that." Draco managed.

"Is it serious?" Snape asked, cringing.

"Yeah." Draco said. He cringed himself, expecting Snape to start shouting at any moment.

"How serious?" Snape asked, looking like he was steeling himself for a blow to his big, greasy nose.

Draco paused, struggling with the words. He cursed, telling himself to face facts. He would have to start saying the words eventually, and now was as good a time as any.

"I think I love him."

"Have you lost your mind?" Snape exclaimed, thunderstruck. The once-nervous Muggles now looked exceedingly in fear for their lives.

"No." Draco admitted quietly. "Just my heart."

He thought Snape looked like he was about to faint.

XII The World According to Draco Malfoy (Part Two)

Draco and Snape left the Muggle train and the Underground Station in

relative silence. Apparently, Draco's declaration of love had not only caused Snape to leave off the topic of Harry, but it had been enough to put him off conversation entirely. He said little as they walked through the Muggle streets, occasionally growling directions in short, monosyllabic statements.

The silence was a blessing, as far as Draco was concerned.

Snape's hated Harry in the same seething, irrational, emotionally-unbalanced kind of way that the Weasel hated Draco. It was actually worse, in many ways, because Snape's hatred for Harry stemmed from something older, something that had been festering and simmering since before Harry was born.

From what Draco had heard from his father and various others, Snape and James Potter had loathed each other on sight. Almost immediately, Snape had extended this hatred to include Sirius Black, because just like Harry and the Weasel, James and Sirius had been inseparable since the train ride to Hogwarts.

Snape's hatred was also expanded to make room for Remus Lupin shortly thereafter, because much like Harry and the Weasel did with Granger, Potter and Black adopted the werewolf into their exclusive club a few weeks after school had started.

As with the current Gryffindor trio, Potter, Black and Lupin had been talented, popular, and had managed to get away with everything. Snape, on the other hand, had been an ugly, greasy, bookish loner, a fact the original Gryffindor trio had never let him forget.

The rest was history, and it also meant Harry had been damned before he had ever set foot in the Potions classroom.

Harry was the famous and renown son of Snape's worst enemy, the godson of Snape's second worst enemy, and during Lupin's stint as a Hogwarts professor, Harry had been the favorite student of Snape's third worst enemy.

The original Gryffindor trio's tagalong, Wormtail, was Snape's fourth worst enemy, but the fact that Wormtail and Harry were on opposite sides of things was not actually doing Harry any favors.

Snape still hated him, and that was all there was to it. Draco had the notion that Snape would have introduced Harry to the green curse and

left his body for the squid a long time ago, if Harry was not so necessary to the fate of civilized wizardry.

That, and such an act would put Dumbledore in a snit that could not be soothed over with even a sizable gift from Honeydukes.

As far as Draco saw it, talking to Snape about his relationship with Harry was a pointless exercise. Snape hated Harry, and there was no convincing him otherwise. Draco could waffle on until he was blue in the face, and it would change nothing. The best he could hope for was that he and Snape could agree to disagree, but knowing Snape, that was very unlikely.

Any further discussion would only make both of them angry.

If they had not been in a public place, surrounded by Muggles, Snape likely would have had a violent, boisterous outburst the moment Draco had admitted to it. Draco was willing to wager that if they had been alone, he and Snape would have performed a very lifelike reenactment of Harry and the Weasel's argument from the night before.

Snape knew Draco too well to be fooled or put off by evasive answers and drawling sarcasm, and Snape had been a family-friend to the Malfoys long enough that Draco no longer bought into Snape's looming, ominous, vile-Potions-Master-of-your-nightmares bollocks.

It would only get ugly, better if they avoided the whole thing entirely.

Draco had been so caught up in his own thoughts that he did not notice that Snape had stopped walking. Draco paused, eyeing the Potions Master both anxiously and curiously. They were in a rather seedy and unpleasant part of town, and Snape was loitering in front of a large, dilapidated metal-and-glass booth-- of which most of the glass was busted out.

Snape frowned at Draco, and gestured him into the booth. Draco got in, grimacing at the glass crunching under his boots. Snape squeezed him after him, shoving Draco up against a large, black box that was hanging precariously from the back of the booth. Snape retrieved a smaller thing from the side of the box, it looked like the Muggle hand-talking thingies he had seen on the train, only it was larger, and connected to the bigger box with some kind of string or cord.

Snape reached around Draco, and started fiddling with the numbered

dial on the front of the large box.

"Six." Snape said aloud, putting his finger in the hole marked 'six' and turning the dial around. "Two, four, four, two."

"Welcome to the Ministry of Magic." A loud, female voice said. It was not coming from the box, but rather, emanating from the very air. "Please state your name and business."

"Severus Snape." Snape said. "I am here to escort Draco Malfoy to the Department of Birth, Death and Inheritance."

There was an odd, clicking noise, and two small, silver things popped out of a slot on the large, black box.

"Thank you." She replied. "Visitors, please take the badges and attach them to the front of your robes."

"Visitors to the Ministry." She went on. "You are required to submit to a search and present your wands for registration at the security desk, which is located at the far end of the Atrium."

The booth started to shake and twitch, and looked like it meant to go underground.

Draco hastily took the badges out of the slot. The one on top read *Severus Snape, Visitor*. He handed it to Snape, who frowned at it quickly before pinning it to his robes. Draco took a look at his, and rolled his eyes.

Draco Malfoy, Visitor [Supposedly Dead]

"The Ministry of Magic wishes you a pleasant day."

"The Ministry thinks I am dead." Draco griped. "What could be more pleasant than that?"

The booth gave a sharp lurch, and everything went black.

~*~

"Excuse." Snape said gruffly.

The thin, stuffy-looking woman behind the information desk looked at Snape with a vaguely put-upon expression. She pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose and eyed him expectantly.

"Yes?" She asked wearily.

"I am here to escort him to the Department of Birth, Death and Inheritance." Snape explained, nodding towards Draco. "If you could tell me what floor that is on."

Her eyes flicked from Snape to Draco. They took Draco in thoughtfully, and widened slightly as they passed over his visitor's badge.

"You're supposed to be dead." She declared incredulously.

"No need to sound so disappointed." Draco grumbled. Severus elbowed him sharply.

"Hence why we are here." Snape went on, with more diplomacy than Draco thought he possessed. "As you can see, he is very much alive."

She eyed Draco again, lingering on his clothing, and looked very much like she did not wish to make bets on *how* alive.

"Level Three." She said, waving towards a throng of people massed at the far end of the lobby.

Draco studied his surroundings as they mingled with the large group of people. The Ministry was richly built, in a pretentious way. Draco supposed it was meant to be lavish, but succeeded only in being just this side of gaudy. The polished, dark wood floors and walls were decent enough, they were similar to the paneling in Draco's own room, but the ceiling left much to be desired.

It was bright blue, enchanted with golden magical symbols that cavorted across its surface. They seemed to move about randomly, rather than in a set pattern. He rolled his eyes at that, thinking of the Slytherin common room. He and Zabini had recently charmed it a dark blue and set it with small, white stars in a depiction of the constellations. Their stars, however, did not just flit about the ceiling, but shifted with a purpose, as if changing with the position of the Earth.

The centerpiece of the entry hall was an enormous gold fountain. A

large, stately looking wizard was surrounded by a witch, a goblin, a centaur and a house-elf, all set over a large pool of water. The figures were crafted well enough, but the slight dinginess to their golden hue said it was not made of gold, but of a baser metal charmed to look like gold.

The crowd of people moved slowly and laboriously, like a herd of recalcitrant livestock. Many of them had boxes or packages with them, and some of those packages shook or twitched or made worrying noises. The man next to him had a box under his arm that periodically shrieked like a banshee, only softer and more high-pitched.

Draco discovered the crowd has stopped moving when he abruptly walked into Snape's back. The throng had halted in front of a large row of golden grills, which were opening and closing of their own accord. People stepped out of them, then people from the crowd stepped in them. The grills slammed shut, and jerked upward with a series of bangs and clatters.

Even though there were about twenty grills, Draco and Snape missed the first set, and were forced wait for the next.

"Lifts." Snape said, seeing Draco's curious stare. "Muggle invention."

Draco snorted, giving his opinion of the Ministry of Magic utilizing Muggle things in its office.

The grills arrived once more, and Snape ushered Draco inside one. Several people clamored in after them, including the man with the banshee-box, making it a very tight fit. There was once again a series of bangs and clatters, and the grill jerked away.

"Level seven." Informed a voice. It was the same, lilting female voice they had heard in the metal-and-glass booth. "Department of Magical Game and Sports, incorporating the British and Irish Quidditch League Headquarters, Official Gobstones Club, and Ludicrous Patents Office."

Two wizards got off, and a witch got on. The witch cast Draco a disparaging eye for his Muggle clothes. They tarried on his visitor's badge, then shot up to his face.

"You're supposed to be dead." She pointed out.

Draco's retort was cut off by the lift jolting into motion, and Snape's

elbow in his ribs.

"Level six." The voice said after a moment. "Department of Magical Transport, incorporating the Floo Network Authority, Broom Regulatory Control, Portkey Office, and Apparation Test Center."

People got off. More people got on, followed by small, purple pieces of paper, folded up into something that vaguely resembled birds. The grill door was started to slide shut, but was stopped by a hand shooting out and catching it.

"Going down?" A woman asked, poking her head in the lift.

"No." Someone said. "Up."

"Sorry." The woman mumbled.

She stepped back and sideways, and Draco noticed there was a girl with her, probably her daughter, by their resemblance. The girl went to Hogwarts, and was a Gryffindor. Draco knew this not because he recognized her (though she plainly recognized him from the way she was goggling at him and Snape), but from the t-shirt she was wearing with her Muggle jeans.

It was a deep red, with the words *Weasley Is Our King* emblazoned across the front in large, flashing gold letters.

"You're supposed to be dead." The Gryffindor girl managed, just before the grill closed.

Snape snorted, and whispered in Draco's ear. "You will be dead, once the His Majesty finds out you are bugging his special little hero."

"He knows." Draco growled harshly. "But you are right, he is none to happy about it."

"Neither am I." Snape replied shortly.

Draco sighed heavily. He was not about to have this conversation in a lift at the Ministry of Magic. Snape, who was apparently content to do just that, opened his mouth, but was cut off by the Ministry's know-it-all woman.

"Level five." She announced. "Department of International Magical

Cooperation, incorporating the Magical Trading Standards Body, the International Magical Office of Law, and the International Confederation of Wizards, British Seats."

The grills opened. No one got off, but Mad-Eye Moody got on, followed by Mundungus Fletcher. Moody looked more irate than usual, to the point he was visibly seething, and Fletcher looked extremely embarrassed and sheepish, and was carrying a bundle in his hands.

Draco decided he probably did not want to know.

Then, Fletcher moved, and Draco caught a glimpse of his bundle. He had a pile of T-shirts over his arm. They were upside down from Draco's view, but from what he could see, they had a large, disgruntled-looking picture of Harry on the front, with the words *Potter for Minister* slowly scrolling right above it.

Draco decided he definitely did not want to know.

He looked away from Fletcher to see Snape and Moody were pointedly ignoring each other. Snape was looking at the ceiling of the lift, and Moody was studying the floor, and seemed increasingly uncomfortable. Fletcher, however, was oblivious to both Snape and Moody, as well as everything else.

Eventually, Moody spoke, apparently deciding that as an Auror, he should have some kind of opinion on the sudden reappearance of Lucius Malfoy's supposedly-dead son.

"You're supposed to be dead." He said sharply.

"Am I not?" Draco asked wearily.

"Level four." The know-it-all Lady interjected. "Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, incorporating Beast, Being and Spirit Divisions, Goblin Liaison Office, and the Pest Advisory Bureau."

The man with the banshee-box got off. Draco was not sorry to see him go, especially since the box was wailing with a redoubled effort, and had started to shake.

He was followed by a flock of the purple paper-birds, and two wizards. Two more wizards got on, as well as three more paper-birds.

The lift jolted to a stop, and Snape bundled Draco out the door before the know-it-all lady could start her waffle. Moody bumped into Snape deliberately as they went. Snape cursed under his breath, but did not admonish the grizzled Auror.

Once away from the lift, Snape pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket. Evidently, Moody had slipped Snape a note when he had jostled him. Snape eyed it quickly, grunted, and put it back in his pocket.

"What, then?" Draco asked.

"Order." Snape said, in a short whisper. "Meeting. Tomorrow."

With that, Snape pulled Draco down a corridor, following a sign that indicated the location of the Department of Birth, Death and Inheritance. They went straight, took two right turns, and stopped at an unassuming wooden door.

Draco pulled open the door, and found himself staring at a receptionist who looked alarmingly like the woman at the information desk in the lobby. She frowned at his clothes, and asked him his name.

"Draco Malfoy." He said.

"You're supposed to be dead." She said, eyeing him curiously.

At that moment, Draco decided the next person to greet him like that was getting a very unpleasant surprise.

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Draco was beginning to wonder if he should have stayed dead and saved himself the trouble.

He and Snape had been at the Ministry for a ridiculously long time. They had been shuttled back and forth between different offices within the Department of Birth, Death and Inheritance for some few hours, and Draco had filled out so much paperwork he had a dull, throbbing pain in his hand.

They were now sitting in a dimly lit waiting area at the rear of the

Department, waiting to see what kind of dent the paperwork had made on Draco's case.

"The counsel is convening, Professor Snape." said a woman at a desk in the front of the waiting area. She seemed to possess infinite patience. "They will be reaching a decision shortly."

"Decision?" Snape growled. "There is no decision to make! He is quite alive, as you can see for yourself."

"I understand that." She said, still unflappable. "However, declaring someone to be alive is not a simple matter."

"Declaring him dead was simple enough!" Snape grouched. "He went missing for a couple of weeks, and your office wasted no time procuring a Death Certificate."

"We had reason to believe he had passed on." The woman said smoothly.

"Hardly." Snape sneered. "You wanted to believe he was dead."

"Sir, the counsel will settle this matter as soon as they can." She said. It was an obvious dismissal. Snape scowled at her for good measure, before taking a seat next to Draco.

"Bureaucratic bollocks!" Snape hissed.

Draco could only agree. He shifted uncomfortably on his chair. His arse was starting to go numb. He picked up a two-day old copy of the *Daily Prophet* off the seat on the other side of him and started flipping through it despondently.

"So, tell me about you and Potter." Snape said. His tone was almost conversational, but he was grimacing fiercely.

"It's a long story." Draco offered.

"We have nothing but time." Snape snapped.

Draco was still unwilling to have this conversation, but after consideration, he figured he might as well go ahead and have it. He would have to have it eventually, and the fact that they were in a public place would keep Snape from having a full-blown conniption fit.

With a deep, steadying breath, Draco launched into an explanation. He told the story in complete detail, from the first time he had heard the humming, to the argument between Harry and the Weasel the night before. Snape gave him a curious look when he mentioned him how he had contemplated killing Harry, and looked close to vomiting when he told him about kissing Harry in the garden.

"Potter." Snape said finally. "The Angels dealt you a very unfortunate hand."

"I'm fine with it, thank you." Draco snapped.

"So you intend to pursue a relationship with him?" Snape asked, curling his lip.

"I am already in a relationship with him." Draco said. He and Harry had not actually discussed what they were to each other, but that was a detail.

"And you would insist that you are in love with him?" Snape asked.

"I think so." Draco said slowly. "I need a little more time to sort that out."

"This puts you in a very dangerous position." Snape went on. "I could name at least fifty people, off the top of my head, who would find this development very disagreeable." Snape paused, frowning. "Including your father."

"I don't intend to ask my father for his opinion." Draco said, repeating the words he had said to Harry about the Weasel.

"Your father is not the type of person who withholds his opinion until it is asked for." Snape said.

"Yeah, all right." Draco conceded. "But I do not plan to see him, so I don't think he will get the chance to tell me about it."

"Your Housemates will be very displeased." Snape added.

"My Housemates can bugger off." Draco informed him, thought he knew Snape was right. "My practice of shagging people from other Houses annoys them to no end, but they've managed to continue on

with their lives."

"This is quite different." Snape pointed out needlessly.

"I hadn't figured." Draco drawled, rolling his eyes.

"This is not a simple matter of you being caught with a Gryffindor in the Astronomy Tower." Snape went on. He obviously felt he needed to press the seriousness of the issue, nevermind that Draco was already aware. "Your... *boyfriend* is the Boy Who Lived, who, if you recall, is fighting against everything they believe in."

"It's not Harry's fault they bought into Voldemort's claptrap." Draco said petulantly.

"You bought into it once, yourself." Snape said carefully.

"So did you." Draco gave back.

"I did not change camps because I fell in love." Snape said crossly.

"Neither did I." Draco retorted. "I changed camps because my father is a murdering bastard."

"And Potter is making sure you enjoy your stay." Snape said, shuddering.

Draco's reply was cut off by a tall, elderly wizard standing in front of him. He smiled thinly at Draco, and handed him a folded parchment.

"Mister Malfoy." He said in an oily voice. "Welcome back to the land of the living."

Draco unfolded the parchment to find it was his Death Certificate, with the word *Revoked* stamped across the front.

"Looks like we don't have to plan my funeral, after all." Draco quipped.

"Well, that's a blessing." Snape muttered. "I would certainly hate to see Potter in widows weeds."

Harry had meant what he had said about 'not going down there to get mocked'.

As it turned out, however, boredom eventually forced him to leave the master bedroom and head down the stairs.

He had tried to go back to sleep after Snape and Draco left for the Ministry, but that idea had not worked out. The light filtering in through the bedroom window had been bright and persistent, and he had been unable to ignore it, even with the covers pulled over his head.

He had lounged in bed in a half-sleeping, half-waking state for the better part of an hour, his mind drifting to the events of the night before. His thoughts had passed briefly over the argument he had had with Ron, but he eventually abandoned that for more pleasant memories.

His scathing, parting remark to Ron about going upstairs to fuck Draco had been delivered purely out of spite, and nothing more. Seeing how horribly Ron had reacted to him and Draco kissing, he had known saying something like that would make Ron's insides twist and turn for the rest of the night, and that had been exactly what he had wanted. He had never been so angry with Ron in his life, and had wanted Ron to sit up the whole night, furious and seething.

However, once he and Draco got upstairs, it had sounded like a passable idea. Once Draco had started stroking him all over, it had sounded like a reasonable idea. Then, Draco had started mapping out every inch of his body with his tongue, it had sounded like right corking idea.

By the time Draco's mouth had sucked an almost violent orgasm from him, it had sounded like the best idea he had had in years, and he had wanted nothing more in the world than to have Draco's cock inside him.

It had been absolutely perfect.

He had honestly thought it would hurt more. It had hurt, but not in the horrible way he had been expecting. The first time he and Hermione had had sex it had hurt her quite a bit. From that, he had figured

having Draco's cock in him would hurt something fierce, since his entrance (unlike Hermione's) was not really meant for that sort of thing.

Then again, perhaps it was. Draco had stumbled upon a spot that had made his body rather happy about his cock being up there.

The sex had been a completely shattering, mind-blowing experience. His body had burned and froze at the same time, overwhelmed with sensations he could not describe. It had been glorious and perfect, and for the moment, he had forgotten about everything in the world but Draco.

And Draco's cock, but that went without saying.

Spending the morning thinking about Draco and his cock had left him with a sizable problem of his own. He had tried to ignore it, but it had throbbed until it could no longer be ignored, making sleep a foregone conclusion.

He had eventually settled on having on off at the wrist in the shower, under the flimsy pretence of washing and getting ready for the day.

Of course, once he was washed and dressed, he had found himself with little to do. He and Draco spent little time in the master bedroom unless they were snogging or sleeping. Anything with any kind of entertainment value was in the sitting room, or the unused, medium-sized parlor at the rear of the house.

To make matters worse, the unmistakable scent of kippers permeated the master bedroom. Harry had first tried to pay it no mind, but much like his earlier erection, his stomach had not been content to be neglected.

Which brought him to where he was now, standing outside the kitchen with nervous knots in his already grumbling stomach.

He and Ron had never had an argument of that degree. They had had spats over, even heated disagreements, but this had been very different. Never in the course of five years had Harry had the distinct desire to beat Ron about the face and shoulders with something blunt and heavy, preferably until he was unconscious.

A shovel came to mind.

As angry as he still was, he really hoped he and Ron could get past this. Ron was his best friend, and he loved him more than he could put into words. But he loved Draco too, and that was not a point he was about to debate with Ron everyday for the rest of his life.

He did not want to have to choose between Ron and Draco. They were both very important to him, in very different ways, and he needed them both, in very different ways. If Ron made it come down to a choice, however, Harry would have to content himself with Draco and try to continue on without Ron.

He wondered if he should try and talk to Hermione later. Perhaps she would be able to beat some sense into Ron. Of course, given the way he had been acting when he found out Harry had been sleeping with her, he wasn't sure if he could bet on it.

Harry suddenly realized what an idiot he looked like, standing outside the door to his own kitchen, starving half to death because he was afraid to open a door in his own house.

After a few calming breaths, he opened the door and walked into the kitchen, reminding himself to keep his shoulders straight and his head held high. Grimmauld Place was his, and he was not about to walk around cowed in his own house because Ron did not approve of his relationship with Draco.

Ron was sitting alone on one side of the table, glowering at nothing in particular. Hermione was sitting on the other side with Ginny, chatting quietly. Harry could only assume the seating arrangements meant Ron was still in a fit about Harry knowing Hermione a little too well.

Mrs. Weasley was not there, thankfully. If Ron decided to start in again, he did not want to get into it in front of his mother. She would no doubt want to put in her two Knuts worth, and she might also be compelled to owl Dumbledore with concerns about his and Draco's sleeping arrangements.

Sleeping arrangements that, obviously, he was quite happy with, and in no hurry to have changed.

The three of them looked over when they heard the door open. Ginny stopped talking mid-sentence. Hermione's eyes went wide, her fork frozen en route to her mouth. Ron's glower deepened, and he dropped

the biscuit in his hand on his plate in a show of disgust.

Harry's eyes passed over Ron without stopping. He favored Hermione and Ginny with a tight smile and a small nod of the head, and proceeded over to the stove without a word to anyone. The silence was pointed, and Harry could feel their eyes on his back.

As he piled a plate with kippers, eggs, fried tomatoes, and toast with three pairs of eyes boring into his back, he decided he was not going to eat in there.

So much for not being cowed in his own house.

He turned on his heel and started towards the door with his heaping plate in his hand, not speaking, not even looking over at the table.

"Where are you going?" Hermione asked suddenly, looking concerned.

"Back upstairs." Harry said shortly, pausing to look back at her.

"Stay in here." Ginny said.

He softened slightly, knowing that at least Hermione and Ginny did not think he was a freak. He felt bad abandoning them, especially since Ron was obviously giving Hermione a hard time, but he still did not want to eat with Ron scowling at him.

"He's in a hurry to go be with his boyfriend." Ron said nastily.

"Actually, Draco is not here." Harry said. He was replying to Ron, but speaking to the room in general. "He had something to take care of at the Ministry."

Ron snorted.

"Then stay." Hermione pressed, shooting Ron a sour look.

"Sorry, Hermione." Harry said. "If I stay down here I'd rather be put off eating."

His eyes flicked to Ron quickly, before he headed out the door.

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Remus Lupin had to admit he was not surprised when he found Harry knocking on his bedroom door in the middle of breakfast.

Being a werewolf had numerous unpleasant drawbacks, but at the same time, the wolf's blood in his veins, though tainted, had given him a few advantages. Among these advantages was a fairly heightened sense of smell, and an ability to hear things that, for humans, were usually drowned out by the general noise.

He could also hear things that, for normal humans, were drowned out by a decent Silencing Charm. A simple Silencing Charm barely effected him at all. To him, it was about the equivalent of listening to someone shout directly at him with his hands over his ears. Stronger ones made the speakers sound like they were talking with balls of cotton in their mouths, but usually, if he strained his ears hard enough, he could pick out what they were saying.

He had heard shouting last night after dinner, coming from the direction of the sitting room. Someone in the sitting room had cast a Silencing Charm, and a fairly strong one at that, so the voices had been muffled. That, coupled with the distance between his bedroom and the sitting room, he had not been able to make out what they were saying, but it had been quite clear an argument was in progress, and a heated one at that.

From what he had been able to tell, the argument had been between two males, punctuated by occasional female commentary. Whether the argument had been between Harry and Draco, Draco and Ron, or Ron and Harry, Remus could not be sure, but he was pretty certain that whoever had been arguing (even if it had been Draco and Ron), it had had something to do with Harry.

This suspicion was confirmed by the Harry knocking on his door in the middle of breakfast, with a plate full of food like he intended to eat his meal on Remus' couch.

"The company at breakfast not to your taste, Harry?" Remus asked, gesturing him in.

"Something like that." Harry muttered. "Do you mind?"

"Not at all." Remus said. He rarely had visitors, and while this was partially his own fault, sometimes he thought it would be nice to have

people stop by his side of the house. "Make yourself to home."

Remus' room was fairly large. It was actually two rooms; a larger one that had once been a drawing room, and a smaller antechamber off of that. The antechamber served as his bedroom, and he had turned the drawing room into an office of sorts, complete with desk, bookshelves, two chairs, and a couch.

Harry opted for one of the chairs across from the couch. It was next to a small table, which he set his plate on.

"Something on your mind, Harry?" Remus asked gently.

"No." Harry said, too quickly. The lie was obvious on his face, and he was apparently aware of this, because he tried to cover it up by shoveling kippers into his mouth.

Remus decided not to press the matter right away. Instead, he studied the young man trying to drown his sorrows in kippers and eggs in front to him. A young man who had seen far too much difficulty and heartbreak in his life, a young man that far too many people only saw as the Boy Who Lived, rather than a living, breathing human being.

The werewolf sighed, knowing there was not much he could do about that. He had long ago left off whinging about how life wasn't fair. He had learned the hard way that life, in fact, was fickle indeed.

If life was fair, he would not have been bitten by a werewolf at the tender age of seven. If life was fair, James Potter would still be alive, and his son would be an ordinary almost sixteen-year old boy, instead of the hope of the Wizarding World. If life was fair, Sirius Black would not have spent twelve years in Azkaban for a murder he hadn't committed while Peter Pettigrew had roamed free.

The fact that Pettigrew had spent those twelve years as a rat was hardly any consolation.

Sirius' death had been a bitter potion to swallow, for both of them. Harry had finally received the parental figure he had always wanted, only for it to be ripped from him two years later. Remus had lost a very dear friend and more, and one of the few people who had been able to look past the fact that he was a horrible, violent creature once a month.

Remus, however, worried more about Harry than he felt sorry for himself. He had lost Sirius once before, to Azkaban, and he had managed. Harry had lost his godfather, at what could not have been the worst possible time. The adolescent years were a sore and difficult time to have no support or guidance even for a boring, ordinary boy, never mind one who shouldered so much responsibility.

"Harry." Remus tried again. "Are you sure there is nothing on your mind?"

"No." Harry said, again, far too quickly. He fancied that was the same kind of 'no' he (and James and Sirius) had given Dumbledore many times during his years as a student.

Remus paused, choosing his words carefully.

"I realize that as a werewolf, I made a debatable candidate for the position of 'responsible adult'." He said gently. "But I don't want you to think just because Sirius is gone that you must keep everything inside."

Harry's eyes tightened slightly at the mention of Sirius, but he nodded slowly.

"Only, I want you to know you can always speak freely with me, if you wish." He went on, smiling. "I won't tattle on you to Dumbledore or Mrs. Weasley, or spill your thoughts to the *Daily Prophet*."

"Sometimes, Mrs. Weasley worries me more than Dumbledore." Harry admitted, around a mouthful of tomatoes.

"I daresay she does." Remus agreed. "She can be right fearsome when she gets a head full of steam." He laughed. "But, her heart is in the right place."

"I know." Harry conceded.

"As is Ron's." Remus offered, taking a gamble.

Harry went rigid and his face clouded with anger. Remus decided the argument must have been between Ron and Harry.

"Ron is an arse." Harry said sourly, frowning at his plate like it had been his breakfast he had argued with last night.

"You want to tell me what you and Ron argued about last night?" Remus ventured.

Harry's face went suspicious. "How do you know about that?"

"I have better hearing than most people." Remus said lightly. "Let's just say that people shouting behind a Silencing Charm sounds like the merpeople yelling when my head is underwater. I might not be able to make all the words out, but I certainly know they are talking."

"Did you hear it all?" Harry asked nervously.

"I didn't properly hear anything, but I could tell you and Ron were shouting at each other." Remus said, bluffing the details slightly.

"Ron is an arse." Harry said again.

"I don't doubt that." Remus agreed.

"Just because he doesn't agree with my decisions doesn't give him the right to shout at me." Harry complained.

"Friends do have an inconvenient way of thinking they know what is best for us." Remus said.

"Well, he doesn't know what is best for me, and I am not sure I want to be his friend if he is going to try to tell me what to do all the time." Harry said, a bit petulantly. "He had no right to shout at me."

"You are quite right. He should not have shouted." Remus said. "But before you decide you are never speaking to him again, keep this in mind-- unlike you, Ron is not a Gryffindor by choice. He is a Gryffindor in heart and mind."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked.

"Ron is a lot like his mother, and a lot like Sirius." Remus explained. "He often acts and speaks without thinking things through, without stopping to figure on how it could effect someone, especially when he is angry."

"But, he always speaks from the heart." Remus continued. "No matter how asinine it sounds coming out of his mouth, it is straight from his

heart, and it is based on love and concern."

"Yeah, all right." Harry relented. His face softened a bit, but went stern again almost immediately. "But he is still an arse."

"So, what did you do to get him so heated?" Remus asked. "You weren't snogging his sister, again, were you?" He added with a smile.

"It's a long story." Harry said evasively.

Remus winked at him. "Luckily for you, I have nothing but time."

Harry sighed heavily, and Remus knew he was going to get his way.

"Tea or coffee?" He asked, moving to the small fireplace in the corner of his room.

"Remus, have you ever heard of the Lovers' Soulsong?" Harry asked.

He froze. He turned and looked at Harry to see he was completely serious.

"Butterbeer, then." Remus said airily, moving to the liquor cabinet.

He had a feeling Harry was going to need all the liquid courage he could get.

XIII The World According to Harry Potter (Part Two)

Harry's breakfast lay abandoned on the small table. He was now sitting on the opposite end of the couch from Lupin, sipping his third butterbeer. It was a bit early for butterbeer, but Harry didn't care. He was feeling rather pleasant, and he wasn't going to let a little thing like the impropriety of drinking before noon ruin it.

As he sat there, he realized this was the first time he had really talked to Lupin since Sirius died, and he kicked himself for not coming to see him sooner. He wondered how Lupin had dealt with Sirius' death. He felt a bit guilty now that he had not tried to see Lupin, or send him an owl right after Sirius died. Sirius had been Lupin's best friend, and he had known him far longer than Harry had.

Of course, when Sirius died, Harry had not given much thought to anyone else. He had pushed everyone away as best he could, because he had wanted to be alone with his misery.

It felt good to talk to someone about life. More specifically, it felt good to talk to someone about something that did not involve Voldemort or Death Eaters or the fate of the Wizarding World. That was why he had liked Lupin so much when he had been a teacher at Hogwarts. He had been one of the few people who had cared about Harry as a person, not just because he was famous or important.

They had been discussing the Lovers Soulsong for almost an hour. Actually, Lupin had been doing most of the talking. Harry had brought it up, and Lupin had waffled on about some of the things he had heard about it over the years. Just in the last few minutes, Lupin had asked why he had brought it up, and Harry had told him the truth.

Well, part of the truth.

He had not come around to telling Lupin it was Draco, because he was not quite sure how he would take that information. He did not need someone else telling him how he was confused, or that Draco was just lying in wait to kill him, and he certainly did not want someone else looking at him askance because Draco was a boy.

"You heard the song, then?" Lupin said. His face was both incredulous and impressed.

Harry nodded.

"You hadn't been drinking, had you?" Lupin asked wryly.

"No." Harry laughed.

"I had to be sure." Lupin said, laughing as well. "I went out drinking with your father and Sirius many times, and I can tell you, after one too many shots of firewhisky, you'll hear the damndest things."

"No firewhisky." Harry insisted.

Personally, he would like to hear some stories about Lupin, Sirius and his father drinking.

"Are you sure it was a phoenix?" Lupin asked.

"Quite." Harry said. "Dumbledore has a phoenix. He sang for me once. This was exactly the same."

"Well, my boy, you are lucky, then." Lupin said, smiling grandly. "Love like that rarely happens anymore."

"Do I have to love this person?" Harry asked.

He wasn't asking so much for himself, but for Draco. Draco had adamantly believed that love was for the birds two short weeks ago, and part of Harry wondered if he was simply resigned.

"No, you don't have to." Lupin said. "Would be difficult work not to, because you'll be drawn to them, but its not mandatory."

"Although, I would have to say you'd be a fool to let it slip past you." Lupin went on "To spend your life with someone who shares your soul- - that is a precious gift."

"It's a shame everyone doesn't think so." Harry muttered.

"Harry, in some situations, you have to do what is best for you." Lupin advised. "You especially should. You've spent a lot of time doing what other people expect you to do, or what other people need you to do." Lupin sighed sadly. "When it comes to things like this, you should do what makes you happy."

"My best friend has very different ideas about that." Harry said bitterly.

"It is Ron, then?" Lupin asked. "Is that was the argument last night was about? You told him, and he did not approve?"

That was an understatement. Of course, Harry knew that the presentation of the information had probably left much to be desired, from Ron's point of view. He had come into the room to find his best friend snogging his worst enemy, in front of his sister and his girlfriend.

"Pretty much." Harry said, sipping his butterbeer.

"He does not approve, how?" Lupin inquired, raising an eyebrow. "He

does not believe in the myth, or he does not like who you are meant to be with."

"We never got around to how he felt about the myth, really." Harry said. "He got stuck on who I was meant to be with, and went on about that the whole time."

"So, it *is* his sister." Lupin asked leadingly.

"No, it's not Ginny." Harry said.

"Are you going to tell me who, or do I need to feed you more butterbeer?" Lupin joked.

"I will." Harry said. "Just give me a minute."

"I'm going to the kitchen." Lupin said suddenly, standing.

"Why?"

"I haven't had breakfast." Lupin said. "I was about to see to it, right before you showed up. So, I am going to go fix myself a plate, and when I get back, you can tell me."

Harry paused, then nodded slowly. "Take your time, then."

Lupin laughed his whole way out the door.

~*~

"I'm back." Remus said ominously, carrying a large plate of sandwiches.

"Are all those for you?" Harry asked, eyeing the plate dubiously.

"Oh, no." Remus replied. "I figured I would bring a couple for you, just in case."

"I suppose you want me to tell you, then?" Harry asked, frowning.

"Of course." Remus said brightly. "But, you do not have to, if you'd rather not, and I won't bring it up again."

"No, I want to tell you." Harry said. "Only, you might want to sit down."

Setting the sandwiches down on the middle of the couch, Remus obliged.

"Go on, then." He said, brightly. "I am too old for suspense."

Harry took a deep breath. "Draco."

Nothing could have prepared Remus for that. If someone else had come up to him and told him that Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy were meant to be together, he would have politely suggested they stop by St. Mungos to have their head examined. Shocked as he was, he took care not to show any kind of reaction on his face. Ron had done enough damage, he was not about to make it worse.

"You are quite fortunate." Remus said carefully. "He is a very nice looking young man. Strange taste in clothing, but very nice looking, all the same."

"You are not going to yell?" Harry asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Why would I?" Remus asked, taking a healthy bite of ham sandwich.

"Because he is Draco." Harry said flatly. "Because his father is a Death Eater, and that."

"Lucius Malfoy is a horrible, evil man, I'll give you that, and I am sure it is safe to assume that Draco had a rather...*eventful* childhood." Remus said. "But, I cannot see how that has any bearing on your relationship, if he is who he has shown the Order to be since he came to us."

"That's just it." Harry said. "Ron can't get over his father, or that he used to be on Voldemort's side."

"I can see where that would be difficult for Ron to let all of that go." Lupin said diplomatically. "You have to remember, the Weasleys and the Malfoys had hated each other for many, many years. Even before Voldemort was an issue."

In truth, the Malfoys and the Weasleys had hated each other for centuries. The Malfoys had always been wealthy, arrogant purebloods

who pushed for the purification of the Wizarding race, while the Weasleys had been kind, humble and tolerant. For generations, Malfoys had viewed the Weasleys as an embarrassing lot of blood-traitors, and the Weasleys had thought he Malfoy to be nothing more than vile, scheming, power-hungry purists. The two families could not be relied on to agree on anything, even something as simple as the color of grass.

"What do you think?" Harry asked.

"I won't lie to you Harry, when I first met Draco at Hogwarts, I thought it was pretty clear what side he was on." Remus admitted. "And honestly, I think if his father hadn't killed his mother, his loyalties would still be on that side. But, things change. People change. Dumbledore trusts him, and that is enough for me."

"I wish Ron saw it like that." Harry said. "He said I had lost my mind and that I was just confused and didn't know what I wanted, and he is convinced that Draco is going to kill me."

"You will just have to give him time to warm up to the idea." Remus soothed.

"He'll never warm to it." Harry said sourly. "He has always hated Draco, and right now, he hates me, too."

"I seriously doubt he hates you." Remus said. "He might of said some mean, hateful things last night, but I would be willing to bet the basis of those mean, hateful things was love and concern for you."

"He has a funny way of showing it." Harry grouched. "Yelling at me, and hitting my boyfriend."

Remus paused for a moment, trying to remember what he had been like at sixteen.

"Ron is a sixteen year-old boy, and sixteen year boys are notorious for an inability to express their feelings properly." Remus said. "He was angry, last night, and he wasn't thinking properly, which was probably why some of what he said sounded hateful and mean. But, the fact that he was angry shows that he cares. If he didn't care, he would not have bothered getting angry."

Harry grunted.

"He wouldn't have bothered hitting your boyfriend, either." Remus said.

Harry grunted again, a bit louder, and took a healthy swig of butterbeer.

"Can you honestly tell me that you think Ron doesn't care?" Remus asked gently. "He sacrificed himself on a chessboard so you could get to the Sorcerer's Stone. He followed you into the Chamber of Secrets and the Department of Mysteries, so you would not have to go alone."

"Well, when you put it like that..." Harry grumbled.

"Ron has always stood by you, to protect you, often without regard for his personal safety." Remus went on. "His motivation last night was no different, albeit misguided. It's probably safe to say he still views Draco as the enemy, and in his own way, he thought he was protecting you."

"Yeah, all right." Harry agreed grudgingly. "But he also seemed a bit put off about his best friend being gay."

"Some people do have definite ideas about that." Remus admitted. "Maybe you are right, maybe that does bother him." He paused thoughtfully, giving Harry a considering look. "But, maybe you for you, he'll eventually learn to think differently."

"It doesn't bother you?" Harry asked.

"Not at all." Remus said truthfully. "Of course, I have never viewed sexuality as something that was black and white. I think it's what is inside a person who counts, not what is inside their trousers."

Harry seemed to ponder this for a moment.

"Would my father have been bothered by it?" Harry asked.

"No." Remus said. "Nor Sirius, if that is your next question."

Apparently, that had been Harry's next question, because he took a moment to regroup.

"Really?" Harry asked.

"Yes, really." Remus assured.

"How can you be so sure?" Harry asked.

He realized that this was an issue that would truly bother Harry. If Harry thought his father or Sirius would have been shirty about his sexual preference, he would probably reconsider the whole thing, Lovers Soulsong be damned. He also realized that Harry, much like he father, would not be satisfied with someone telling him, he would have to see it with his own eyes.

"I just can." Remus said airily. He got up from the couch, and moved to the bookcase. After a moments consideration, he pulled one out and tossed it to Harry as he sat back down.

"What's this?" Harry asked, eyeing him askance.

"Photo album." He said. "It's my fifth year at Hogwarts. Have a look. I think there is a couple in there of your mother near the end."

Harry flipped through the pictures in silence, occasionally glancing up at Remus, eyeing him like he was trying to change the subject. Remus ignored Harry's pointed stares, and waited. After a few moments, Harry gave a sharp gasp, and Remus bit back a smile, knowing that Harry had found the picture he had wanted him to see.

~*~

"Remus?" Harry sputtered, gesturing wildly to the album. "Why is my father kissing Sirius in this picture?"

"Because he wanted to, I guess." Lupin said calmly, biting back a smile.

Harry had absolutely no desire to watch his father snog his godfather, but for some reason, his hands were unwilling or unable to close the album or turn the page. He continued to stare, and the James and Sirius in the picture continued to snog. He was tempted to ask Lupin a thousand questions-- how, why, when, for how long, but at the same time, he didn't want to know.

He glanced over to Lupin, and seeing the satisfied smile on his face, he

realized he had been had.

"You showed me this on purpose!" Harry accused, frowning at Lupin.

"Of course." Lupin said cheerfully. "You were concerned that your father or Sirius would have been bothered by your sexual preferences. As you can plainly see, they would have had nothing to say about it."

Glancing at the picture again, Harry had to agree with him, there.

"I can't believe you showed me a picture of my father snogging!" Harry complained. He wrinkled his nose at the picture, and finally located the motor skills required to shut the album and set it aside.

"If I had told you, would you have believed me?" Lupin asked.

"No." Harry conceded. "I probably wouldn't have."

"Which is precisely why I showed you." Lupin gave him a satisfied smile. "You are very much like your father in that way. He always had to see a thing to believe it."

"Did they love each other?" Harry asked.

"They were best friends, and more." Lupin said. "They loved each other dearly."

For some reason, Harry was glad for this, perhaps due to his own experiences. Sex with Hermione had been fine and dandy at the time. It had been a release of sorts, a way to forget everything. Now, compared to the way Draco made him feel, it had been a cold and empty and mindless thing.

A loveless thing.

"I think I love him." Harry said suddenly.

Last night, Harry had said he loved him. The words had just left his mouth, without him really even thinking about it, but right after he had said it, part of him had wanted to take it back. As he had thought about it throughout the day, he found he didn't know if he had said it because he meant it, or because he had simply been angry with Ron and weary of his needling.

"You think?" Lupin asked, with a raised eyebrow.

"Well, I how am I supposed to know?" Harry asked, frowning. "I've never been in love before."

"You're what, expecting to wake up one morning and *know*?" Lupin questioned. He looked amused at this.

"Well, yeah." Harry said.

"I fear it doesn't work like that." Lupin said, shaking his head. "Love rarely happens all at once. It is usually something that happens over time."

Harry didn't like the sound of that. It seemed rather messy and disorganized. If a person was going to have feelings, they should not be vague and confusing. The feelings should make their presence known loudly, and explain themselves clearly, so the person would know how to proceed.

"He is obviously very special to you, and you are obviously very special to him." Lupin said. "Perhaps, for now, you should be content that you know that much, and just let things sort themselves out."

"Be happy with what I have, then?" Harry asked.

"Indeed." Lupin said, sounding a bit like Dumbledore. "It is all any of us can do."

Taking a fortifying swig of butterbeer, Harry decided he would do just that.

XIV Nothing Else Matters (Part One)

To Lucius Malfoy, the only thing that mattered was power and influence.

People had a tendency to worry overmuch about things like good and evil, or light and dark, or what would happen when this was all over. In Lucius' opinion, these were the kind of notions best left to religious zealots and scholars. He did not have the patience for such things, and

even if he did, he did not have the time.

It was a futile exercise, as far as Lucius saw it, because the gods had abandoned everyone to their own devices long ago.

There would be no great and terrible judgment or reckoning on the day of one's death. One's good and bad actions would not be tallied or weighed on a scale, because chances were that the gods could not be bothered. All one could do was live their life to the fullest and take what was offered, because once one's body gave up the ghost, everything was over and done.

It all came back to power and influence.

He had thrown his lot in with Voldemort years ago, not so much because Voldemort pushed for the extermination of Muggles and the purification of the wizarding race, though Lucius did hold with those ideals, but because Voldemort had been a clear and obvious route to power.

Lucius had no qualms about the things he had done over the years. He had plotted, schemed, tortured and murdered without thought, but it had never been without reason. Lucius rarely did things without reason, and that reason was always personal gain. Voldemort had required these things from him, and because Voldemort had promised power to those who were faithful, Lucius had been happy to oblige.

Good and evil were not of consequence. Power was the ultimate goal, and compared to that, nothing else mattered.

Power had always been Lucius' one true love, and he had always been willing to attain it by any means necessary. From this, however, Lucius had learned that power was not for the weak. Only the strong could stomach some of the things that had to be done to achieve it.

Lucius had always worked to promote Voldemort's cause. Nothing pleased him more than the addition of another strong, loyal member to the Dark Lord's ranks. However, unlike Zabini and some of the other fools that passed as Death Eaters, he had long ago left off trying to convert every person who Ollivander would give a wand.

Power was not for everyone. People with weak wills and faint hearts would only be more dangerous to the cause in the end. Many had flocked to Voldemort's side at the first, only to turn tail and run

when the going got tough. Voldemort' expected everyone who bore the Dark Mark to torture and murder as thoughtlessly and effortlessly as Lucius' did.

Of course, only Lucius tortured and murdered as thoughtlessly and effortlessly as Lucius did, which was why he was Voldemort's right hand, and why everyone else was not.

Power was certainly not for everyone. It was only for the strong, and in Lucius' mind, that did not include women.

With the rare exception of Bellatrix Lestrange, who had more bollocks than any five men Lucius had ever met, women were notoriously soft and weak. They were dithering and untrustworthy creatures, and no matter how tough and uncaring they appeared to be on the outside, they did not have the stomach for killing and war. They did not have the strength to attain true power, because they always needed to justify their means.

Narcissa had been soft and weak.

Ironically, this was why he had chosen Narcissa as his wife, rather than Bellatrix. At the time, neither of the Black sisters had been particularly aligned with Voldemort's cause, and Lucius had wagered that Narcissa's sweeter, more pliant personality would make her easier to sway.

This proved to be a crowning example of why Lucius was not usually a betting man.

Bellatrix was now one of Voldemort's strongest, staunchest supporters, and among the Death Eaters, she was second to only Lucius. In hindsight, she would have been a much better match, even if Lucius would have had to live with the fact that her proverbial cock was nearly as big as his.

Narcissa had played the part well enough in the beginning, but over the last few years, she had let her conscience get the better of her. She had gone weak and soft, and had found no peace in the way Lucius had sculpted Draco into a nearly perfect copy of himself.

The miserable bitch had betrayed him, for no other reason than she had not wanted Draco to follow in his father's footsteps.

Lucius had always hoped for many children, but it had not come to pass. It had taken Narcissa a full five years to get pregnant, but she had carried and delivered Draco with ease. Lucius had thought this was a clear sign that that they would have many children, but Narcissa's body had had other ideas.

Following Draco's birth, his seemingly healthy wife had suffered a spate of sudden and mysterious miscarriages. On three different occasions, she had bled the child out only hours after announcing she was carrying it.

Lucius had often wondered if it had truly been Narcissa's body that had been fickle, or if it had been Narcissa, herself. He knew that women had their ways to make an unwanted pregnancy dissolve into a swirl of fluid and blood. Perhaps once she discovered that Lucius planned to craft his children in his own image, she had not desired to give him anymore.

This was a thought that angered him, but at the same time, he was able to acknowledge that it may have turned out for the best. With no other children running around, he had been able to devote his complete, undivided attention to Draco.

Draco was Lucius' most prized possession, and his finest creation.

And now, it seemed he was missing.

~*~

Dinner was a fairly uncomfortable affair.

Mrs. Weasley, sensing the tension and pointed silence in the room, had prepared and dished up dinner in a state of quiet that was rather unusual for her. After everyone tucked in (and they had all attacked their plates like their dinner had done them a personal wrong, except Draco, who contented himself with slurping his coffee violently), she had mumbled some excuses and left, evidently deciding she was better off eating alone.

Draco's mood had been sour even before he had realized he would have to spend the next hour across the dining table from the Weasel.

All thanks to the Ministry of Magic.

The whole supposed-death ordeal had been tiresome and unnecessary. He had figured it was over once the oily-voiced wizard handed him his revoked Death Certificate, but he had been wrong. He and Snape had been four paces from the door when the oily-voiced wizard had asked them to wait, because there was another matter than needed clearing up.

Draco's mother was dead, and his father had debatable enough legal status that the Ministry considered him as good as dead. Unfortunately for Draco, this had rendered him an underage wizard with no legal guardian.

This situation had not been alarming to Draco in the least. As far as he saw it, he had been raising himself for years. The oily-voiced wizard from the Department of Birth, Death and Inheritance, however, had seemed to find it a situation so dire that all other work in the office had stopped while it was resolved.

Thankfully, it had been resolved, and for the first time in his life, Draco had been truly grateful to the gods for the existence of Severus Snape.

Had Draco not produced a legal guardian, he would have become a ward of the Ministry, and as such, he would have been spending the remainder of the summer at Morgana's Home for the Orphaned and Unfortunate.

Needless to say, Draco had found this a less than appealing idea.

Snape had apparently agreed, because he had suddenly volunteered to sign himself away as Draco's legal guardian, right there on the spot.

Grateful as Draco was for this, he was inclined to think it was not entirely out of the goodness of his heart. Snape had been a friend to the Malfoy family for years, but he was not in the habit of performing random acts of kindness, even for a Malfoy. Rather, Draco figured Snape had thought losing Draco to a home for wayward and disadvantaged wizarding brats when he was meant to be at Grimmauld Place would have invoked a rather unpleasant reaction from Dumbledore.

Either way, Draco left the Ministry of Magic an hour after being declared alive with a revoked Death Certificate and a spanking-new legal guardian.

For some reason, Snape had gotten the idea that being Draco's legal guardian gave him the right to tell Draco what to do, and he had wasted no time trying to do so.

His first order of business had been to insist Draco to leave off the 'nonsense with Potter', forthwith. This had lead to Snape and Draco having a spectacular row in the middle of the Underground Station while waiting for the train. An argument, given the shouting and wand-waving, that had attracted the attention of nearly all the Muggles in the station.

Draco had said, under no uncertain terms, that if Snape was going to try and make him break up with Harry he could march him right back to the Ministry and hand him over to Morgana and her wayward brats. True, he would be separated from Harry in the mean time, but Harry would still be his boyfriend, and while Owl Post was a rather unsatisfactory way to have sex, at least when school started in the fall they would be free to get on with it.

After a bit of consideration, Snape had grudgingly let the matter drop. Draco did not know if it was because he had said he would go back to the Ministry, or because he had threatened to hex off Snape's lower bits, right in front of the Muggles, if he brought it up again.

Upon reflection, Draco did not think threatening the Potions Master and his Head of House with a Castration Spell was the brightest idea he had ever had, but it had certainly shut Snape up for the nonce.

Not that there was evidence that Snape had put his lower bits to use in years, mind.

However, if the Weasel did not cease and desist with the 'die, Ferret, die' glare he was fixing Draco with, Draco could very well be forced to cast a Castration Spell before the evening was out, after all.

It was not like Draco would really be doing anyone a disservice if he lightened the Weasel of his lower bits. The only person who might possibly have any need for them was Granger, but from the way she was frowning at him, she apparently did not have any intentions on his lower bits, or any other part of him, in the immediate future.

The only people in the room who did not look fit to commit murder were Harry and Ginny, who were chatting amiably about Merlin-knew-

what while everyone else scowled at each other over their pot roast and boiled potatoes.

Draco wondered absently what had Harry in such a fine mood. The Weasel was occasionally glancing away from Draco to glare at Harry with a look along the lines of 'I hate you, hero, I hate you', but Harry was flawlessly ignoring it. He would periodically shoot Hermione soft smiles, but was focusing most of his attention on his enthusiastic conversation with the Weasel's sister.

Ginny said something funny, and Harry laughed jovially. He looked over at Draco, and seeing Draco was not feeling mirthful in the least, reached out under the table and rested his hand on Draco's leg. Draco took up Harry's hand, holding it. The skin on skin contact, though slight, made the song hum softly in his ears, and Draco felt himself relax a bit

"Remus!" Harry exclaimed, as the werewolf appeared in the doorway. In a rare show of sociability, he had come down to dinner while everyone was eating, rather than waiting until they were gone. "Won't you join us?"

"No, thank you Harry." Lupin replied kindly. Draco thought he looked a bit off-color, and wondered nervously when the next full moon was. "I'm in the middle of a book. I just thought I would pop in and see to dinner."

Draco rolled his eyes at that. It seemed Lupin read more than Granger, something that should be physically impossible to do.

With that, Lupin set about fixing himself a plate. Draco watched him as he did so, noting the surreptitious glances the werewolf was shooting in the direction of the dining table. Draco decided he had not come downstairs while everyone else was present by accident, or out of a desire to be sociable.

He was checking up on something.

As Lupin turned towards the door with his full plate, he paused, studying the table a bit more openly. His eyes tarried slightly on Draco, but stayed only a moment. He then glanced back and forth between Harry, who was still chatting with Ginny, and the Weasel, who was still scowling like his life depended on it.

Something soft and nearly fatherly passed over Lupin's face as he looked at Harry. When he looked at the Weasel, his face tightened a bit, forming into an expression that was worry, edged ever so slightly with annoyance.

He glanced at Draco one more time before going out the door. His expression was unreadable, but he favored Draco with a muted smile, the kind of smile that made Draco think he *knew* something.

It dawned on Draco that if Lupin did know, Harry had told him.

Draco did not find this surprising, really. Harry had just gotten himself into a relationship with a boy who had once been his enemy, and was currently at odds with his best friend. He had probably wanted to talk things over with someone, and Harry's current list of 'someones' was rather short, now that his godfather was dead.

If he had wanted an adult's perspective, Lupin made more sense than anyone else that was lying around. Draco did not know how personal Harry's relationship with Dumbledore was, but Draco could not picture Harry detailing the particulars of his romantic entanglements with the Headmaster.

Moody and Snape were also out of the question, and Mrs. Weasley could be a bit excitable, at times.

Lupin, on the other hand, seemed nice enough (even if Draco found him a bit disquieting), and he had Harry had gotten on fairly well when Lupin was teaching at Hogwarts. Not to mention, he had been friends with Harry's father and godfather.

Draco's reverie was cut short by two loud cracks, sounding in rapid succession. The cracks were followed by the appearance of the Weasley twins, one of who had managed to Apparate himself practically on top of the table.

Draco wondered if this day could get any worse.

"Evening, Weasleys!" Fred bellowed cheerfully. Everyone but Draco grumbled a response.

"Hermione. Harry." He added, nodding to each. He frowned when he caught sight of Draco, and elbowed George.

"What's the albino clown doing here?" George asked, raising an eyebrow. "I thought this place was spelled to keep out the riffraff."

"Evidently not." Draco snapped, eyeing the pair with derision. Albino clown, indeed. They were fine ones to talk, seeing as the pair of them were like a circus act from the Hell.

"Where is the funeral, then?" Fred asked, peering around exaggeratedly.

"They are a cheerful lot, aren't they?" George quipped. "Even Malfoy looks more evil and murderous than usual."

"It's been a long couple of days." Hermione offered quietly.

The Weasel grunted.

"Well, leave off the sour faces!" Fred demanded brightly.

He fished around in his pocket of his coat and pulled out a rubber chicken. He tossed it at Hermione, who squeaked when it came to life. It squawked and fluttered around the table for a bit, then promptly burst into flames like a phoenix.

Nobody was particularly impressed, nor did it improve the mood at the table.

"Tough room." George whispered loudly to Fred, out of the corner of his mouth.

"Quite." Fred agreed. "I am going to fix me a plate, before this lot makes me want to kill myself."

I should only be so lucky. Draco thought bitterly.

The twins prattled on quietly amongst themselves while filling their plates, occasionally dissolving into the kind of conspiratorial laughter that was frankly worrying, coming from them. Once they had their plates piled with enough food for three people, they circled the table predatorily, looking for a place to sit.

Fred looked like he meant to sit in Hermione's lap as a gag, until the Weasel shut him down with a scowl.

"Seriously, then." Fred said. "Why is everyone so glum?"

"Seriously, then." echoed George, who was standing behind Harry and Draco. "Why is Harry holding hands with the Ferret under the table?"

"The Ferret is Harry's boyfriend." The Weasel replied in a nasty, tattling singsong.

"Well." George said, raising an eyebrow. "That would explain why everyone is so glum."

XIV Nothing Else Matters (Part Two)

It seemed that Weasleys Wizarding Wheezes of Ninety-Three Diagon Alley, purveyor of mischief and mayhem for the last six months, was doing quite well.

The twins were also doing quite well. They were still the same boisterous jokesters who could find humor in everything, which was a stark contrast to their clothing. Gone were the trademark Weasley jumpers and hand-me-down robes. They were dressed finely, in black, pin-stripe suits and matching fedora hats that made them look alarmingly like the old-fashion mobsters of Muggle cinema.

They also looked alarmingly grown up, though as dinner progressed through two more rubber chickens, three fake wands, and a foam brick to Draco's head, Harry knew that they were still the same old 'Gred and Forge' he had gone to Hogwarts with.

The same Fred and George who had responded to rumors that Harry was the Heir of Slytherin by announcing his arrival down the school hallways like some demented processional of a king. The same Fred and George who had unleashed a swamp on an upstairs corridor of Hogwarts merely to vex the current Headmaster, a portion of which was still on display, because Flitwick had thought it was a good bit of magic.

As Fred and George herded everyone into the sitting room after dinner amid more foam bricks, a handful of dungbombs, clouds of powder that smelled like vomit, and a butterscotch candy that briefly turned Ginny into a goat, Harry realized that some things would never

change.

Harry was in no particular hurry to hang out in a common area. He was in a fairly good mood, and did not want it spoiled by Ron. He had taken everything Lupin had said into account, and he knew that he and Ron should make up, but it was plain from the look on Ron's face that now was not the time or place.

Not to mention, he rather wanted to spend some time with Draco after being apart from him the whole day.

However, as the dungbombs and vomit-powder flew, he found himself powerless to stop the whirlwind that was Fred and George. They had not even asked if anyone wanted to go to the sitting room, they had just started herding everyone into it like they were leading some kind of parade.

Draco had resisted at first, which had only resulted in him being strapped in a Full Body Bind and Levitated out of the kitchen and onto a sitting room couch. It would seem that as owners of a successful joke shop, they felt it their civic duty to try and raise everyone's spirits, even the spirits of the boy they so lovingly called the Ferret.

Resigned, Harry flopped down onto the couch next to Draco, who was by now, almost fully mobile.

"We come bearing gifts!" Fred announced as he dug around inside a trunk sitting by the fireplace.

Harry noticed Hermione was eyeing the trunk worriedly, not that he blamed her. Gifts from Fred and George could easily be combustible, smelly, or outright dangerous.

Harry was rather relieved to see Fred pull out what looked like ordinary, mundane t-shirts. They were Gryffindor red, with the House sigil on the back. Fred turned one around to show off the front, and Harry could not help but laugh.

The words *Weasley Is Our King* were printed across the front in large, gold letters.

Draco was eyeing the shirt suspiciously, and he had gone a bit paler than normal. Harry thought he heard him mutter something like 'you're supposed to be dead' under his breath.

Ron smiled fleetingly, and shot Draco a triumphant look, as Draco had made up that song purposely to mock him, only for it to be a hit in the Gryffindor Tower once Ron had learned what to do with Quaffle.

"Here you are, and here you are." Fred said, theatrically passing out shirts. He paused at Draco, clucking his tongue. "This will not do, for you. Not at all."

He and George whispered for a moment, then Fred passed his wand over the shirt, muttering a few spells. The shirt turned a distinct Slytherin green, and the lion on the back changed into a snake.

The front read *The Snitch Is Out There. Just Ask Harry Potter*, in large, flashing, silver letters.

"You are too kind." Draco groused, as a balled up the shirt sailed across the room and hit him in the head.

Harry had to admit he was grateful for the levity, as Hermione, unable to help herself, started laughing at Draco's shirt. Ginny started too, then Harry joined in, and Draco eventually succumbed as well. Ron did not laugh outright, but he looked like he was choking it back.

"I dare you to wear that your first day back to school." Harry whispered in Draco's ear.

"Not on your life, Potter." Draco returned fondly, resting his hand on Harry's leg.

"Ronnekins was serious, then, about the Ferret being your boyfriend?" Fred asked, giving the hand on Harry's leg a pointed look.

"Yeah." Harry said, forcing his voice to be light.

Harry flinched inwardly, expecting some kind of snide commentary, but none came. Fred and George considered this information silently for a moment, Fred with pursed lips, and George with a raised eyebrow. Then, Fred chuckled quietly and George gave an amused snort.

"What's so funny, then?" Draco asked.

"Nothing to get riled about, mate." Fred said brightly. "It's just a bit

random, is all."

"Quite." George agreed. "I've heard that opposites attract, and that, but you two..." He trailed off and whistled through his teeth.

"How long have you been together?" Fred asked conversationally.

"About two weeks." Harry said.

"You're not meaning to be a Death Eater, then?" Fred asked, narrowing his eyes at Draco.

"No." Draco snapped, his body tensing.

"Good." Fred said. His demeanor changed instantly, and he smiled grandly. He tossed a foam brick at Harry, which turned into a bouquet of paper flowers as it landed in Harry's lap. "Bully for you both, then."

Suddenly, George Summoned Draco's shirt to him. After studying it for a few moments, he mumbled a few spells and turned it around.

It now read *The Snitch Is Out There, But I'd Rather Watch Harry's Bum Than Look For It.*

Draco gave a snort, but Harry laughed and squeezed his hand. He understood the twins well enough by now to know that shirt had been their way of showing their approval.

When Ron caught sight of the shirt, however, his face flushed and he made a loud, strangled sound.

"Ron?" George asked. "You haven't been at the candies in the bottom of the trunk, have you?"

"No." Ron groused.

"What is it, then?" Fred pressed.

"The Weasel King does not approve of us." Draco explained crossly, gesturing vaguely in Ron's direction. "He's a bit miffed about it, really. He would insist I am going to kill Harry while he sleeps."

"Ronald." Fred chided. His voice and wagging finger were a spot on impersonation of Mrs. Weasley. "Is that true?"

Ron nodded, a furious look fixed to his face.

"That's a bad show." George put in, with a similarly wagging finger. "Harry's your best mate."

Ron mumbled something unintelligible, glared at Draco, then scowled at his brothers.

"Well, yes, he is a ferret-faced git." George agreed. He had evidently caught what Ron had mumbled. Draco seethed. "But if Harry likes him, you should be happy for him."

"Harry wasn't even gay!" Ron complained.

"People reconsider." George said cheerfully. "Bill was dating a bloke before he got in with Fleur, and you didn't get all tetchy with him."

Ron looked murderous. Fred gave him a withering look, and sighed. George shrugged, and turned his attention back to Harry.

"I must say, I am impressed, Harry." George said wryly, waggling his eyebrows. "You tamed the infamous Slytherin Shag."

"Shut up, Weasley." Draco snarled.

"Malfoy was quite the legend with the ladies." George went on, ignoring Draco completely. "I daresay this development will have the birds going spare."

"Quite." Fred agreed. "Harry had a bit of a fan club, too, if I remember." He laid the back of his hand to his forehead dramatically. "Girls will be weeping day and night, from the Tower to the Dungeon."

"Of course, if you let them have a look, they might be willing to forgive you." George quipped, winking. "You're both nice-looking fellows. The girls might find it a bit inspiring, if you follow."

"They'll have no problem, there." Ron snapped. "That's how I found out, now that you bring it up. I walked into the room and found them snogging in front of my girlfriend and my sister!"

"Your girlfriend!" Fred gasped, looking over at Hermione. "I had no idea!" This apparently deserved another foam-brick-turned-flower-

arrangement, which landed unceremoniously in Hermione's lap. "Bully for you both, too."

"Don't." Hermione snapped, tossing the flowers aside. "I am not sure we are together, anymore."

"You're breaking up with me?" Ron sputtered. Apparently, this had been news to him.

"That depends!" Hermione said. "Are you done being an insufferable prat?"

"About what?" Ron asked. "Harry and the Ferret or Harry and you!"

"Both!" Hermione shouted.

"Harry!" Fred gasped in shock. "Been a bit busy lately, have you?" Harry thought he, and George, looked rather impressed.

Hermione glared furiously at the twins, as they were both now leering at her impudently.

"Your brother is mad at me for things that happened before we were together." She explained.

"Ronnekins!" Fred said flatly, rolling his eyes. "That's bad form. Did she get shirty about that accident you had with Lavender Brown?"

"You'll have to forgive him, 'Mione, he can't always help himself." George said sadly, ignoring Ron's rapidly purpling face. "He's the youngest brother, you know. It left him a bit repressed."

"That's it!" Ron shouted. "If you are going to talk about me like I am not here, I am going to leave."

He stood up, and as he did, a loud, false farting noise sounded from his general vicinity. He glared pointedly at Fred and George, who were both whistling tunelessly and looking at the ceiling.

"Sod off, all of you!" With that, Ron started for the door.

As soon as he was out of the room, Hermione started to cry.

"I will never understand you lot!" George exclaimed, throwing up his

hands. "You are never happy unless you are suffering and miserable."

Harry thought he might be right.

~*~

Immediately following the Weasel's tantrum, several things had happened at once.

Ron had stormed out. Hermione had started to cry. Ginny, after giving both Hermione and Harry a strange look, had bolted out the door after Ron.

Harry had gone sullen, and had almost looked like he meant to join in with Hermione on the tears.

Draco decided he and Harry should go upstairs.

As he silently lead Harry up the stairs, he heard a series of bangs and whoops from the sitting room that could only have been an attempt on Fred and George's part to cheer Hermione up.

One of the ginger freaks had said they were only happy when they were suffering and miserable. Part of Draco was starting to think he had not been too far of the mark. The other part, of course, wasn't sure he should take mental-health advice from a man who charmed rubber chickens into explosive devices for a living.

Draco was still unsure of what to make of that shirt the twins had made him. There had been an obvious mocking tone to it, but it was difficult to tell, with the twins.

"How was the Ministry?" Harry asked quietly, as they slipped into the master bedroom.

"Enthralling." Draco replied sarcastically, pulling Harry to him and wrapping his arms around him. "I spent the day convincing people I was alive."

"Wasn't it obvious?" Harry asked, with a raised eyebrow. "I mean, with you talking and walking around, it shouldn't have been that hard to figure out."

"One would think." Draco said. "Of course, I don't think it was so much that the Ministry couldn't see I was alive, they were just disappointed."

"Don't say that." Harry complained.

"Well, its true." Draco said. Harry gave him a flat look, and Draco decided to change the subject. "So, what did you do, today?"

"I stayed up here for a bit." Harry said. "I tried to have breakfast, but Ron was being a wanker."

"The Weasel was not *being* a wanker." Draco corrected. "He is *always* a wanker."

This earned him another flat look. Draco responded with a dazzling smile, and Harry softened slightly. Draco led Harry to the bed and laid down, pulling Harry on top of him.

"So what, then?" Draco asked, twisting a lock of Harry's black hair around his finger. "You came back up here?"

"No." Harry said. "I took my breakfast to Remus' room, and spent the day there. I was there right up until you came back."

Draco had thought as much. "Did you tell him about us?" He asked.

"Yeah." Harry said. "We talked about you, and about Ron."

"And what did he have to say?" Draco asked. Lupin had not particularly looked like he disapproved in the kitchen, but it was hard to tell with Lupin. The werewolf (probably for obvious reasons) played things close to the vest. Unlike Harry, his thoughts were not written across his forehead for all to see.

"He said we're lucky, about the song, and all that." Harry said simply. "He said what we have is a gift."

"Really?" Draco asked.

Draco was only partially surprised. Even if only half of what Snape had ever told him about Lupin was true, he was a bit of a romantic. If Snape could be believed, Lupin had pined for Black the whole time he was in Azkaban, loving him and hating him at the same time.

Of course, Snape was a fine one to talk about pining. Draco's mother had once told him that Snape had spent half of his Hogwarts career mooning over her, and the other half mooning over Harry's mother.

"What did he say about the Weasel?" Draco asked, not sure if he wanted to know.

"He said that Ron really does care about me." Harry said, in a muffled voice. He had tucked his head under Draco's chin, and was now speaking into his neck.

"He's got a funny way of showing it." Draco commented dryly.

"That's what I said, but Remus said it is the fact he is showing anything that counts." Harry replied. "He said if Ron didn't care, he wouldn't have bothered getting angry or hitting you, or any of that."

Draco made a noncommittal noise, and stroked a hand up and down Harry's back.

"He figures Ron will come around." Harry said quietly. "He said he just needed some time to sort himself out."

"But Lupin was fine with it?" Draco asked. "With us?"

"Quite." Harry said.

"He didn't start in on my father, or anything?"

"Nope." Harry said. "He says you might have been on the wrong side of things before, but you're here, now, and Dumbledore trusts you, so that is enough for him."

Draco was relieved at this. It was nice to know someone in Grimmauld (besides Harry) could look at him without seeing his father.

"Look at your neck." Harry laughed. The way he was laying, his eyeball was probably right on top of it.

"Don't start." Draco said. "I had to hear about it all day."

"From who?" Harry asked, lifting his head to look at Draco. "Snape?"

"Yes, Snape." Draco said flatly. "My new legal guardian."

"What?" Harry choked.

"Well, my mother is dead, and the Ministry does not exactly consider my father suitable." Draco said. "I'm underage, so I needed a guardian."

"But Snape?" Harry asked.

"He was the closest legal adult I had to hand." Draco quipped. "Dumbledore was not around, and I couldn't very well ask them to sign me over to you."

"I'm younger than you!" Harry pointed out.

"True." Draco chuckled. "Besides, if I told them why I wanted to be signed over to you, they would have put me in Azkaban for defiling their special little hero."

That earned him a decidedly hard pinch in the side.

"Besides, he is not all that bad." Draco went on, swatting at Harry's hand.

"He's horrid." Harry said.

"Only to you." Draco teased. "And the rest of your House." He added, making Harry pinch him again.

"What did he say about your neck?" Harry asked.

"He knew it was from you right off, though I don't know how." Draco admitted. "He waffled on about how I was out of my mind, and that my father would be furious if he knew."

"We had a pleasant fight at the Underground on the way home." Draco went on. "He'd just signed the papers, so I think it had gone to his head. He tried to go all parental, and told me he didn't want me seeing you anymore."

"What did you tell him?" Harry asked, frowning.

"I told him to stuff it, and I said I would hex his balls off if didn't leave off."

Harry's eyes went wide. "You did not tell Severus Snape you would hex off his balls."

"I most certainly did." Draco insisted. "Said I'd have them off and hand them to the nearest Muggle." Draco snorted. "He must have believed me, because he was rather quiet on the train."

"I wish I could get Ron to be quiet." Harry said, going sad once more.

"Maybe he would if you tell him you mean to have his balls off." Draco joked.

"I am not going to threaten my best friend with a Castration Spell." Harry said.

Some best friend. He thought. "Why not?" Draco asked. "It's not like he needs them. Granger is not speaking to him, anyway." Draco went thoughtful for a moment. "I can't say I blame her."

"*You* are agreeing with Hermione?" Harry asked suspiciously.

"Once, and only this once." Draco said. "He is rather being a git about it. The ginger freak was right-- whichever one it was-- she didn't get all shirty about stuff he did before they were together."

"Now I have heard everything." Harry breathed. "You just said Fred was right about something."

"Again, once and only this once." Draco said. "I am not sure as I should, though, after that shirt."

"Oh!" Harry laughed a bit. "That was George, with the shirt, and he wasn't being mean."

Draco snorted.

"That's just his way. Both of them, really." Harry defended. "They joke about everything. They were telling you their fine with us, is all."

"How can you be so sure?" Draco asked.

"Because if they weren't, the shirt would have exploded." Harry said sincerely. "Or put a stench on you so foul you couldn't wash it off for

weeks."

Draco decided Harry was probably right.

Besides, Harry was kissing him, which was a good deal more important than wondering what the ginger freaks had been on about with that shirt.

Harry's mouth was hot and devouring, and that shirt seemed very unimportant, indeed, because the shirt he was currently wearing was rapidly being removed. Harry kissed Draco hard as he worked the buttons, nipping at his lip and pushing his tongue into Draco's mouth insistently. Draco moaned into his mouth, and once the shirt was dealt with he wrapped his arms around Harry to pull him closer, loving the way Harry's weight felt as it held him to the bed.

Harry's hands roamed Draco's chest and shoulders and arms almost frantically. They were searching and stroking, trailing lines of fire all over Draco's body and making the song rise in his ears.

Draco lost his hands in Harry's hair as his mouth found a nipple, tangling his fingers in the inky, black locks as Harry's tongue licked and teased. He arched into Harry's mouth, his hands slipping down Harry's neck to his back and shoulders. He clutched Harry and pulled at him, wanting him closer. Harry's weight was heavy on him, pinning him to the bed, but Draco still didn't think he was close enough.

A hot line of kisses brought Harry's mouth back to Draco's. He kissed Draco, his tongue searching out Draco's before sucking it into his mouth. He pushed his hips into Draco's, and Draco bucked up against him, hissing as the contact shot sparks across his body.

Harry sat up from Draco long enough to do away with his clothes and the rest of Draco's. He moved back on top of Draco very quickly, the skin on skin contact and the pressure of Harry's cock against his made Draco's body burn.

It was so new and wonderful, yet strange and different at the same time. Draco's body had never reacted to any one else in this way. Sex had always been nothing more than a simple series of reasonably pleasurable sensations that eventually came to an end.

There was nothing simple or reasonable about this.

Perhaps it was the song. Perhaps it was because before Harry, he had gone through the motions of the physical act while locked away in his own mind. It was no longer about pleasure for the moment, or thoughtlessly working towards release.

It was about completion.

That word swam through his mind as Harry's lips and teeth and tongue worked on his neck, and with that thought in mind, and the song roaring in his ears, he brought his mouth to Harry's ear and whispered what he wanted.

Harry snapped his head up to look at Draco, but Draco slid his hand to the back of Harry's neck and brought his mouth to his, kissing away the hint of nervousness that had hedged his features and clouded his grass-green eyes. Harry's hands crept tentatively down Draco's body, but Draco captured one in his own and moved it to where he wanted it to be.

When Harry's finger slipped inside him, there was a brief flash of pain, but it was quickly replaced by a stretching feeling. He was suddenly bombarded by a wave of new sensations. It was as if the fire and ice that usually swirled and spiraled over his skin was now present inside him, searching and spreading and mapping out the new territory.

The sight of Harry sprawled between his legs with his finger inside his body gave him an extremely vulnerable feeling, but oddly, it was an amazing feeling at the same time, because he knew right at that moment that he trusted Harry.

He wondered if Harry had felt the same way.

After a moment, Harry added a second finger. The flash of pain returned, and it was not quite as brief, but the song, and Harry's free hand skimming over his thighs and flitting over his cock quickly soothed it away.

Right as he got used to the feeling of having something inside him, Harry stroked a place inside him that caused spots of color flash before his eyes. Harry did it again, and Draco shuddered and writhed. Just as he had done to Harry last night, Harry worked his fingers over that spot until Draco's brain threatened to shut down and his stomach felt like it was disappearing.

"Harry." He moaned, pushing against Harry's hand.

"Are you sure?" Harry said quietly.

"Please, Harry."

He drew a sharp, gasping breath when Harry slid inside him. It was more than pressure, more than a dull pain, but at the same time it felt very, very right. It was like Harry was breaking him apart and putting him back together at the same time.

The song was shifted, the sweet voices of a hundred phoenixes roaring so loudly he thought his whole body was vibrating with the intensity of it.

He felt whole.

Complete.

Perfect.

He had thought it was perfect. He had thought Harry had broken him apart and put him back together.

Then Harry started to move.

Harry thrust in and out of him slowly, angling his movements so each one hit that glorious spot. His brain *did* shut off, and his stomach *did* disappear. He *was* breaking apart and coming back together, and all he could do was cling to Harry with all the strength he could find and hope Harry could keep the world from swallowing him whole.

But Harry's face was close to his now, his mouth searching for his. Draco looked into those grass-green eyes, and knew that Harry was just as lost to sensation as he was, and drowning in emotion just as quickly as he was.

Nothing could keep the world from swallowing them but the song.

It was a brilliant mingling of many voices, an intricate mixing of tone and pitch that was beautiful and melodious beyond words, a shattering blend of harmony and chords that made him feel like his body would explode from the sheer joy of hearing it.

Harry was moving faster now, and his cock was brushing against that spot in a way that made Draco's body writhe and shake in a way he couldn't control. Harry's hand slipped between them, wrapping around his cock and stroking him with the same rhythm of his movements.

Harry pushed into him hard, leaning in to capture his mouth in a kiss. Draco's body *did* explode, and he brought Harry right along with him.

They cried out each others' names as they came, loud enough that at that very moment-- despite a Silencing Charm that could drown out a banshee-- Remus Lupin looked up from his book and smiled.

With a shuddering breath, Harry collapsed on top of Draco, burying his head in Draco's neck and clinging to him like he thought he would suddenly fly away. Draco nudged Harry's head out of its hiding spot to claim his mouth in a gentle kiss, a fleeting touch of lips against lips.

When Harry pulled away, Draco looked at him, really looked at him, and a something moved inside him, like a lock turning or a missing piece finally falling into place.

"I love you." He whispered into Harry's hair.

"I love you, too."

As those words tumbled out of Harry's mouth, many things that had been nagging at Draco for the last two weeks fell away. He would stand by Harry in front of the gods and Hogwarts, and if his housemates didn't like it, they could go ahead and die of it. The Weasel could go ahead and die of it, as well, and his father, too, and Snape could take his opinions and shove them someplace unpleasant.

Harry loved him, and nothing else mattered.

XV

A Broken Nose and A Broken Heart, an Empty Bottle of Gin

Draco often succumbed to the normal male habit of falling asleep immediately after sex. This time, however, was quite different. He was not even the least bit drowsy, but rather, wide awake, and unusually contemplative.

Fifteen minutes ago, he had told Harry he loved him.

Harry had returned the sentiment, without hesitation, and while this was quite clearly a cause for joy, a small part of him did not trust his own judgment. Not because he regretted telling Harry, or because he thought Harry had only said it in return to placate him, but because the small part of him that did not trust his own judgment was reminding him quite loudly that things rarely worked out so perfectly.

That small part of him was waiting for the other dragonhide boot to drop.

The steady rise and fall of Harry's chest and Harry's even breathing was soothing, but they were also a reminder that Harry was asleep when Draco was not. He wanted to sleep, he really did, but his mind would not rest. He wanted it to rest, before he laid awake half the night talking himself out of the best thing that had happened to him in years just because he was afraid it was too good to be true.

Draco stayed as he was for a few more moments, tracing the lines of Harry's sleeping form with his fingertips, before quietly climbing out of bed and pulling back on his clothes.

He needed to go for a walk.

Back at the Manor, if his brain had been fussed and unsettled like this, he would have slipped away to the mausoleum for a couple of hours. This was a release that was unavailable to him now, and as he descended the stairs he decided he would have to make do with the garden. It was not as peaceful as the mausoleum, or graveyards in general, for that matter, but it was quiet, and chances were that it would not be occupied.

No such luck.

Draco entered the garden to find the Weasel in the gazebo. He was sitting on one of the wooden benches, with his head leaned back against the latticework and a bottle in his lap. He looked up as he heard Draco's boots crunching on the gravel pathway, and regarded Draco with an expression that was sour, as well as a little bit muzzy. The Weasel looked like someone had recently had a go at him. His hair was a total loss, his nose was bloodied, and a large, purple bruise was spreading under his right eye.

"Sod off, Malfoy, I'm busy." He groused thickly.

Draco paused in the archway of the gazebo, contemplating the once and future Weasel King. He was an insufferable prat, spawned from a long line of embarrassing blood-traitors. Draco did not find him witty or amusing in the least, nor did he think he was particularly bright. As far as Draco could tell, he had no discernable use, and Draco could not understand for the life of him why he meant so much to Harry.

But, it occurred to him that the Weasel probably had similar thoughts about him.

He turned to go, but paused, and after eyeing the Weasel up and down once more, decided to stay. He and the Weasel would have to get themselves sorted out eventually. Now was probably as good a time as any, since the Weasel was obviously more than a little drunk. He was likely too soused to argue with his usual Gryffindor conviction or cause Draco any kind of lasting harm, magical or otherwise.

Of course, the Weasel was not the brightest *Lumos* in the classroom when he was sober. There was a good chance Draco would be wasting his breath, because it would be falling on deaf, drunk ears.

"You look like shit." Draco commented lightly, leaning against the archway.

"I told you to bugger off." Ron slurred. "I'm busy."

"Busy doing what?" Draco asked. "Nursing your broken nose, or drowning your sorrows?"

"Fuck you." Ron snapped, waving him off.

"Thank you, Weasel, but no." Draco drawled. "Not that I would bother with you, anyway, but I just got well fucked."

"That's disgusting." Ron complained, his lip curling. He appeared content to leave it at that, but he looked at Draco oddly, and seemed to let his morbid curiosity get the better of him. "Did Harry really just put his cock in you?"

"Yes." Draco said simply, unashamed.

Ron made a strange hiccuping noise, like he was trying to keep himself from vomiting.

"Why?" He asked.

"I assume he put his cock in me because he wanted to." Draco said flatly.

"Why did you let him?" Ron asked, wrinkling his nose.

"Because I wanted him to." Draco said. "Besides, I put my cock in him last night, so it was only fair."

"Shut up! Shut Up!" Ron shouted. He made that hiccuping noise again, and waved Draco off. "Just shut up! Merlin's balls, that's worse than Dumbledore and McGonagall!"

"Does it really bother you that much?" Draco asked, pushing himself off the archway.

"Yes, it really does." Ron said, taking a swig from the bottle in his lap. "It bothers me greatly."

"Why?" Draco asked. He took a couple of steps towards Ron and folded his arms. "Because I am a boy, or because I am me?"

Ron sighed, and leaned his head back against the latticework. He was quiet just long enough that Draco had started to worry he had passed out when he spoke.

"Both." He said finally. "More because it is you."

"Again, why?" Draco demanded. "Because you hate me, or because Harry is supposed to hate me?"

"Again, both." Ron said, parroting him flippantly. "More because he is supposed to hate you." He gave a tight, self-depreciating laugh. "We were supposed to hate you together."

"So that's it, then?" Draco snapped. "You think I am taking him away from you?"

"You already have." Ron said sourly.

"Oh, no." Draco said, gesturing sharply with his hands. "Don't you dare try to pin this on me. If he is not speaking to you, it is not

because of anything I said. It is because you've been such a complete pillock about our relationship."

"I am sorry if I was not as happy about it as Hermione and my sister." Ron snapped. "I don't get off on watching you two snog."

"Yeah, alright." Draco relented. "I suppose that was not the best way for you to find out."

Ron snorted. Then, he eyed Draco up and down and shrugged. "Probably wouldn't have mattered, at that." He said. "My best friend would still be a toff, and he would still be bugging you." He sighed. "Bad news, no matter how I got wind of it."

"You are such a wanker." Draco snapped, throwing up his hands.

"Why, because I am not jumping for joy because Harry wants your cock in his arse?" Ron asked.

"Oh, leave off." Draco shouted. "That is not the point, and you know it."

"It is the point." Ron retorted. "Harry was not a ponce until you started hanging around. What the shit did you do to him, anyway?"

"I didn't *do* anything." Draco grumbled. "The Angels did it."

"Whatever." Ron muttered.

"I'm telling you, I didn't *do* anything." Draco said. "No charms, no curses, no love potions. And I didn't confuse him by sticking his cock in my mouth."

"How do you explain it, then?" Ron asked. "He didn't like boys before."

"We share a soul, Weasel." Draco snapped. "At that level, gender is rather irrelevant."

"You still on about those ruddy birds?" Ron said, chuckling sourly.

"Yes, I am." Draco said. "We explained it all to you. Were you not listening? I'll explain it again, if you like, and I will use small words this time, so you will understand me."

"Oh, I was listening." Ron said crossly. "And I understood every bloody word. I just don't believe it. I never heard any birds singing when I kissed Hermione."

"Good Gods, you are thicker than I thought." Draco replied, rolling his eyes. "I wouldn't have thought it was possible."

"What do you mean, Ferret?" Ron asked.

"Not everyone hears them, you git." Draco said. "Only people who share a soul with someone."

Ron apparently did not have a canned response for that. He glowered at Draco for a minute, then bend down to retrieve the bottle.

"*Accio!*" Draco shouted, and the bottle sailed into his waiting hand.

It had been nearly empty when Ron dropped it, and most of what it contained had spilled out when it fell, but the little that was left was more than enough, as Ron was clearly one tot from completely pissed.

Ron narrowed his eyes at Draco, then once his clouded brain processed what he saw, he goggled at him.

"How the shit did you do that with no wand?" Ron asked.

"That is me and Harry's little secret." Draco said airily.

"Wandless magic." Ron complained. "Of course Harry could do it." He shook his head, then held out his hand. "Give it back, then."

"No." Draco said lightly.

"Fuck you." Ron shouted.

"We've already been through this." Draco drawled. "Besides, I get to hear birds singing when I fuck Harry. Merlin only knows what my ears would be inflicted with if I fucked you."

"Shut up and give me the bottle." Ron said.

"No, Weasel." Draco shook his head and frowned. "You have had enough."

"Don't tell me what to do." Ron said peevishly.

"I will." Draco said, gesturing grandly. "And I can, because I am not the one who is too pissed to stand."

"I am not too pissed to stand." Ron insisted. Then he stood, and gave himself the lie by wobbling and collapsing back onto the bench.

"As I was saying, you have had enough." Draco commented.

"What the shit are you out here for, anyway?" Ron asked. "It's not like I want your company."

"I came down here to talk to you." Draco lied. He hadn't, really, but there was no point in getting into that, now.

"About what?" Ron asked, narrowing his eyes at him.

"About Harry." Draco said simply.

"I don't want to talk about Harry." Ron grumbled.

"Why, because it upsets you to think about what an arse you have been?" Draco demanded.

"No, because it upsets me to think about what an arse his boyfriend is." Ron replied.

"You're hurting him, you know, acting like this about it." Draco said.

"Better I hurt him now than you hurt him later." Ron said, jabbing a finger in Draco's direction.

"I swear to Merlin and the rest, Weasel, if you start in on how this is just some grand plan to kill him, I'll make your face look worse than it already does."

"You have hated him for five years." Ron said.

"I never really hated him." Draco admitted quietly.

"Bollocks." Ron spat. "Next you'll be telling me you were pining for him all this time."

"No, that's not what I said." Draco replied.

"It might have been better if you had, at that." Ron said. "Because I am not about to believe you had such a sudden change of mind in two weeks."

"You wouldn't understand." Draco mumbled.

"Oh what, the birds again?" Ron said incredulously. "These must be right incredible birds, then. You two have liked girls all along, now suddenly, you're poufs. You two have hated each other for five years, now suddenly you're in love."

"That's how it is, Weasel." Draco said. "I never said it made sense."

"I makes no kind of sense." Ron agreed. "And Harry will only get hurt."

"I told you, if you start in about how I am going to kill him..." Draco started.

"But you will." Ron interjected. "Maybe not with a spell, or a knife in is back, but you will."

"How!" Draco demanded.

"He's not like you, Malfoy, he bloody cares about people." Ron said. "You heard him in the sitting room the other day. He's in love with you, or at least, he thinks he is. You'll get tired of him, or get in with some girl behind his back, and that will fucking kill him, same as a curse."

"I wouldn't do that to him." Draco said.

"Bloody Hell!" Ron cursed. "You have shagged nearly every girl at Hogwarts in the span of two years. You can't stick to one person for longer than a half-hour. What makes this any different?"

"I love him." Draco said.

"Codswallop." Ron barked. "You're not capable of love."

"How the fuck would you know!" Draco shouted. "Your love life is not in the best shape, for you to be making that kind of judgment."

"Don't worry about my love life." Ron snapped. "It doesn't concern you."

"Mine does not concern you, either, at that." Draco retorted. "Actually, I would thank you kindly to stay out of mine, since your grand efforts with your own have left you with a broken nose and a broken heart." Draco hefted the bottle and added. "An empty bottle of gin."

"Nearly empty bottle of gin." Ron groused, eyeing the bottle mournfully.

"What happened to your face, then?" Draco sneered. "Granger finally knock some sense into you?"

"Leave Hermione out of it." Ron snipped.

"From what I saw the earlier, she was leaving herself out of it." Draco responded nastily. "Well out."

"Sod off." Ron shouted.

"So really. Did Granger lay you out?"

"No." Ron said sourly. "My sister did for my face."

Somehow, Draco was not surprised by this.

"Because of Granger?" Draco asked.

"Because of everything." Ron grumbled. "Because I am mad about you and Harry. Because I am mad about Harry shagging Hermione." Ron sighed. "She says I am being a right prat."

"Well, you are." Draco agreed. "On both counts."

"I didn't ask you for your opinion."

"Well, I am giving it." Draco drawled. "As far as Harry and Granger go, I am not thrilled, either, but I'm not whinging on about it."

"Why would it bother you?" Ron asked suspiciously.

"Because whether you want to believe it or not, I do care about him." Draco said. "And the thought of him with someone else pains me, even

if it was before we were together."

"It's different." Ron said petulantly. "He's my best friend, and he knew I liked her."

"No, he didn't." Draco said. "He asked you, and you went on about Quidditch. Don't blame him for your lack of communication skills."

"Yeah, all right, I never properly told him." Ron said. "But I am sure it was rather obvious."

"Obvious to you, Weasel." Draco countered. "You should know better than anyone that Harry is not always too quick on the uptake about those kinds of things."

Ron gave him a sour look for that, but Draco shrugged him off. He was not doing Harry a disservice, he was simply stating fact. The rumors he had questioned Draco about awhile back had likely been gossip that Harry had overheard at the Gryffindor breakfast table. Draco doubted Harry had become privy to that information because he had been paying attention to the students' comings and goings.

"Besides, his agenda has been a little full with the Dark Lord returning, and all that." Draco went on. "I am sure his mind has been occupied with more important things than what his friends are getting up to after he goes to bed."

"It still fucking hurts." Ron complained, still petulant. "Why the shit does he have to bloody have everything?"

"Don't you dare start with that rubbish." Draco sneered.

"Well, he does." Ron insisted. "He's ruddy famous, and everyone loves him."

"Bollocks!" Draco shouted. He jumped out of his seat and stood in front of Ron, fixing him with a level eye. "His parents are dead. His godfather is dead. Aside from you, and Granger, and me, and Quidditch, what does he have, really?"

"He's got my family, and Lupin, and Dumbledore.." Ron started.

"That's not the same!" Draco cut off, fuming. "Your parents will never be his parents, and the werewolf will never be Sirius, and

Dumbledore will let him die in the end, if that is what it takes to end this war."

"But..."

"But, nothing." Draco spat. "He still has nightmares about Sirius, you know. Three different nights, I've woken up to him screaming for him. The last time, he cried for over an hour in my arms after he woke up, saying how sorry he was, and that it was all his fault."

"He blames himself for that shit!" Draco went on. "Did you know that?"

"I knew he was." Ron said. "I didn't know he still did."

"I've told him he shouldn't." Draco ranted, only half-hearing Ron's response. "If who I've heard killed Sirius is who really killed Sirius, there was not a bloody thing he could have done. There is not a bloody thing anyone could have done, because that bitch is as crazy as my father. Harry is lucky she didn't take off his head while she was at it."

"I've told him, but he doesn't listen." Draco went on. "He's such a sodding Gryffindor, he blames himself for everything, and once he gets an idea in his head, he can't let it go. So he cries, because there is nothing else he can do about it, and it kills me to watch, but I do, because there is nothing I can do about it, either."

"I didn't know." Ron said quietly.

"Of course you didn't" Draco roared. He was vaguely aware that he was screaming at the top of his lungs, but he didn't care. "You were too busy feeling sorry for yourself, because you got stuck being the sixth of seven Weasleys, and he got to be the Boy Who Lived."

In the back of his mind, he realized the incongruity of him shouting at Ron for being jealous of Harry for the same reason he had been jealous of Harry for the last five years, but he didn't care about that, either. Draco, at least, had thought he had had reason to think ill of Harry all that time, before he had discovered that his father's waffle about him had been nothing more than propaganda.

The Weasel, on the other hand, had been playing at being Harry's best friend while nursing his sour grapes, and this galled Draco for some reason. He had no real friends, so he had no experience to go off of, but he was rather sure Ron was going about it all wrong.

He watched Draco for a few moments with a blank, unreadable expression on his face. Draco was wondering if his original assessment had been correct, that he had just wasted a long, painful hour of his life, when the Weasel did something wholly unbelievable.

The Weasel King started to cry.

Draco suddenly found himself uncomfortable. He had no desire to watch the Weasel King weep like a girl. He could barely stomach men crying, in general. Harry was a different story, and at least he managed to still be beautiful while he was at it. The Weasel had gone all red and blotchy, and it was atrociously unattractive with his hair.

"Oh, leave it out." Draco complained. "I told you that you had had too much to drink."

The Weasel made a loud snuffling sound. He apparently forgot about his broken nose, because he rubbed at it ferociously with his hand. He winced and yelped, and looked like he was about to cry all over again.

"Are you done, then?" Draco asked.

"Yeah." Ron said quietly.

"Sit up then, and I'll fix your face."

"Just because I'm going to let you date Harry does not mean I am letting you near my face with your wand." Ron said.

"Who said you are letting me date Harry?" Draco drawled. "I intended to keep dating him, whether you liked it or not. I had just hoped, for his sake, you would quit being a prat about it."

"You hurt him, and I swear I will rip your spine out and strangle you with it." Ron threatened.

"How poetic." Draco simpered. "That is more charming than the standard 'I will rip your heart out with my bare hands.'"

"Don't push me, Ferret." Ron warned. "Just because I am going to leave off you and Harry does not mean I am happy about it."

"Fine, whatever. As long as I can fuck him in peace." Draco said,

smiling at the way Ron shuddered. "Now sit still, so I can fix your face."

"You are still not coming near my face with a wand." Ron asked.

"*Lumos*" Draco said, and a ball of light balanced on his hand. "What makes you think I need a wand?"

"Point," Ron said. "But, what makes you think I will sit still for it."

Draco decided not to point out that he was still too washed to do otherwise.

"Because no one in the house can sort you out." Draco taunted.

"That's not true." Ron countered. "My mum..."

"Will want to know why you are completely pissed with a broken nose at midnight." Draco pointed out. "As will the werewolf, to be sure."

"I don't plan to tell her I am pissed." Ron said lamely.

"That still leaves you with a rather random broken nose." Draco commented. "Besides, you smell like the Three Broomsticks."

"Sod off." Ron said, but he frowned.

"I doubt Ginny will want to fix you up, after all the trouble she went to." Draco said. "And Granger is still mad at you."

"Harry?" Ron ventured.

"Harry wouldn't know a Healing Charm if it danced naked in front of him." Draco said honestly. "Never mind that he is asleep."

"Alright, fine." Ron grumbled. "But if you make me look worse, I'll hex you in half."

"Admit it Weasel, I could not possibly make you look worse." Draco drawled. "Anything I could do would only be an improvement."

Shortly before midnight, Severus Snape readied himself for the meeting.

He donned his heaviest, blackest robes, and a thick, black cloak with a deep hood that hid his face in shadow. He preferred to stay nameless and faceless at these meetings. If he stayed anonymous and avoided idle chat, there was less chance of his ruse being discovered because he tripped over one of his own lies.

Many in the Order had little respect for what he did. Sirius Black, especially, had never fully appreciated the level of risk involved in attending these meetings. Of course, Sirius Black had never fully appreciated much of anything. He had always charged headlong into things, without giving the endeavor in question a second thought, which was possibly why Severus was still alive and Sirius was not.

He reported every detail of every meeting to Dumbledore, and while he did not regret this, there was the distinct possibility that it would eventually be his downfall. Dumbledore routinely stayed one step ahead of Lord Voldemort, a tradition that could only carry on so long before someone realized he was receiving information from the inside. If someone did figure it out, suspicion would, of course, fall on Snape, because he had been on the Hogwarts payroll for the last seventeen years.

Eventually, someone would also grow wise. Severus had been feeding Voldemort information for year, there was no way he could maintain his credibility, otherwise. But, the information was essentially useless, even if it sounded impressive when it first came out of his mouth.

Potter's schedule of classes and Quidditch practices, his Potions marks and the friends he kept sounded well and good coming out of Severus' mouth, but there was little anyone could do with the information. With the exception of Barty Crouch Jr., no one had managed to infiltrate Hogwarts, no matter how hard they tried.

This failure was not for lack of trying. Any given day of the week, one of the Dark Lord's faithful minions was forming a plot to sneak into Hogwarts to put an end to Dumbledore, Potter, or preferably, both. No one could say the Death Eaters were not tenacious. In Snape's opinion, the continued failure was mainly due to the fact that on the whole, Voldemort's minions were not the Wizarding World's best and

brightest.

Of course, it was probably in Snape's best interest that the majority of Death Eaters were a bit slow on the uptake. Otherwise, they would have figured out he was a mole a long while back, and he would be dead, or in the Incurable Hexes ward of St. Mungos.

He uncorked two small vials containing potion of his own design; an opaque, purple mixture that would counteract the Veritas Curse, and a clearer, blue concoction that would nullify Veritaserum. He downed the contents of both, grimacing at the sour taste. The blue one was especially foul. It tasted very much like a lemon soaked in vinegar and the juice of hot peppers.

Unfortunately, these precautions were necessary. Death Eaters were a paranoid lot, and Voldemort asked too many questions by half.

He tucked a small pellet into one of the pockets of his robes. It was a compressed mixture of herbs and roots that would interfere with his body's ability to register pain; something that could be quite useful, considering interrogation-under-torture was one of Lord Voldemort's favorite ways of divining information. Instead of blinding, excruciating pain, he would feel only mild, nagging discomfort, which would allow him to keep his head if he ever found himself being questioned under Cruciatus.

As the large, grandfather clock in the corner of his study struck midnight, Snape laid his hand on the portkey, and felt the familiar sensation of being yanked up and away by an imaginary hook behind his navel.

The portkey brought him to the same place it always did; a small, nondescript stone chamber with no distinguishing features and no visible means of egress. Snape had long ago given up trying to figure out where this place was, because there was no way to so. The only thing Snape did know was that it was a dungeon. After seven years at Hogwarts as a Slytherin, and another seventeen as Hogwarts' Potions Master (ten of which were spent as the Slytherin Head of House), Snape could identify a dungeon if he was blindfolded.

Once inside, Snape started towards the table of tea and biscuits. He was not particularly hungry or thirsty, but he knew the importance of keeping up appearances.

The thunderous crack that preceded Apparition startled Snape to the point that he sloshed tea on himself. A pointed silence fell over the room as Wormtail materialized, amid a cloud of smoke and a shower of fireworks.

Under his hood, Snape rolled his eyes and curled his lip. Wormtail had a flare for the dramatic, and he exercised it at every opportunity. When Voldemort was about, Wormtail was the perfect sniveling, groveling lackey, but on the rare occasions when Wormtail was allowed to run about unsupervised, he strutted and preened and made much of himself.

Snape wondered if Wormtail knew what everyone else knew--Voldemort believed that Wormtail was faithful, but he also thought Wormtail was too stupid to lace his boots unaided.

Snape's ruminations on Wormtail were cut short by two more cracks, followed by the Apparition of two more hooded figures. As Snape's eyes lingered on the smaller of the two, a chill ran through him. It was plainly a woman, by the small frame and distinct fullness in the bosom.

It could only be Bellatrix Lestrange, which meant her traveling companion was the last person Snape wanted to see.

Snape wanted to believe she had come with Rodolphus, but Snape honestly knew better. Rodolphus Lestrange ranked highly amongst the Death Eaters only because he was married to Bellatrix, and not because he had any useful qualities of his own.

I am going to have a lot of explaining to do. Snape thought, as the figure with Bellatrix pulled back his hood, and Snape looked in the cold, gray eyes of Lucius Malfoy.

~*~

The dining table in Albus Dumbledore's kitchen was covered with books.

Dumbledore was seated at the table, amid the piles of dusty, ponderous tomes. *Ancient Magic of the British Isles*, the book he was currently perusing, was opened on top of another book, which was open on top of yet another book. A battered copy of *History of the*

Druids and their Practices was open in front of those books, propped precariously against the table's candelabra centerpiece.

"You work too hard, Albus." Minerva McGonagall chided as she swept into the kitchen.

"Indeed." Dumbledore said lightly. He retrieved his teacup, took a sip of tea, and set it back on top of a stack of four or five closed books.

"Have you eaten, at least?" She wheedled. He did not look up, but waved distractedly to the plate of eggs and sausage resting on top of a different stack of closed books.

"And where is Severus, this morning?" She asked, glancing at the decidedly empty fireplace.

"He will be here shortly, I am sure." Dumbledore said.

"Oh, good." McGonagall said airily. "I am not sure I will be able to enjoy my breakfast without his head making dire proclamations from the fireplace."

"There was a meeting last night." Dumbledore said.

"Then he will no doubt be full of cheerful news." McGonagall quipped. She moved to sit in the chair next to Dumbledore, and clucked her tongue when she discovered it was already occupied with a large stack of books. "Gods, Albus, you've brought the whole library to breakfast."

"Indeed." He said again. He took up *Religious Monuments of the Ancient Word* out from under the plate of eggs and sausage and handed it to McGonagall.

"Stonehenge." She said quietly, setting the book aside.

"Yes." Dumbledore said. "I fear I know little of the place. My life has been concerned with a different kind of magic."

"Do you really believe the Crystal Sword to be there?" McGonagall asked. She leaned over his shoulder and helped herself to a sausage from his plate.

"What I believe does not matter." Dumbledore said. "Voldemort believes it is there. I do not wish to take the risk of second guessing

him."

"You are right, as always." She said lightly. She pursed her lips at him fondly, then Levitated the stack of books onto the table so she could sit. "Can I be of assistance?"

"Perhaps." Albus said.

He retrieved *The Mysteries of Stonehenge* from the table and handed it to McGonagall. She opened it to a place he had marked, a detailed sketch of the monument on a page that folded out.

"According to Severus, the Crystal Sword is inside." Dumbledore informed her.

"Inside?" She asked, incredulous. "Stonehenge is a ring of standing stones in the open air. How in the name of Merlin is it *inside*?"

"From what Severus has gathered, there is a chamber underneath." Dumbledore explained.

"A chamber?" McGonagall asked. "Underneath? But how is it accessed?"

"Severus does not know." Dumbledore said, frowning slightly. "From what he has been told, Voldemort will be performing the spell that opens the chamber, himself, so no details have been divulged."

"And when is this all to take place?" McGonagall asked worriedly.

"Two days time." Dumbledore said, shaking his head. "Two days, and I am no closer to a plan, I am afraid."

McGonagall smiled softly at him, and patted his hand. She knew Dumbledore would come up with something. He always did.

"Is that the post, Kitty?" He asked, indicating the owl tapping at the kitchen window.

"Yes." She said, rising to let it in. She looked at the writing on the envelope and hissed. "It's from Severus."

"It must be horrid news, then." Dumbledore said, opening the letter. He scanned the contents quickly, then looked back up at McGonagall,

who was watching him expectantly.

"It is both good and bad." Dumbledore said. "We will be getting a little more time."

"Oh?" McGonagall asked. "How is that?"

"It seems the spell necessary to open the chamber can only be performed at the full moon." Dumbledore explained. "Therefore, they have pushed back the date two full weeks."

"What is the bad news, then?" She asked.

"Mister Pettigrew is planning a diversion of sorts, for the same night." Dumbledore said. "Something that will draw the attention of Mister Potter and myself, so we will be otherwise occupied when they arrive at Stonehenge."

Dumbledore and McGonagall stared at each other for a few moments. Dumbledore turned his gaze to *History of the Druids and their Practices*, then looked back up at McGonagall, his eyes twinkling.

"Of course!" He exclaimed, rising. "Why didn't I think of it, before."

"Albus?" McGonagall asked.

"Send out owls to the Order immediately, informing them there will be a meeting tonight." Dumbledore instructed, reaching for his cloak.

"Seven o'clock will do nicely." He paused, considering. "Also, send an owl to Grimmauld Place, telling Mister Malfoy that Mister Potter is to redouble his efforts."

"Of course, Albus." McGonagall said. She started digging around on the table for parchment and a quill. "Are you leaving?"

"Yes." Dumbledore said. "Something in that book reminded me of an old acquaintance. She may be able to help. I am off to the Summer Country."

"The Summer Country!" McGonagall gasped. "There is a leisurely jaunt."

"It cannot be helped." Dumbledore said. "She does not have a Floo, and she cannot be reached by owl."

McGonagall's peered at *History of the Druids and their Practices* and her eyes widened, as she realized who Dumbledore meant to go see.

"If you are talking about who I think you are talking about, she cannot be reached by any means unless she wishes to be reached."
McGonagall warned.

"Or, unless my need is great enough." Dumbledore said. "I think this situation qualifies."

With that, he kissed McGonagall lightly on the forehead, and Apparated out of his kitchen with a crack.

~*~

"Fuck, Draco!" Harry panted, his voice echoing off the walls of the unused, medium-sized parlor at the rear of the house.

Draco responded to that by kissing Harry and rocking against him slightly. Harry shuddered, and gripped Draco's hips hard enough to bruise. This only made Draco rock against him again, and sink his teeth into the soft flesh where Harry's neck met his shoulder.

"You know..." Harry struggled. "I don't think, oh gods, that this is, fuck, what Dumbledore meant by... 'redoubling my efforts'."

"Are you complaining, Scarhead?" Draco teased, nipping at his ear.

"No." Harry said quickly, shuddering again.

He was, in fact, in no condition to complain, considering where his cock was. It was inside Draco, who was straddling his lap and riding him with a kind of deliberate slowness that made Harry think he was purposely trying to drive him insane.

"Do you want me to stop?" Draco asked, rocking back and forth tauntingly.

"No." Harry blurted. "Don't you dare."

"Then do something useful with your mouth." Draco warned. "I'd rather you didn't go on about Dumbledore when I am fucking you."

Harry obliged and kissed him, sucking on his lower lip and pushing his tongue into Draco's mouth. The song rang sweetly in Harry's ears, mingled with the sounds of Draco's hitched breathing. Draco squeezed the muscles that were sheathing Harry's cock and rocked against him delicately.

Harry moaned loudly and dug his nails into Draco's hips. It was just too much. Draco was too hot and too tight, and he was moving with a slowness that bordered on torture. His movements were just enough to stoke the fire in Harry's belly, but not fast enough or hard enough to make him come.

The whole thing had been unexpected, really, especially so soon after breakfast. They had spent the hour before breakfast molesting each other in the shower like they always did, so Harry had not figured on them having sex directly after breakfast.

Harry decided it had something to do with the post. Draco had gotten an owl from McGonagall at breakfast, relaying a message from Dumbledore for Harry to redouble his efforts. Draco had read the missive, handed it to Harry, and before Harry had finished reading it, Draco had bodily dragged him from the kitchen table and out the door, amidst catcalls and whistles from Fred and George.

Once in the unused, medium-sized parlor at the rear of the house, Draco had promptly divested Harry of his clothes without a word. He had then tossed him on the couch, and rather abruptly sat on his cock.

Draco had no doubt started at the current maddeningly slow pace to allow his body to adjust to the violent introduction of Harry's cock into his arse. But once he had discovered how thoroughly it was driving Harry insane, he had continued with it well after his body warmed and opened.

Harry was shaking uncontrollably, and the song was strained and needy, begging for release as desperately as his body was. Growling, he held onto Draco's hips tighter and thrust up into him.

"Be still." Draco chided, slapping at Harry's hands.

Harry ignored him and thrust again. His cock grazed Draco's prostate, and he smiled wickedly when Draco gasped.

"Be still, Harry, or I will slap you in a Full Body Bind." Draco warned again, his voice shaky.

"You're... oh, sweet fuck, trying to kill me." Harry managed.

"No, I'm simply enjoying myself." Draco said airily.

"You're bloody well taking your time." Harry said. "What's gotten into you?"

"You have." Draco said wryly.

He rocked against Harry, and rotated his hips in a circle. Harry's eyes rolled, and he his head hit the wall behind the couch. Harry attempted to thrust again, but Draco only smiled and clucked his tongue at him. He pulled Harry's hands off of him, holding them tightly in front of him by the wrists, and tightened the grip of his knees on either side of Harry, effectively pinning him to the couch.

Harry growled in frustration, but there was little he could do about it. Pinned like he was, and without the use of his hands, he did not have the leverage to participate. All he could do was sit there and let Draco ride him into oblivion.

And Draco did.

The song raged, the combined voices of a chorus of phoenixes, serenading him as Draco slowly drove him insane. The feeling of completion washing over him was overwhelming. He never felt more whole than when he and Draco were together like this, even when Draco was in the process of teasing him into madness.

Finally, Draco released his hands. He grasped Draco tightly by the hips and thrust into him hard and fast, moaning and cursing as he did. When he came, screaming, his body was shaking and he was drawing sharp, heaving breaths like he had taken all the stairs of the Gryffindor Tower at a dead run.

Draco chuckled softly and kissed him. Harry melted into the kiss, trying incongruously to catch his breath while Draco's tongue was down his throat.

As he pulled away from Draco's mouth he noted the pointed stiffness jabbing him in the belly. Harry waited until Draco started to move off

him, then grabbing him by the waist, he tossed Draco unceremoniously onto the couch and swallowed his cock in one smooth motion.

"Oh, dear gods." Draco moaned.

Harry decided that fair was fair, and he sucked Draco at the same teasing, deliberately slow pace that Draco had fucked him. Draco cursed and writhed and called him all manner of unsavory things, but Harry did not relent. He smiled around Draco's cock, and pinned his hips to the couch so Draco could not thrust into his mouth.

"You are wicked." Draco complained.

Harry choked down a laugh, and softly trailed his tongue along the underside of Draco's cock.

"Evil." Draco panted. "Pure evil."

Harry swirled his tongue around the head of Draco's cock for a few, long moments, then abruptly swallowed him down. Draco lost the capability of speech then, and made a low, wailing noise in the back of his throat. He snagged his fingers in Harry's black hair and tried futilely to push himself farther into Harry's mouth.

Shortly, Draco was shaking and gasping as hopelessly as Harry had been. Harry teased the head of Draco's cock again, resulting in another string of incoherent curses. He quickly swallowed Draco down again, carefully slipping two fingers inside Draco's body as he did so. His fingers brushed Draco's spot just as Draco's cock hit the back of his throat, and Draco came violently, cursing and pulling at Harry's hair in a way that made him worry Draco had pulled a handful of it out.

"Did I tell you that you are evil?" Draco said weakly, as Harry kissed his way up his body.

"You did." Harry said, kissing him.

"Good." Draco mumbled into his mouth. "I love you."

"I love you, too."

~*~

"Can you believe those two?" Fred giggled, as Harry and Draco left the kitchen.

"It is early for that." George agreed. He affected a gasp. "I mean, they barely finished breakfast."

Ron looked up from his plate sourly, and decided as much as he loved Fred and George, it was time they went back to their flat above Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes, if they were going to prattle on about Harry and Draco all morning.

Just because he had agreed, in a drunken haze, to play nicely, did not mean he had to be happy about it.

"How do you know they left for that?" Ron asked crankily.

"Oh, please!" George scoffed. "Did you see the look on the albino clown's face?"

"He was gagging for it!" Fred added, wagging his eyebrows.

It was George's turn to giggle. "We're probably lucky he didn't toss Harry on the table..."

"...and shag him right here." Fred finished, slamming his hand on the table for effect.

"Leave it out!" Ron begged.

~*~

Albus Dumbledore stepped off the barge as it struck ground. He surveyed the scene around him, taking in the lush green landscape dotted with flowers and apple trees. Avalon had changed little since the last time he had been here, though it had been some twenty years. It was still a peaceful and tranquil place, and the magic of the women of the Holy Isle thrummed and buzzed in the very air.

A young woman appeared at his elbow, dressed in the same slate-blue shift and deerskin tunic as the young woman who had accompanied him on the barge. She nodded to him, and silently gestured him to

follow her. He obliged, and did not try to engage her in speech. The crescent moon tattooed between her brows was fresh, and the thong tied around her tunic was braided. She had recently been made a priestess, and could easily be under a vow of silence.

He followed the priestess in silence as she led him down the same path he had taken the last time he had been here. Young girls in novice white and women in the priestess-dress of slate-blue carried on about their business as he walked, paying him no mind. If they found an old wizard in half-moon spectacles and buckled, high-heeled boots among them odd, they gave no indication.

They ranged in looks as well as age. Many were tall, russet women, with fair skin and red or golden hair, while some were shorter and slimmer, with dusky features and blue-black hair. The blood of the ancient British tribes, as well as the blood of the pict-folk before them ran undiluted in many of the women of the Avalon.

The priestess stopped in front of the same unimposing wattle-and-daub building he had visited last time. She smiled at Dumbledore, and nodded in a silent gesture of farewell. He watched her go, wondering idly what her name was, before laying his hand on the handle of the door.

He could only hope the Lady would be willing to help.

Two millennia ago, the Lady of the Lake had held a position of power so great that even the High King of Britain had watched his tongue when he spoke to her. Even Merlin had walked lightly around her, not because he was a coward, but because he was wise.

If a situation like Dumbledore's current quandary had arisen two millennia ago, the Lady of the Lake would have aided without question.

Of course, things were different now.

War had come to the Isles, in the form of Romans and Vikings and Saxons, and the Druids had depleted in number. Christianity had come to the Isles, and the last High King who had given any consideration to the old ways had died at the hands of his own son, on the shores of this very island. War had come again, many, many times. More kings had come, each bringing their own troubles, none giving Avalon a second thought, and most thinking Avalon was nothing more than a

myth.

Over the last thousand years, religion, Christian or otherwise, had fallen out of fashion. Avalon had slipped out of the realm of men, and had long ago distanced themselves with the concerns of the world.

Steeling himself for one of the few people on earth who could be a match for his own stubbornness and tenacity, Dumbledore opened the door.

"Albus Dumbledore. I had not thought to see you again in this life."

A tall woman stepped out of the corner of the room. She was dressed in the same slate-blue shift and deerskin tunic of the other priestesses, but her tunic was spotted rather than plain, and her shift was linen, not wool.

"Lady Caoimhe." Dumbledore said, inclining his head. "You have not changed a bit."

This was the truth. The last twenty years had been very kind to the Lady of the Lake, and she looked very much the same, as if time flowed differently on Avalon. Caoimhe was easily fifty years old, but it barely showed. Her long, auburn hair bore no gray, and her face was soft and smooth.

"The years are less of a burden here in Avalon than on the outside." Caoimhe said simply. She gestured him towards a pair of handcrafted wooden chairs, and considered him for a few moments before sitting, herself. "But, I am sure you did not make this arduous journey to comment on my appearance."

"No, Lady." Dumbledore admitted. "I have come to ask your help."

XVI
Loving You Is Like Loving the Dead
(Part Two)

"*Flora Cultivus*." Draco said, aiming his wand at the hydrangea bush in the corner of the garden.

The large bush that hosted the sparkling white lilies and narcissus was no longer the focal point of their lessons.

"Concealment." Draco said quietly.

"*Abscondius!*" Harry shouted. The bush shimmered, as if covered in an Invisibility cloak, then disappeared.

"*Finite Incantatum.* Draco said. "Again."

"*Abscondius!*" Harry shouted, a bit louder. The bush abruptly disappeared.

"*Finite Incantatum.* Draco said. "Try the other one."

"*Ignotum!*" Harry declared. The bush faded away in stages, until it was gone.

"*Finite Incantatum.* Draco said. "Again."

"*Ignotum!*" The bush disappeared all at once.

Harry had improved by leaps and bounds since their first lesson a couple of weeks ago. Once Harry got himself sorted out he would be a force to be reckoned with, but as it stood right now, his progress aside, he was not nearly good enough for Draco's peace of mind.

"*Finite Incantatum.* Draco said. "Fireballs."

"*Infernus!*" Harry said, aiming his wand high in the sky.

There was a deafening noise, followed by an eruption of fire that rained down from the sky. The hydrangea bush caught fire, as did several of the smaller bushes around it.

"*Finite Incantatum.*" Draco said. He muttered several different spells to quash the fires, as well as the spell to regrow the hydrangea bush. "Now, the larger one."

"*Infernus Gigantum!*" Harry said loudly.

There was another deafening noise, and balls of fire the size of Quaffles started hailing down all over the garden. The hydrangea bush violently erupted into flames four feet tall, and the smaller bushes around it dissolved into ash almost instantaneously.

Draco ended the spell and repaired the damage quietly, and instructed Harry to do it again. Despite the interesting results the first few times Harry had tried this spell, he seemed to finally have a handle on it. Actually, he seemed to do reasonably well with anything related to fire.

Once again, Draco ended the spell, repaired the damage, and regrew the bush.

"Line of fire." Draco said quietly.

"*Flammatus!*" Harry said, aiming at the hydrangea bush.

A thick stream of fire shot directly out of Harry's wand, searing a large hole in the center of the bush. He deftly directed the stream about until the bush had disintegrated into a pile of smoking embers.

"*Flora Cultivus.* " Draco said. "Again."

"*Flammatus!*"

Harry was starting to look a bit tired and peaky, but Draco was relentless. He quizzed Harry mercilessly, barking out spells as he paced back and forth across the garden. He chose the spells at random, careful not to fall into any kind of pattern.

Harry needed to expect the unexpected. Draco regrew the bush, and instructed him to do it again.

McGonagall's morning missive had simply said that Dumbledore wished for Harry to redouble his efforts. He was annoyed with the Transfigurations professor for being so infuriatingly vague, though from what he had heard of Dumbledore's letter-writing habits from Mrs. Weasley, a note from Dumbledore, himself, would have been similarly sparse.

The best he could guess was that Dumbledore had become aware of some kind of plot, a plot that likely involved Voldemort and his father, which meant Dumbledore would shortly be sending Harry off to his death.

And of course, Harry's patented Gryffindor bravery and courage and honor, and his complete lack of common sense would keep him from refusing. He would go without a second thought, because he felt he

had to, and Granger and the Weasel would go with him, also without a second thought and because they felt they had to.

Draco would go as well, more to protect his boyfriend than out of a misplaced sense of duty. He had been practicing his own skills as brutally as he pushed Harry, spending the early hours while Harry slept perfecting his Patronus and brushing up on the same Dark Arts spells he had been teaching.

Bloody Dumbledore. He thought. *Why can't he just do it himself and get it over with?*

He knew he was not being entirely fair. From what Harry had told him, there was some kind of prophecy that would insist Harry had to be the one to have it off with Voldemort. Dumbledore could wave his wand at the Dark Lord all he wanted, and it wouldn't do a whit of good. Harry had to end it all, because of who he was.

Bloody Boy Who Lived. Draco thought.

He considered this for a moment, and shook his head, because he knew it was not Harry's fault.

Bloody Angels. He amended. *Of all the people they could match me up with, they stick me with the one person who probably won't live to see his twentieth birthday!*

It was increasingly unfair, really. Draco finally allowed himself to have feelings, finally admitted that he cared about someone, and the someone in question had a death sentence hanging over their head.

Furiously, he shoved the thoughts away. He didn't want to think about Harry getting hurt, or dying, or being struck by some curse that made him a drooling vegetable incapable of independent movement.

Draco had seen Longbottom's parents once, about a year ago. It had not been a pretty sight.

Suddenly, Draco paused, aware that Harry was watching him. He had been ranting to himself so long that he hadn't regrown the bush after the last time Harry destroyed it. Harry, who was now more than a bit off-color, was dividing his energy between catching his breath and looking at Draco expectantly.

Tossing his wand away, Draco pulled Harry to him and kissed him fiercely, plundering Harry's mouth like he was trying to crawl inside him and stay there forever. Draco pulled away from Harry to see his eyes flash questioningly, but he did not speak, nor did he move away when Draco reclaimed his mouth.

He made short work of Harry's clothes, pulling at the offending articles desperately. He yanked at Harry's shirt so violently that one of the buttons popped off, and he snarled in frustration when the zipper of Harry's trousers became caught.

The song was jaunty and harsh in Draco's ears, as if mocking him for accosting Harry just to soothe his frenzied emotions.

For all his haste, once he had Harry laid out on his belly in the shade of the bush of white lilies and narcissa, he slid into Harry's body slowly, trying to savor the moment.

He would never be able to crawl inside Harry and stay there for ever. He would have to settle for what he had right now, and try to make it last as long as possible.

~*~

"Merlin's balls!" Fred sputtered, peeking out the back door of Grimmauld Place. "I don't believe it!"

George looked over his brother's shoulder, and made a strangled sound. "But, it's barely lunchtime!"

"What's the hold up, then?" Ron asked impatiently. "You said we were having a picnic, and I am starved."

"The garden is otherwise occupied right now." George said, turning to Ron with an impish smile.

"Harry and the Ferret are out there, what?" Ron asked.

"Oh, they are out there, all right." George said.

"I told you the git was gagging for it." Fred said, giving George a wink. "It can't be more than three hours since the last time."

Ron's face crumpled as he figured out what was going on.

"Bloody Hell! Are they at it, again?" Ron groaned.

"Oh, yes." Fred laughed. "They most certainly are."

"I never pictured Harry as the type to be having it off morning, noon and night." George said lightly.

"Me, neither." Fred commiserated. "There must be something about the Ferret that makes him..."

"...ready to go at the drop of a hat." George finished.

"Indeed." Fred said brightly.

"I think I need to lie down." Ron groaned. He turned, and started down the hallway.

"You sure you don't want to have a look?" Fred teased.

"You're missing quite the show." George added. He peered exaggeratedly out the door again, and whistled through his teeth. "The Ferret is giving it to him, good."

"Oh, Merlin!" Ron shouted, clapping his hands over his ears. "Leave it out!"

~*~

"Earthquake." Draco said.

"*Terra Contremus!*" Harry shouted, pointing his wand at the base of the hydrangea bush.

The ground directly under the bush began to shake violently, causing the bush to tremble and the ground to rent and furrow.

"*Finite Incantatum.*" Draco said. "Again, and more."

Harry frowned at Draco before turning his attention back to the bush. Draco had been working him harshly since after breakfast, and he was demanding more results than usual. It seemed Draco would not be

satisfied until Harry was capable of reducing the garden to a pile of rubble with one spell.

He was tired, and more than a bit woozy, and Draco had worked him through lunch.

"*Terra Contremus!*" Harry shouted.

Draco watched the bush and the ground under it shake with an unimpressed expression. Then, his face went blank and his eyes went unfocused. He continued to watch the bush twitch, but Harry was willing to wager he was not really seeing it.

"*Finite Incantatum.*" Harry snapped impatiently.

Draco was still staring at the bush absently.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked.

"Nothing." Draco said quickly.

The huge, blatant lie hung in the air for a few moments, and Harry pursed his lips at Draco in annoyance. Regardless of what he was saying, something was very obviously wrong.

"Are you sure?" Harry pressed, eyeing him askance.

"Yeah." Draco said, restoring the bush with an absent, half-hearted wave of his wand. Harry noted that he did not look away from the bush, or more importantly, he did not meet Harry's eyes.

"*Disanimus.*" Draco said quietly.

"*Disanimus!*" Harry declared. The bush abruptly began to wither and die.

"*Flora Cultivus.*" Draco said. "Again."

"*Disanimus!*" Harry said. Tired, his voice wavered, which resulted in the bush looking gravely ill rather than a breath away from death.

Draco sighed. "You are supposed to get better, not worse." He said, a bit caustically. "Again."

"I'm tired." Harry complained.

"Again." Draco said, unmoved.

Harry took a deep breath. "*Disanimus!*" He barked forcefully.

The bush died rather spectacularly.

"There, are you happy, now?" Harry snapped.

"I'll never be happy." Draco said. "Again."

"No." Harry said. He dropped down to sit on the ground, and glowered at Draco defiantly. "I told you, I am tired."

"You don't have time for this." Draco insisted. He walked over to where Harry was sitting and tried to haul him to his feet by an arm. Harry stubbornly went boneless, so Draco only succeeded in pulling his arm up over his head without actually getting him off the ground.

Harry snatched his arm away from Draco's grasp and shook his head at him.

"You don't have time for this." Draco said again, impatiently.

Harry snorted at that. Draco was a fine one to talk about wasting time. About an hour ago, Draco had abruptly paused their lesson to fuck him. No explanation, no warning. He had just pulled Harry's clothes off and tossed him onto the ground.

Literally.

Draco had kissed him so hard it had almost hurt, had very nearly ripped his clothes off him, and had practically thrown Harry on the ground. That in itself was not entirely unusual, Draco had his fair share of aggressive moments, but for all his yanking and tugging and pulling and flipping Harry about, once he had gotten down to business, he had fucked Harry so gently Harry had been speechless.

Harry hadn't been sure, he had not really been able to tell, given the position they were in, but it had sounded like Draco had been crying when he came.

The song had been odd, too. Harry had heard it, loud and clear as

usual, but it had been strained and fussy, like the phoenixes were annoyed or angry or put out about something.

And never mind they had just had sex about three hours earlier.

Once again, Harry was wondering if Draco's strange behavior had something to do with the post.

"Harry." Draco said flatly.

"Yeah, alright." Harry growled. "One more spell, and I will do it three times. After that, you are going to let me rest for a bit, and get something to eat."

"Fine." Draco snapped, waving him towards the bush.

Harry stood, and faced the bush with his wand out.

"Avada Kedavra." Draco said.

Harry went stiff, and a chill ran through him. He whirled to face Draco with narrowed eyes. He would not learn to use the Killing Curse. Not now, not ever.

"No." Harry said. "I won't do it."

"Why not!" Draco snarled. "It's the same as Disanimus."

"No, its not." Harry argued. "Avada Kedavra kills people."

"Disanimus kills people." Draco pointed out hotly.

"Avada Kedavra killed my parents!" Harry shouted.

"It will kill Death Eaters, too." Draco shouted back, advancing on Harry. "Only, you need to learn how to use it."

"No, I don't."

"What, you think the Death Eaters won't use it against you?" Draco demanded.

"Didn't work the last time." Harry said petulantly.

"Don't you dare!" Draco raged. "Don't you dare gamble like that. Just because the Killing Curse bounced off your bloody head once does not mean it will bounce off it, again."

"The Killing Curse *bounced* off my head for a reason!" Harry shouted. "My mother died protecting me! That is why it *bounced* off my head!"

"The Killing Curse bounced off your head because your head is incredibly thick!" Draco snapped.

Draco immediately looked mortified for saying it, but Harry didn't care. He turned on his heel and went back inside, leaving Draco alone in the garden.

~*~

"He said the Killing Curse bounced off my head because it's thick!" Harry complained.

"What, the curse?" Remus asked benignly, biting back a smile.

Whether Harry appreciated it or not, right now he needed levity. Looking back, Remus recalled that he and Sirius had had more pointless arguments than he could properly count. At the time, they had seemed earth-shattering, the kinds of rows that could end relationships, but in truth, they had been rather meaningless and contrite, nothing more than young boys under the influence of hormones and emotions.

Harry, curled up in a ball on one of Remus' wing-backed chairs, gave the werewolf a very flat, withering look.

"No, my head." He clarified, narrowing his eyes.

"And what brought this argument on?"

"Draco's been teaching me Dark Magic." Harry said. "Dumbledore's orders." He added quickly.

"I figured as much." Remus replied, unflappable. "That is just like Dumbledore, putting Draco's unsavory knowledge to use."

"He has been teaching me all kinds of nasty things." Harry went on.

"Today he wanted me to learn the Killing Curse. I wouldn't do it, and he got all shirty about it."

Somehow, finding out Draco Malfoy knew how to cast the Killing Curse did not surprise him.

"And, why did he want you to learn it?" Remus asked.

"So I can kill Death Eaters." Harry muttered.

"Understandable." Remus said carefully.

"I don't want to kill anyone." Harry said, wrinkling his nose. "And I certainly don't want to kill anyone with the curse that killed my parents."

"Understandable." Remus said again.

"And, I told him that." Harry said, frowning at his Butterbeer. "I told him I didn't want to kill people with the curse that killed my parents. He said they would use it against me, anyway, and I told him that it didn't work the last time."

For a brief moment, Remus could almost imagine he was speaking with James, as that was exactly the kind of thing James would have said. Harry was so much like his father sometimes, it was startling. He was also quite a bit like Sirius, more like Sirius than one would expect from the short amount of time they had spent together. Of course, Sirius, like James, had always thought he was invincible.

"Is this when he told you that you have a thick head?" Remus asked.

"Not quite." Harry said, shaking his head. "First he started shouting about how I shouldn't gamble, and that just because it *bounced* off my head once didn't mean it would do it again."

"He's right, you know." Remus said gently.

"He didn't have to tell me I have a thick head." Harry pouted. "The Killing Curse didn't kill me because my mother died protecting me. He didn't have to make fun."

"Oh, Harry." Remus said, smiling. "He's only worried about you."

"Worried about what?" Harry demanded. "Dumbledore said I am safe, here. Its not like someone is going to just drop by kill me."

"You said he's just been acting a bit off, today?"

"Yeah." Harry said. "He got a letter from Dumbledore this morning. That's when he went all wonky."

"What did the letter say?"

"That's exactly it. It didn't say much of anything." Harry said, shrugging. "Only, I should redouble my efforts."

"Maybe he took that to mean something is going on." Remus ventured. If he had received a letter from Dumbledore like that, he probably would have jumped to similar conclusions.

"The letter said nothing about anything going on." Harry insisted.

"Harry, you know how Dumbledore is." Remus reminded. "He is worse than Moody when it comes to Owl Post."

"True." Harry admitted grudgingly.

"I tell you, he's worried." Remus said. "You do have a habit of getting into sticky situations."

Harry snorted.

"You tangle with Death Eaters on a regular basis, and whether you want to admit it or not, it could get you killed." Remus responded. "I could see where Draco would find this worrying."

"You don't even know Draco." Harry said sourly.

"You're right, I don't." Remus agreed. "But, I do know what it is like to be in a relationship with someone whose life is in danger. It is disquieting, to say the least."

Harry studied him quietly for a moment, his eyes slowly widening with realization.

"Sirius?" He asked quietly.

Remus nodded.

"I thought he was with my father?" Harry asked, flabbergasted.

"He was." Remus explained. "From the beginning of our third year until about the middle of our sixth. By our seventh year, we got ourselves sorted out for good. Sirius ended up with me, and your father started dating a nice girl named Lily Evans."

Harry stared at him for quite some time, seeming to be at a loss for words.

"Dumbledore once told me Sirius was impetuous in school." Harry managed finally.

"Impetuous was not quite the word for it." Remus said. "He had no regard for his own personal safety, and he was the kind of bloke who could get into trouble at a church picnic."

"Were you with him when he got out of Azkaban?" Harry asked.

"Yes." Remus said simply. "I spent two years loving a man who was running for his life. The Death Eaters wanted him dead, the Ministry wanted him back in Azkaban, and the Dementors wanted his soul."

"So, you think Draco thinks I am going to die?" Harry asked.

"Possibly." Remus said "Why don't you go ask him?"

"Because he is being a prat." Harry grumbled.

"He'll get over himself." Remus said, airily. "I always did, anyway."

"I want to know how Sirius ended up with you." Harry said suddenly.

"Another time." Remus said, chuckling.

"Why not now?" Harry demanded.

"Because you are stalling." Remus said, laughing. "You don't want to go talk to your worried, overprotective boyfriend."

"Maybe." Harry said, frowning.

"Harry." Remus warned.

"Yeah, all right." Harry said, heaving himself from the chair. "I'll go talk to him."

~*~

Draco had not seen Harry since lunchtime, and it was nearly dinner. He had made a perfunctory search of the house, but did not find him. Draco finally decided that Harry was hiding himself with the werewolf, so he shut himself in the medium-sized, unused parlor at the rear of the house to have a nice, long sulk.

He did not get to sulk nearly as long as he had intended to. Once he had gotten himself conformable, Ginny and Granger came bursting into the room, declaring that his presence was required in the sitting room.

He followed Granger and Ginny into the hallway, grumbling to himself as he went. In his current mood, the last thing he needed quality time with the Weasel and the ginger freaks.

When he reached the sitting room door, he found Harry waiting for him. Granger and Ginny went inside without a word, leaving them alone.

"The Order is meeting." Harry said quietly.

Draco grunted.

"You were right, then." Harry went on. "Something is probably going on."

Draco grunted again, and folded his arms across his chest.

"I love you." Harry offered.

"I love you, too." Draco muttered. "Even if you are a git."

"Yes, I am a git." Harry admitted, pulling Draco to him. "A thick-headed git."

"Don't start." Draco said.

His tone was grumbling, but he relaxed into Harry's embrace and wrapped his arms around him. Harry held him tightly, and buried his face in Draco's hair.

"I'm not going to die." Harry whispered.

"You'd better not." Draco replied. "You had just better not."

Harry kissed him then, and gentle brush of lips against lips. He fluttered his tongue across Draco's lips almost shyly, but Draco allowed it, pulling Harry closer and opening his mouth to him.

The sweet sound of the song was interrupted by the sitting room door creaking open, and the Weasley twins bursting into a girlish fit of giggles.

"Again?" Fred asked. He gasped theatrically and shook his head.

"You two have *far* too much time on your hands." George added.

"What. Do. You. Want?" Draco ground out.

"We don't want anything." Fred explained. "The Order does. They want the both of you, in the kitchen."

With that, Fred held the door open for them, and George made a grand bow and gestured them through the door.

Draco gripped Harry's hand tightly, and followed him into the sitting room.

XVII Double, Double, Toil and Trouble (Part One)

Lucius' current accommodations were not at all to his tastes.

Granted, the hidden chamber in the basement of William Parkinson's house was a definite improvement from his former cell in Azkaban, but it still left much to be desired.

In truth, he was better off than most who had left Azkaban with him.

All were in hiding, and most were living more deplorably than he was.

Bellatrix Lestrange and her insufferable husband were cooped up in the attic of a flat above Knockturn Alley. Augustus Rookwood was living in a place that made the Shrieking Shack seem hospitable. Walden MacNair was sleeping in an overlarge kitchen cupboard in Bristol.

And Nott was still in the Incurable Hexes ward of St. Mungos. The mudblood bratling that Potter kept around had apparently done a number on him. Lucius had assumed she had only put a *Stupefy* on him. No one had properly seen what had befallen Nott after the mudblood's spell knocked him unconscious, but whatever it had been, he was now a total loss, and the Healers were unable to sort him out.

Lucius was growing restless.

His living conditions were only partially to blame. It was the fact that he was forced to endure the conditions. It galled him that he and everyone else had gone to all the trouble to escape Azkaban, only to exist in hiding.

He hated hiding. He hated waiting.

He understood the need to stay unseen, but he did not like it. He was out of contact with everyone, out of touch with what was going on in the world, and he was sure that shortly, he would start to go out of his mind.

Lucius had never been one to play from the sidelines.

He had always been a proactive man, and he had never believed in doing things in half-measures. If Lucius endeavored in a task, he did it with everything he had. He devoted all his time and energy to it, gave it his full attention, and did not rest until it was completed to the best of his ability.

In his current situation, he could do little, and it was eating away at him.

And, try as he might, he could still not locate Draco, something that was driving him to distraction.

Shortly after he had returned from Azkaban, he had sent an owl to the

Manor. When he had not gotten a response, he had sent Parkinson to go speak with him. Parkinson had returned to tell him that Draco was gone. Parkinson had also said Draco's wardrobe had been emptied, meaning he had planned to go wherever he had gone, and that he intended to stay.

The portraits, of course, had been of no use. Their constant chatter had always bothered Narcissa, and she had long ago charmed them into silence. They would only speak in response to a direct order from a Malfoy. Parkinson was not a Malfoy, and Lucius had not wanted to risk making a personal appearance.

Parkinson had also been unable to speak to a house-elf, not that they would have been any help to him, anyway. They, too, would only take a direct order from a Malfoy. Even if Parkinson had seen one, they would not have told him anything important.

Recently, he had heard a rumor that Draco had been sighted at the Ministry, in the company of Severus Snape. Apparently, the Ministry had been under the assumption that Draco was dead. Snape had taken him to the Ministry to clear up that little misunderstanding. At some point during that trip, he had also managed to get himself named as Draco's legal guardian.

This was a development that Lucius had mixed emotions about.

Snape had been a friend to the Malfoys for many years. He was not the easiest person to get along with, but he was intelligent and had a decent store of common sense. He was more than capable of seeing to Draco's needs, and would certainly make sure no harm came to him.

However, Lucius was not entirely sure where Snape's loyalties truly lied. Many, including Lucius, thought Snape had been playing for the other side for years, mainly, because Potter was still alive.

It was difficult to reconcile how a potions master of the highest regard was unable to poison a boy he shared a castle with for nine months out of the year. Snape could brew the most nefarious concoctions with ease, yet Potter had not suffered more than a headache in the last five years. It was all incredibly too convenient, and Lucius did not believe in coincidences.

If Draco was living with Snape, it raised more questions than it answered. Why had Draco not tried to contact his father? Why had

Draco gone to live with Snape, rather than Parkinson, who was his godfather? Why and Snape signed for Draco, when he knew Draco had a godfather? The biggest question was this-- why had Snape not contacted Lucius to inform him that his son was safe?

Lucius had seen Snape only once since learning that he was Draco's legal guardian. He had caught a brief glimpse of him at the last Death Eater meeting, but had not had the opportunity to speak with him. Wormtail had gone on at length, and Snape had abruptly disappeared away once the pompous rat had finally run out of words.

Unlike most Death Eaters, Lucius was not an unreasonably paranoid man. However, it had seemed to him that Snape had been avoiding him. Not only had he not been bothered to send a message to Lucius about Draco's whereabouts, the one time Snape could have spoken to him about it, he quit the premises as soon as possible.

It was time he contacted Snape. Draco did not belong with Snape, he belonged with his father and godfather.

The fact that the Ministry had allowed Snape to sign for Draco when Draco had a godfather did not give him pause. There was no accounting for the behavior of Ministry Officials at any time, but they were particularly prone to odd fancies when a Malfoy was involved.

No doubt, the Official in question had wanted Draco out of his sight as soon as possible. Letting Snape sign for him had been an immediate solution to the problem, whereas summoning Parkinson and waiting for him to arrive would have forced the Official to endure the presence of a Malfoy for another fifteen full minutes.

And now, there was nothing that could be done. The contract Snape had signed had been magically binding. It could only be revoked if it Snape was considered unfit, or if it was discovered that Draco's parents had not actually been dead (or of debatable legal status) at the time it was signed.

However, he had worked with the Ministry long enough to know how Ministry regulations worked, and he knew that every magical contract had a loophole. If Draco came to live at Parkinson's *at Snape's behest*, no harm would befall either of them. All he had to do was convince Snape to willingly send Draco to Parkinson's.

And, he knew he must do so. He was not about to let his son spend

the rest of the summer with someone who might be Beating for the other team. Draco had always seemed eager to please his father, and had show great aptitude for the Dark Arts. Yet, he was still young, and presumably, still impressionable. A prolonged period of time with someone who had debatable loyalty to the Dark Lord might cause Draco to rethink his alliances.

Lucius had invested sixteen years in Draco, he was not about to see it undone by two months in the hands of Severus Snape.

He could not Apparate, as he did not want to risk leaving Parkinson's house, and he could not Floo. The Ministry monitored the Floo Network, even putting his head in the fireplace would be a risk.

Sighing, he summoned one of Parkinson's house-elves to bring him some parchment and a quill. He disliked using Owl Post under any circumstances, but he did not see any other option. The Death Eaters had several codes and ciphers that were unknown to the other side. If he wrote it in one of those, it would not matter if it fell into the wrong hands.

He frowned once the house-elf produced them, as he had no desk, not that there was space in the small chamber for one. He settled himself on the edge of the small bed, laying the parchment on the tiny nightstand.

He stared at the blank parchment for quite some time before dipping the quill in the ink and starting to write.

Severus,

*It has come to my attention that something
very important to me is in your possession.*

*I was very distraught when it went missing,
and I am extremely displeased with you that
you did not inform me you had it with you.
Had you notified me, it would have saved me
a good deal of worry.*

*As you probably know, I made arrangements
concerning this object many years ago. In the
event that I was unable to keep it with me, it
was to be sent to a mutual acquaintance of*

ours. It would be most appreciated if you would send it to this mutual acquaintance as soon as possible.

I assure you, the next time we meet, we will discuss this matter in detail.

Regards,

L

Lucius read the letter over several times before setting aside the quill. It was to the point, yet suitably vague. He set two charms on it-- one to make the parchment appear blank, and one that would cause the parchment to dissolve into ash like a Howler once Severus had read it. Satisfied, he folded it in half, and half again.

He wondered for a moment on how he would get it to Snape. His own eagle-owl would be as bad as a banner, and Parkinson's owl could point back to Parkinson if the letter was intercepted.

Finally, he summoned the house-elf again, and told it to bring him Parkinson's daughter. If she took the letter to the Post Station in Diagon Alley and sent it with one of the public-use owls, it would not be traceable to either Parkinson or himself.

~*~

Molly Weasley was not Harry Potter's proper mother, and she never would be. She was not even Harry's legal guardian.

That role had fallen to Sirius Black, though he had spent most of his tenure as Harry's godfather indisposed. As much as Molly had loved Sirius as a person, that had probably been for the best. Sirius had hardly been able to take care of himself, before Azkaban, or after. He had spent most of his un-incarcerated adult years being supervised by a werewolf. There was no way he would have been able to raise a child.

After Sirius' untimely, yet unsurprising death, the task had fallen to Dumbledore. Dumbledore was a kind, sweet, knowledgeable man, but he was too old to understand someone as young as Harry, and too busy to pay him the attention he deserved.

Molly was not Harry's mother, but she was the closest thing Harry had to one, though Hermione did do her best to keep an eye on him, bless her heart.

Through that, some of the sixth sense she had developed concerning her own children had carried over to him. And she did have a sixth sense. She often acted oblivious, and her children often accused her of being clueless, but that could not be further from the truth. She knew what went on, and occasionally, she knew what was *going* to go on before her children did.

There were just times when she chose not to interfere.

Sometimes, you had to let your children make their own mistakes. Take Ronald, for example. Molly was well aware that he had done something to bollocks up his relationship with Hermione (the relationship Ron thought she did not know about because she was clueless). However, there was no point in stepping in, because it would be counterproductive. Intrusion into his personal affairs would only cause him to balk. Assuming she could even get him to sit still long enough to listen, he would no doubt do the exact opposite of her advice, because he was convinced that he knew everything, and that his mother knew nothing.

And sometimes, you had to accept that certain situations were out of your hands. Molly did not approve of Bill's current girlfriend, but she knew there was no point in bringing it up. Fleur Delacour was a veela, for Merlin's sake. Done was done, the spell had been cast. Molly could go on about Fleur's lengthy list of faults until her voice gave out, but Bill would not hear a word that came out of Molly's mouth.

The Order meeting was in full swing, but Molly had tuned Dumbledore out. She had already heard it all, Dumbledore had gone over the plan in minute detail with the adults, before calling the children in. It was a shame, that the children were expected to deal with these kinds of things, but like she had said to Draco the day he arrived, the world had gone stark, barking mad some time ago.

As she let Dumbledore's waffle float in one ear and out the other, her attention turned to Harry. She considered him for a moment, saddened at the kind of responsibility he had to face at such a young age.

Suddenly, she sat up a bit straighter and peered at him curiously, because what she saw behind the rapt attention and pinched expression he was duly giving Dumbledore was truly shocking.

And Molly Weasley was hardly ever shocked.

After raising seven children, any woman would have a thick skin, but given the seven children in question, Molly had a hide and like a Norwegian Ridgeback.

Five of her children had played Quidditch. That alone was enough to give a woman the vapors, but there was more to it than that.

Bill worked in a place where sand demons and curses older than time, itself, were the daily fare. Charlie was employed at a Dragon Reserve, where he routinely faced fire-breathing monsters. Fred and George had given her heart palpitations from the cradle, and were working tirelessly to give a new generation of children the same opportunity. Ron was best friends with the Boy Who Lived, which was definitely not the safest of occupations. Ginny had let You-Know-Who talk her into opening the Chamber of Secrets, and had nearly gotten eaten by a basilisk for her trouble.

When it came down to Percy, he was no different, except he had waited until he was fully grown to give her gray hairs.

Her children's behavior could be worrying, and it was often infuriating. Over the years, Bill and Charlie and Ron and the twins-- especially the twins-- had caused her to lose sleep, and had provoked her into fits of rage that would have made Sirius Black proud.

However, she was very, rarely shocked. After more than twenty years of raising children that could test the patience of a saint, there was little on this earth that could give her a true, honest surprise.

However, looking at Harry now, she was exactly that-- surprised. And the slightest bit alarmed.

She had had reason to be suspicious over the last couple of weeks. Dumbledore had seen fit to make them a matched set, but he had said they could spend a select few hours with everyone else. They did, however, usually spend that time together, and often as not, they spent it alone.

Ron's sudden change in demeanor towards Harry was also suspect. Ron would never admit it, but Molly knew that deep down, her son thought Harry had hung the moon. She also knew that Harry loved Ron without question. They occasionally had spats, every once and awhile they had an argument, but they had never had full-on row.

When asked, Ginny had stubbornly refused to give details. She had, however, confessed that Ron had started the row. Ron would not have done that, unless Harry had done something Ron found completely revolting and unforgivable.

And then, there were the wards on the master bedroom door. Molly had ventured up there last week to return some of Harry's laundry, only to find the room was sealed up tighter than a Gringotts vault.

A series of Locking Charms that would give Bill pause was strange enough, but that had not been all.

Intrigued by the Locking Charms, Molly had investigated the door further, only to find a Silencing Charm in place. Not any old Silencing Charm, either, but one that would easily drown out wails caused by the Cruciatus Curse.

Looking at Harry now, she did need to suspect any longer. A mother always knew.

Harry was sitting next to Draco, though that was not an unusual sight, anymore. It was not an obvious thing, either. Actually, it was a rather subtle thing, something that a person with an untrained eye would not catch.

They were sitting too close together. Not *pointedly* too close together, it was not as if one was practically in the other's lap. Yet, they were too close. It was a seating arrangement she had seen between Sirius and Remus many, many times. Close enough that they were aware of the each other and in touching distance of the each other, but not close enough to really draw attention to themselves.

Draco's body was leaned towards Harry. Again, not pointedly so, just enough to catch Molly's eye. In fact, she was willing to bet Draco was not even properly aware of it. Draco's body was just reflexively doing what it wanted to do.

Harry's body was slightly angled, and he was a bit hunched, a sure

sign that the hand he had hidden away under the table was not in his lap, but resting on Draco's leg. Unless, of course, it had gravitated to someplace a bit more unseemingly.

Harry and Draco were sleeping together.

This was not really the shocking bit, as again, Molly was not easily shocked. As odd as it seemed to her that two boys would want to be intimate with each other (or two girls, for that matter), she understood that sometimes the wind blew the other way, and she could accept that. She had a deceptively old-fashioned appearance, but when it came down to it, she was rather open-minded.

She had not always been, but once again, she had her children to thank for that. Over the years, they had forced her to see things differently.

Once, about a year before he started dating Fleur, Bill had owed to say he was coming home for a visit. The note had also said he was bringing someone special with him. Bill had not used any incriminating pronouns in the missive, so Molly had just *assumed*.

She had been not at all prepared for the tall, brown-haired bloke Bill had waltzed through the front door of the Burrow with. Arthur had gawped like a child on his first trip to the Quidditch World Cup, but Molly has smiled, and been the very face of courtesy.

Molly had always figured that Percy liked boys. He had a tendency to come off as a bit effeminate, and his first five years at Hogwarts had passed without even a whisper of a girlfriend. While this could have been partially blamed on his somewhat fussy disposition, there had always been enough available girls at Hogwarts that his lack of girlfriend could have also been by choice.

Once of the true shocks she had had in the last handful of years was catching Percy canoodling with that Clearwater girl on the platform at the end of his sixth year.

And then, there was the twins, but that was a delicate subject, and the less said about it, the better.

Open-minded nor not, nothing could have prepared her for this.

Despite that her children were convinced otherwise, Molly remembered

what it was like to be young and impetuous. She also remembered the adolescent plague called hormones-- she had seven children, after all, and a person with seven children could not act like they had never had urges.

However, what she was looking at right now did not seem to be just the result of youth and hormones.

There was a light in Harry's eyes Molly had never seen before, in all the years he and Ron had been friends, and he was wrapped in an unmistakable aura of happiness. There was a marked change in Draco as well. There was a softness about his features, as if the cold, hard indifference had perpetually displayed since his arrival was slowly ebbing away.

Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy were in love, and Molly Weasley had never been so surprised in all her life.

~*~

It had been a year since Harry's had learned of the Order of the Phoenix, and in that year, Harry had been invited to his fair share of meetings. Yet, in all that time, he could not shake off the sensation of impending doom he felt whenever he walked into the kitchen of Grimmauld Place to face the Order.

The usual feeling of impending doom was doubled today, due to some of the occupants of the room.

Underneath his twinkling eyes and whimsy, Dumbledore was a war strategist. Harry knew it sounded dire and tragic when he thought about it like that. He also knew it was a bit of an incongruous thought, given Dumbledore's unconcerned outward appearance, but that was just how it was.

However, Dumbledore, like many of the other members of the Order, thought war was business that should be handled by the adults. Dumbledore's plots and schemes never directly involved the children-- except for Harry. Harry was invited to the meetings because he was Harry. Whether anyone in the Order liked it or not, it would come down to Voldemort and Harry in the end, and they had all grudgingly learned to accept this.

"Voldemort is after a mythical relic called the Crystal Sword."
Dumbledore explained.

Harry glanced towards the far end of the table and his stomach knotted. Hermione and Ginny were sitting between Remus and Tonks. Ron was standing behind Ginny's chair, flanked by the twins.

If Dumbledore had invited *them* to the meeting, something must be horribly wrong.

"Used instead of a wand, the Crystal Sword will amplify magic."
Dumbledore went on. "With the Crystal Sword, one could cast a spell that is five times stronger than a spell cast without it."

He sat up straight in his chair, and tried to focus on Dumbledore.

To be completely honest, he did not always pay too close attention to what was said at these meetings. It was always the same waffle: blah blah Death Eaters, blah blah blah danger, blah Voldemort, blah blah Dark Magic, blah Dementors, blah blah blah Lucius Malfoy, et cetera, et cetera.

It was not that he found the meetings boring, but rather, he just did not see the point. Over the last year, he had found that the Order's carefully laid plans were usually for naught, because nothing ever went the way it was supposed to. The shit would hit the fan spectacularly, everything would dissolve into chaos and confusion, and Harry would just stand there and do what he did best-- not die.

He was the Boy Who Lived.

"The Crystal Sword is at Stonehenge, in an underground chamber that can only be accessed during the full moon."

Of course, in an alarming trend, his ineffectual bumbblings with Voldemort had resulted in the death of others. Sirius had died last year, and Cedric Diggory the year before.

This thought shook him, and the twisted, knotted sensation in his stomach was replaced with a heavy kind of cold, like he had swallowed a large block of ice.

"The full moon is in less than two weeks." Dumbledore said.

And in two weeks time, one of the people in the kitchen of Grimmauld Place would probably be dead, just like Sirius and Cedric Diggory. Unfortunately, there was nothing for it. All he could do was hope for the best, and pray that if someone did die, it was not Hermione or Ginny or Ron or one of the twins.

Or Draco.

Turning his head to look at the blond boy next to him, Harry now understood Draco's earlier overprotective outburst. If Dumbledore had invited Draco to this meeting, he obviously planned to include Draco in the plans.

Harry's chest tightened again. The hand resting on Draco's leg tensed, and he dug his nails onto the fabric of Draco's pants.

"At the full moon, the Order will travel to Stonehenge." Dumbledore continued.

Harry was suddenly aware that Dumbledore had stopped speaking, and he looked up to see the Headmaster looking at him pointedly.

"Are we going to try and get the Crystal Sword?" Harry managed.

"If we can secure the Crystal Sword without risk, that would be splendid." Dumbledore said brightly. "However, if all we accomplish is keeping it out of Voldermort's hands, I will be satisfied."

"Why at the full moon?" Harry asked, gazing sidelong at Remus.

The timing of the event meant Remus would be left behind, and Harry had mixed emotions about this. It was somewhat comforting to know Remus would be safe, or as safe as he could be during his transformation, but at the same time, it would be equally comforting (in a selfish kind of way) to have Remus at his side.

"I fear I do not wholly know the answer to that." Dumbledore said. "From what I have gathered, gaining access to the underground chamber involves some form of Planetary Magic."

"Planetary Magic?" Draco squawked. "Is Voldermort an Earth Mage?"

"No." Dumbledore said simply, shaking his head. "To my knowledge, there has not been an Earth Mage born for five hundred years or

more."

"Then how is he going to open that chamber?" Draco asked incredulously.

"As strong enough wizard could work a simply Planetary Spell." Dumbledore replied. "Assuming the spell that opens the chambers is not too difficult, Voldemort could most likely manage it, though it would be an extreme drain on him."

"So he will be weak?" Harry asked.

"Yes." Dumbledore nodded. "Unfortunately, he has planned accordingly. A number of his Death Eaters will be joining him."

"But none of us are Earth Mages, either." Harry pointed out. "How are we supposed to keep it closed?"

"We are not going to keep it closed." Dumbledore explained, his eyes twinkling mischievously. "I have enlisted help from the outside. I have an old friend who is well versed in some of the more ancient spells."

"I thought you said there hasn't been an Earth Mage for five hundred years." Draco said flatly.

"She is not an Earth Mage, nor does she possess our kind of magic." Dumbledore said. "She wields religious magic, a power far older than wizardry."

"You're going to pit religious magic against Voldemort dabbling in Planetary Magic?" Draco gaped. His expression plainly said he thought Dumbledore had gone round the bend.

"Stonehenge was a center of religious power long before it was a wizarding monument, Mister Malfoy. I daresay her and her women have seniority in the matter." Dumbledore said, a bit cheerfully. "However, they will be undefended while they work, which is where we will come in. We will have to keep the Death Eaters at bay while her and her women work."

"All of us?" Harry asked, shooting a pointed glance towards where his friends sat at the far end of the table.

"No, Mister Potter, not all of us." Dumbledore said.

The stranglehold on Harry's heart and lungs relaxed a bit.

"You and Mister Malfoy will accompany half the Order and myself." Dumbledore replied.

Harry's chest suddenly felt tight again. He did not want Draco to come within a hundred miles of Voldemort. He wanted Draco to stay in Grimmauld Place, where it was safe.

"What about the other half?" Draco asked smoothly, as if Dumbledore announcing he would be facing Voldemort in two weeks time was of no consequence.

"As you probably can guess, Voldemort wants no disruptions while he is trying to open the chamber." Dumbledore said. "In light of that, Wormtail has devised a diversion for that same night, something to draw my and Mister Potter's attention so he can work in peace."

"What?" Harry ventured, though he was convinced he did not want to know.

It was Snape who answered.

"Wormtail and a handful of Death Eaters will be arriving at the home of Miss Granger's parents, shortly before Voldemort leaves for Stonehenge."

"What!" Hermione shrieked, jumping from her seat. "My parents!"

"Yes." Snape said. "Your parents. He plans to arrive there and take them hostage, then notify Mister Potter in some manner. He is no doubt assuming that Mister Potter's hero-complex will force him to drop what he is doing and rescue your parents, forthwith."

"Leaving Voldemort to open the chamber at Stonehenge unhindered." Dumbledore added.

"But what about my parents!" Hermione demanded. She was shaking, and her face was pale. Harry noted that Ron moved towards her and put an arm around her shoulder.

"Well, thanks to Professor Snape, we are well aware of Wormtail's plan, so we will be prepared." Dumbledore said. "When Wormtail

arrives, a group of us will already be there."

"Them?" Harry asked, gesturing towards Ron and the rest.

"And the rest of the Order." Dumbledore said.

"Why them?" Harry complained. "Why do they have to be put in danger? Leave them here! The rest of the Order can handle Wormtail and a couple of Death Eaters."

"I understand your concern, Harry." Dumbledore said. "Unfortunately, there is no other way."

"Why not?" Harry demanded.

"Professor Snape brought me this information at great personal risk to himself." Dumbledore explained. "If Wormtail arrives to find the Order waiting for him, Voldemort will know that information was leaked to me, and he would not have to ponder too long before he looks to Professor Snape."

"However, if Wormtail arrives to find the Grangers having dinner with Harry Potter and the Weasleys, hopefully, he will think he simply has bad timing."

"Hang on." Draco said. "How is Harry going to be at Granger's house if he is at Stonehenge with me?"

"Indeed." Dumbledore said, smiling widely. He turned towards the far end of the table and inclined his head to Ron. "Mister Weasley, how would you like to be Mister Potter for a day?"

XVII

Double, Double, Toil and Trouble (Part Two)

The look on the Weasel's face was absolutely priceless.

It reminded Draco of the time Adrian Pucey took a Bludger to the head during a Slytherin and Ravenclaw Quidditch. He was wide-eyed and slack-jawed, utterly baffled, and seemed vaguely disoriented.

Draco listened as Dumbledore explained his plan in detail. The Weasel, polyjuiced as Harry, would join Granger, Ginny, the twins, and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley for a staged dinner in Granger's kitchen. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley would be the only visible members of the Order on hand. The rest of the accompanying Order would be stashed in a side room somewhere in Granger's house.

When Wormtail arrived at Granger's, the twins, who had Apparating a handful of feet down to a science, would pop into the next room, then pop back a few moments later with the Order in tow. Dumbledore was hoping that Wormtail would assume the twins went off to the Order's secret hideout, and not just down the hall.

The jury was in-- Dumbledore had gone completely round the bend.

Of course, Draco had to admit, as barmy as Dumbledore's plan was, it had style. Not to mention, there was something ironic about the Weasel having to parade around as Harry. He had spend the last five years cultivating sour grapes over Harry's fame, now he would get to be the Boy Who Lived.

It was especially satisfying, because the Weasel did not look too pleased at the prospect.

Be careful what you wish for... Draco thought, with more than a bit of malice.

"What do you say, Mister Weasley?" Dumbledore asked.

"I, uh... well, er..." Ron babbled.

"Splendid." Dumbledore said, nodding sharply at Ron before turning his attention to Snape. "Professor Snape, I trust you have some polyjuice on hand?"

"Yes." Snape replied, just as Harry shouted "No!"

"Mister Potter." Dumbledore started, his tone slightly warning.

"No." Harry insisted, shaking his head furiously. "You'll get him killed!"

"Mister Potter, your concern is understandable." Dumbledore agreed.

"It's bad enough you are going to send him off!" Harry interrupted. "If

he looks like me, he'll be a target!"

Harry was very nearly shouting, and Draco goggled at that. McGonagall looked slightly bemused, but Lupin, Tonks, Moody and the Weasley's were completely taken aback. Boy Wonder or not, one simply did not shout at Albus Dumbledore.

"I am sorry, Mister Potter, but it is the only way." Dumbledore replied smoothly, unaffected by Harry's raised voice. "Wormtail's plan is to draw you to Miss Granger's house that evening, and he intends to inform you of his arrival. If you are not there, he will send for you, and when you do not come, he will think something is amiss. Therefore, you must *be* there."

"Then send the real me!" Harry demanded. He slammed one fist on the table loudly. The hand resting on Draco's leg tensed, and his finger's dug into Draco's flesh painfully.

"You will be needed at Stonehenge." Dumbledore said simply.

This declaration snapped Draco back to reality. His elation at the Weasel's predicament dissolved, and he was suddenly very aware that he and Harry were being sent to sort out Voldemort.

Which brought him back to his earlier, original worry that Dumbledore intended to send Harry off to die.

"As I said, if all we accomplish is keeping Voldemort away from the Crystal Sword, I will be satisfied." Dumbledore went on. "However, if it is possible to take it, I would like to."

"Then bloody take it." Harry said waspishly.

"There are numerous myths surrounding the Crystal Sword, and its disappearance from circulation in the Wizarding World." Dumbledore said calmly. "One of those follows that it is lying dormant until a certain person comes to claim it."

There was a very long, uncomfortable pause, and everyone, unsurprisingly, looked at Harry.

"I have to take it." Harry said finally, in a flat tone.

"I do not know if that particular myth applies, or if it is speaking of

you." Dumbledore said. "However, I would hate discover that the myth *does* apply, and it *is* speaking of you, only for you not to be in the area."

"I have to take it." Harry said again, resigned.

"As much as it pains me to admit, if that myth does apply, it is likely speaking of you, since you are who you are." Snape growled.

"Bloody, bugging Hell! Why does it always have to be you!" Draco blurted.

He winced as soon as the words were out, because the majority of the people in the room were staring at him in confusion. The words could have been easily been from bitterness and jealousy, but he knew his tone had named them from fondness and concern.

"Not that I am saying no, mind." Ron piped in suddenly. "Only, won't it look a bit off if Harry is in two places at once?"

"Of course." Dumbledore said, smiling. "It will create no end of confusion, and I am hoping for that."

~*~

Snape found himself wondering what Lupin and Black had ever seen in each other.

Black had been loud, obnoxious and boorish. He had been a raging tempest prone to unnecessary displays of temper, and had been utterly incapable of having a thought without expressing it.

Lupin, on the other hand, had been the calm and collected background to Black's histrionics. He had been quiet and reserved, and very introspective. He had never been one for emotional displays (unless provoked), to the point that he had rarely displayed emotion on his face-- a habit Lupin maintained to this day.

Right now, the werewolf's face was inexpressive as ever, but Snape was willing to wager that inside, Lupin was positively irate. Voldemort's timing could not be worse for him. The Dark Lord would be going after the Crystal Sword at the full moon, which meant Lupin would be left at Grimmauld Place to keep the home fires burning while

everyone else went off to save the world.

Dumbledore's plan was brilliant, but it was a bit too intricate and complicated for Snape's peace of mind. Experience had taught him that in a situation involving Voldemort and Potter, all bets were off. Even the simplest plans were wont to go array, and this plan was far from simple. It had far too many 'ifs', 'ands' and 'buts' to go off without a hitch.

Lucius was another situation that was threatening to go to Hell in a handcart. The letter he had received this morning had been troubling, to say the least. Lucius had made no outright threats, but Snape knew Lucius better than that. Lucius was much like Dumbledore when it came to Owl Post, and what was left unsaid in his letters said much more than what was actually written on the parchment.

And the letter's demand would not do at all.

There was no way he could send Draco to Parkinson's. Even if Draco was willing to go, Dumbledore would not hear of it. Not to mention the snit the idea would put Potter in. If Draco did go, his Golden Boy boyfriend would immediately go harrowing after him, which would put Snape in more trouble on both sides than he was already in.

And he was likely in a good deal of trouble. He had not replied to Lucius' letter yet, nor did he intend to. Unfortunately, there was no way *for* him to. He could not deny that Draco had been given over to his charge, and since Draco had been given over to his charge, there could not act like he did not know where Draco was.

No amount of lying would get him out of this mess, and the truth was stranger than fiction.

Dear Lucius,

*Sorry I did not contact you sooner,
the whole turncoat thing is rather
time-consuming.*

*As for Draco, I am afraid I cannot
send him your way. Dumbledore
said no. Besides, Draco doesn't
want to go anyway. He hates you,
he is fighting for the Order, and he*

*is bugging the Boy Who Lived on
a regular basis.*

*Cheers, and send my love to the
Dark Lord.*

Severus

Oh yes, he was in a *good* deal of trouble.

There was an extreme likelihood that Lucius would be invited to either of the full moon's festivities, something that made everything that much more worrisome. However, there was not much Snape could do about it, but hope for the best.

The best being that he, Lucius and Draco would all be on opposite sides of the island on the full moon. Of course, Snape was well aware that that was not possible. He had never won any awards in mathematics, but he knew enough to know the equation would not work out in anyone's favor.

Three people who needed to stay away from each other. Divided by two points of confrontation. No matter how Snape did the math, it still equaled someone being left in the sniff, *before* he added in the unknown variable-- where Voldemort would decided to send Lucius.

Snape had the very uncomfortable notion that if everything did go tits up, he would be the one left holding his cock with a sheepish look on his face.

He was having a rather unsettling mental picture of himself standing in the middle of the Amesbury Plains with Lucius at his elbow, asking him why his one and only son was aiming a wand at him and holding hands with the Boy Who Will Not Die.

He felt a headache coming on.

The most obvious solution would be to leave Draco behind. Of course, Snape was well aware that that would not happen. Much like mathematics, Snape only had a hedgy grasp on the science of human behavior, but some things were just obvious.

Never mind that Dumbledore seemed to think Draco had to go everywhere Potter went, it was plain Draco would not allow himself to

be left behind. Snape had seen the way Draco had been looking at Potter throughout the Order meeting. He had seen the pained expressions and worried looks, and he had heard Draco's outburst.

Draco would want to be there to protect Potter, as ridiculous as that was.

His pondering was cut short by Molly Weasley, who offered him more tea and pressed yet another biscuit on him. He had already had more tea than was good for his bladder, and Molly was handing him what had to be his third biscuit, but he accepted both with gruff thanks. Molly was nervous and concerned about what Dumbledore's plan meant for the children (especially since the majority of the children involved were her own), and he knew she was dealing with it the only way she knew how-- stuffing everyone with food.

After him, she moved on to Mundungus Fletcher, which was a true marker of her mental state. She was still tetchy with Fletcher over that business with Potter and the Dementors and the cauldrons, and usually could not be bothered to offer the disreputable pile of rags a glass of water.

He looked away from Molly and Fletcher to see Draco and Potter slipping out of the kitchen. He cursed under his breath at that. He had been hoping to have a word with Draco about his father, and he did not want to have to pry him away from Potter to do it.

Snape left the kitchen quickly, depositing his tea on a nearby table abruptly enough that it sloshed over the edges of the cup, and handing his biscuit to Mundungus as he passed him. He pushed open the kitchen door and glanced up and down the hallway, spotting Draco and Potter at the far end of the hall, near the door that lead outside.

Potter was leaning against the wall with his arms folded across his chest and a blank, but implacable look on his face. Draco was standing him front of him, speaking to him. Draco's voice was low enough that Snape could not catch what he was saying, but he was gesturing grandly enough as he spoke to more than make up for his hushed tones.

Evidently, they were having some kind of argument.

Similar to his earlier musings about Black and Lupin, he found himself wondering what Draco and Potter saw in each other. Of course, the

situations were vastly different. Lupin and Black had been like apples and oranges. Draco and Potter, however, were like two different breed of mule.

They were incompatible in a hundred ways, but they were eerily similar in many ways, as well, the kind of ways that could be detrimental to a relationship.

Snape had not been in a relationship in nearly five years, but from what he remembered, it involved some kind of give and take. Both parties needed a grasp of the concept of compromise, and he did not think Draco or Potter had even heard of such a thing.

Both were stubborn beyond words, and would argue a point with a ferocity that bordered on religious conviction.

Potter's stubbornness was due to the Gryffindor bollocks about bravery and courage. He felt it was his duty to stand up for what he believed in, and argue his point with irritating tenacity that bordered on idiocy. That folderol with Umbridge proved he did not know when to let a sleeping dog lie. It had probably never crossed Potter's mind that he was deliberately provoking the woman, he had no doubt thought he was doing the brave and honorable thing by speaking his mind.

Draco's stubbornness stemmed from a sense of entitlement and a privileged upbringing. He was spoilt beyond reason, and used to getting his own way. He had probably never heard the word 'no' out of an adult's mouth until the day he came to Grimmauld Place. Actually, he had probably never heard the word 'no' out of anyone's mouth. Draco had no true friends, Crabbe and Goyle were the closest thing he had, but Snape did not figure either of those oafs ever argued with him.

Of course, Potter had cultivated his own sense of entitlement since coming to Hogwarts. From what he had heard, his early years with Lily's relatives had left a bit to be desired, but the celebrity status he had gained when entering the Wizarding World had more than made up for it. He was also spoilt in his own right. Weasley and Granger usually gave in to him, Lupin often gave in to him, Black had always given in to him, and Dumbledore had the habit of looking the other way.

Or awarding House Points for him breaking the rules.

Snape started to turn to leave them alone, but curiosity got the better of him. Quietly, he cast a spell that changed the acoustics in the hallway in his favor. Their voices were strained and echoed, like they were speaking to him through a long tube, but he was able to make out what they were saying.

"No." Draco said, shaking his head.

"You don't have to go." Potter said.

"That doesn't mean I'm not going to." Draco said, giving Potter a withering look.

"Draco, please." Potter said plaintively.

"No." Draco replied. "What would you have me do, then? Babysit Granger and the Weasel?"

"You could..." Potter started.

"Absolutely not." Draco snapped.

"You could stay here." Potter offered quietly.

"What?" Draco demanded, his voice going shrill.

"It would be safer." Potter pointed out. Snape found himself vaguely uncomfortable that he and Potter were in agreement about something.

"Don't you dare!" Draco hissed. "Don't you dare start in about 'safer' when you are going to go have it off with Voldemort."

"What about your father?" Potter asked, looking at him expectantly.

"What about the Dementors?" Draco asked, looking at Potter just as expectantly.

"The Order can see to the Demetors." Harry retorted.

"And the Order can see to my father." Draco gave back.

Draco folded his arms across his chest and favored Potter with a self-satisfied smile. Potter watched him for a moment with pursed lips, then sighed heavily, letting his head fall back against the wall. Draco

took a step towards Potter and trapped him there, putting his hands to the wall on either side of him.

Snape cringed, and was once again tempted to go. If they started kissing, he was going to be violently ill.

"I just don't want you to get hurt." Potter mumbled, looking at the floor.

"I don't want you to get hurt, either." Draco said. "But since you are obviously figuring on doing just that, I am going to go with you."

Snape rolled his eyes at that. Like he had figured, Draco was not of a mind to be left at Grimmauld Place to hold down the fort while Potter risked his arse. Snape was tempted to remind Draco that Potter had faced Voldemort six times without his help and had managed, but he doubted Draco would appreciate his input.

"You don't have to." Potter said, looking up at him.

"Of course I don't." Draco replied, with a hint of his usual drawl. "But I want to."

There was a long, pointed silence. Potter considered Draco for a bit, fidgeting nervously and worrying his lower lip between his teeth. Draco studied him as well, regarding him with a stubborn expression that said he would not be moved on this topic. Finally, Harry sighed, pulled Draco to him by a handful of his black, silk shirt, and wrapped his arms around him.

"You're a bloody git." Harry complained, partially into Draco's neck.

"Wanker." Draco replied, too fondly for Snape's overfull stomach.

"If you get killed, I will never forgive you." Potter said, removing his face from Draco's neck to look at him.

"If *you* get killed, I will never forgive *myself*." Draco said.

"I won't get killed." Potter said, his lips twisting in to a dry smile. "Boy Who Lived, remember."

"Only because you have a thick head." Draco replied.

This was apparently some joke between them. Snape did not understand it, but Draco and Potter started snickering uncontrollably. Once he had calmed himself, Potter whispered something in Draco's ear. He did it soft enough that the spell only rendered it as a muffled hum, but from the blush that crept over Draco's face, Snape was quite sure he did not want to know what Potter had said.

Then, as Snape had been dreading, they started kissing.

Noisily.

Messily.

Unnecessarily.

Forcing back the urge to scream until he went hoarse and retch violently, he slipped back into the kitchen, and tried to remove the horrid image from his mind.

~*~

Avalon had not involved itself in the world of men for time out of mind.

Once, the Holy Isle had been the very center of Britain, and the Lady of the Lake had spoken with an authority that surpassed that of the High King. But even then, Avalon had not readily involved itself in the affairs of the outside world. Avalon was a holy place, a place concerned with Mother.

There was a fine line between guiding and meddling. While the distinction was important, it was difficult to make. And often times, one did a thing with the intention to guide, only to be meddling in the end.

And there were always consequences, regardless, even for the Lady of the Lake.

Vivane had thought she was doing the will of the Mother when she brought about the conception of King Arthur. She moved Heaven and Earth to bring Igraine, wife of Duke Gorlois, and Uther Pendragon together at the proper time. Arthur was conceived, but the events of that night resulted in the death of the Duke, as well as war between Uther and the men of Cornwall.

Morgaine, the woman many call Morgan Le Fey, had thought she was doing the will of the Mother when she sought to replace Arthur with her consort, Accolon of Wales. She moved Time and the Mists to bring Accolon and Arthur together for their duel. Arthur lost, but Accolon died, and the events of that night also resulted in the death of Mordred, the son of Arthur and Morgaine.

Albus Dumbledore had come to Caiohme earlier in the day, asking her to do something that had not been done for one thousand, five hundred years-- he wanted the Lady of the Lake to involve herself in the outside world.

She had taken her time deciding. She needed only to row out to the middle of the lake and look upon Arthur, where he lay in his charmed sleep under the water, to see what happened when Avalon meddled in the affairs of men.

Caiohme had agreed, reluctantly, only because his need seemed so great. She knew nothing of this Lord Voldemort, but it was plain he was evil, and if he did succeed in taking the Crystal Sword, he could pose a kind of threat that could affect the fate of Avalon.

The Holy Isle no longer laid within the world of men, but if this Voldemort managed to lay waste to everything, Avalon would die out, as well, and the last home of the Mother, with it.

Slowly, Caiohme rose from her seat in front of the hearth. She had been staring at the crackling flames for some time, to no avail. There was no peace within her for meditation, tonight.

As she left her wattle-and-daub hut, she called to the first priestess she saw. Meliora was still a child, barely in her fourteenth year. The women of the Holy Isle ranged in age from young children to old women with white hair, but more than half had not yet reached adulthood.

It pained her to involve children in something so dangerous, but the Mother had not seen fit to provide otherwise.

"Meliora." Caiohme said softly. "Gather all the fully-trained. Tonight, we practice The Closing."

With that, her decision had been made. All she could do was hope she

did not live to regret it.

XVIII
The Sun Will Come Out, Tomorrow
(Part One)

The sun was a dependable, stalwart, and rather predictable thing. He rose in the morning, set in the evening, and he made slow but steady progress across the sky throughout the day. Aside from when he reddened and purpled during sunrise and sunset, he was always a bright, fiery yellow. He remained more or less the same shape, and was an unmoving focal point in the universe.

The moon, on the other hand, was a fey and uncanny thing. She was sometimes big, and sometimes small. She was white as she hung in the sky, except for when she was golden or bluish. She was never the same shape two days in a row, and she flitted around in space as she saw fit.

Also, she rose and set on a timetable that was wholly her own. While the sun started his arc over the horizon every morning with alacrity, the moon only made her nightly appearance when she could be bothered to do so. Sometimes, it was near midnight before she showed herself. Occasionally, she did not come out at all. Every once and awhile, she arrived before the sun was even finished dipping below the horizon.

It was one of those evenings now, where the moon was creeping into the sky before the sun had decided to go to bed for the night. The sun was dark and dwindling, and the moon was already bright in the russet horizon.

Remus had never understood how it was possible for the moon and sun to hang side by side in the sky. Sirius would have known, as Astronomy had always been his strength. Sirius would have explained it to him if he had asked, but he had not. While people would probably assume otherwise because of his condition, Remus had never looked into the moon's habits, and only knew enough about her to predict when she was due to be full.

Of course, he did not need to know too much about her, because his body would always tell him when she was due to rise in all her glory. The day before she was due to be full, Remus always felt tired and

sickly and lethargic, and there was a chill to his skin that could not be warded off with a fire in the hearth or any amount of blankets.

That weakness and chill was on him now, as he stood at the window, watching the sun and moon share the sky. The moon was large, only one day from full, and the sun was small, shrinking away and slipping below the horizon.

"Do not set." He whispered to the sun, but he knew it was pointless.

The sun would set, as it always did, and it would set tomorrow, as it always did, and there was not a thing he could do about it.

She would rise tomorrow, and Remus would Change tomorrow. Harry would face Voldemort tomorrow, and Remus would be unable to help.

Remus hated the moon as much as he feared it.

Situations like this one reminded Remus of exactly how much he hated the moon. Her selfish schedule dictated the comings and goings of his life, and it ate at him. Remus would Change every month, and every month, Remus and anyone close to him had to accommodate that. The Marauders had always planned their outings around the moon, and the Order tried to plan their meetings and such around her, as well.

There was nothing for it this time. Voldemort had planned his attack for the full moon, which meant Remus was well out of it. Snape would give him the Wolfbane Potion, he would turn into an ordinary, boring wolf, and he would curl up and doze in one of his armchairs while everyone was in danger.

"Do not rise." He whispered to the moon, but he knew it was futile.

It was already evident the moon meant to rise today, and Remus knew without a doubt she would rise tomorrow. While there were times when she did not come out, she never failed to show herself when she was due to be full.

"Do not set, and do not rise." He whispered again, before turning from the window.

He pulled the drape closed violently, blotting the vision from his mind. He had much to do before tomorrow night, and it would not get done while he stood at the window, wishing the moon away to another solar

system.

He had to check the locks on his door, to make sure they would hold firm. If he took the Wolfsbane Potion he would Change into a regular wolf, but he was still a danger. He was no longer prone to attack mindlessly, but he did possess animal instincts. If he got loose, and someone or something happened across him, he might attack, if he was hungry or felt threatened.

He needed to put away anything breakable or important. The lupine mind was a simple thing, and he had learned long ago that he could not make the distinction between what was valuable and what was not as a wolf. He would chew or piss on whatever was handy, whether it was a pile of old newspapers or an ancient, priceless manuscript.

More importantly, he needed to see a man about a potion.

~*~

Draco really hadn't meant to do it.

It had been Harry's fault, really. Harry had been the one who wanted to go outside and practice Dark Magic after dinner, and Harry had kept practicing, even after the light had started to fail. It had been dark, and Draco had not really been able to see the hydrangea bush properly. Besides, Harry had gone and dropped his wand. It was not like Draco had knocked it out of his hand, or anything. Harry had dropped it, and he had bent over to pick it up, and Draco had been watching his arse, rather what he had been pointing his wand at.

Instead of a harmless hydrangea bush, Draco had conjured something more akin to a jungle, complete with Venus Flytraps and Devil's Snare.

Still, it had been completely Harry's fault, what with him showing off is bum.

That, and the Devil's Snare. The ornery plant had been the one to wrap itself around Harry and drag him through the mud, not Draco. The Devil's Snare was the reason Harry needed a shower before bed, and that was certainly not Draco's fault, even if he had made the Devil's Snare in the first place.

Draco really hadn't meant to do it, but right now, he found he was not

sorry it had happened. Of course, right now, he was standing in the master bathroom, watching Harry through the frosted glass of the shower door.

And Harry in the shower was nothing to be sorry about, under any circumstances.

Watching Harry through frosted glass was a bit maddening, as his form was vague and hazy. It was, however, an odd, picturesque view, because of the way the bathroom had been built. The dark, morbid madman who had designed Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place had apparently lost his nerve with the master bathroom. Where the rest of the house was black and gray and more black, the master bathroom was done in white-- the kind of bright, glossy white that could give a person a migraine too early in the morning.

Harry was muted and veiled behind the frosted glass, but his golden skin was dark against the shower's blindingly white tiles. The contrast highlighted his form in a way that more than made up for the intrusion of the shower door.

Draco watched quietly as Harry rubbed a cloth over his arms and chest. He could almost see the soapy sheen the cloth left in its wake, the small, white bubbles spreading over Harry's skin and traveling downwards. He could picture the spray of the shower hitting Harry's body, running down his lightly-muscled chest in tiny rivulets.

He felt a familiar heat in his groin, and reached down to cup his rapidly hardening cock through his pajama pants. He bit back a moan as he touched himself, not wanting to alert Harry of his presence. There was something very erotic about watching Harry like this, and Draco did not want to break the spell just yet.

He had seen Harry in the shower numerous times. They took a shower together every morning, including *this* morning, but even so, Draco could not tear his eyes away. Even though he had seen Harry in the shower several hours earlier, Draco was not tired of it.

He didn't think he would ever grow tired of it.

It was truly amazing, this effect Harry had on him. A two months ago, he could not reconcile the idea of bedding the same girl two nights in a row. Now, he wanted nothing more than to have Harry to himself for the rest of his life.

Draco watched as Harry moved, bending slightly to run the cloth over his legs. Once again, Draco could almost see the light foam swirling around Harry's legs, and could picture the water running down his back and over the curve of his arse.

The heat in his groin shifted to an ache, and the feel of his own hand was no longer remotely satisfying. He moved towards the shower door, pulled it open, and was inside the shower with his arms around Harry before he the door even clicked shut behind him.

Harry, slippery and wet, twisted around in his arms to kiss him. His lips felt warm against Draco's, heated from the steamy water. He pulled Harry closer as Harry's tongue slipped into his mouth. His usual flavor of cinnamon and toffee and vanilla was laced with a faint hint of oatmeal soap.

The song rang in his ears as Harry's soapy hands slid over him. Harry ran them down his shoulder and arms, then slipped them around to explore his back. He slid his hands down to Draco's waist, and paused with a soft chuckle.

"Do you normally wear clothes to the shower?" Harry teased, plucking at the waistband of Draco's thoroughly soaked pajama pants.

In his haste to get into the shower, he had apparently forgotten to get undressed. Cursing, he stripped himself of the offending article before turning his attention back to Harry.

He reached his arm out to touch Harry softly, making the song hum quietly in his ears. He trailed his fingertips over the curve of Harry's collarbone and down his chest, tracing lazy patterns in the tiny rivers that trickled down Harry's skin.

Draco watched a bead of water leave Harry's hair, splash onto his shoulder, and run down his chest. He pulled Harry close, sinking his teeth into the spot where the bead of water had landed, before following its path downwards with his tongue. He paused at Harry's nipple, sucking it into his mouth, making Harry cry out and grind against him.

Draco moved as well, pushing Harry back against the white tiles of the shower wall. He pressed against Harry, relishing the feel of Harry's skin against his and the hot water spraying them both. He buried both

his hands in Harry's wet, black hair and kissed him soundly before dropping to his knees to take Harry into his mouth.

Harry moaned loudly as Draco's lips slid over him. He arched up from the wall and tangled his hands in Draco's hair, twisting the damp, moonlight-colored strands around his fingers and mumbling Draco's name over and over. He pushed into Draco's mouth, and Draco obliged him, taking him deeper.

He sucked Harry hard and fast, working his mouth over Harry's cock as insistently as the song rang in his ears. Harry made a whinging, growling noise in the back of his throat, and his legs started to shake violently. He released his hold on Draco's hair to slam his hands against the tile wall, trying to find purchase. Draco only smiled around Harry's cock and sucked him harder, grasping Harry by the hips to keep him upright.

Draco loved the noises Harry made when they were together. Harry would shout and moan and cry out with no regard to what he sounded like, and Draco never grew tired of hearing it. He loved the way Harry's body reacted to his touch. Harry's skin would pebble and his breathing would grow hitched. His body would shake, and he would cling to Draco like he was losing control of everything.

He loved it when Harry lost control.

Harry came with a shout, thrusting into Draco's mouth so hard it almost took him by surprise.

Then, it was Draco who took Harry by surprise. Before Harry could even catch his breath, Draco spun him around to face the wall and slid two wet, soapy fingers into him. Harry groaned weakly as Draco's fingers slipped inside him, but he instinctively pushed back against Draco's hand.

"Tell me you love me." Draco hissed into Harry's ear.

"I love you." Harry moaned.

"Tell me you want me." Draco insisted. His fingers brushing against Harry's sweet spot, pressing on it softly.

"Oh, fuck." Harry panted, shaking. "I want you."

Draco pulled his fingers out of Harry, and replaced them with his cock.

"Tell me you aren't going to die." He demanded, as he thrust home.

"I'm not going to die." Harry managed. He rocked against Draco, urging him to move.

"Promise me." Draco said quietly, staying as still as he possibly could.

"I promise." Harry said. "I'm not going to die."

And finally, Draco moved.

He fucked Harry as hard and fast as he had sucked him, right up against the wall. It was not long before Harry's legs gave out for good, and Draco was trying desperately to hold them both up on his own precariously wobbly legs.

They both came, screaming, so abruptly that Draco thought his heart had stopped. And as they collapsed onto the shower floor, gasping for air, Draco thought maybe his heart *had* stopped.

Maybe they had both just died, and come back to life like the phoenixes in their song.

~*~

About this time tomorrow, Ron would be standing in Hermione's kitchen, facing a bunch of angry Death Eaters while looking a whole lot like Harry Potter.

He hadn't really thought about it over the last two weeks. When Dumbledore had first mentioned it, Ron had been well and truly shocked, but he had shoved it in the back of his mind after the Order meeting had ended. Now that the big day was nearly here, he was starting to get a bit worried.

More than a bit worried, really.

He supposed he shouldn't be. He was best friends with Harry Potter, for Merlin's sake. Bumping into Death Eaters in the middle of the night was old hat, by now.

Of course, this was a bit different. Every other time they had gone faffing off after danger, Harry had been there. He knew it was rather childish and silly, but the situation never seemed *quite* so bad if Harry was there. Sure, something could go wrong (it sure as shit went wrong at the Ministry of Magic), but a part of him knew everything would not go completely tits up if Harry was hanging around.

Because Harry was a bloody hero.

Ron was not a bloody hero, and honestly, most of him didn't want to be.

True, it had always envied Harry a little bit. It would be difficult not to, because Harry was who he was. Harry was famous, and Harry was popular, and all the girls thought Harry was something to look at.

On the other hand, Harry could barely get a moment's peace. In their first year, he could hardly go to the lavatory without someone pointing and gawping at his forehead. Hell, the Ferret had come to gawp before their first Sorting. And that bloody Creevey idiot! Three years later, and he still would not leave off of Harry, no matter how many times Ron told him he would shove that camera up his arse.

And, when the shit did hit the fan, it usually splattered all over Harry.

Take tomorrow, for example. Harry was rather getting the short end of the stick. Ron and Hermione had to deal with some Death Eaters and that Wormtail arsehole. Harry had to hang around some spooky rocks waiting for You-Know-Who to show up, with no one to rally round but Malfoy.

Malfoy.

To be completely honest, he guessed Harry could do worse, tomorrow. He would never admit it out loud, but the Ferret knew what he was on about in the Dark Magic department. A couple of days ago, he had watched them practicing in the garden, and he had seen Malfoy do some things to the plants that were downright frightening.

However. Malfoy was still an ugly, sneering, ferret-faced git, even if he could make a hydrangea bush die just by giving it the stink-eye. He was still a bigoted, arrogant sod, his father was still an evil, murdering bastard, and Ron still did not understand what Harry saw in him.

Harry hadn't even been gay until Malfoy started hanging around.

But, to be fair, Ron had told Malfoy the truth awhile back. It was because Malfoy was Malfoy, not because he was a boy. Ron was not exactly thrilled about Harry being gay, and a little warning would have been nice, but it was not *that* important.

This was about friendship.

He and Harry had been friends first, before the Ferret had come along and bollocksed it all up. Harry had hated Malfoy. He had always hated Malfoy. If Ron remembered correctly, Harry had disliked Malfoy before he and Harry had ever become friends. And the first day of school, right before the Sorting, Harry had turned his nose up at Malfoy in front of the gods and Hogwarts, and had chosen Ron as a friend.

Five years and some ruddy singing birds later, Harry had turned his nose up at Ron. For Malfoy. That was the bit that killed Ron-- that it had been for Malfoy.

Ron had spent the last month or so waiting impatiently for them to break up. Malfoy was such a total, insufferable prat, there was no way they could keep on without Malfoy doing something to hurt him.

Not that Ron really wanted Harry to get hurt, mind. Only, if the whole thing had blown up in Harry's face, it would have served him right and proper. Besides, Ron would have felt a little bit better about being such an arsehole about the whole thing, because he would have been right.

He was not entirely willing to admit he might have been wrong. However, he missed his best friend something horrible. Especially these last two weeks, because he had spent most of that time alone.

The twins had gone back to their flat above Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes after the Order meeting, and had stayed there until the day before yesterday. Fred and George did have a business to run, and while Lee Jordan had been keeping an eye on the place for them, they thought they should go have a look around.

Ginny was gone, as well, and wasn't due to come back until tomorrow morning. After much begging, she had convinced their mother to let Dean Thomas come for a visit. Of course, Dumbledore wasn't about to have him hanging around Grimmauld Place, so Ginny and Dean were

at the Burrow, under the watchful eye of Bill and Charlie.

Ron wasn't sure who he pitied more-- Dean; for having to deal with his girlfriend's two oldest brothers, or Bill and Charlie; for what Ginny was going to put them through to keep them out of her and Dean's hair. She'd been reading *Saucy Tricks for Tricky Sorts* before she left.

Hermione had been back and forth to her parent's house quite a bit since the Order meeting. When she was in Grimmauld Place, she spent most of her time with her nose in a worryingly thick book, wearing an expression that said she did not want to be bothered.

He missed Hermione, too, not that he was going to go tell her, or anything.

Ron knew he probably shouldn't have gotten so arsed about her and Harry, but at the time, he hadn't been able to help himself. A man could only take so much bad news at once, really. But they had pulled out all the stops, that day, without even letting him have a lie-down inbetween.

Still, he missed her, and he supposed Fred had been right. He really couldn't get in a stick about stuff she did before they were together, even if it was with Harry.....

A small noise made him look up, and he no longer needed to wonder if he should go talk to Hermione, because she was standing in his room.

"Hi." She said quietly.

"Hi." He said flatly.

They studied each other for a bit, then Ron, suddenly uncomfortable, looked away. A pointed silence followed, but Ron didn't look up, because he could feel Hermione's eyes boring a hole into him, and tried to distract himself by picking imaginary lint off his Chudley Canons coverlet. With his eyes looking downward, he could see her toeing her shoe on the mangy carpet nervously. Eventually, she gave a heavy, somewhat impatient sigh, and sat next to him on the bed.

"I've been thinking..." She started, trailing off. She folded her hands in her lap, then fussed with her skirt, then folded them in her lap again. "Oh, Ron! This is silly."

"What is?" He asked, slowly.

"That we are still not talking." Hermione said, giving him a level look. "We've been friends forever, and it's been over a month, now."

"Yeah." He agreed, glancing up at her.

"And you could die tomorrow!" She blurted, her cheeks coloring.

"Bloody Hell, Hermione!" He choked. "I am not going to die!" At least, he hoped he didn't.

"You could get hurt." She insisted, not that Ron wanted to think about it. "If something happened to you, and we were still having this silly fight, I would never forgive myself."

"Yeah." He said again. He wanted to say quite a bit more, but he was afraid he would put his foot in his mouth, again.

Suddenly, she hugged him, worming her arms around his neck and squeezing so hard it was difficult to breathe.

"I've missed you." She mumbled into his neck.

"I've missed you, too." He admitted, slipping an arm around her to stroke her back.

"And no more silly fights!" She said, pulling away from him.

On a whim, he pulled her back, and kissed her. He'd missed this, too. He wasn't sure if this was what she had come in here for, but he figured there was no harm in trying.

After all, she had said 'no more silly fights'.

XVIII The Sun Will Come Out, Tomorrow (Part Two)

The stench emanating from the cauldron was absolutely foul.

Carefully, Snape measured a spoonful of Eye of Newt from a small vial, and tipped it into the cauldron. The thick, brownish brew hissed

furiously, and belched acrid smoke. Snape glared murderously at the cauldron, and waved the smoke out of his face impatiently.

He hated making Wolfsbane Potion. Unfortunately, there was nothing for it, because it was Lupin's time of the month.

Once the smoke cleared, Snape took up a large, long-handled, wooden spoon and began to stir. Three times clockwise, three times counterclockwise, and then three times clockwise, again.

Holding the spoon perfectly still, Snape slowly added ingredients with his other hand. He dropped in a pinch of Dragon's Scales, a half a measure of ground Dragon Bone, and three coarse hairs from the hind-leg of a female wolf. The contents of the cauldron bubbled and sputtered menacingly, then settled down to a quiet simmer.

As the brew calmed itself, Snape began to stir again, clockwise. He had to agitate the concoction until it changed from a dull brown to a rust color. There was no particular count to it, but Snape had learned that the change usually occurred between fifty and fifty-five strokes.

He supposed it was necessary that Lupin not turn into a ravening madman every month. He did not, however, understand why the task always fell to him. It was not an overly difficult potion to make, it was simply time-consuming. One only had to pay attention and follow the instructions.

Of course, Lupin could barely brew tea without help from Molly Weasley.

So Snape made the Wolfsbane, every month, because no one else could be bothered, because Lupin would probably kill himself if he tried his own hand at it.

And, because Dumbledore had asked him too.

Dumbledore did have some nerve, asking him to. It was not like Dumbledore didn't know Snape disliked Lupin. On the contrary, he was well aware of it, but he asked him to, anyway, because the Headmaster had never really had a sense of propriety.

Then again, the Headmaster thought it was foolish that Snape was still holding a grudge. Especially since half the grudge was dead, a quarter of it had gone over to the other side, and the other quarter was

relatively harmless for twenty-eight days out of the month.

Upon reflection, Snape supposed Lupin had been the least abhorrent of the four of them. Potter had been a conceited, self-important prat, Black had been an ill-mannered, mean-spirited arse, and Pettigrew had been a bootlicker.

Lupin had been more quiet and reserved, he had rarely been outright mean, and he had not really been in on Black's plot to kill him with a werewolf and a violent tree. Granted, Lupin had been the werewolf in question, but it was not like he could help that.

Still, he had been one of *them*, and his boyfriend had been the worst of them all. Of course, Black hadn't been Lupin's boyfriend at the time of the Whomping Willow fiasco, he had been Potter's, but the less said about that whole arrangement, the better, as far as Snape was concerned.

"Evening, Severus."

Name the Dark One, Snape thought sourly, as Remus Lupin stepped out of his fireplace.

"It needs another moment." Snape said shortly. The potion was the right color, but not quite the proper consistency.

As he waited, Snape glanced over at Lupin. The werewolf inclined his head at Snape, but thankfully, did not make an attempt at smalltalk. Snape had no desire to chitchat with an old school enemy, just because Dumbledore and the Order expected them to play nicely.

Lupin folded his arms across his chest and waited quietly by the fireplace, like he always did. He never came fully in, or helped himself to a seat. Then again, Snape never invited him to do so.

Once the potion was thick enough, Snape ladled a decent amount into a glass vial.

"Ready." Snape said gruffly, gesturing with the vial.

"Ta, Severus." Lupin said, crossing the room to collect it.

"The usual rules apply." Snape instructed. "Take it an hour before the sun sets, and do not eat a half-hour before you take it."

"Yes, Professor Snape." Lupin joked.

"And make sure you take it all." Snape went on, ignoring the quip.
"Don't spill half of it down your front, or feed it to Potter to see what happens."

Though the Gods knew, Potter could use a dose of something personality-adjusting.

As usual, Snape had made more than enough, just in case Lupin ever fumbled and spilled some of it. One would assume he could take a potion without incident, but Lupin had been a Gryffindor, after all, and no one had ever accused Gryffindors of being overly bright or particularly agile.

Take Longbottom, for example. Acutally, Snape wished someone *would* take Longbottom. To Beauxbatons, perhaps, or to that new institute the American wizards had built in Salem.

"Thank you, Severus." Lupin said, reaching his hand out. "I do appreciate it."

Snape made a noncommittal noise and held the vial out. Lupin reached out, his fingers accidentally brushing Snape's as he took hold of it. Snape's eyes flicked to Lupin, but the werewolf made no indication he noticed it. He simply inclined his head to Snape again, turned, and started for the fireplace.

"You know..." Lupin said, pausing in front of the fireplace. "I am sorry about that business with the tree."

"Pray, don't mention it." Snape said snappishly, waving him off.

It was far too late for that, as far as Snape saw it. There had never been a word of remorse from any of them when it happened. Half-hearted apologies, some twenty years after the fact, would only serve to make him angry.

"Really, Severus, I am." Lupin said quietly, his amber eyes plaintive. "I wasn't... *myself*, that night. I had no way of knowing what they were getting up to."

"Yes, yes." Snape scowled bitterly. "I am sure you are horribly

distraught, now that twenty some-odd years have passed." He snorted, and waved his hands dismissingly. "You were obviously quite upset about it at the time, as well, since a short time afterward you started dating the man who arranged it all."

"That, I will not apologize for." Lupin said stiffly. "I loved him well."

"I am sure you did." Snape said meanly. "And, I am sure James did, as well, when it was his turn."

Lupin's yellowish eyes flashed dangerously, and his face darkened. He made a low noise in the back of his throat, something akin to a growl. Snape had a fleeting, fearful moment, and his hand inched reflexively for his wand.

For a split-second, Snape's mind flew back in time. He was suddenly sixteen, again, standing at the secret door of the Whomping Willow and face to face with a werewolf.

Then, it was over. Lupin took a deep breath, and the darkness left his face. He favored Snape with lingering, derisive look, but there was no real anger in it. He inclined his head to Snape once more, and disappeared into the fireplace.

Snape stared at the empty fireplace for a full minute before turning away, and he was halfway through the finishing touches on the Polyjuice for tomorrow before he realized he was still holding his wand.

~*~

"You know, we were meant to be the same person."

George, his attention focused on the tattered copy of *The Standard Book of Spells, Grade Seven* he was leafing through, only half-heard his brother. He was looking for a spell he remembered from school-- a charm that made inanimate objects speak. Fred had been working on some poseable dolls of the Hogwarts staff, and George thought they would sell quite well if they could talk.

"Are you listening to me?" Fred asked, raising an eyebrow at his brother.

"Not at all." George answered honestly, looking up from the book to

flash him a cheeky grin. Fred rolled his eyes, and George sighed indulgently. "What are you on about, then?"

"I said, we were meant to be the same person." Fred repeated. He snatched the offending book out of George's hands, tossed it on the floor, and plopped himself in his lap.

"How's that?" George asked, as Fred settled against him. He reached up and idly twisted a lock of Fred's red hair around his finger.

"Hermione explained it to me the other day." Fred said, with a measure of seriousness that most people would not believe he was capable of. "About identical twins, and how they start out as the same person."

"Oh?" George asked, his interest piqued. He paused his hand, letting Fred's hair slip through his fingers. It was exactly the same shade as his own. "Go on, then."

"She said we were actually the same egg, at the first." Fred explained. "Only, we split in half, early on."

"Really." George said thoughtfully. "I could believe that."

"Make sense, it does." Fred said, pleased with himself.

It did make sense, now that he thought about it. He had always thought Fred was his other half. This notion was reinforced by a warmth spreading through him as Fred snuggled a bit closer and leaned his head back on George's shoulder.

"You worried about tomorrow?" Fred asked, turning his head so he was speaking into George's neck.

"A little." George replied quietly. His hand sought out one of Fred's and squeezed it. "You?"

"Yeah." Fred said. His breath ghosted over George's neck, making him shiver. "A little."

In truth, George was more than a little worried. Everyone was in for quite a bit of nastiness, tomorrow, and if something happened to Fred.....

That rather depressing train of thought was derailed by Fred's lips sliding over his neck. He shivered again, and felt a familiar rush of heat that only his brother could cause.

Well, *anyone* could cause it, but only Fred could make him feel exactly like *this*.

"No, don't." George complained weakly, though he really didn't mean it. "Not here. Mum's just across the hall."

"Let's go back to the flat, then." Fred offered, slipping off George's lap and hauling him to his feet by his hands. "Just for a little while."

George considered this briefly, then smiled wickedly and pulled his brother in for a kiss.

"We'll come back in the morning."

~*~

Harry sunk his teeth into the back of Draco's neck as pushed into him. Draco moaned and arched up off the bed, causing Harry to slide all the way in him with one, smooth stroke.

He paused, relishing the feel of Draco surrounding him. It was hot, velvet heat so tight around him it almost hurt, so perfect it was almost unbearable. He knew it would feel even better once he started to move, but a little bit of him was always scared to move at the first, afraid that if he did, he would break the spell and find it was all a figment of his imagination.

But Draco rocked backwards, coaxing him, and the song roared, urging him, He did move, taking Draco in long, slow thrusts, angled to hit that spot that made Draco scream.

He loved to hear Draco scream.

To this day, over a month gone, it was still completely unbelievable.

If, five years ago, someone had told him that snotty boy he had just met in Madam Malkin's was his soulmate, he would have laughed until his sides exploded. If, the next day, after Draco had delivered that sneering, derisive speech before the Sorting, someone had told him he

and Draco would fall for each other and kiss and make love morning, noon, and night, he probably would have smacked them for their cheek.

Shockingly enough, they would have been right.

Though, a small part of him thought it made sense.

For some reason, Draco had always been the first person he looked for when he walked into a room. The Great Hall, the Potions classroom, the Care of Magical Creatures area, the Quidditch Pitch-- it didn't matter. Wherever he went, his eyes searched the room for silvery hair and gray eyes.

He had always watched Draco, though at the time, he had thought he was keeping an eye on the enemy.

Draco had always made his insides knot and his heart pound like it was running away. Draco had always made his blood simmer and his skin heat up like he was standing a handful of feet under the sun. Draco had always been able to work his last nerve in a way that no other person could manage.

Draco had always made him feel like no one else could. Only, he had thought it was powered by hate at the time.

Of course, Sirius had once told him that love and hate were really the same emotion.

Suddenly, Harry pulled out of Draco and flipped him onto his back. He wanted to look at Draco's beautiful face and lose himself in those gray eyes.

Harry kissed Draco as he slipped back inside him, tasting and feeling and savoring him. He moved his mouth to Draco's ear as the song reached a fever pitch, words spilling uncontrollably out of his mouth.

He told Draco how much he loved him, and how he couldn't imagine his life without him. He told Draco how he had always watched him, how Draco had always made him freeze and burn at the same time, and how Draco had always made him feel everything.

He told Draco how they had very nearly been in love from the beginning, and it had just taken them five years to sort themselves

out.

It had been love at first fight, but they had been too stupid to realize it at the time.

~*~

That greasy, big-nosed git had a lot of sodding nerve.

Remus was positively irate when he stepped out of the fireplace and into Grimmauld Place's sitting room. He had tried to put on a calm front as he left Snape's, but it was quickly slipping away. He was so furious he was shaking, and he was quite glad that the sitting room was not full of people, like it usually was.

He could only imagine what Harry and Draco were getting up to, given that today was the last day before all hell broke loose. Ginny was at the Burrow with her boyfriend, likely trying to get up too much the same thing. He was almost willing to wager Ron and Hermione were, as well. He knew they were still estranged, but given the weight of what tomorrow would bring, now was as good a time as any for reconciliation.

Either way, Grimmauld Place was blessedly empty as Remus stalked through the halls, threw his door open violently, and slammed it shut with enough force to make his whole side of the house shake.

That ugly, lanky-haired bastard had an incredible amount of bloody nerve. His balls were so big they probably drug on the ground when he walked.

Remus took a deep breath as he sank into his armchair, and tried to compose himself. He did not get angry often, but when he did, he came close to losing his mind. The wolf was always there, lurking right under his skin, and of late, it was harder and harder to control.

This only proved a point Sirius had brought up long ago-- trying to be nice to Snape was rather like pissing in the wind.

Granted, it had been a bit late for apologies. Of course, when it had happened, Remus had been a bit young for apologies. He had been sixteen, for Merlin's sake. He had been furious with Sirius and James for giving away his secret like that, but he had never realized the true

gravity of the situation. Nor had it occurred to him that Snape had been harboring a grudge about it.

As time passed, and he understood how dangerous the whole thing had been to Snape, there had not been much opportunity to apologize. He had not seen much of Snape over the years, and when he finally had, at Hogwarts, he had not been of the mind to apologize for anything. Especially after Snape had announced his condition to all and sundry, thus indirectly costing him his job.

A recent event had made him change his mind. A recent event, coupled with reflection on past events.

He had lost James and Lily, with no warning. He had lost Sirius--twice, no less, also with no warning. When Sirius had returned from Azkaban, it had never occurred to Remus that he would lose him again. Then he did, only two short years after getting him back.

From this, Remus had learned a very important thing. Never leave anything unsaid, because the weight of those words will haunt you for the rest of your life.

The time for apologies had come and gone, and Remus had been well aware of this. However, he had felt compelled to make them, anyway, particularly because Snape would be risking his neck something fierce, tomorrow.

So much for trying to make amends.

And the bloody bastard had had no right, bringing up *James*.

When James and Sirius had been together, Remus had never given it a second thought. They had been so young, and so ridiculously smitten with each other that the whole thing had been rather cute, really. However, when he got with Sirius, his opinion on the matter had changed a bit.

The whole thing had then become uncomfortable, to say the least.

He had Sirius had gotten together some two months after James had started dating Lily, so Sirius had figured there was no harm done. Remus had hoped Sirius was right, and James had always smiled and said he didn't mind at all, but Remus would have been blind not to see he was slightly bitter.

Sirius hadn't noticed, but that was on the mark for him.

Lily had, which had been another mess, entirely. They had had a spectacular row about it in the Marauder's bedroom one night, and while the Silencing Charm Lily had cast had kept everyone else in the Gryffindor Common Room ignorant, Remus had heard every bloody word. She had flat out told James they were finished, if she caught him mooning over Sirius one more time.

James had immediately stopped giving Remus and Sirius the hairy eyeball, but Remus had always wondered if he had been really over and done, or if it had just been for Lily's benefit.

He remembered James and Lily's wedding like it was yesterday.

It had been a lovely June day. The weather had been perfectly mild, and there had not been a cloud in the sky. The Potter's backyard had been done up beautifully, covered in lilies and white roses and silk sashes just this side of Gryffindor red.

At the altar, James had looked grown up and proper. His black dress-robos had been exquisite, and Mrs. Potter had even managed to make his hair behave. Next to him, Sirius had looked adorably ridiculous, and completely out of place. His long hair had kept falling into his gray eyes, and the cuffs of his black, leather motorbike pants had been peeping out from under his too-short robes.

Just before Lily had emerged from the house, Remus had caught James and Sirius eyeing each other sideways. He had gotten a horrible, painful knot in his stomach, and for a brief moment, he had worried he might have to take Lily out for a serious round of drinks, because the groom and the best man were going to run off together and never been seen again.

Suddenly, he realized he was having the same panicky feeling he had had at the Potter's wedding. His stomach was knotting, and his heart hurt like it was being squeezed by a large hand.

Remus got furious all over again, this time at himself. He stood, kicked a nearby footstool across the room, and started to pace.

He could not believe Snape had managed to drag up these insecurities. Over twenty years had passed, and both the men in question were

dead. A three minute conversation with Snape, and he was fidgeting about things he had long forgotten about.

Then again, a small part of him was oddly grateful, because this was the first time he had felt *anything* since Sirius died. It was almost a relief, to know he was still capable of emotion.

Strange, though, that it had been Snape who caused it.

Remus glanced out the window and sighed. The sun had gone down, and the moon was large and bright in the dark sky. At first sight she looked full, and Remus had to stare at her for a few moments to see the slight unevenness to her.

"Don't rise, tomorrow." He said bitterly, before turning from the window.

Tomorrow, before he took his potion, he was going to hug Harry, and tell him he loved him. He was going to tell Harry he was proud of him, and that James and Sirius would have been proud of him, too.

There were plenty of Silencing Charms on the master bedroom, but as far as Remus was concerned, they were for naught. What he heard was vague and muffled, but it was enough to confirm his original suspicions of what Harry and Draco were getting up to.

He smiled at that, a bit sadly, and hoped that come tomorrow, they hadn't left anything unsaid.

XIX Without You, Everything Falls Apart (Part One)

"Ron, are you ready?"

He glanced up at his mother, and nodded mutely. She produced a bottle of Polyjuice out of her robes, and handed it to him. He took it and set it on the table in front of him, but did not unstopper it.

Just then, his world narrowed to the vial of brownish liquid sitting on a canary yellow placemat, as if on display. He did not really see Hermione, or his family, nor did he notice the completely terrified Grangers, or their yellow and white kitchen.

All he could see was the Polyjuice, and all he could think about was how much he did not want to do this.

He was not the bloody hero, that was Harry's department. He was not Harry, and he did not want to be Harry, even for a little while.

Three hours, to be exact.

The Polyjuice was something of Snape's own design, altered to last longer than regular Polyjuice. Ron did not know what Snape had done to it to make it last three hours, but he was pretty sure he was better off that way.

Polyjuice. Polyjuice that Snape had made. Polyjuice that Snape had made that would make him into Harry Sodding Potter, for exactly three hours.

"Ron?" His father questioned. The moon had been in the sky for almost an hour now. Wormtail and his cronies were due at any moment, and he still pointedly looked like Ronald Weasley.

"Yeah, alright." He mumbled, pulling the cork out of the vial.

He pulled a folded parchment out of the pocket of his trousers. Wrapped inside were three of Harry's hairs. He carefully dropped the hair in the vial, and waited for it to stop snapping and bubbling before raising it to his lips.

He sniffed at the lip of the bottle, and frowned. Hermione smiled thinly, and patted his leg encouragingly. Squeezing his eyes shut, he pinched his nose, and downed the vile stuff in one long, horrid swallow.

He immediately felt violently ill. His stomach knotted painfully, nausea washed over him, and the world rocked dangerously. He took deep breaths, hoping they would calm his stomach, and gripped the edge of the table hard, trying to stay in his chair.

As his body calmed, he became aware that he was a bit shorter, and a good deal skinnier. His clothing (cast-offs from Harry's fat-arsed Muggle cousin) had been too big, but now they were ridiculously huge. The sleeves of the supposedly short-sleeve shirt went almost to his wrists, and he had no idea how his trousers were going to stay over

his arse.

He had a sore spot on the inside of his right thigh that he was pretty sure he did not want to know about, because he had the sneaking suspicion it had something to do with the Ferret.

Slowly, Ron stood up, trying to get accustomed to his new body. He took a step back, tripped over something he didn't see, and crashed into something large and blurry.

There was a loud grunt, then "Ron!"

The grunt was a complete mystery. The 'Ron!' sounded like Hermione, but he couldn't be sure, because though the owner of the voice was standing over him, it was vague and hazy.

"Here, you'll need his extra glasses."

Glasses were put into his hand, and as he slipped them onto his face, everything came into focus. The owner of the voice was, in fact, Hermione, he had tripped over his chair, and he had landed on George.

"Sorry, mate." Ron said, standing. "Harry's blind as a bat."

George rolled his eyes at him dramatically as he took a hand-up from Fred.

"So, what now?" He asked.

"We wait." Arthur Weasley said, before going over the plan one more time.

Ron only half-listened to his father. He had heard the plan too many times since the Order meeting, and he certainly did not need to hear it again. In short, once Wormtail arrived, the twins would Apparate into the sitting room to alert the rest of the Order. They would come barreling in, two of them would get the Grangers the shit out of there, and then, they would sort Wormtail and the Death Eaters out.

And Wormtail and the Death Eaters would be after him, because he looked like Harry Potter.

He really didn't want to be the hero.

But, as he brushed messy black hair out of his eyes, his fingers traced over that all too familiar scar, and he knew he would have to be.

At least, for the next three hours.

~*~

"Mister Potter, its time."

Dumbledore's voice was quiet, and his face was uncharacteristically solemn and grave. Draco had been wearing much the same face all day, when he thought Harry wasn't looking, but for some reason, Harry found it more disquieting from Dumbledore. The Headmaster was usually chipper, even during unpleasant times, and he could deliver bad news in a tone that said it was of no more importance than a weather report.

Draco, however, was another matter, entirely. He had nearly driven himself to distraction with worry, though he probably thought Harry hadn't noticed. He was trying to hide it, stuffing it under layers of sneering sarcasm and off-hand remarks, but Harry knew it was there.

Harry knew, because he felt much the same way.

He really wanted Draco to say behind, but he had finally let the matter drop a week ago, when it was plain that bringing it up would only start a fight. Draco had made up his mind, and grindyglows would fly out of Harry's arse before he managed to talk Draco around.

And he really didn't want to fight with Draco. Not ever, but certainly not now.

He hadn't wanted to watch Ron and Hermione go. He hadn't wanted to, because he hadn't wanted to think about what they were going off to do. They had both put on brave faces, but he had been able to tell that inside, Hermione had been a wreck, and Ron had not been far off that.

In the end, he had watched them go, because they had been going because of him. If it was not for him, none of them would have been in this mess.

Voldemort had targeted Hermione's parents, because of him. Ron was going to spend the evening parading around as Harry Potter, because of him. The twins, Ginny, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, and half the Order of the Phoenix were quietly waiting around a Muggle kitchen for Wormtail and a bunch of Death Eaters to arrive, because of him.

And because of him, Draco was going to Stonehenge.

Harry looked over at Draco, and Harry's hand sought out his under the table. Draco looked up as he squeezed it. He tilted his head to the side and gave Harry a crooked smile. He smiled back, and resisted the urge to lean over and kiss him.

Half the bloody Order of the Phoenix was in the room, and that would not do at all.

Dumbledore would probably take it in stride, he was usually unflappable, but the rest of the Order might not take it so well. He honestly didn't care what they thought, but he was well aware that *now* was not a good time. They likely did not need any startling news at the moment, and it would be much safer for everyone involved if they were not goggling at him and Draco when they should be paying attention to where Voldemort was pointing his wand.

"Mister Potter?" Dumbledore pressed.

Harry looked up at the Headmaster, his eyes loitering on the portkey he held, but he did not move. He knew he should move, knew he had to move, but it felt like his arms and legs were made of lead.

Finally, a nudge in the ribs from Draco jolted him into motion. He heaved himself up, and started over towards Dumbledore. He narrowed his eyes at the portkey as he went, glaring at it like it had done him a personal wrong.

It was a small chunk of stone-- oddly shaped, and jagged on one side, like it had been chipped off a larger rock. It was dull and gray and unimpressive, and looked like any normal, ordinary rock from a garden or park.

Of course, knowing Dumbledore, it wasn't ordinary at all. Dumbledore had probably nicked it from Stonehenge, as some kind of private joke.

Wherever it came from, it was about to take him to Stonehenge. Him,

and Draco, and Dumbledore, and McGonagall, and Dedalus Diggle.....

As the Order clustered around Dumbledore, Harry wormed his way between Moody and McGonagall to stand next to Draco. He pressed in close to Draco, and Draco dropped his hand to his side to take a hold of his.

"Are you ready?" Dumbledore asked, to no one in particular.

Nodding, Harry lifted his free hand, but Draco was faster. He lifted there interlocked ones and laid them on the stone, their fingers still twined together.

He felt the familiar sensation of a hook yanking him from behind his navel. The room spun around him, and everything went black.

The last thing her heard was wolf-Remus in the other room, whining and scratching at the door.

~*~

Many, many years ago, in a History of Magic class he scarcely remembered, Professor Binns had told him that Stonehenge had once been the center of religious power in all of Britain.

Snape made a mental note to tell Binns he was a big, unsubstantial, transparent liar, when the term started in the fall.

If he lived that long.

Stonehenge was, in fact, cold and dreary and depressing, and Snape could not fathom what the Druids had been on about. All the religious mystery that shrouded the place boiled down to a bunch of large rocks that loomed in a rather disconcerting fashion.

He felt no rapture, no intimate connection with the divine. Only the slightly chill wind, and an impending sense of dread.

Of course, the dread was possibly due to the man who was currently circling the altar stone predatorily.

Snape cast a baleful eye at Voldemort, his thin frame draped in voluminous black robes. He seemed to have grown stronger in the last

few months, thought Snape could not guess as to how or why.

Though, even when he had been a frail, weak, wreck of a man, he had still managed to strike fear in the cold, little black hearts of his minions.

The minions in question were currently preening themselves. They seemed to be under the impression that being chosen to accompany Voldemort, rather than Wormtail, somehow made them special.

Snape, however, was a bit more pragmatic. He had a fairly good idea of what was really going on. The people Voldemort had sent to the Granger's were the people he thought he could trust to act without him breathing down their neck. The people he had chosen for Stonehenge, on the other hand, were the ones he felt he needed to keep an eye on.

Which likely meant that Snape's jig was just about up.

One would probably think it was a bit arrogant of Voldemort, to bring the untrustworthy members of his lot with him to the more important of the two tasks, but Voldemort was nothing, if not arrogant.

That, and he had two wildcards up his sleeve-- Lucius Malfoy, and Bellatrix Lestrange. Those two were more than capable of keeping everyone else in hand while the Dark Lord was babbling in Welsh and stealing ancient relics of myth and legend.

Lucius had not approached him yet, something that Snape found rather worrying. Lucius had two stages of anger; immediate, hot, seething wrath, and slow, calculated, simmering rage. Of the two, the slow variety was more dangerous, because it gave him plenty of time to plan your demise in numerous painful, shockingly inventive ways.

"The time comes." Voldemort said suddenly.

Voldemort stationed himself in front of the altar stone, flanked by Lucius and Bellatrix. The Death Eaters, including Snape, formed a circle around them, but Voldemort ignored them. He was watching the sky intently, evidently waiting for the moon to reach a certain point.

Snape focused on Voldemort, and forced himself not to look around for Potter and Dumbledore.

If he was going to continue on with this ruse, the least he could do was bother to look surprised when the calvary arrived.

~*~

Ron had to admit, he had not been expecting Wormtail to ring the sodding doorbell.

The Granger's doorbell was a delicate, tinkling of chimes, but it was almost deafening in the silent kitchen. It shocked everyone near to death, and they exchanged confused looks for a moment before collectively agreeing to ignore it.

It rang again.

It was not quite as startling this time, though it was still as confusing. Befuddled looks were exchanged again, and once more, nobody moved.

"Someone's at the door." Ron said slowly, not really comprehending his own words.

Mr. Granger sighed and got up. He fixed a firm expression on his face as he started for the living room, as if he intended to inform the individual ringing his bell that now was not a good time for him to be coming around, selling vacuums.

As he left the kitchen, Molly's eyes went wide, and Arthur jumped to his feet. Realization set in, and they both started for the door at once. This jerked everyone else into action, and they were in the Granger's pink and powder blue living room about ten seconds behind Mr. and Mrs. Weasley.

The pair stopped dead a few paces in the room, staring at Mr. Granger. Everyone else skidded to a halt behind them, except Ron, who pushed through everyone and stepped between his parents.

"Can I help you?" Mr. Granger asked.

"No, Muggle, you cannot." A short, hooded and cloaked figure spat as he pushed his way inside.

With a flick of the man's wrist and a muttered spell, Mr. Granger sailed

sideways through the air, and crashed loudly into a wall. Mrs. Granger screamed and started for her husband, but was stopped by Arthur Weasley throwing out his arm to hold her back.

The man stepped fully into the room, and several similarly cloaked and hooded figures filed in behind him. He pulled back his hood, revealing a round face and a pointy nose. He was badly balding, and his wispy hair was light; not silver like Malfoy's, but practically colorless.

His watery eyes searched the people clustered in the kitchen doorway before settling on Ron.

"Mister Potter." Wormtail said, smiling. His voice was oily, and he sounded a bit more confident than he had in the Shrieking Shack two years ago. "Fancy meeting you here."

He raised his wand, held by a shiny, silvery hand, and pointed it at Ron.

Ron had a sudden moment of complete loss, wherein everything he had learned in five years at Hogwarts, including Defense Against the Dark Arts classes and DA meetings, left him in a furious rush. He stood staring blankly at Wormtail, his mind groping furiously for a spell, any spell-- the fern-growing one, even, but nothing came.

"You're rather quiet, Mister Potter." Wormtail cajoled. He moved towards Ron, gesturing with his wand as he spoke. "Did we come at a bad time, or are you not in the mood for heroics, tonight?"

Ron opened his mouth, knowing full well that the real Harry would have already given this overgrown rat some cheek, but nothing came out.

Wormtail stopped a few paces in front of him, his robes swirling around him. This reminded Ron vaguely of Snape, who often twirled his about him theatrically. With that, his mind conjured a hazy recollection of a meeting of the Dueling Club, and Snape flying through the air, his robes flapping as he went.

"*Expelliarmus!*" Ron shouted, before his wand was even at the ready.

Wormtail took two stunned, shuffling steps backwards, his wand clattering to the ground. Wormtail quickly retrieved it, and shouted *Stupefy* before he was fully upright, but Ron dodged it and countered

with another successful Disarming Charm that sent Wormtail sprawling.

Then, a voice that sounded like either Fred or George sent a Bat-Bogey at Wormtail's entourage. The clustered group of Death Eaters scattered, shouting various hexes and curses as they did. This was followed two Apparation cracks sounding in rapid succession, and Ron crashing to the ground from a Leg-Locker he hadn't seen coming.

His wand rolled away from him as he fell. He located it quickly, and pulled himself over the carpet towards it with his arms. Just as his fingers closed around it, a foot came to rest on his wrist.

Ron looked up to see Wortmail attached to that foot, but he was suddenly gone, lying flat on his back from something that had come shooting out of Ginny's wand. Ginny hastily restored his legs and gave him a hand up, but before he could thank her she spun around, treating a different cloaked figure to whatever she had done to Wormtail.

As Ron approached Wormtail, he had the distinct impression he should have asked her to borrow *Saucy Tricks for Tricky Sorts*.

This thought fled as he found Wormtail in front of him. He was seething with anger, his round, pasty face flushed an alarming shade of red.

"Did you think it would be that easy, Potter?" Wormtail scoffed. "Spells from your first year?" He gave a derisive snort and hefted his wand. "You truly are a sorry excuse for a hero."

"I am not a sodding hero!" Ron shouted, charging at Wormtail. His wand and magic momentarily forgotten, he attacked Wormtail bodily, knocking him to the ground.

Clearly not expecting a physical attack, Wormtail was motionless as Ron landed on top of him, his eyes wide with shock. Ron sat back, straddling him, the knees on either side of Wormtail's body pinning his arms to the floor.

Ron glared. Wormtail hesitated. And, with a surge of pure anger, Ron did something he had wanted to do since he had watched Scabbers transform into this horrible man in the Shrieking Shack.

His fist sailed right for Wormtail's face, his wand still clenched in his hand, catching Wormtail right in the jaw with a loud, resounding crack.

Wormtail howled piteously as Ron's fist connected with his jaw, but he did not move. Ron's left hand flew, sinking squarely into his belly, and Wormtail made a pained grunt that was almost as satisfying to Ron as the howl.

Raging, Ron punched him again, this time in the nose, then once more in the gut.

Suddenly, Wormtail started to struggle wildly. He twisted futilely, attempting to remove his arms from under Ron's knees, and bucked his body upward, trying to throw Ron off.

This only incensed Ron further. He leaned forward over Wormtail, using his left hand to pin Wormtail to the floor, and redoubled the assault with his right. Wormtail screamed, and emotions Ron could not properly lay name to rose to the surface, coursing through him in a way that was both frightening and exciting.

Childish, indignant anger at the pet he had cared for and argued with Hermione over, the pet who had turned out to be a murdering Animagus in disguise.

Furious, righteous anger for what he had done to Harry and Harry's parents and to Sirius Black, and for what he had hoped to do to Hermione's parents.

And, the exquisite thrill of being able to lay his hands on him, and make him feel pain for everything he had done.

It felt good. It felt right. He felt completely and totally vindicated.

Ron's hand flew one more time, connecting solidly with Wormtail's pointy little nose with a sickening crunch. Wormtail gave a wail that Ron felt as much as he heard, and somehow, Wormtail found the strength to toss Ron off of him.

~*~

Draco had assumed Dumbledore's portkey would drop then a short walk from Stonehenge. What it had done, however, was drop them

right inside the monument, towards the south side of the circle of stones.

Once the new locale solidified around him, he was suddenly aware of two things; Voldemort, and his father.

Voldemort looked stronger and healthier than the last time Draco had seen him. He was still abnormally thin and pale, but he no longer seemed drawn and gaunt. He stood tall and erect as he chanted to the large, flat stone in the center of the circle, and appeared completely unconcerned with their abrupt arrival.

Lucius Malfoy was on Voldemort's left. He was thinner from his stint in Azkaban, and had that haunted look people who had been to the Wizards Prison often had, but he had not lost the ability to make anyone, even his own son, shiver from a single, lifted eyebrow.

Their arrival sparked a hue and a cry from the assembled Death Eaters, one of which, unluckily, Draco thought might be Snape from his height and build. The commotion did not deter Voldemort's attention at all, but Lucius and Bellatrix Lestrange immediately looked over to see what put the peons in such a panic.

Lucius' first reaction seemed to be confusion. He cocked his head to the side, and eyed his son in what appeared to be bewilderment.

Slowly, the ramifications of Draco's present company seemed to set in. He pursed his lips, his gray eyes pausing for a moment on Harry, and the confusion quickly gave way to anger.

But then, as his gaze tracked up and down his son one more time, his eyes lingered for a moment on Draco and Harry's clasped hands. The anger shifted to something a few notches above rage, something so far and beyond wrath there was probably no word for it.

Other than murderous.

"Agorwch, drws garegog mawr." Voldemort chanted, his arms lifted in a V over his head. "Agorwch a gadael i mi mynedfa".

The Death Eaters all stood with their wands at the ready, but they did not move. They were all looking to Lucius, waiting for his instruction, but he did not have the opportunity to give it.

Just as he opened his mouth, Dumbledore sent something very bright and very blue at Voldemort. Nothing happened that Draco saw, there was apparently some kind of barrier around him, but he faltered a bit in his chanting.

"Myn y gogledd a'r dde, rwy'n orchymyn i chi" Voldemort continued, his voice wavering slightly. "Myn y Ddwyrain a'r Orllewin, rwy'n orchymyn i chi."

Lucius paused, and pulled his wand, but Draco was faster.

"*Expelliarmus!*" He shouted.

Lucius stumbled backward into Bellatrix Lestrange, who had been at his elbow. He retrieved his wand quickly and sent a Stunning Spell at Draco, just as Bellatrix sent the same to Harry.

Draco wrenched Harry to the ground by the hand he held, ducking the pair of spells. From the ground, half atop of Harry, he sent a Repelling Spell at his father, that sent him flying across the circle of stones. He heard Harry shout something from underneath him, and the hem of Bellatrix's robes erupted into flame.

"Do you remember everything I taught you?" Draco asked, as he pulled Harry to his feet.

"*Expelliarmus!*" Harry shouted, pointing his wand over Draco's shoulder. Bellatrix, who had been advancing on them despite her smoldering robes, staggered backwards.

"Good boy." Draco nodded, taking that as an answer. "I love you."

"I love you, too." Harry said, before starting after Bellatrix, and ostensibly, Voldemort.

"Myn y gornel, rwy'n orchymyn i chi. Yn y'r enw o'r Fam, rwy'n orchymyn i chi"

Draco did not watch Harry go, as his attention immediately turned to looking for his father.

His father was more knowledgeable than him and had more years experience, so he had no illusions as to how a fair duel between them sort itself out. Draco would die painfully, and spectacularly, and the

Order would probably have to send what was left of him back to Harry in a matchbox.

Of course, Draco had no intentions of playing fair.

"So, my son returns." Lucius said stiffly, from behind Draco.

Draco spun to face him, and lifted his wand. "I am not your son."

"Are you not?" Lucius asked. His tone was scoffing, and he lifted his wand at Draco almost lazily. "Your mother would have some explaining to do, if she was still alive."

At this off-hand mention of his mother, the hate simmering inside him lurched violently to a boil. He cast three Repelling Charms at his father, one right after the other, each before his father had regained his feet.

Lucius ended up sprawled against one of the standing stones. He righted himself quickly, and aimed a hastily mumbled spell in Draco's general direction.

For all his bad aim, the spell hit Draco square. It was a Dark Arts variation on a Leg-Locker, equally as useful, and painful besides, as the limbs were not only frozen, but charmed with a vivid sensation of pins and needles.

Draco muttered the countercurse quickly, and forced his legs to work. He got to his feet, and advanced on his father, not ever truly aware of what he planned to do.

He stopped as a spell sailed towards him, and dodged it, dropping to the grass and rolling sideways. He had not recognized the spell, but he had the idea that it was particularly nasty, and he was quite sure he wanted nothing to do with it.

"Your mother is dead." Lucius said, moving towards Draco. "And, you will be joining her shortly, if you do not have a satisfactory explanation as to why you came here hand in hand with Potter."

"Because I love him." Draco said simply.

Lucius' face contorted with fury, and it was a sight that Draco found himself relishing, rather than fearing. Lucius started to rage, but his

voice was drowned out by chanting. Not Voldemort, but the beautiful, mingled voices of women.

His father hesitated a moment, turning his attention from Draco to sudden appearance of a group of blue-clad women at the northeast corner of the circle. They were walking purposely, single-file, and chanting in the same language as Voldemort.

Draco used his father's moment of confusion to his advantage, hitting him with a Repelling Spell. He started off towards where his father had gone flying, but was stopped in his tracks by another painful Leg-Locker.

It was quite dark where he had fallen, and he thanked the Gods he still had his wand, because he never would have found it if he had dropped it. He did the countercurse quickly, but as he got to his feet he heard approaching footsteps.

"Disanimus!" He shouted, in the direction of the footsteps.

There was a grunt, and the sound of a body hitting the ground.

He looked up, and decided he didn't have time to see if he had hit his father, or if it had even been his father, because he had more pressing matters to attend to.

At the southwest corner of the monument, where fallen stones had left a gaping hole, Dementors were arriving, two at a time.

XIX Without You, Everything Falls Apart (Part Two)

The thick, powder-blue carpet was not enough to soften the blow when Ron's head hit the floor. Everything went dark for a split second, and the room swam around him briefly when he pushed himself up on his elbows.

The Order was all here now, and both the living room and kitchen had erupted into chaos.

Kingsley Shacklebolt was less than three feet from him, screaming

spells at a Death Eater Ron vaguely remembered from the Department of Mysteries. The twins, standing back to back, were each facing off with someone; George, with a hooded man, and Fred with a man who, without his hood, looked quite a bit like Pansy Parkinson.

A scream and a thud brought his attention to Hermione, and he turned his head to watch her fall to the floor in a Full Body Bind. He forced himself into a sitting position and aimed his wand at her, his clouded mind searching for the counterspell.

The Death Eater, another one from the Department of Mysteries who Ron thought was named Dolohov, leaned over Hermione, his wand ready.

"*Furnuculus!*" Ron shouted, as he struggled to his feet.

The Death Eater gave a start as his face erupted into large, angry boils. His hands went to his face, and he took a few faltering steps away, just as Ron was drawing near.

Another thud announced Tonks, coming to the rescue the only way she knew how, by knocking things over. Evidently, she managed to mumble the counterspell as the end-table she disturbed fell over and she went arse-over-head onto the floor, because Hermione moved.

His progress towards Hermione was stopped by a black-cloaked figure hovering in his periphery. Ron spun, and Hermione was forgotten as he looked on Wormtail. A large, purple-black bruise was spreading underneath both of his eyes, and blood was dripping liberally from his nose.

Wormtail's appearance was so shocking that Ron goggled at him for a minute, wondering what the shit had happened to him. Then, complete, unadulterated hatred flashed in Wormtail's swollen, watery eyes, and he remembered that *he* had.

"You will pay for this, Potter!" Wormtail raged. "You will pay!"

Ron didn't see the Full-Body Bind coming, and was still wondering what Wormtail planned to do to him as he hit the floor. Once he figured it out, there was nothing he could do but lay there. Frozen, he braced himself for what was to come.

Out of the corner of his eye he caught a glimpse of his father running

towards the kitchen after a Death Eater he did not recognize. As his father and the Death Eater passed him, Wormtail went very still. Ron was suddenly able to move, and was unceremoniously hauled to his feet.

"Can you walk?" His father asked, eyeing him up and down.

"Yeah." Ron mumbled.

"All right, then." Arthur commented. "On your way." He gave Ron a pat on the shoulder, then chased after the quarry, who had slipped into the kitchen.

Turning, Ron saw that Wormtail was still frozen in place. Ron gave him another Stunning Spell for good measure, then scanned the room for Hermione.

The end-table was still on its side, and the lamp that had been on top of it was on the floor next to it, broken cleanly in half. A few paces from the wreckage, Emmeline Vance was having it off with female Death Eater Ron had never seen before.

There was, however, no sign of Hermione or Tonks, nor was Wormtail where he left him, two Stunning Spells be damned.

He started for the kitchen, stopping only to wait as a bright yellow something shot out of Ginny's wand, across his path and into the belly of the Death Eater Fred had been fighting earlier.

Ron stepped over him after he hit the floor, and ran into the kitchen.

The first thing he saw in the kitchen was his mother, flawlessly taking two Death Eaters at once. She stunned one, then the other, then bound them together with an *Incarcerous* so enthusiastic it trussed them up like mummies.

Behind her, Hermione was again at Dolohov. He was still inflicted with boils, and none too happy about it. Hermione did something to him that made him scream. Then, he crumpled to the floor in a heap, as Hermione's mother ran past him and cracked him on the head with a frying pan.

He didn't have time to wonder why Hermione's mother was not tucked away somewhere safe, because he was bowled over by a Death Eater

trying to get away from Moody.

"Come back here, you bloody bastard!" Moody yelled, his magical eye swiveling as wildly as he was waving his wand. Ron almost understood why the Death Eater was running, as he had never seen Moody look so scary.

Suddenly, his head was pushed down forcibly, and he looked up to see a shower of silver sparks sail past where his head had just been.

"Sorry about that, mate." Shacklebolt grinned. "Impediment Jinx. Right strong one, at that."

Ron mumbled his thanks, but Shacklebolt was gone, yelling an Impediment Jinx of his own to the female Death Eater who had been dueling with Emmeline Vance.

He started for door, meaning to go back into the living room when he froze.

In the doorway was Fred, his face ashen and panicked, his wand in a white-knuckle grip in his right hand. His left arm was slung around George, who he was half-carrying and half-dragging. George appeared to be unconscious, probably due to the large, purple egg on his temple, and he had a large gash on his side that was pouring blood all over the yellow and white tiles that checkered their way across the Granger's kitchen floor.

Fred hauled George's deadweight around and dumped him into one of the chairs at the kitchen table. George slumped over and his head lolled and dropped forward. Fred grasped his twin's face by the chin and tilted it upward. George groaned quietly. His eyes fluttered, but did not properly open.

"George!" Fred pressed, using his free hand to slap George's face lightly. "George!"

Ron suddenly remembered how to walk, and started over towards them.

"Merlin's Balls, George! Wake up!" Fred begged. He let go of George's face to shake him by the shoulders.

"What happened to him?" Ron asked.

"Bloody fucking Dolohov, and his bloody purple lightning!" Fred snapped. "George! Wake up, George!"

George groaned again, a bit louder, but did not rouse.

"Don't you fucking die on me, George!" Fred screamed, shaking him harder. "I fucking love you! You hear me, you big, stupid git? You can't fucking die on me!"

Mrs. Weasley appeared out of nowhere, and pulled Fred away from George. He started to slide out of the chair, but Ron caught him and held him firm.

"He can't die!" Fred said, struggling to get free of his mother. "He can't die."

"Stop trying to shake him to death, then." Mrs. Weasley replied, her tone calmer and more sensible than her face belied.

"But he's out cold." Fred insisted desperately. "He can't die, Mum. I bloody can't live without him!"

"I know, dear, I know." Mrs. Weasley said, and something pained flitted across her face. pausing to aim her wand over Fred's shoulder. Ron looked over just as a Death Eater collapsed in a heap in the kitchen doorway. "Take him to Harry's."

"Now?" Fred asked dumbly.

"Yes, now." Mrs. Weasley said. "Can you Apparate?"

"Yeah." Fred said, after a moment. "But, what about..." He trailed off, waving ambiguously towards the living room.

"Go with him." She said firmly. "If he has ever had a reason for living, it is you. Now go!"

Ron did not get a chance to work out the full meaning of that confusing conversation. Mrs. Weasley grabbed Ron by the arm as Fred collected George, and pulled him towards the living room.

As he stepped into the living room he shivered. Goosebumps crawled over his skin, and he was suddenly aware that it was unusually cold.

"Bloody fucking hell!" Ron cursed, stopping dead in his tracks.

Wormtail was standing in the center of the living room with an unconscious Ginny over his shoulder, and Dememtors were pouring in through the front door.

~*~

Harry immediately headed for Voldemort.

Bellatrix Lestrange tried to waylay him twice, but he shut her down both times, once with another *Incendio* to the hem of her robes, and once with a shot of the Cruciatus Curse that he very nearly meant.

He probably wouldn't have, if it hadn't been *her*.

He had almost forgotten Voldemort during the spate of Cruciatus. He had almost felt justified, standing there watching Bellatrix Lestrange scream, as if he had been working off all his frustration and anger at Sirius' death.

He had finally walked away from her, her screams still ringing in his ears, because he knew that above all, his business was with Voldemort.

Voldemort was either oblivious to his presence, or uncaring. He was also protected by something, because the first three spells Harry cast at him had no effect at all. Voldemort's voice went strained every time Harry's magic hit the invisible barrier, but the spells seemed to have no lasting effect on him.

Harry paused momentarily as he heard more chanting; different chanting, like a chorus of women. He turned quickly as saw that there were, indeed, women. Loads of them, all dressed similarly in blue robes. He gawped at them for a moment, but shook it off, realizing they must be the religious women Dumbledore had been talking about.

He aimed his wand at Voldemort, but was knocked over by something large and heavy. Harry opened his eyes to find it was a Death Eater, who was sprawled on top of him with his wand pressed into Harry's neck and a hand over his mouth.

"Potter." He rasped, from underneath his hood. Harry's eyes went wide with recollection immediately, because he would know that voice anywhere.

"You aren't going to get to him." Snape hissed quietly. "There is a special kind of Imperturbable Charm on him, one that Lucius Malfoy created himself."

Harry nodded silently. With Snape's wand pressed into his neck, it was a small gesture.

"You need to protect the women." Snape went on quietly. "They are the only hope we have."

Harry nodded again, minutely.

"Put a Stunning Spell on me, roll me off of you, and get to Dumbledore." Snape instructed, his voice barely above a whisper.

With that, he shifted slightly, enough that Harry could get his wand between them. He froze for a moment, feeling a little odd about putting a spell on a teacher. Then, he recalled how he had Disarmed Snape in the Shrieking Shack without hesitation, or permission.

Then, Snape spoke, and he remembered why.

"The word you are looking for is *Stupefy*, Potter." Snape snarled in a low tone. "Really, if you're the hero here, I may have picked the wrong side."

"*Stupefy!*" Harry bellowed, with no reservation. Snape went stiff as a board, and Harry pushed him off of him with a firm heave.

The Headmaster was in the center of the fray, wielding his wand with his trademark flare. Unusual and colorful spells, probably of his own design, flew out of his wand with ease.

Behind him was McGonagall, who was facing off with MacNair. MacNair aimed something at her that was roughly the color of Avada Kedavra. McGonagall dodged it by transforming into a cat. She quickly ran between his legs, transformed back, and hit him with something that made him crumple to the ground.

The women had formed two rings around Voldemort, one inside the

other. Each ring was chanting something different, but they seemed to blend together in perfect harmony.

"Bydd e ddim yn agor. Byddwch chi ddim yn basio." The inside ring sung.

"Mae'r Fam yn ymwadu â chi. Mae'r Fam yn omedd â chi." The outside ring answered.

Just underneath them, he could hear Voldemort, his voice crude and vulgar in comparison.

"Agorwch, drws garegog mawr. Agorwch a gadael i mi mynedfa. Myn y gogledd a'r dde, rwy'n orchymyn i chi. Myn y Ddwyrain a'r Orllewin, rwy'n orchymyn i chi."

A hand clapped on his shoulder, and Harry jumped a foot in the air.

"Harry, my boy." Dumbledore said. "You must help me now. We must protect the priestesses, at all cost." He gave Harry's shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "From the Death Eaters, and the Dementors.

"Dementors?" Harry choked, but Dumbledore was gone. He was already rounding up the Order, instructing them to form a ring around the women.

The air turned to ice, and Harry was suddenly very aware of the Dementors Dumbledore had been speaking of. They were pouring inside the circle through a gap in the stones, and there were a large number of them, far more than had been at the lake that night with Sirius.

He started to feel faint, and could dimly hear his mother screaming in his ears. He tried to shake it off, but there were too many. Standing there, dazed and staring at the shadowy figures in the sky, he was bowled over for the second time that night, this time by Draco.

"Oh, Fuck!" Draco panted. "The Dementors are here."

"I see that." Harry said weakly. He still felt a bit faint, but something about Draco had blocked his mother's screams out of his mind.

"Come on, then." Draco said.

Draco sprang off of him, and pulled Harry to his feet. He immediately felt very faint again, and his mother's voice was now accompanied by his father. He grabbed at Draco's arm for support, and the feeling subsided slightly.

"I think I killed my father." Draco blurted, as he half-led, half-dragged Harry towards the rest of the Order.

"You think?" Harry stammered. "Were you aiming?"

"Are we ever?" Draco asked.

"Point." Harry conceded.

"Bydd e ddim yn agor. Byddwch chi ddim yn basio."

"Mae'r Fam yn ymwadu â chi. Mae'r Fam yn omedd â chi"

"Myn y gornel, rwy'n orchymyn i chi. Yn y'r enw o'r Fam, rwy'n orchymyn i chi."

Draco located a spot in the Order's circle that was large enough for them to be side by side, between Dedalus Diggle and Charlie Weasley. As Draco was left-handed, and Harry was right, Harry quickly stepped to Draco's right, so he could hold his hand while he used his wand.

Something about Draco's proximity lessened the Dementors' effect on him. He didn't know why, but now was not the time to question it. Gripping Draco's hand tightly, he lifted his wand, and started casting the spells that Draco had taught him.

"*Flammatus!*" Harry barked, and the two Death Eaters running towards him burst into flames.

"*Repellinus!*" He shouted, and another flew through the air.

"*Terra Contremus!*" He yelled, pointing his wand at the ground beneath the feet of two approaching Death Eaters. The ground underneath them shook violently, and they fell hastily to the floor.

As he watched the two shaken Death Eaters scramble away, the air suddenly went chill. He couldn't see the Dementors, but he certainly could feel them, and that was enough, for him.

"Expecto Patronum" Harry screamed.

A white stag, beautiful and proud, poured flawlessly out of the end of his wand. It cocked its head had Harry in greeting, then started off round the circle of stones. Immediately, Draco's Sirius look-a-like joined it, and they made a graceful circuit around Stonehenge together.

Next to him, Draco dueled like an automaton. He easily cast spells in rapid succession, without really pausing to see what the first one did before shouting out the second. Various spells shot out of his wand, some Harry recognized, some he did not, and his Patronus was always spot on.

"Bydd e ddim yn agor. Byddwch chi ddim yn basio."

"Mae'r Fam yn ymwadu â chi. Mae'r Fam yn omedd â chi."

"Agorwch, drws garegog mawr. Agorwch a gadael i mi mynedfa. Myn y gogledd a'r dde, rwy'n orchymyn i chi. Myn y Ddwyrain a'r Orllewin, rwy'n orchymyn i chi."

This time, the priestesses were distinctly stronger than Voldemort. It was not that they had gotten louder, but Voldemort had gotten softer.

"Bydd e ddim yn agor. Byddwch chi ddim yn basio."

"Mae'r Fam yn ymwadu â chi. Mae'r Fam yn omedd â chi."

"Myn y gornel, rwy'n orchymyn i chi. Yn y'r enw o'r Fam, rwy'n orchymyn i chi."

"Oh, shit." He heard Draco shout. He looked over at Draco, who gestured off in the distance with their clasped hands. "It's the Lestrage bitch."

Harry growled, and felt his earlier righteous anger returning. Though this was the second time he had ever laid eyes on her, he hated her with everything he had.

Because of her, he had lost the only father figure he had ever had. Because of her, Remus had lost his best friend and his lover. Because of her, Neville Longbottom's parents were vegetables who lived in St. Mungos and didn't recognize their own son.

"Expelliarmus!" Harry shouted.

Harry had put enough force behind that spell to send her flying several feet. As she righted herself and groped for her wand, Harry once more set her robes aflame. She wailed, but managed to grab her wand, and shortly the flames were out.

Suddenly, Harry collapsed to the ground.

Pain ripped through his body that he could not describe. Violent, searing, burning pain that made his body twitch and convulse. He couldn't hear himself, but he knew he was yelling, screaming in a way that would make him go hoarse.

Just as soon as it came, it was gone. He was vaguely aware of Draco pulling him upright, his wand still aimed at Bellatrix's prone figure. He didn't know what Draco had done to her, and he had the feeling he didn't want to.

"You alright?" Draco asked, running the back of his wand hand over Harry's forehead and cheeks. His free other hand was otherwise occupied by Harry's hand, and Harry was squeezing it so hard Draco's fingers were turning purple.

"Yeah." Harry lied. He was exhausted and weak and shaky, but he was not about to admit to it. Now was not the time for Draco to go into one of his overprotective fits.

Draco abandoned conversation to send something nasty-looking at MacNair. MacNair howled, clutching at his belly, but managed to send Draco flying backwards. Harry lost his grip on Draco's hand. The screaming started in his brain again, but he managed a decent enough Patronus to ward it off while he went to collect Draco.

"Bydd e ddim yn agor. Byddwch chi ddim yn basio."

"Mae'r Fam yn ymwadu â chi. Mae'r Fam yn omedd â chi."

"Agorwch... drws garegog... mawr. Agorwch... a gadael i... mi mynedfa."

Voldemort was stumbling over the words now, struggling to keep the rhythm of the chant. Looking over his shoulder, Harry saw that Voldemort's chest was heaving as he tried to take in air, and his arms

were hanging limply at his sides.

Inside the inner circle of priestesses, Dumbledore and McGonagall stood side by side, their wands aimed at Voldemort. Harry could not hear their spells, or make out what they were doing, but he knew they were probably trying to break down his protective barrier.

Draco Repelled a Death Eater, and Harry Disarmed another. They sent off a Patronus each, and Draco set someone on fire. Harry felt Draco's hand tense in his, then Draco fell to the ground, screaming.

"Such pretty boys, together." Bellatrix cooed, a few paces away from where Harry stood. "I could enjoy the thought of that, if you were not one of the two."

Her wand was pointing at Draco, and as he screamed, Harry had no doubts as to what was coming out of it. Adding this to her long, mental laundry-list of crimes, Harry did the unthinkable, for the second time that night.

"*Crucio!*" He raged, and he meant every bit of it.

Bellatrix screamed, and dropped to the grass. She rolled violently from side to side, wailing and clutching at herself. Harry stood there, seething, watching her twitch without an ounce of remorse.

Sirius. Sirius falling through the veil.

Frank and Alice Longbottom. They don't even recognize their son.

It seemed to grow worse for Bellatrix, the angrier Harry got. He dimly noticed Draco tugging on his arm, but he shrugged it off. He kept staring at the bitch who had killed his godfather, pouring every bit of anger and rage and hatred into the Unforgivable Curse coming out of his wand.

Sirius. Sirius falling through the veil.

Draco was tugging again, and shouting, then he suddenly stopped.

Frank and Alice Longbottom. They don't even recognize their son.

Suddenly, he was falling backwards, and his wand was flying out of his hand.

"That'll be enough, my boy." Dumbledore said quietly, tucking his wand away to give him a hand up.

Harry blinked back into himself, and he glanced around to see that Voldemort and the Death Eaters were gone, though he did not know how.

He noticed Bellatrix Lestrange gasping for air as Hestia Jones bound her and confiscated her wand. Abruptly, the reality of what he had done hit him. He suddenly felt very cold, in a way that had nothing to do with Dementors, and a large knot was forming in his stomach, twisting painfully.

"I shouldn't have done that." He said quietly.

"Indeed." Dumbledore said. "Thought I honestly cannot say I blame you."

"But..." Harry started, shame coloring his face.

"We will talk about it later." Dumbledore said. "I fear you have more important matters to attend to."

He looked at Dumbledore blankly for a moment. Then he turned to Draco, to see if Draco had caught what the Headmaster was on about, but Draco was not there.

Then he made a strangled, choking noise and the knot in his stomach turned into a lead weight, as he saw Charlie Weasley lifting Draco's unconscious body off the ground.

"What happened to him?" Harry asked, his voice going shrill.

"Can't say I know, mate." Charlie said, hoisting Draco up, with one arm under his shoulders and one under his knees. "MacNair did it, and it was right nasty, whatever it was."

"Oh, fuck." Harry cursed. He grabbed one of Draco's cold, limp hands, and squeezed it. "Holy fucking hell."

"I'm taking him back to your house." Charlie announced.

Harry looked at him stupidly for a moment, wondering why Charlie

would take him to the Dursley's, before he realized Charlie meant Grimmauld Place.

"I'm going, too." Harry said.

"Dumbledore's arranging a portkey as we speak." Charlie said.

"No, I'm going with him, now!" Harry insisted.

Charlie boggled at him quickly, but he took in Harry's desperate face and the way he was wringing Draco's slack hand, and seemed to let it go.

"Can you Apparate?" Charlie asked.

"I'm not old enough." Harry said, shaking his head. "He can, but he never taught me."

"He can?" Charlie snorted. "Shame he's the one that's out cold, then, isn't it?" Charlie asked. "Oi, Bill, I need a hand, here!" He added, shouting over Harry's shoulder to his brother.

"You go with Bill." Charlie decided. "I'll take the Ferret."

"Don't call him that!" Harry snapped.

Charlie gave him a quizzical look, but Apparated away without comment.

Harry stared at the empty space that where they had been, until a firm hand turned him around. Bill Weasley's arms went around his waist, and in a blink of an eye, Stonehenge was just a memory.

~*~

His sister was unconscious, in the hands of a lunatic madman.

Ron thought, with a morbid kind of mirth, that he and Harry had done this dance before.

Then, he remembered that last time, Harry had really done it. They had started out together, but a bunch of big, bloody rocks had separated them at a crucial moment. Harry had faffed off to do the

saving, and Ron had been left standing in the dark, surrounded by a maze of ancient plumbing.

All at once, the room erupted into bright, blinding, white light as half-dozen Patroni took shape in the living room. Ron saw a horse, a bear, two dogs and an otter take off after the Demetors coming through the door.

Ron idly wondered why someone did not shut the bloody thing, though deep down, he knew it probably wouldn't help.

Shoving that useless thought away, he focused on Wormtail. His mind searched frantically for spells, but he dismissed each one, afraid of what might happen to Ginny if he accidentally hit her.

His mother was standing a few paces from him, staring at Wormtail and Ginny, her screams muffled by her hand clamped over her mouth. His father appeared at her elbow immediately, surveying the situation with wide eyes. They both regained their composure and pulled their wands, but they both seemed to be suffering from the same kind of worry for Ginny as Ron was.

There was another flash of light, as more Patroni were conjured to ward off the returning Dementors.

His attention was briefly torn from Ginny's predicament by a long, wail from the corner of the room. Mrs. Granger could not see the Dememtors, but she apparently could feel them. Seemingly at wits end from this new, mind-numbing, yet invisible assault, she was crouched in the far corner of the room, shaking uncontrollably.

"Get her out of here!" Ron shouted at his parents, pointing to where Hermione was in front of her, keeping the Death Eaters away.

"But Ginny!" His mother started.

"GET HER THE SHIT OUT OF HERE!" Ron barked at his mother, in a tone he had never dared to use with his mother, and would probably never dare to again.

His mother gave a start, but she evidently decided that now was not the time to argue about it, because she blasted a Death Eater out of her way with something fierce-looking, and started for Hermione's mother.

"Potter!" Wormtail shouted. "Get your little army out of here, or the girl dies."

The words were barely out of Wormtail's mouth when Ron launched himself at Wormtail, ready to pound the stuffing out of him, again. He did not tackle Wormtail, but bowled into him, using his free hands to pull Ginny away from him. Wormtail tried to keep a hold of her, but his grasp was weak, and instinctively put out his hands to catch his fall.

Once Ginny was well out of it, Ron focused on Wormtail. He was picking himself up, but Ron set off after him again, this time keeping a hold of him as the pair fell to the ground.

Unfortunately, Wormtail was ready for him, and did not prove to be as easy a target as he had been before. He squirmed and struggled desperately, trying to keep himself out of a position where Ron could pin him down.

He got out from under Ron twice, kicking and flailing his arms as he went. He twisted so that he was on his stomach, and tried to pull himself across the carpet with his hands. Ron managed to flip him back over and aim a solid punch to his jaw. Wormtail howled, and rolled with all his strength, putting himself on top.

He glared down at Ron in triumph, but the satisfied expression quickly dissipated. Ron was taller, and stronger, and growing up with five brother had left him well accustomed to physical altercations. With a growl he rolled with everything he had, putting Wormtail under him with a knee wedged between Wormtail's legs.

"You sodding bastard!" Ron shouted. "What did you do to her?"

Wormtail only howled, responding not to Ron's question, but to the knee that was pressing on his groin. Ron leaned into him harder, and Wormtail howled again, and the hands, which had been clawing at Ron's shoulders and arms fell uselessly to his sides.

"I'll fucking kill you!" Ron raged.

Right then, they were accidentally trodden on by Emmeline Vance, Tonks, and the three Death Eaters they were chasing. Ron, on top, took the brunt of it, and Wormtail used Ron's moment of shock to throw him off.

Ron went back against the wall, his head cracking into it painfully. The room spun, and as his vision righted itself, he saw Wormtail advancing on him with his wand drawn.

"What was that about killing, Potter?" Wormtail asked. "Looks like it will be you, rather than me."

Ron, still sprawled along the wall, pointed his wand at Wormtail. He felt his body shifting, changing, and he panicked, realizing that his time as Harry Potter was quickly running out. His mind raced as Wormtail approached, and he desperately tried to find a spell that would put and end to this.

Dimly, he remembered something he had overheard, when spying on Harry and Malfoy in the garden.

Wormtail stopped about two feet from him, and smiled.

"*Avad--*"

"*Disanimus!*" Ron shouted.

Wormtail gave him a fleeting, stunned look, then crumpled to the ground.

All hell broke loose immediately thereafter.

With Wormtail down, the remaining Death Eaters started Apparating away. The members of the Order started to shout and scream, torn between relief that it was over, and anger that they were getting away. The Dementors swooped in for one more assault, but six or seven Patroni were more than enough to chase them away.

Weakly, Ron stood, his eyes darting around the room. His parents were both fine, but shaken. Ginny was still out cold, but she was resting safely over Arthur Weasley's shoulder. Hermione looked like she was in one piece, though she was wearing an expression that said she was not too sure about it.

Hermione ran up to him, engulfing him in a tight embrace. He kissed her soundly, then stroked her hair when she buried her head in his chest.

"They're gone." Ron mumbled, as much to himself as to her.

"What happened to Wormtail?" She asked, turning from him to point at where the Death Eaters had left him.

Ron's gaze fell on him, and went completely stiff.

"I killed him." Ron said quietly, the color draining out of his face. "I bloody fucking killed him."

"Oh, Ron." Hermione breathed. She looked from Ron, to Wormtail's motionless body, back to Ron, then wrapped her arms around Ron again. "It's all right."

"No, its not!" Ron snapped, shaking. "It's not all right! I just bloody fucking killed someone! Don't tell me it's all right!"

"Ronald, that'll do."

The voice gave Ron as start, as he had been expecting Hermione. He looked up to see Dumbledore, and scrubbed a hand through his hair in confusion.

"Stonehenge..." Hermione started.

"Is over and done." Dumbledore finished. "As is this, it would seem."

"I'm sorry, Professor Dumbledore." Ron said, pointing at Wormtail. "I didn't mean to, it just kind of happened."

"Mister Weasley." Dumbledore said firmly, cutting off Ron's babbling with a hand on his shoulder. "We will talk about it later. Right now, I think it would be best if we all returned to Harry's house."

"But..." Hermione started.

"We've all done some things were are not proud of tonight, myself included." Dumbledore said. "Unfortunately, it is inevitable, during times of war."

"But..." Ron tried.

"In time, Ronald. As I said, I think it is best if we get back to Harry's house."

Mutely, Ron and Hermione allowed themselves to be shuffled into the kitchen, where a portkey was sitting on the kitchen table, ready to take them all back to Grimmauld Place.

"Is Harry alright?" Ron asked, unable to help himself.

"Physically, Harry is fine. He suffered no more than a few scraped and bruises." Dumbledore said. "However, he is very upset."

"Why?" Hermione asked. "What happened."

"Draco suffered a grave injury, and for reasons unknown, Harry is beside himself with worry." His eyes twinkled a bit, saying he knew those reasons quite well. "I daresay he could use a friend right now, and last time I checked, he had two very good ones, in the both of you."

XX

Without You, It's Not as Much Fun to Pick Up the Pieces
(Part One)

Apparently, Dumbledore had been prepared for the worst, because when Fred arrived at Grimmauld Place, Madame Pomfrey had been waiting for him.

The sight of her had given him an odd, momentary sense of relief. His last thought before Apparating from the Granger's had been that Errol would likely have a stroke on the journey to fetch her, and that George would be well and truly dead before she arrived.

However, she had gone as white as her apron when Fred explained what Dolohov had done, and she had looked very worried as she had directed Fred to carry his brother to the makeshift infirmary she had set up in the medium-sized, unused parlor at the rear of the house.

And that, as far as Fred was concerned, was not a good sign. Any relief he had had about her being on hand had disappeared in an instant.

Quidditch alone had sent both he and George to the Hospital Wing countless times, never mind their pranking. Harry also turned up there routinely, and since being close friends with Harry Potter was an

occupational hazard, Ron frequented it as well.

No matter what had happened, she would only sigh, and cluck her tongue at the dangers of Quidditch and the foolhardiness of young boys. Even when Harry had come crawling out of the bowels of the school covered in blood and basilisk venom, she had only pursed her lips at Dumbledore and pointed Harry to a bed.

In all the times Fred had been to the Hospital Wing, as a patient or a visitor, he had never seen Madame Pomfrey look like *that*, like she was afraid she might not be able to fix it.

She had to fix it. She just had to.

Worse yet, he was being made to wait outside. Once George had been settled into one of the conjured beds, and Fred had given Madame Pomfrey a more detailed account of what Dolohov had hit George with, the woman had dismissed him. He had begged and pleaded to be allowed to stay, and had even promised not to say a word.

Madame Pomfrey, however, had been unmoved. She had fixed him with a formidable look, and had shooed him away like a bloody cat.

He stood staring at the wooden double-doors of the medium-size, unused parlor at the rear of the house for a long time, unsure of what to do with himself. He toyed briefly with the idea of spelling a hole in the door, so he could at least see, but eventually decided against it. He was desperate to see what was going on, but at the same time, he did not want to do anything that would distract or aggravate Madam Pomfrey when she was trying to save his brother's life.

He had to live. He just had to, because Fred did not think he could live without him.

He retired to the sitting room, where, after standing motionless in the center of the room for a few moments, he started to pace. He didn't really make him feel any better, and he didn't really know why he was doing it, other than out of nervous habit and learned behavior.

He and George had been young when Ginny was born, just a little over three. He did not remember much of the event, other than they had all been gathered into the Burrow's main room to wait, and that his father had paced-- paced for hours, like he had meant to wear a trench in the floor.

Apparently, that was what a man did, when a loved one was ill, or under the attentions of a mediwizard who had tossed him out of the room.

So Fred paced.

It gave him no real comfort, but it gave his nervous, panicky body something to do while he tried to focus his thoughts. They were invariably of George, laced with the occasional notion of what he would like to do to Dolohov, if he ever got the chance.

He and George had been dueling side by side. Fred had not seen Dolohov approach George, because he had been busy having it off with another fellow in a hood. George had jostled into him just as he had been putting his Death Eater in a Full-Body Bind. He had turned to look to his twin, only to see Dolohov in front of him with his wand on him.

Lightning, in a sickly shade of purple, had left Dolohov's wand in a flash. The lightning had connected with George in his side, leaving a great, bloody gash, and George had collapsed to the floor with a scream so loud it had shook Fred where he had stood.

Fred was not sure if George had gone out from the spell, or from the knock he took to the head when he had hit the floor. Madame Pomfrey had seemed to think the answer to that question was very important, but Fred had not been able to say.

A loud crack thundering in his ears brought his thoughts to the present. He looked up to see the back-view of his brother Bill appearing a few feet from him, and the thin arms wrapped around his neck said he had a passenger. He was only briefly curious as to who, because Bill turned and stepped sideways.

It was Harry Potter, and he looked as bad as Fred felt.

"Draco?" He asked quietly, when Harry met his eyes.

For an answer, there was another crack, and Charlie appeared with Malfoy's limp, unconscious body cradled in his arms.

"Pomfrey's here." Fred said to Charlie. "She's in the side room."

Charlie nodded quietly. He gestured for Bill to help him, and together, they bundled Malfoy out of the sitting room without a word.

Harry started to follow, but Fred stopped him.

"She'll only throw you out, mate." Fred said. "She did the same to me."

He glared at the door Charlie was shutting behind him, but stayed where he was. He knew as well as Fred how Pomfrey could get when she got in her stride.

"Who'd you bring?" Harry asked, not turning from the door. He sounded like he didn't want to know.

"George." Fred mumbled. He stopped pacing, and sank down onto one of the couches.

"Oh." Harry said quietly. He looked at Fred blankly for a moment, and scrubbed a hand through his hair. "Is it over, at Hermione's?"

"I don't know." Fred said. "George went down in the middle of it."

Just as Fred had, Harry eventually gave over staring into space to start pacing. Fred watched him for a moment, but found it only made him nervous and fidgety.

"Come on, then." Fred said, patting the couch, more from a need for Harry to be still than a desire for company.

"But, I... uh." Harry started.

"It won't help." Fred said, shaking his head. "And I know, because I have been doing it for the last hour." He smiled thinly, and patted the couch again. "You'll only put a hole in the carpet."

Harry nodded weakly, and joined Fred on the couch.

"He can't die." Harry mumbled, as he sat. "He just can't die."

"I know." Fred replied, unsure if he was talking about George, or Malfoy, or both. "I know."

Then, the hero of the Wizarding World started to cry.

Fred, at a loss for what to say, did the only thing he could think of. He pulled Harry into a hug, and joined him.

~*~

As it turned out, Bill and Charlie Weasley had fair experience with Healing Charms. This was actually unsurprising, given the nature of their jobs. Charlie did well with cuts and scrapes and bruises, and Bill was great with healing things that had been done by curse or hex. They had quickly agreed to sort out those with minor injuries in the kitchen, so Madam Pomfrey could see to those who really needed it.

Madame Pomfrey had been at it a long time, and the nervous people waiting in the sitting room had been given little in the way of comforting words.

Dumbledore had come out once, to give brief updates.

Ginny had not been hexed, but rather, had a mild concussion from being knobbled squarely in the head. As it turned out, Hermione's father had suffered the same. It had appeared that Wormtail had done something sinister to him, but really, he had only sent him flying, and when his head hit the wall, it had knocked the light right out of him. They had both been dosed with something to ease the swelling, and seemed to be well out of it.

Hermione's mother was also doing fine, despite the fact that she had fainted upon arriving at Grimmauld Place. She had suffered no real physical injuries, only, the whole experience-- from the Death Eaters to the Dementors to being Apparated here by Mad-Eye Moody, of all people-- had been too much for her. She had simply succumbed to nervous collapse, and had been given something to sleep it off.

Dumbledore had said nothing about Draco or George. It was often said that no news was good news, but with Dumbledore, that was not always the case.

Harry did not want to talk. Evidently, Ron did not want to either, which seemed to be perfectly fine with Harry.

Hermione thought they should. Or rather, she wanted them to talk, to fill the nervous silence in the room, but after Dumbledore had left, she

hadn't bothered trying, because she had had a fair idea of what the results would be.

In addition to the updates, Dumbledore had given them the usual speech he saved for these kinds of occasions, that all was as well as could be expected, and that he would explain everything in the morning.

Harry had nodded mutely, and Ron had grunted. From that, Hermione had figured she would not get any more response out of them than Dumbledore had.

Probably less.

She was now sitting on the couch quietly, trying her best just to be there for them. She was sitting between them, nestled in the curve of Ron's arm, with one of Harry's hands clasped between both of hers. Ron's arm was stretched out over her shoulders, and his hand was resting on the back of Harry's neck.

Fred had been with them at the first, sitting on the other side of Harry. He had left them when his parents arrived, and was now curled up on the couch across from them. His head was in his mother's lap, and she was absently stroking his red hair as she spoke quietly with her husband.

Watching this, Hermione was immediately struck by how strong a person Molly Weasley really was. Six of her seven children had walked headlong into danger tonight, six children she could have lost at any moment. But she had gone with them, instead of trying to stop them, because that was what she had had to do.

And now, as one of them lay dying, she was comforting another, rather than comforting herself.

Fred had been worse off than Harry when her and Ron had arrived. He seemed somewhat calmer, now that his mother was here. Hermione wondered if it was her presence, or if she had put some kind of charm on him to soothe him.

If it had been a charm, Hermione wished she knew what it was, because Harry was in dire need of it. He needed a good, long lie-down, where he woke up to find Draco was perfectly fine.

Ron, however, needed to talk. Perhaps not right now, but eventually. She knew, without a doubt, that he was beating himself up over Wormtail.

In Hermione's opinion, he shouldn't be. In the particular situation, there had been nothing else for it. Ron had done what he had needed to do to stay alive, what he had needed to do to keep everyone else alive.

Honestly, he had done what Harry should have let Sirius and Professor Lupin do two years ago. She had understood why Harry had stopped them; he had not wanted them to be murderers, and a living Wormtail could have cleared Sirius' name.

But, Sirius was dead now, so that no longer applied, and if you asked Hermione, Wormtail had had it coming, nine ways to Sunday.

Of course, no one was asking Hermione. Ron probably never would ask her, because that was totally unlike him. He would brood, and hate himself, and let it eat away at him, like Harry did when Sirius died.

He was brooding now, in his own, quiet way. She could see it in his face, worry over George, coupled with a fierce desire to kick himself in his own bum. His eyes were fixed and glassy and blank. He was looking over his mother's head, but she was quite sure he wasn't seeing anything. His hand was still resting on the back of Harry's neck, but he was idly twisting a lock of Harry's hair around his finger. It was a slow, methodic motion, as if he had no idea he was doing it.

He probably didn't.

She wanted to hug him and kiss him and tell him everything would be alright, but at the same time, she wanted to shake him and scream at him and make him understand he had only done what had needed to be done.

Hermione sighed, and bit her tongue.

She knew it was very easy for her to say Wormtail had had it coming, because she hadn't been the person to give it to him.

~*~

As she was prone to do in unpleasant, stressful, or worrisome situations, Molly Weasley made tea and biscuits. It was close to three in the morning, and no one was particularly hungry, but she made the tea and biscuits, anyway, probably out of a perverse need to do something boring and mundane.

Harry suspected she was just trying to keep busy, trying to create a sense of normalcy that would calm herself, and everyone else.

He didn't want her tea, and he didn't want her biscuits. He wanted Draco. Draco, whole and awake and in one piece, and sitting next to him on the couch.

But, he accepted her tea and biscuits when offered, and even managed to mumble something that passed as thanks. It wasn't her fault he wasn't hungry or thirsty, and she was only trying to keep herself sane. When she moved on to feed Moody and Shacklebolt, he floated the tea to the table and put the plate of biscuits in Hermione's lap.

At this point, he would settle for an update about Draco.

The last he had heard (and it felt like it had been ages ago), Ginny was alright, as were Hermione's parents. Dumbledore had not, however, said anything about George or Draco. Hermione had tried to tell him that didn't mean anything, but Harry had been quite sure she had only been trying to make him feel better.

Dumbledore had come out not too long ago, but he had had infuriatingly little to say. After a few, short, whispered words to McGonagall, he had Apparated off. He had returned a bit later, with one of blue-robed women who had been at Stonehenge.

Harry did not want to think about Stonehenge, right now.

He knew he probably should, but he didn't want to. He knew he should be more curious as to what happened during that apparently crucial period of time when he was trapped in his own mind, but he wasn't. He knew he should be wondering all manner of things about Voldemort and the Crystal Sword, but he wasn't.

McGonagall had been telling Molly Weasley about it, shortly before she had started in with the tea and biscuits. Harry had tuned them out flawlessly, because he had just not wanted to hear it.

Dumbledore would explain everything in the morning, like he always did. However, Harry wouldn't want to hear it then, either.

He knew he should ask about what happened at Hermione's house, but he didn't. This was not so much out of apathy, but because of Ron. It had been Harry's experience that Ron would go on at length about anything he was involved in that was vaguely exciting or dangerous. However, Ron was pointedly not talking about it, and from this, Harry decided that he probably shouldn't ask.

Ron had either done something incredibly stupid, or he had done something very, very bad. Whatever it had been, Ron was not talking about it, so Harry wasn't going to bring it up.

Apparently, Ron did not want to talk about anything, but right now, that was perfectly fine with Harry.

Harry's world had dwindled away to his hand clasped between Hermione's, and Ron's fingers tugging absently at the hairs on the back of his neck. He really didn't need words right now, because those gestures were enough. Hermione's hands around his and Ron's hand on the back of his neck were very warm in comparison with how cold he felt inside.

They did nothing to stop his worrying, but they were somewhat soothing, and right now, he was grateful for that much.

Draco had to live. He just had to.

For the thousandth time, he kicked himself for being distracted when Draco went down. He had been so caught up in venting his rage over Sirius, he hadn't been paying attention when Walden MacNair knocked his boyfriend on his arse.

Draco had been trying to get his attention, too. Draco had been pulling on his arm. Draco had probably been talking at him too, but he hadn't heard a word of it, because he had been too busy...

Shuddering, he ripped his hands away from Hermione's to bury his face in them. He took deep breaths, trying to still his shaking body, but it didn't do any good. He felt Hermione's arms go around his neck, and Ron's hand drift down to pat his back. He tried to calm himself with that, tried to focus on those warm points of contact on his cold

body, but it was hopeless.

Tears prickled in his eyes, but he brushed them away roughly. Crying wasn't going to make Draco better, any faster, just like torturing Bellatrix Lestrange hadn't brought Sirius back.

"You should get to bed, Harry." Hermione commented quietly.

Harry shook his head, his face still buried in his hands. He couldn't sleep right now. What if Draco died, while he was dozing away? He was already unwilling to forgive himself for this whole mess, that would be the absolute end.

"Really, Harry." Hermione pressed. "It's late, and you've had a very hard day."

"Can't sleep." He mumbled, into his hands.

"I'll give you a charm, then." Hermione said, misunderstanding what he meant by 'can't'.

"Yeah, alright." Ron said, untangling himself from Harry and Hermione to stand up. "I'll take one of those."

He looked like he needed it.

Hermione seemed to decide that Ron had answered for Harry as well, because she stood, and started to haul him off the couch. He tried to argue with her, but his words came out in disjointed mumbles, so finally, he gave up.

Silently, he allowed himself to be shuffled off to bed; Draco unconscious body pictured clearly in his mind, and Bellatrix's screams ringing in his ears.

~*~

He would have expected it to hurt more.

If he had known it was coming, and he had had the chance to ponder it, he would have figured on it hurting something fierce. In actuality, it had been the exact opposite. It had been a bit of a shock, but it had not hurt, at all.

Draco had only had a split second to think about it. He had been trying to talk to Harry, been trying to get Harry's attention. When he had turned around, MacNair had already been in front of him, and the spell had already left his wand.

There had been no time to think, or move, or fire something off at him. All Draco had been able to do was stand there and watch it.

He had known what was coming. Disanimus was a darker green. It had an almost brownish hue, and it did not light up the immediate area like the Killing Curse did.

When it had hit him, there had been no pain. His body had gone cold, and his vision had faded to black, and that had been the end of that. He had not even had time to scream, and he did not remember hitting the ground.

Just like that. Over and done.

He had been alive one second, and dead the next.

Dying was not what he would have expected. There had been no bright flashes, no light at the end of the tunnel. His life had not passed before his eyes, and he had not hovered in the air, looking at his lifeless body.

Right now, he was looking at a graveyard.

It was an old graveyard. Newer cemeteries usually opted for the bland, slab-like headstones that laid flat on the grass. Here, the markers were raised stones and carved statues, and most were overgrown with moss and lichen.

He had the idea it was a Muggle graveyard. The statues were finely carved, but the figures did not move or speak.

The very center of the graveyard was marked with a small, mausoleum-type building. It was small, compared to the mausoleum at Malfoy Manor, but seemed almost overlarge in its quaint surroundings.

It was old, and leaning a bit to the side. Ivy and vines were climbing up its walls, and it seemed like the plants were the only thing keeping

it upright. The name "Percival" was chiseled into the stone above the rusted, iron door. Draco did not recognize the name, but as they had probably been Muggles, that was unsurprising.

Two small, stone benches were arranged outside the Percival mausoleum in a V. At the point of the V was a iron vase. The flowers had long ago rotted away, and all that was left were bleak, graying stems.

He was currently sitting on one of those benches, staring at the remains of the flowers. He had the feeling they had been roses, before they started to decompose. What was left of the stems were long and thin, and riddled with thorns. He fancied they had been dark red, and that they had been beautiful before they died.

As he sat there, he found himself humming a Muggle tune he had been fond of, when he had been alive.

I don't want to start any blasphemous rumors, but I think that God has a sick sense of humor

A dead goth in a graveyard. The Gods had a very sick sense of humor, indeed.

He started to walk, padding softly across tall, weed-infested grass. He threaded his way through the raised blocks and unmoving statues with a deliberate slowness. He paused to read the names, and trail his fingers over the carved curves of the stone.

Draco had all the time in the world, now.

He wished he had had the chance to say goodbye to Harry.

Harry was the only thing his mind would focus on, as he walked. He wondered what Harry was doing right now, what Harry was thinking. He hoped Harry wasn't sad or grieved or upstairs in the master bedroom of Grimmauld Place, crying his eyes out.

Of course, if it had been the other way around, and Harry had been the one that died, Draco would have been doing exactly that.

And, Harry would blame himself for this. He would kick himself for not making Draco stay behind, and hate himself for not protecting him. All his Gryffindor bollocks would not allow for him to realize the truth-- he

could not have done anything. The spell had been halfway to him when he turned around.

Just like that. Over and done.

Alive one second, and dead the next.

He paused in his progress, as a particular stone caught his eye. It was short, but long, and fashioned like an open book. He stopped and stared in earnest, as the names on the stone registered in his mind.

The left page said:

POTTER

*James and Lily
1981*

and on the right:

*May Your Spirits Shine Like
The Light In Your Son's Eyes*

Unable to form a coherent thought, Draco sank down in front of the marker, and stared.

~*~

The flat above Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes had two bedroom, each with their own bed, but Molly Weasley was rather sure that was only for the sake of pretense.

Fred and George had shared a bed until they were six. For no particular reason, other than a lack of financial resources. Space had been tight, but money had been tighter, and that was simply how it had worked out.

When they were born, they had been small enough to share a crib. There had not been money to buy another, and there had been no sense in trying to find the money when one crib managed to accommodate them both.

Ron's arrival, when they were two, evicted them from the crib. There

had only been enough money for one bed, so again, Molly had figured they would just have to make do. They had still been small enough that there had been plenty of room, especially since they had had the habit of sleeping practically on top of each other.

Ginny had been born the next year, and once again, the decided lack of space had been overridden by a complete lack of funds. Ron had kept the crib, the twins had stayed as they had been, and Ginny had slept with her parents.

However, by the time the twins turned six, something had had to be done. Two six year olds in one bed had become a tight squeeze, their habit of hogging each others' space notwithstanding. Ron had been almost four, and had been rapidly becoming too large for the crib, even after a Stretching Spell, and Ginny, at three, was too big to still be sleeping with her parents.

So, Fred and George were given bunk beds for their sixth birthday. Ron moved into the twins old bed, and Arthur transfigured the crib into a regular, single bed for Ginny.

They had seemed excited about their present, and that night, had cheerfully gone to sleep in their separate beds. In the morning, however, Molly had come in their room to find them curled together in the bottom bunk, a freckled tangle of entwined arms and entangled legs.

She didn't know what kind of sleeping arrangements they had had at Hogwarts, but she figured it had not been far off that.

In their second year, Fred and George had joined the Gryffindor Quidditch team, much to Molly's dismay and worry, not to mention vexation at the added expense of two brooms. During their third match, Gryffindor versus Ravenclaw, Molly's fears had been realized. A Bludger had knocked Fred off his broom. He had fallen no small number of feet, and had landed mostly on his head.

The next morning, her and Arthur had received an owl from Dumbledore, informing them of the accident. He had said that Fred would be fine, he just needed some rest, and that he would be in the Hospital Wing for the next few days, if the Weasley's wished to come for a visit.

He had also added, post scriptum, that in the small hours of the

morning, Argus Filch had found George asleep on the floor outside the Hospital Wing door.

Which was why, when she came down the stairs, she was not surprised to find Fred outside the medium-sized, unused parlor at the rear of the house. He was sitting on the floor, with his back leaned up against the door and his arms hugging his knees.

He seemed to be asleep, from the way his chin was tucked into his chest, but he looked up when he heard his mother approaching.

"Fred Weasley." She said, trying for her best, disapproving tone, though her heart was not in it. "You should be in bed. It is very late."

Truth be told, late was an understatement. It was so late it was actually early.

"She won't let me see him." Fred said quietly, looking up at her.

"He needs his rest." She said. "As do you."

Fred shook his head, then dropped it back down.

"What, then?" Molly asked. "You're going to stay out here all night?"

Fred mumbled something into his knees that sounded like 'yes'.

Again, Molly was not surprised.

When Filch had found George waiting outside the hospital wing for his brother, he had tried to bundle him off to bed. George had had no intention of going anywhere. Filch's threats of detention had fallen on deaf ears, and George had raised a ruckus that had woken half the castle.

"Up, up!" Molly said, hauling Fred to his feet by a strong grip on one of his arms.

He started to protest, loudly, but Molly shut him down by hefting her wand, and pointing firmly in his face.

"I swear to the Gods, Fred Weasley, if you wake up everyone, after the night they've had, I'll fix you so you'll wish you have never learned to talk."

He quieted immediately, but his face clouded with both hurt and anger. His eyes were wet when they met hers, and after meeting her gaze for a moment, he lifted his chin, slightly. Molly folded her arms across her chest, ready to dig him her heels, but as she studied her son's face, her resolve started to crumble.

Fred was such a bright and lively person, it was a complete shock to seem so broken apart. When Ginny had run afoul with the basilisk, and after his father's adventures with a murderous snake, he had managed to keep enough a hold of himself to veil his worry in a thin veneer of quips and light-hearted jokes.

Of course, in those instances, he had had *George*.

Which, only proved something she had suspected for awhile, now. Fred and George were a part of each other, in a way that almost made them the same person. They needed each other, and it seemed that being together was the only thing that kept them anchored.

Earlier, she had spoken with Dumbledore, and Dumbledore had told her and Arthur something he had not wished to announce to all and sundry. George's injuries were severe, and there was a possibility he might not pull through. Madam Pomfrey had done all she could, but she was worried, and when Madam Pomfrey was worried, something was very wrong, indeed.

There was nothing she could do for George, and she knew there was only one way she could give Fred any kind of peace.

"Get out of the way, Fred." She said, pointing her wand at the door.

"I already tried." Fred said. "It didn't work."

"That." She said slowly, "is because you don't know the spell."

Fred gave a start, and inched out of the way.

"*Abiertus*." She whispered. The lock jiggled, and the tumbler slid back in its chamber.

Fred looked back and forth between her and the door, apparently unable to move.

"Go on, then." She said, gesturing towards the door. "George is waiting."

"But, what about Pomfrey?" He asked, as he reached for the door's handle.

Madam Pomfrey. That was, in fact, a very good question.

"I... well, I'll think of something." She said hastily. "I can't very well tell her the truth, now can I?"

Fred froze, and snatched his hand away from the handle like it had burned him. His eyes went wide in horror as he looked at his mother and realized she knew something she didn't need to know-- the true state of affairs between him and his twin.

"Mum... I, uh..." Fred started.

"No." She said, waving him off. "Don't explain. Please don't explain." She pinched the bridge of her nose and sighed heavily. "For Merlin's sake, don't say anything."

"But, Mum."

"No. I don't want to hear it." She snapped. "It's wrong, Fred. Wrong. Wrong in a hundred ways I could name off, and a thousand more that I couldn't. But that's how it is, and he needs you, right now." She gestured towards the door, again. "Go." She pressed. "Go to him, before I change my mind."

Fred nodded silently.

As Fred reached for the handle again, several things that said she should have known, all along, his home.

The way they had always cried, as children, if apart for even a handful of minutes. The way they had always slept together, practically on top of each other. The way they had held hands nearly everywhere they went, until they were nine, to the point that George had learned to use a fork with his left hand, his other hand was free to hold Fred's at the table.

The way Fred had kept her and Arthur up half the night, the night before they left for their first year at Hogwarts. He had been

demanding to know when was the last time a Weasley was Sorted into something other than Gryffindor, because he had been terrified that him and George would be Sorted into different houses.

"It's my own fault." She mumbled.

"What?" Fred asked.

"You and George." She said quietly. "It's my own fault. I should have separated you, more."

"No, Mum." Fred started.

"Yes." She insisted. "If I had been paying attention, I would have seen it coming a long time off. I just didn't want to."

"Mum, don't." Fred said, but she waved him off, and gestured pointedly to the door.

She followed him in, wanting to have a look at George, herself. She stopped when she walked into Fred, who was frozen under Madam Pomfrey's formidable gaze. Dumbledore was with her. He did not look ready to hex Fred into next week, like Madam Pomfrey, nor did he look entirely surprised.

"Mrs. Weasley." Madam Pomfrey started, in a tone that said she was not afraid to wake the whole house, if that was what it took to get these interlopers out of her infirmary.

"It's alright, Poppy." Dumbledore said gently, gesturing Molly and Fred all the way in.

Fred did not wait for Madam Pomfrey's answer. He quickly abandoned them to pull up a chair at George's bed, and take up one of his hands.

"Albus." Madam Pomfrey started.

"They're twins, you'll remember. I've heard, often times, that is a bond stronger than magic." Dumbledore said. "It would be best for both of them, if you let him stay."

Madam Pomfrey harrumphed. "The boy is not well." She said stiffly. "Not well, at all."

"Indeed." Dumbledore agreed. "However, you did say he is doing better than we thought. Just now, you said that it looks like he might live, after all."

Molly gave a heavy, shuddering sigh of relief.

"I assume he was sleeping outside the door?" Dumbledore asked, turning to Molly.

"Yes." Molly said, glancing over at her sons. Fred had pulled the chair very close, and had leaned his head on George's shoulder.

"Well, best we let him in, then." Dumbledore said lightly.

Madam Pomfrey grunted, but Dumbledore smiled.

"Would be a shame for one to recover from a serious injury, only for the other to catch pneumonia while waiting outside for him." Dumbledore said, echoing what he had said after Fred's Quidditch injury, when Molly and Arthur had come to Hogwarts, to see George tucked into the hospital bed with him.

"It's July." Madam Pomfrey commented, a bit peevishly.

"Indeed." Dumbledore said. "But, this house is as drafty as Hogwarts, I am afraid."

XX

Without You, It's Not as Much Fun to Pick Up the Pieces
(Part Two)

When Harry woke, he found he was still exhausted, despite the fact that he had slept like a stone. He also found that he was a little bit confused. He was not completely aware of where he was when he first opened his eyes, and it took him a few moments to sort it out.

It also took him a moment to comprehend why Draco was not lying next to him, once he figured out where he was. It was not that he didn't know Draco was downstairs in the makeshift infirmary, it was just that part of him, in his sleep-muddle state, had been vainly hoping otherwise.

He sat up and gave a start. Dumbledore was in his room, sitting on a

chintz armchair that was not a regular fixture in the room. As a matter of fact, it looked suspiciously like the one he had conjured during Harry's hearing at the Ministry. He was staring at Harry fixedly, and his bright blue eyes were filled with concern.

"Good afternoon, Mister Potter." He said finally.

"Afternoon?" Harry asked thickly. He peered out the window to find that it was, in fact, quite late in the day. "What time is it?"

"About one." Dumbledore said.

"I slept until one?" Harry squawked. Dumbledore nodded.

Harry jumped out of bed, and headed for the wardrobe. As he dug through it, he was briefly aware he was standing in front of Dumbledore in his trolleys, but he shoved the thought away. He had more important things to worry about, like getting dressed so he could go downstairs and see Draco.

Not that Pomfrey was going to let him in, but it was worth a try.

"Harry." Dumbledore said gently.

Harry stopped and looked over at Dumbledore, a black T-shirt of Draco's in one hand, and a pair of faded Muggle jeans in the other.

"I didn't mean to sleep this long." Harry babbled, stepping into the jeans. "Hermione put a charm on me, because I said I wouldn't be able to sleep."

"And well she did." Dumbledore said, nodding slowly. "Because you are quite right. You would not have been able to." Dumbledore considered him for a moment, then gestured to the bed. "Have a seat."

"I can't." Harry insisted. He pulled the shirt over his head, putting it on backwards. Realizing his mistake, he cursed, and twisted the recalcitrant cloth around him until he had it on properly. "I've got to go downstairs. I've got to see Draco."

"Madam Pomfrey will be disinclined to let you in." Dumbledore warned.

"I'll talk her around." Harry said, knowing it was a big, fat lie. The

giant squid could not talk Madam Pomfrey around. Dumbledore raised an eyebrow at him, but Harry only lifted his chin defiantly.

"We need to discuss last night." Dumbledore pressed.

"I don't want to." Harry said stubbornly. He didn't look at Dumbledore, but rather, focused his attention on locating two of the same shoe in the bottom of the wardrobe. "Not right now."

"You know, Harry, Madam Pomfrey finds me most convincing." Dumbledore said airily. "I could be persuaded to talk to her."

"If?" Harry asked, a bit warily.

"If you have a seat." Dumbledore said, smiling.

Sighing, Harry dropped the trainers in his hand, and sunk down on the edge of the bed.

"Yeah, all right." Harry grumbled, steeling himself for a long explanation of what happened.

Dumbledore studied Harry for a moment, as if trying to figure out where to start. He tapped a finger to his lips as he mulled it over, then nodded to himself.

"I will start with events at the Granger's." He said finally. "Wormtail is dead."

"What?" Harry asked. "Dead? But how? Who did it? Moody? Kingsley Shacklebolt?"

"Ron." Dumbledore said lightly.

"Ron!" Harry shouted, his eyes nearly falling out of his head. "Ron killed Wormtail?"

"Yes." Dumbledore said.

Slowly, Harry's brain processed this information. Ron had killed someone. His best friend had killed another human being. This explained why Ron had been in no hurry to talk about what happened at Hermione's. It was not the kind of thing that Ron would be able to just shrug off, and it was certainly not the type of thing he would brag

about.

"I fear he had no other choice." Dumbledore said. "He seems to believe otherwise, but that is a fact. If Wormtail had not died, things at the Granger's would have gone far worse than they did."

"By all accounts, there were more Death Eaters than Order members from the first." Dumbledore said. "Apparently, the twins took a few of them out, straight away, as did Ginny."

"The twins." Harry repeated slowly. "What about George?"

"George took a very serious curse, a personal specialty of Mister Dolohov's, which inflicts severe damage to the internal organs." Dumbledore explained. "It seems that he will live, but I am afraid he is far from out of the woods."

Harry frowned, and gestured for Dumbledore to continue.

"Ginny and the twins quick action evened the score a bit, and the Order was able to hold their own, until the Dementors arrived." Dumbledore said. "With the Dementors, things shifted in favor of the Death Eaters. The Order had to divide their time between fighting the Death Eaters and keeping the Dementors at bay. Which, I fear, is why no one was handy when Ginny was knocked in the head."

"Is she going to be alright?" Harry asked.

"She is fine, and she was awake, last I was downstairs." Dumbledore informed. "But, she is weak, and will likely be abed for several days."

Harry nodded quietly. This, at least, was some good news.

"As I said, was it not for Ron, things at the Granger's would have ended very, very badly." Dumbledore said. "The Death Eaters were gaining the upper hand. But, when Wormtail fell, they left, as quickly as possible, I assume."

Harry sighed, and pondered this for a moment. He found that while he was sorry Ron had had to do it, he was not sorry it had happened. Actually, he was oddly grateful. If Ron had not done it, many of his friends would be dead.

"Now, as for our own fight." Dumbledore went on. "Lucius Malfoy is

also dead."

"Draco!" Harry blurted.

Draco had said as much, last night, but Harry had not really thought on it, at the time. There had been too much going on for him to stop and contemplate it, and he had tried to mollify himself with the fact that Draco had sounded unsure if he had actually killed him or not.

"Sadly, I believe that is the case." Dumbledore said. "I did not see it. But, knowing Lucius, he immediately went for his son, as soon as he figured out whose side he was on."

"Also, knowing Lucius, any confrontation between the two of them would have resulted in death." Dumbledore paused, and sadness passed over his face. "All we can do, I am afraid, is take comfort that it was Mister Malfoy, and not Draco."

"Yeah." Harry said quietly.

As he thought on it, he found he his feelings about Wormtail and Ron applied to this situation, as well. He was not sorry Lucius had died, he was sorry that that Draco had had to do it.

"What about Voldemort?" Harry asked, after a pause.

"It would seem he escaped." Dumbledore said. "The counterspell proved to be effective, and he wore himself down trying to produce a spell strong enough to supercede it."

"Professor McGonagall and I managed to weaken the barrier that was protecting him." Dumbledore explained. "Once he felt the barrier weakening, he used the last of his strength to Disapparate away."

"What?" Harry stammered. "He just *left*?"

"As I told you, the spell he was trying to work was Earth Magic. Voldemort is not an Earth Mage, and performing that kind of magic was an extreme strain on him." Dumbledore said. "He knew he would not be strong enough to fight any of us off, after all the energy he had poured into the spell. Once it looked like Professor McGonagall and I were going to make him an easy mark, he used the little strength he had left to escape."

"And you just let him go?" Harry demanded.

"He was still behind the barrier when he Disapparated." Dumbledore said simply. He paused, and pursed his lips at Harry. "As for Missus Lestranger."

"No." Harry said. "Please."

"She is currently in the Prisoner's Ward of St. Mungos." Dumbledore pressed on. "She is weak, and needs a bit of rest, but otherwise, she is fine."

"I can't believe I did that." Harry said numbly.

"As I told you yesterday, Mister Potter, I cannot approve of what you did." Dumbledore said gently. "However, I cannot say that I wholly blame you, for reacting to her the way you did."

Harry averted his eyes from Dumbledore, and tried not to cry.

He couldn't say it couldn't have happened to a worse person, because that would be a lie. He couldn't say she didn't deserve it, because it paled in comparison to everything she had done. However, he could not believe he had lost control of himself like that, and gratification he had received from the act, at the time, was not only shocking, it was horrifying.

And, it was against the law.

"Am I in trouble?" Harry asked, bracing himself for the answer. At least, last he had heard, the Demetors no longer guarded Azkaban.

"Do you mean, am I going to pack you off to the Ministry?" Dumbledore asked, and Harry nodded. "No, I am not."

Harry's head shot up, and he looked at Dumbledore in confusion.

"You did something grievous, Mister Potter." Dumbledore said honestly. "Though, I daresay you will punish yourself for it, far worse than I, or the Ministry ever could."

Harry looked away again, and hastily brushed the tears out of his eyes.

"As for the Crystal Sword." Dumbledore said. "Voldemort's attempt to open the chamber failed, so it is still under Stonehenge. At the time, I thought it more important we get everyone home, and safe, then try to secure it."

"In a few days, when everyone is feeling better, we will go retrieve it." Dumbledore went on. "The women have agreed to meet us at Stonehenge, and open the chamber for us."

"I thought it could only be opened at the full moon?" Harry asked.

"The spell that Voldemort tried to use required it be done at the full moon, yes." Dumbledore clarified. "It was the only version of the spell he could have managed, because it enabled him to draw on the moon's power to aid him."

"The women, however, do not need the moon's power to open it." Dumbledore said. "Caiohme believes there is a version in her scrolls that will allow the women to open it any time they wish. She is researching it as we speak."

"Caiohme?" Harry asked, confusion flitting over his face.

"The Lady of the Lake." Dumbledore said.

Harry's eyes went wide, and his jaw dropped open. "What?"

"Caiohme is the High Priestess of Avalon." Dumbledore said. "She is the Lady of the Lake."

Harry stared at Dumbledore for a long while, completely dumbfounded. Dumbledore returned his gaze with a smile, seeming to find amusement in Harry's befuddlement.

"I thought Avalon was just a myth." Harry managed, finally.

"Mister Potter." Dumbledore said, fixing him with a level eye. "You, of all people, should know that some myths are more real than others."

Harry made a choking sound, and grabbed onto the bedpost to keep from falling off the bed. Dumbledore had a disconcerting way of knowing a little too much about everything, but this was impossible. There was no way he could know about him and Draco. He was hardly ever at Grimmauld Place. He had never even seen them together.

Even if he suspected that something was going on, that did not account for him knowing about the song.

"Mister Potter?" Dumbledore questioned, when Harry continued to work his mouth like a dying flobberworm.

"How do you know?" Harry asked.

"I am old, Harry. I am not blind." Dumbledore said cheerfully. "It was very obvious, by the end of your first week at Hogwarts, that there was something very... *interesting* between you and Draco. And, I had the notion that eventually, it would sort itself out into something a bit less violent."

"But the myth?" Harry insisted desperately. For his next trick, Dumbledore would be reading minds.

"I'll admit, I did have some help, there." Dumbledore smiled. "Evidently, Draco confessed the whole thing to Professor Snape, when they went to the Ministry. Afterward, I entertained Professor Snape's head in my fireplace, while he bellowed for an hour about the impropriety of it all."

"Does it bother you?" Harry asked.

"Not in the least." Dumbledore said. "But, the thought of it gets Professor Snape's wind up something fierce." He paused, and his eyes twinkled mischievously. "And while I shouldn't say it, that's always a bit amusing."

Harry could only laugh.

"Come, now." Dumbledore said. He stood, and the chintz armchair disappeared. "Let's go downstairs, and I'll see if I can't talk some sense into Madam Pomfrey."

~*~

"Well, I would not have figured to find you here."

The voice, sudden and loud in the stillness, jerked Draco back to himself. His head snapped up, and he received the kind of shock that probably would have killed him, if he had not already been dead.

He looked very different from the pictures Harry had of him, but Draco knew who he was right off. He was older and thinner than the man from the pictures. His hair was longer, almost to his shoulders, and his eyes were darker than Draco remembered from the pictures.

But the smile was the same. A slight quirk to his lips that said he knew something you did not-- and more importantly, he wasn't going to tell you.

"Sirius Black." Draco said.

"Draco Malfoy." Sirius replied. He considered Draco for a moment, then flopped down in the grass beside him. "Like I said, I would not have figured to find you here."

"What, in a Muggle graveyard, keeping company with Harry's parents?" Draco asked.

"Something like that." Sirius said, with a chuckle.

"What are Harry's parents doing in a Muggle graveyard?" Draco asked.

"They were living as Muggles, when they died." Sirius answered. "Remus had wanted them buried at the wizarding cemetery in Ottery St. Catchpole, but Dumbledore had thought it would be best if they stayed here."

"Where is here, anyway?" Draco asked.

"Godric's Hollow." Sirius said.

"A Muggle town, named after Godric Gryffindor?" Draco asked, with a raised eyebrow.

"Never followed that, myself." Sirius said. He was quiet for a minute, studying Draco with curious eyes. "I understand your Patronus is a spot on impression of me."

"Yeah." Draco said, smiling. "Gave Harry a right shock, the first time he saw it."

"I know." Sirius said. "I was there."

"What?" Draco stammered. "You weren't there."

"I was, at that." Sirius insisted. "You just didn't see me. I'm not a ghost. Not a proper one, anyway."

"How's that?" Draco asked. "You're dead."

"I didn't die." Sirius explained. "I fell through a device that lets people communicate with the other side."

"So you're still alive?" Draco asked. Sirius nodded. "Why don't you go back, then?"

"I don't have a body to go back to." Sirius said. "Otherwise I would. The other side is right boring."

"Harry misses you something fierce." Draco said.

"I know." Sirius said, shaking his head. "I miss him, too. I watch him all the time."

"All the time?" Draco asked, his face coloring.

Sirius gave a snort of laughter. "I take off, when you two start in. Though I must say, you two start in quite a bit."

Draco's face went bright red, and his mouth dropped open in embarrassment. People had caught him having sex before, but given that the voyeur in question was Harry's godfather, this was a bit different.

"Not to worry." Sirius said, chuckling. "It's no worse than what me and his father got up to. And we were younger, at that."

"His father?" Draco choked. "I thought you were with the werewolf!"

"I was." Sirius said. "For a good long time. I'd still be with him, if I hadn't fallen. When you and Harry start in, I usually go to Remus' room. Sometimes I think he knows I'm there."

"You loved him" Draco stated. It was not a question.

"Of course." Sirius said. "James and I were best friends, and I loved him well, but we were just kids. Remus was something special." He

paused, and favored Draco with a smile. "Do you love Harry?"

"With everything I have." Draco said.

"That's good to hear." Sirius said.

With that, he stood, and hauled Draco to his feet.

"It's been a pleasure, Mister Malfoy." Sirius said. "However, it is past time you went back."

"Back?" Draco sputtered. "I can't go back! I'm dead."

"That's just it." Sirius said. "You're not."

"What do you mean, I'm not?" Draco demanded. "I'm here, aren't I?"

"Yes, you are, but you shouldn't be." Sirius said. "And you need to go back. If you wait to long, you might not be able to get back."

"But..."

"Like I said, I watch Harry all the time." Sirius said. "And I was watching him earlier. He's sitting with you, right now. You're unconscious, but you are not dead. That's why I came looking for you. I wanted to tell you to go back, while there is still time."

"How?" Draco asked.

"Just go." Sirius said. "I can't explain how I go back. I just do it."

"Alright." Draco said. "I'll give it a shot."

"Tell Harry I love him." Sirius said. His voice was quiet and sad. "And tell Remus...."

"What?" Draco asked. "Tell Remus what?"

"Nothing." Sirius said. "Don't tell him anything. One day, I'll figure out how to get back properly, and I'll tell him, myself."

And then, Sirius was gone.

Draco stared at the place where he had been for a few moments, still

dumbfounded. Then, he cursed himself for wasting time. Sirius had said he had to go, before it was too late.

He took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and thought about Harry.

~*~

It had taken no small amount of work to get him into the medium-sized, unused parlor at the rear of the house.

He had begged, and he had pleaded. He had nagged and wheedled, and had tried to charm his way through the door. He had lied and said he wasn't feeling well. He had even resorted to putting a Furnculus on himself, a Furnculus that Madam Pomfrey healed from the doorway before slamming the door on his face.

In the end, he called in reinforcements. Ron's hopes were not high as he approached the door, flanked by his mother and Dumbledore, but he knew his chance of getting in a room that was guarded by Madam Pomfrey were better with the two of them than they had been, alone.

Madam Pomfrey was not pleased as his mother coaxed and Dumbledore cajoled. Madam Pomfrey was frowning at him in a rather disconcerting manner, but he ignored her, and prayed, and hoped that the Gods were listening.

Hermione was in her room, closeted with her mother. She had been up there most of the day, and there was no indication she was coming out anytime soon. Harry had slept most of the day away. Now that he was up, he was in the infirmary, waiting for the Ferret to wake up.

Which left Ron alone, and right now, he did not want to be alone.

After some consideration, Ron had decided to go after Harry. Hermione was busy talking to someone who was awake, while Harry was hanging around someone who was unconscious. Ron was in no particular hurry to see the Malfoy, but Malfoy was out cold, so it was not like he would be talking.

Evidently, whatever his mother and Dumbledore had been saying to Madam Pomfrey worked. She gave an impatient snort, but moved out of the way to let Ron pass. Dumbledore thanked her kindly as Ron waked in, and Madam Pomfrey replied with something along the lines

of 'I don't know why I bother closing the door, at all'.

Ron found Harry right away, sitting in the Ferret's bed. He was leaning against a pile of pillows propped up against the headboard. He was sitting atop the coverlet, with his legs stretched out in front of him. His eyes were closed, and he could very well have been asleep, except for the hand that was idly soothing Malfoy's hair.

Malfoy was lying flat on his back, the coverlet pulled halfway up his chest. He was wearing the standard-issue blue and white cotton pajama that Madam Pomfrey seemed to have an endless supply of. Ron found this vaguely amusing, because he knew those pajamas were not at all to the Ferret's tastes.

He stopped chucking to himself as he got close enough to Malfoy to properly see him. Impossibly, he looked paler than usual, and had taken on an almost grayish hue. There were shadows under his eyes, quite dark against his paleness, and his cheeks were a bit hollowed.

Harry opened his eyes as Ron approached, the hand trailing through the Ferret's hair never stopping. He watched as Ron pulled up a chair, but didn't speak. As he sat down, he belatedly wondered if this was a good idea, toying with the notion that Harry might still be mad at him.

All had seemed forgiven and forgotten when they had been on the sitting room couch, last night. No words had passed between them, then, they had only taken comfort in each others' nearness, so Ron could not be sure.

He almost decided to leave, but stopped, when he remembered what Dumbledore had said to him last night.

I daresay Harry could use a friend right now. And last time I checked, he had two very good ones, in the both of you.

"Hi." Ron said quietly.

"Hi." Harry replied.

"How is he?" Ron asked, more because he knew he should ask, not because he wanted to know.

"Do you care?" Harry asked, a bit bitterly. "Honestly?"

"I'm trying to, for you, at least." Ron said. "Honestly."

"He might die." Harry said flatly. The hand smoothing Malfoy's hair stopped to brush over his cheek.

Ron opened his mouth, then closed it with a snap.

"The curse MacNair hit him with is meant to kill." Harry explained. "It puts you in a coma, at first, but eventually it will kill. Pomfrey's given him stuff to reverse it, but she is not sure if it will work."

"Disanimus." Ron mumbled. It wasn't a question.

"How do you know about that?" Harry asked.

Ron shook his head. "I, uh...." He fumbled. "Well..."

"Oh." Harry said, his eyebrows shooting up. "That's how you did it, then."

"Did what?"

"Wormtail." Harry said. Ron looked both mortified and confused. "Dumbledore told me."

"I didn't mean to." Ron said quietly. "My sister... Hermione's mum was screaming, and the Dementors. I really didn't mean to... it just kind of came out."

"Ron." Harry started. He leaned forward, and took Ron's hand in his free one. "Don't blame yourself."

"How can't I?" Ron asked. "He's dead."

"From what Dumbledore said, it was the only way." Harry said. "If you hadn't done it, everyone would be dead. Your sister, the twins, your parents, Hermione..."

Ron waved him off, and sighed. "I know." Ron said. "Only, I wish it hadn't been me, you know?"

"I know." Harry said, his eyes darkening. "I'll have to kill Voldemort, one day, and when it's all done, I'm sure I'll feel the same way. It has to be done, I just wish it didn't have to be me."

"I'm not a bloody hero." Ron grumbled.

"Neither am I." Harry offered, a bit sourly. "I just bump into Voldemort everywhere, and I refuse to die."

They sat in companionable silence for quite some time. Harry's gaze eventually drifted from Ron to study Malfoy, and Ron left his bedside chair to look at his sister.

She was still out, but seemed to be sleeping, rather than unconscious, from the way she was curled onto side. Her face was peaceful, and had color to it, and her breathing seemed to be healthy.

George, on the other hand, looked as bad as the Ferret. He was pale and still, and his breathing was shallow. Fred had crawled under the coverlet with him, and had George tucked into the curve of his arm. Fred was asleep, but even so, his face was grim and tense.

"They'll be all right." Harry said, as Ron returned to him.

"I hope so." Ron said.

"They will." Harry insisted.

"Ginny will." Ron said. "I'm not so sure about George."

"Earlier, Dumbledore told me George would be all right." Harry offered.

"What about him?" Ron asked, gesturing to Malfoy. "You think he'll be alright?"

"I hope so." Harry said. "I really hope so."

They briefly fell silent again. Then, Harry suddenly gave a start.

"Hang on." He said slowly. "Where'd you learn the Disanimus Curse?"

"Oh, right." Ron mumbled, his face flushing. "I... uh, well. Oh, bloody hell." He sighed. "I was watching you and him in the garden, one day."

"What?" Harry asked. "Why?"

"I don't know, really." Ron said. "I just, well, I couldn't figure on why

you were with him. I wanted to see if maybe he wasn't a right prat when it was just the two of you."

"He's not what you think." Harry said. "I know he's been an arse to you and all, but that's not really him. I think his dad put a lot of that bollocks in his head."

"Yeah, all right." Ron agreed. "He seemed nice enough. To *you*" He emphasized. "I didn't stay too long. You started kissing, and that."

Harry let out a short bark of laughter. "We do that."

"I've noticed." Ron said, furrowing his brow. He wished they didn't, not so much, at least, but he wasn't going to split that hair, right now.

"Are you happy?" Ron asked suddenly. "With him?"

"Yeah." Harry said simply.

"I'm sorry, then, for all that." Ron offered. "I shouldn't have gotten so arsed about it." He paused, considering. "Or Hermione."

"I'm sorry, too." Harry said.

"For what?" Ron asked.

"For not telling you about him." Harry said. "Or Hermione."

They looked at each other for a moment, both embarrassed and sheepish, yet relieved. Then, Harry chuckled, and pulled Ron to him for a hug.

Ron felt like a huge weight had been lifted off his shoulders. It wasn't enough to cancel out the Wormtail business, but it was something.

"Weasel, get your paws off my boyfriend."

Harry gave a gasp, and Ron ripped away from him. They both turned to find Draco awake, and regarding Ron with narrowed, gray eyes.

"You're awake!" Harry exclaimed. "How are you feeling?"

"I'd be feeling a spot better, if I hadn't woken up to find him trying it on with you." Draco replied, his voice thick from sleep. "That's low,

Weasel, even for you, catching a grope from him when I am on my deathbed."

"I didn't touch anything!" Ron insisted, holding up his hands like he was surrendering.

"He didn't." Harry said.

"Only because I ruined the moment by waking up." Draco drawled. "Though I must admit, I wouldn't have figured you for a toff, after all the noise you made about Harry being one."

"I'm not!" Ron squawked.

Harry chuckled, and Draco gave a snort.

"Really, how are you feeling?" Harry asked.

"Tired." Draco complained. "And hot." He added, pushing the blankets away. He looked down at himself, and grimaced. "What the shit am I wearing?"

"Yeah, he's fine." Ron remarked.

"I swear to the Gods, Harry Potter." Draco went on. "If you let them put me in your fat-arsed cousin's pajamas..."

Ron was quite pleased that Draco shut up. Unfortunately for Ron, Harry had silenced him with a kiss, a kiss that neither of them seemed in a hurry to end. He sat there quietly, trying desperately to find something else to look, especially since Draco had pulled Harry half atop him.

Eventually, Ron mumbled some excuses, and left.

He was happy for Harry and all, but he was not about to watch *that* for the rest of the afternoon.

Stonehenge was a completely different place in the daylight. It was still mysterious and somewhat foreboding, but seemed somewhat less sinister to Harry than it had the other night.

Of course, the other night, it had been crawling with Death Eaters.

Dumbledore's portkey, the same nondescript piece of rock as before, brought them to the same place, just inside the circle of stones. The travelling group was considerably smaller than the last time; just himself, Dumbledore, Draco and Remus.

Draco looked tired and worn. He walked and moved a bit slower than usual, almost carefully, and lacked normal feline-like grace. Madame Pomfrey said he was as well as could be expected, but she had counseled rest, because his body needed time to wholly recover from the ordeal of being mostly-dead. She had also said he needed to eat, plenty and often, to get his strength back up.

In a show of his usual stubbornness, he had breakfasted on coffee and white toast, and had insisted on coming with Harry to Stonehenge, even though he didn't need to. Harry had wanted to tell him to stay behind, but he hadn't bothered, because he had known there would not have been a point. It only would have made Draco upset, and in the end, he would have ended up joining them, anyway.

Harry stared openly at the priestesses as he approached intrigued. The other night, it had been dark, and there had been too much else going on for him to give them more than a passing glance. He found them striking and beautiful-- all of them, despite the fact that they ranged widely in appearance and age. Something about them drew the eye, something Harry could not quite place. There was just an air about the that made them seem almost otherworldly, like they would vanish if he thought about them too hard, or his hand would go right through them if he tried to touch them.

One stood a bit apart from the rest, a tall, auburn-haired woman with a face that was difficult to place an age on. She was plainly not young, but her face was smooth, and there was no gray in her hair. She wore the same blue robe and deerskin tunic as the others, but she carried herself with an air of authority that made Harry think she was their leader.

"Lady." Dumbledore intoned, with a slight nod of the head. "It was good of you to do this."

"There was no other way." She said simply. "I sensed your need was great, when you first came to me. But, seeing this evil with my own eyes, I know now there is no other way."

"I assure you, Lady, I am forever in your debt." Dumbledore said. "Now, if I may, I shall make some introductions. Gentlemen, this is Caiohme, the Lady of the Lake. And Lady, this is Remus Lupin, Harry Potter, and Draco Malfoy."

"Young Mister Potter." Caiohme said, smiling warmly. "I have heard much about you."

Harry, at a loss for words, dropped his eyes and blushed furiously.

"You carry a great burden, for someone so young." She went on, her bright eyes boring into him. "A great burden, indeed. Should you ever need rest, or solace, you are always welcome in Avalon."

"Thank you, Lady." Harry managed, more color rushing to his cheeks.

"And you, Sir Dragon." She said, turning her gaze on Draco. "You have seen much that is evil, and know much you should not. This, in itself, is a burden. And he will need you, before this is over." She continued, gesturing to Harry. "Your quick wits to balance out his brave heart."

"A Stag, and a Dragon. Such an unlikely pair." She murmured. "Yet, you are meant for each other, bound together by fire and ash, as well as love."

Harry's eyes went wide, and he sucked in a sharp breath. Next to him, Draco made a faint, strangled sound.

"You should have seen them, Lady, their first few years of school together." Dumbledore said cheerfully. "They were quite intent on killing each other."

Caiohme did not look surprised, but amused. "It often starts as such." She paused thoughtfully, then gestured towards the circle of priestesses, who parted just enough to allow someone to pass. "Come now, let us get this thing done. You will find the chamber is already open."

Still shocked and Caiohme's words, Harry silently allowed himself to be

ushered to the altar stone by Dumbledore. As he approached the stone he saw it had changed. It was tall and stretched, with a wide, yawning opening just wide enough for a person to crawl into.

He was suddenly aware of Draco standing next to him. He opened his mouth and started to tell Draco he didn't have to come, but Draco shut him down with a sharp look.

"I'll go first." Harry said flatly.

"Do you want me to come with you?" Remus offered.

"No, Remus." Harry said quietly. He knew Remus was eager to help after being left out of the last battle, but Harry did not want to drag him into this. "I'll be fine."

With that, he climbed down and positioned himself at the entrance. It was not a door, or stairs, but a chute he would have to slide down, like the Chamber of Secrets.

He took a deep breath, and pushed himself off the edge.

Unlike the Chamber of Secrets, the trip down was surprisingly short. It was almost like a slide at a Muggle playground; no twists or turns, just a straight shot down at a low, sloping grade.

It was, however, very dark. The only light filtering in was a thin shaft from the opening above, and it was doing very little to penetrate the blackness.

He pulled his wand and called for a light, revealing a simple, low-ceiling chamber that appeared to be just tunneled out of the ground. It was small, about twice the size of his cupboard at the Dursley's, and the walls were lined with rough-hewn stone.

Immediately, Draco came down the chute, landing square on his arse.

"That was short." Draco said, as he got to his feet.

"What?" Harry asked.

"The ride down." Draco replied, pulling his own wand. "*Lumos!*" He added. "I had expected it to go on for a bit."

"Remind me show you the Chamber of Secrets." Harry quipped.

"Would you really?" Draco asked, sounding a bit too eager for Harry's peace of mind.

"On second thought, no." Harry said firmly. Draco pouted, but Harry shook his head. He could just picture Draco prancing around down there, so full of Slytherin pride he was fit to burst. "You'd have way too much fun down there, hanging around that statue of Slytherin."

"There is a statue of Salazar?" Draco asked, smiling.

"Well, why not." Harry replied. "It was his chamber, anyway." He frowned at Draco, and sighed. "Never mind that." He went on. "Let's just get this thing and get out of here."

Draco glanced around, and raised an eyebrow. "You do realize there is nothing down here, right?"

Harry had noticed this, but he was choosing to ignore it. The chamber was small enough that the combined light of their wands lit it brightly from end to end, and there was no sign of anything, ancient relics of myth and legend or otherwise.

"It's here." Harry grumbled. It had to be there, after all the trouble it had caused. "Maybe there is another room."

"Another room, with no door?" Draco drawled, making a slow circuit of the room.

Harry ignored this, and started tapping on a section of wall. Much to his dismay, it sounded completely solid, but he ignored this as well, and started tapping a little lower.

~*~

Stonehenge was exactly as Remus remembered it.

Shortly after he was bitten, his parents had tried everything they could think of to remedy the situation. He had been subjected to all manner of charms and potions which did nothing for the lycanthropy, unless you counted a slightly muzzy feeling and a bad taste in his mouth. They had also dragged him to every healer, wisewoman, mediwizard

and witchdoctor in the Isles, and a handful on the continent, who had dosed him with the same charms and potions his parents had already tried.

When nothing else had worked, his parents had visited a local group of practicing Druids. He had been brought to a new-moon ritual at Stonehenge, with little real result. His next three transformations had not been as harsh, but the lycanthropy had remained, and by the fourth moon it had been back to business as usual.

Remus did not recall much of the ritual, he had been a little over ten years old. He had a hazy recollection of hooded and cloaked men chanting in a language he hadn't understood, a roaring bonfire that had belched heavy, acrid smoke, and swallowing a bitter, sour potion out of a carved, wooden cup.

And the stones.

He remembered the stones, most of all, so large and tall compared to himself, so solid and unmoving. They had been mysterious, not in a frightening or dangerous way, just strange and fey, like the black cloaked men who chanted among them.

He had come here once again, some seven years later. Sirius had fancied a look at the place, after Professor Binns had mentioned it in a History of Magic lesson. He had woken Remus in the middle of the night, declaring insomnia and hastening him to the motorbike.

Sirius had brought him here, forging new memories of Stonehenge on a new-moon night; memories of Sirius and sex and the stars.

He and Sirius had laid on their backs in the soft, thick grass until close to sunrise, watching the stars play upon the moonless, midnight-blue sky. The stars had been incredibly bright and vivid, without the interference of the moon's glow or the glare of the lights from Hogwarts.

Through the course of the evening, Sirius had pointed out the various constellations, naming off groupings of stars Remus had scarcely remembered from skived and half-ignored Astronomy lessons.

Sirius had, unsurprisingly, made a great fuss of Canis Major, gloating on how it was the larger of Orion's hunting dogs, and how close it was to capturing Lepus, the Rabbit. He had boasted that the Dog Star was

easily the brightest thing in the sky, and had refused to let the matter drop until Remus had agreed.

He had then pointed out a group of stars in the far distance, a constellation he had named Lupus, the Wolf. He had told Remus it was truly a beautiful constellation when it could be seen properly, and he had complained bitterly that the Wolf and the Great Dog were so far apart in the sky.

Remus found himself staring at one stone in particular, one he remembered from the long, jagged crack that ran diagonally across its surface. Canis Major had been directly above it, that night, the large, marring crack outlined by the bright, shining light of the Dog Star.

"You have memories of this place, Master Wolf?"

Remus gave a start, more from the suddenness of Cahome's voice in the near silence than by how she addressed him.

"Yes." Remus agreed quietly, once he had processed her question.

Cahome reached out, her hand hovering over his heart. "There is much sadness, here." She observed, watching his face carefully. "You have recently lost your mate."

Remus looked away quickly, unable to hold her gaze. He was used to the omniscient act, Dumbledore pulled it all the time, but from her, a complete stranger out of myth and legend, it was wholly unnerving.

"A difficult loss to bear." She went on, her voice warm. "Though, I must press you, do not let it consume you." Remus' eyes flashed at her words, but she ignored it. "The young one, the Stag, he needs you."

"Harry." Remus said quietly.

"You were close with his father." She stated. It was not a question.

"Yes." Remus said. "His mother, as well. And his godfather."

"He sees you as such." She said. "A parent. A father." She paused, favoring Remus with a tight frown. "But he is slow to approach you. He does not want to be irksome, in your time of loss."

Remus wanted to balk, wanted to argue, but he had the distinct impression the Lady was very, very right. Harry had spent much of the time immediately following Sirius' death alone. Remus had let him be, telling himself Harry just needed some time to sort his emotions out, but just the same, *he* had not been in a hurry to talk about Sirius, either.

"You have much to share with others, Master Wolf." She went on. "You have learned much, yet you keep it locked away, inside." She added, gesturing to his forehead. "You would make a great teacher."

"Others would disagree." Remus replied, a bit shortly. Others had disagreed. Loudly, and often.

"Others often fear what they do not understand." She said firmly. "It does not make them right."

"Right or wrong is not the issue." Remus replied. "Popular opinion is the issue, and that is a difficult thing to argue with."

"You speak true." She conceded. "Yet, you have someone on your side." Her eyes left Remus, shifting to the center of the monument and lingering on Dumbledore. "It's been my experience that he is rather convincing, when he chooses to be."

Despite the arguments bubbling inside him, he had to give her that. Dumbledore had hired him to teach at Hogwarts, other people's opinions be damned. Harry had often commented that Remus had been the best Defense teacher they had ever had. While part of him wanted to dismiss it the placating praise of a good friend, it was difficult to ignore fact.

He had heard plenty about Harry's experiences with Quirrell, Lockhart, Crouch-Moody, and Umbridge. If everything Harry (and Ron and Hermione) said about the previous Defense teachers were true, Harry's assessment about him might not be far off the mark.

After Snape announced his condition to everyone, Remus had done the only thing he could do. Dumbledore had not wanted to accept his resignation, but Remus had insisted. Dumbledore could do and think what he wanted, he always had, but the fact of the matter was that no parent in their right mind would want a werewolf anywhere near their children.

Of course, James had never had any reservations about Remus being around Harry, but James, as a rule, had been more than a little daft. He had, after all, chosen the Great and Reckless Sirius Black for Harry's godfather.

"Here, but I must apologize." Caohime said suddenly, her eyes searching Remus' tight, pinched face. "I did not mean to speak as I did, and that was not my intent when I approached you."

"Oh no, Lady?" Remus asked, raising an eyebrow.

"No." She smiled warmly, and made an almost surrendering gesture. "My intentions were purely selfish. Only, I have never met one of your kind, and I find I am curious." She admitted bluntly. "Will you tell me of yourself, Master Wolf?"

Despite himself, a smile tugged at the corners of his lips. He did not really want to talk about it, he rarely spoke of it, if he could help it. However, he found her piercing gaze eerily similar to Dumbledore's, and much like Dumbledore, he found himself unable to tell her no.

~*~

Ron was starting to think his mum had gone round the bend.

She had been baking non-stop for the last week. The kitchen now contained veritable stockpile of biscuits, scones, pastries, cookies and rolls, to the point that it looked like Molly Weasley was expecting to feed an invading army at any moment.

And she continued to bake, never mind that no one was really eating it. Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place was no longer playing host to the entire Order, so there was really no one around to eat it.

With George still unconscious and Fred driving himself to distraction about it, Grimmauld Place's two most accomplished eating machines were down for the count. Ginny was back at the Burrow, and Dumbledore and McGonagall were only here for small periods at a time. Malfoy hardly ate anything at all. Harry, Hermione and Lupin ate just fine, but they ate like normal humans, not the pack of ravenous dogs his mother was obviously cooking for.

Ron was doing the best he could, but he could only put away so much,

especially so much bread.

And the tea! There was enough tea in Grimmauld Place at any given time to float the whole house down the street.

Clearly, his mum had finally run mad.

Not that he could blame her, really. George was still out, and as far as Ron saw it, this was not a good sign. Madame Pomfrey insisted he would pull through, but that did not explain why he was still unconscious, a good week after he had been healed.

Fred was fretting about it enough for everyone, combined. He had lost at least five pounds, and would not leave George's side under any circumstances, unless he was forcibly removed. He even slept in the makeshift infirmary, either in George's bed, or in a large, lumpy wingback chair, pulled up so close to George's bed it touched. Either way, he could not be sleeping comfortably, as Ron saw it. The bed George was in was far too small for two people, and that chair had about as much cushioning as a packing crate.

Fred's obvious state of distress was wearing on Mrs. Weasley. She was concerned about his eating and sleeping habits, and as much as Fred waved her off, it was clear from the pointed weight loss and the dark circles under his eyes that she had cause. Whenever Fred left the confines of the infirmary, his mum's eyes followed him, the worry in them plain. She looked like she wanted to do something or say something, but she didn't seem to know what, so she would say nothing, and bake another rack of scones.

Mrs. Weasley, as well as Dumbledore, Malfoy, and oddly, Lupin, seemed worried about Professor Snape. No one had seen or heard from him since that night-- not one owl, not one head in the fireplace, not anything.

Ron had to admit that he was bit concerned, as well, even if he thought Snape was a greasy git. The Potions Master had put himself in a tight spot, playing for both sides, and if he had been caught at it, there was a good chance he was dead, or worse.

And as much as Ron hated Snape, he did not want him dead, or worse, so he did his best not to think about it.

He also did his best not to think about Wormtail.

Ron had finally come to terms with the notion that it had had to be done. Wormtail's death had caused the other Death Eaters to flee, and that had given the Order a chance to sort the Dementors out. If Wormtail had lived, a lot of people would have died, or would have been given the Kiss.

His parents. His brothers. His sister. Hermione. Hermione's utterly defenseless Muggle parents.

There had been no other way.

This did not make it a less bitter potion to swallow, by any stretch of the imagination. It did, however, make Ron feel a bit less sick about the whole thing, and he supposed he could just have to be content with that.

Hermione was being a good sport about the whole thing, bearing Ron's sudden bouts of sullen silence with warm smiles and comforting hands. She thought he should talk about it-- girls always thought everyone should talk about everything. Though, she seemed to sense his unwillingness, and as of yet, she had not tried to force him.

Ron eyed his mother wearily as she set a large plate of apple turnovers in front of him. If she did not leave off soon he was going to weigh twenty stone before school started, unless someone stated to help him with all these pastries.

His mother gave him a flat look, so he snatched a turnover off the plate and tried to look enthusiastic. He decided the next time Hermione looked like she wanted to talk, he was going to send her after his mum. She might not make any headway with Mrs. Weasley's mental state, but she might be able to talk her around all this baking.

"You should put some away, put a Keeping charm on them." He offered. "Harry and Professor Lupin will be back soon." He said hopefully. "And Mal-- Draco."

"Draco." Mrs. Weasley murmured. "He doesn't eat enough. And he needs to eat. Madam Pomfrey said so."

"He'll eat." Hermione said gently. "He's just upset."

Hermione and Mrs. Weasley exchanged a look. Mrs. Weasley nodded,

and floated half the turnovers to another plate on the counter. When she went to the counter to cast the Keeping Charm, Ron turned on Hermione.

"What's Mal-- Draco upset about?" Ron asked.

"Nothing." She said quickly. A bit too quickly. It was the same kind of 'nothing' they had all given Dumbledore when asked a pointed question.

"Mione." Ron warned. "Is something wrong with Harry?"

"Oh no, Harry's fine." Hermione said. She seemed to find her turnover extremely interesting.

Ron harrumphed.

"Oh, alright." Hermione snapped. "But don't you say anything. Harry told me the other night, but I don't think he was supposed to."

"I won't say a word." Ron said, around a mouthful of turnover.

At least they were apple. The last fruit pastries his mom had forced on him had involved blueberries, and he hated blueberries. Not that his mother had seemed to care overmuch, when she had been making him eat them.

Hermione glanced over her shoulder, to make sure Mrs. Weasley could not hear.

"The other night, at Stonehenge..." She trailed off, and fiddled with her turnover. "Dracokilledhisfather." She finished in a rush.

"What?"

"Draco killed his father." Hermione said. Her tone was almost a whisper, but since she had not run her words together, Ron knew he had heard what he had thought he heard.

"Bloody Hell!" Ron gasped, making Mrs. Weasley look over at them. He gave his mother a sheepish look, then bent his head close to Hermione. "Are you serious?"

"Yes." She said sharply. "And I swear Ronald Weasley, if you say

anything..."

"I won't." Ron said. "Don't worry."

Talk about it? Why would he want to talk about it? The only person worth talking about it with would be Malfoy, and that was not a conversation he wanted to have.

Hey, Malfoy, I heard about your dad. I guess you are not such an evil bastard after all. Sorry about all those fists to the face over the years, and for thinking you were trying to shag Harry to death..

No. Certainly not. As a matter of fact, he was starting to wish Hermione hadn't told him, because this meant Ron had been wrong, and Ron did not like to be wrong.

After considering this for a moment, Ron mentally added it to his ever-growing list of Things He Did Not Want To Think About.

It was safer that way, really, or he would go off his rocker like his mother.

~*~

After fifteen minutes below ground, Draco decided that Harry played hero in the strangest places. It was dark under Stonehenge, and dirty, and the air in the chamber smelled and tasted like it was a thousand years old.

Of course, there was a good chance it *was* a thousand years old, at least.

And, he was getting the distinct impression they were chasing their tails. There was nothing down here, nothing but some dreadful stone paneling and a packed-earth floor. Harry, however, was dutifully ignoring this, tapping away at the walls like he would find something.

Sighing, he walked to the wall directly opposite Harry and started tapping, as well. He highly doubted they would find anything, but it would take all afternoon for Harry to check the whole chamber, and it was obvious Harry intended to do just that.

Bloody sodding hero.

Of course, he was grateful to have some time alone with Harry, even if they couldn't put it to a more inventive use. Now that wounds were almost themselves again, Pomfrey had let her guard down, and the medium-sized, unused parlor at the rear of the house was practically Kings Cross Station. There was a steady stream of people coming in and out, visiting him and Ginny and George, and as much as he missed touching Harry, he was not about to snog him in front of the whole house-- certainly not in front of Dumbledore, McGonagall, Pomfrey, and Mrs. Weasley.

Today had been the first day Pomfrey had allowed him out of the infirmary. Hopefully, tonight, he would get to sleep upstairs, with Harry.

He wondered, though, if he would actually get much sleep. Leaving the infirmary would mean saying goodbye to Pomfrey's Dreamless Sleeping Draught, something he had not fully appreciated until he had gone without it.

Last night, he had drifted off to sleep before taking it, and the results had been less than satisfactory. He had had horrible, violent dreams; dreams of Voldemort, and his father-- mainly his father.

The altercation between the two of them at Stonehenge had popped in and out of his dreams. This had only made him reflect on it in the morning, replaying the scenario over and over in his head. He had analyzed it and picked it apart, trying to decide if there had been anyway for it to have ended differently, anyway for it to have ended without him killing his father.

After looking at it from every angle, the answer seemed to be no, but this was far from mollifying.

He had also dreamed of Sirius Black.

Draco had spent his first two days of consciousness wondering if he had dreamed that conversation with Sirius in the graveyard. He had eventually come to the conclusion that it had actually happened, but unfortunately, this realization was only cause for more questions.

Mainly, he wondered if he should tell Harry. If the conversation had, in fact, happened (and Draco was fairly sure it had), then it was safe to assume that everything Sirius had told him was true, or what Sirius

believed to be true.

Meaning, that Sirius was not really dead, and his spirit was trapped in some kind of odd, in-between place because he had no body to return to. Meaning also, that Sirius' spirit spent a good deal of time hanging around Grimmauld Place.

Draco had the idea the first would only make Harry unhappy. As much as he missed Sirius, and as much as he blamed himself for his 'death', this knowledge would only make him miss Sirius more, and blame himself, as unreasonably as only a Gryffindor could, for Sirius existing in some kind of limbo.

The Gods only what this information would do to the werewolf.

As for Sirius hanging around Grimmauld Place, Draco figured it would make Harry (and Lupin, for that matter) feel better, on the surface. Harry would likely find it somewhat comforting, that he was there, with him, and he would probably like the idea that Sirius could see and hear him, even if Sirius couldn't really interact with him.

But, there was the possibility that the one-sidedness of it all would chafe. What if Harry eventually found it unfair that Sirius was *there* but *not there*? What if talking to a ghost he could not see only made him feel more empty and lonely. If this was the case, it would only make him miss Sirius more-- not to mention the burden of guilt that Gryffindors were so fond of.

Lupin, of course, would pine. He would do it quietly, like he did everything, so that no else noticed, but he would still pine, and Draco would know he was doing it. This would only make Draco feel guilty, and the Gods knew that right now, he had enough to feel guilty about.

Suddenly, Draco was assaulted by several unsavory mental pictures. Lupin, casting sullen, furtive glances in the corners. Harry, peering expectantly at every shadow or trick of the lights. Granger, sitting up all night with large, dusty books, hoping to figure out exactly where Sirius was. Lupin, closeted in his quarters with tea set for two. Harry, addressing long, tearful diatribes to an empty, darkened room.

An ill-advised and possibly bloody resurrection attempt in that haunted, Hogsmeade hovel Harry's father and his gang used to hang out in.

Draco shuddered, and shook his head to clear away those unwelcome thoughts. The resurrection attempt would never come to pass, not with Dumbledore mucking about, but the rest was plausible enough.

He glanced over at Harry, and his chest felt leaden. He didn't like keeping things from Harry, especially something like this, but it rather seemed like there was no other way.

Of course, Sirius had asked Draco to tell Harry he loved him. But, Sirius had sounded like he intended to find a way back, for good. If he did, then there was no need for Draco to say anything, because Sirius would be able to tell Harry, himself.

It would mean more coming from Sirius, at any rate, and Harry and Lupin would not drive themselves to distraction in the meantime.

"Bugger!" Harry swore. Draco turned to see him nursing what looked like a bleeding knuckle.

"You alright?" Draco asked.

"Yeah." Harry grumbled. He stuck the offending knuckle in his mouth, which only reminded Draco he hadn't had sex in a week.

"You know." Draco said slowly, trying not to look at the way Harry's lips were wrapped around his finger. "I am starting to think Voldemort had his facts wrong.

XXI Chambers and Secrets (Part Two)

Molly Weasley had been in the kitchen trying to eavesdrop on whatever Ron and Hermione were whispering about when she heard it.

"MUM!"

Fred.

And he sounded desperate. Frantic. Quickly, she abandoned the kitchen and made her way to the back of the house, a tight heaviness settling in her chest.

"MUM!"

She arrived in the infirmary to see two pairs of brown eyes blinking at her, and her earlier panic left her in a rush. George was awake.

"Oh, George!" She exclaimed, rushing to his bed. "You're awake."

"Yeah." George said, quietly.

"How do you feel?" She asked nervously, running the back of her hand over his forehead and cheeks.

"Geroff, Mum." He grinned, waving her off affectionately. "I'm fine. Just a bit tired." His words were a bit slurred, probably from whatever Pomfrey had been dosing him with.

"Tired?" Fred joked. "You've been asleep for a week!"

Molly could not help but notice that already, some of the color was returning to Fred's face. In a matter of moments, he had become a completely different person. The worried, sullen boy she had seen all week had abruptly turned back into her son.

"Well, what did I miss?" George asked his brother. "How did the battle go? Well, I take it, since we are here, and not some dungeon of You-Know-Who's."

"What do you remember?" Mrs. Weasley asked gently. With an injury like the one he took, she'd be surprised if he remembered much, at all.

"We went to Hermione's. That Wormtail fellow came and talked on for a bit, then Fred tossed a Bat-Bogey at him." George said slowly.

"Then, Wormtail and Ron rolled about on the floor. We went into the kitchen, came back out. Ginny shot something over my head. Yellow, I think it was. But after that, nothing."

"A Death Eater named Dolohov cursed you." Mrs. Weasley provided. He remembered more than she figured he would. "It was extremely nasty. Tore through all your internal organs, and you passed out. Fred Apparated you back here."

"I was so worried." Fred admitted, color rushing to his cheeks. Molly tried to ignore that he was holding George's hand on the coverlet.

There would be plenty of time for *that* conversation, but now was not it.

"You look like Hell." George said to Fred honestly. Molly could only agree. "Have you slept at all?"

"A little." Fred said, a bit sheepishly. "In here, mostly."

"On that ghastly chair, I'm sure." George said, though his tone was fond, and he was lightly stroking Fred's hand with his thumb. "Couldn't you do something with him, Mum?"

"I tried." Molly said, a bit irritably. "I've been trying for years. With both of you, really." She sighed, and smiled, despite everything. "Better him sleeping on that chair, then out in the hall, outside the door."

"Fred." George said.

"Oh, and like you didn't, when I took that Bludger?" Fred gave back. George narrowed his eyes, and Fred smiled triumphantly. "Here, we're even, now. One night on the floor, and six nights on a bloody uncomfortable chair, each."

Molly had the sneaking suspicion Fred had slept *in* George's bed as much as next to it. Probably would have been more, if not for Madam Pomfrey.

"I suppose we are, at that." George said. Then he turned to his mother, and gave her a curious look. "What happened at Stonehenge, then?"

"You-Know-Who got away, but he didn't get the Crystal Sword." Molly said. "Harry and Draco are there now, getting it out of the secret chamber, so it can be taken somewhere safe."

"Malfoy." George said, shaking his head. "Are he and Harry still together?"

"Yes." Fred said.

"Has Ron tried to kill him, yet?" George asked.

"Surprisingly, no." Fred said. "Ron's been right carking about it, since the battle. Hasn't sneered at him, once. He even came in here once or twice to sit with him and Harry."

"More to sit with Harry, I'm sure." George mused. "But, it's a start, and that."

"True." Fred agreed. "Of course, he's been a bit off since it all happened. He's gone all quiet, like. Hardly even talks to Hermione, anymore."

"That's odd, for him." George observed. "Is he well? He didn't take some rogue curse, did he?"

"He's fine." Molly replied firmly, in a tone that said this topic was no longer open for discussion.

She knew they would likely find out eventually, but it was Ron's story to tell, and only if he wished to tell it.

"Mum." George wheedled.

"No." Molly said.

Fred sighed heavily, and exchanged a look with George that said he thought she was wobbling.

"Fred." She countered. "Now that George is awake, it seems to me then you can leave off fidgeting at his bedside like a widowed fishwife."

She winced inwardly at her choice of words, and Fred paled a bit, but George did not seem to notice.

"It's past time you had a real meal, or a decent lie-down." She declared. "Or a shower, for that matter." She added, wrinkling her nose for effect.

"I do not smell!" Fred snapped. Molly wrinkled her nose again. "And stop doing your nose like that, Mum!"

"You are a bit ripe, mate." George commented.

Fred sighed, but allowed Molly to lead him out of the infirmary.

~*~

Severus Snape was, without a doubt, completely up a creek.

He was alive, which he supposed he should be grateful for. He was also not chained, bound, or otherwise imprisoned, another thing he supposed he should be grateful for.

However, given how pear-shaped everything at Stonehenge and the Granger's had gone, he knew it was only a matter of time.

Once Voldemort regained his strength and had some time to think, he would immediately cry betrayal. Accusations would start flying around like moths to a flame, and since the situation involved both *Dumbledore* and *Potter*, the one to get burned would probably be Severus.

He was pinning his hopes on the business about Potter being in two places at once. Potter was very obviously at Stonehenge, Voldemort saw him with his own eyes. With that in mind, once Dolohov and his crew started spinning tales about Potter being at the Granger's, Voldemort would hopefully, turn his suspicious eye on that lot.

Of course, seven or eight people insisting it was Potter under the influence of Cruciatus could possibly be enough to swing that eye back in Severus' direction.

And Zabini, unsurprisingly, had infuriatingly little to say. Granted, in the week he had spent recovering in Zabini's basement, he had seen very little of Zabini. Once it had looked like Severus would live, his care and treatment had been turned over to one of Zabini's house-elves.

There was no way to tell who had brought him down, because most of his injuries had not come from a curse. He had been hit by a particularly strong Full Body Bind, which, in and of itself, did little damage. While lying patiently in the wet grass as it wore off, he had been trampled by several people intent on getting from one side of the monument to the other, a prone figure on the ground notwithstanding.

A large number of boots to the soft parts of his body had managed to rupture something-- something he body apparently needed, because his body had shut down spectacularly shortly afterward.

Severus had known, going into this battle, that he was going to get hurt. He had spent most of the battle shooting impressive-looking but mostly useless spells at no one in particular, but there had been no way for the Order to return the favor. The Order members had not had a way to differentiate between him and any other Death Eater, so he had hoped for the best and had tried to stay out of the way of anything particularly nasty.

Which meant that the Order member who had knocked him on his arse was unaware they did it, but that was probably for the best. If it had been Dumbledore, that would be one thing. If it was Potter, that would absolutely be the living end, so he figured he was better off not knowing.

He had no memory of being brought to Zabini's, and had slept the first three days after his arrival. Zabini had visited him twice since he had been awake, once to tell him what had happened to him, and then to tell him how the plan, in general, had failed.

He had done his best to act surprised, and Zabini had appeared to believe him.

He had not seen Zabini since, but that was probably for the best, as well. The less talking he did, the less chance he had of bugging himself up.

A loud crack gave Severus a start, and he breathed a huge sigh of relief to see it was a house-elf.

"Does Master be feeling better?" The house-elf asked cheerfully. Snape could not remember its name. He had the sneaking suspicion it was female, but it was difficult to tell, with house-elves.

"I am fine." Severus said, honestly.

After six days of fairly uninterrupted rest, and the endless supply of potions the house-elf had been feeding him, he felt quite well, aside from a slight tenderness in his side and a dull headache.

"Does Master require anything?" The house-elf asked.

"No, thank you." Severus replied briskly.

What he wanted, the house-elf would not be able to provide. He needed to get word to the Order that he was still alive, though he was not sure how he could manage it. Zabini's basement was woefully lacking a Floo, and he wagered any missives sent with the house-elf would be run past Zabini first.

The only other option, he decided as the house-elf Apparated away, was a personal appearance. It was, however, fairly implausible.

Yesterday, the house-elf had commented that he would need another week in bed, meaning that any request to be sent home would be politely rebuffed. Zabini's house was large, and fairly deserted-- Zabini was a widower, and only had one child, but Severus did not trust his ability to navigate his way through an sprawling, unfamiliar house without alerting someone to his presence.

Apparation was the only way. Severus felt strong enough to do it, the only question was if the house would let him. Zabini was a Death Eater, and any Death Eater worth his salt would have his house spelled against unauthorized entries and exits. The house-elf could Apparate, but that meant nothing. Malfoy Manor had been spelled to the teeth, and Lucius' house-elves had Apparated around the house with no trouble at all.

Sighing, Severus heaved himself out of bed and cast about for his wand. There was no sense in mapping out an Apparation attempt that would likely get him splinched if he didn't have the tools to do it with.

After a short, perfunctory search Severus found it in the trunk at the foot of the bed. He was glad to see his clothes were inside, as well. Zabini (or the house-elf) had dressed him in pajamas similar to the kind Madam Pomfrey favored, and he had no desire to knock on the front door of Grimmauld Place in blue-striped cotton flannel.

Once dressed, he cast a handful of simple charms to discern if his wand had been tampered with. It seemed well and good, so he cast a charm that would show how the room was spelled. The basement door was not Locked with a charm, but the room was warded against Apparation.

There was, however, a small, slanted window in the corner of the basement. It was a long, wide window, but not very tall, and he was not entirely sure he would fit through it.

The window was spelled, but it was a fairly easy charm to work through, and since a house-elf did not appear immediately after he disarmed it, it was presumably not linked to anything else. Pushing a chair up to the window, he opened it, and started to squeeze his way through.

It was an incredibly tight fit, and he was forced to wriggle through it like a snake. By the time he made it outside his clothes were covered in dirt and grass, but there was nothing for it. Besides, it was still a marked improvement on the pajamas.

As soon as he stood he froze, because there was someone directly in front of him. The figure was a good ways off, and his back was turned to Snape, but he was fairly sure it was Zabini's son, Blaise. Apparently, the window he had crawled through had deposited him in a garden, because Severus' luck was not bad enough, Blaise had picked there and now to relax with a book.

Cursing inwardly, he moved silently to a tree, trying to shield himself from both Blaise and the house. There were no house-elf appearances, which meant no one knew he was gone, but there was a good chance that would not last much longer. Blaise was less than twenty feet away, and Zabini's house had more windows than any two houses Severus had ever seen.

Severus took a deep breath, and Apparated.

~*~

"What?" Harry asked, around a mouthful of bleeding knuckle.

"I said, maybe Voldemort had his facts wrong." Draco offered.

"Why do you say that?" Harry asked, tapping on a new section of wall with the other hand.

"Look at this place!" Draco said impatiently. "If this thing is as special and important as everyone keeps on about, why in the name of Merlin would it be stashed down here?"

"Because someone was trying to hide it." Harry insisted.

"But down here?" Draco asked, incredulously. Despite his protests, he

started tapping on a section of wall, again "You know how wizards are. They would want something like that in a museum, or the Ministry."

Harry snorted. "The Ministry?" He scoffed. That folderol with the prophecy had proved how well the Ministry could keep something safe."

"Yeah, alright." Draco conceded. "The Ministry is a bunch of asshats. But still, this place is dreadful."

"You want some torches, what?" Harry said. He frowned at the bit of wall in front of him, it sounded as solid as the last. "Some wall hangings?"

"At least." Draco said. "A statue of Salazar would not go wrong, mind."

"He was an ugly fellow, if you ask me." Harry joked. "That statue was hideous. Especially after the basilisk bit its nose off."

"Basilisk." Draco muttered. "You have all the fun, you know that?"

Harry turned to fix him with a very flat, warning look.

"Well, its true." Draco went on, paying Harry's narrowed eyes no mind. "I was in the dungeons, *sleeping*, and you were underneath the school, fighting a basilisk and saving the Weasel's sister from certain death."

"Of course, that whole bit proved my theory that You-Know-Who is off is rocker." Draco said. "I mean, of all the people in the school, he picked Ginny Weasley to open the Chamber."

"She had the diary." Harry said, noncommittally. Actually, Draco's father had picked Ginny Weasley, but Harry was not about to bring that up.

Suddenly, Harry remembered something he had not thought of in years-- the Polyjuice incident. The recollection of it, him and Ron and Crabbe and Goyle, and Hermione's face covered in whiskers, made him snicker.

"What's so funny?" Draco asked, suspiciously.

"Nothing." Harry lied. Draco still didn't know about that, and it was probably better that way. "Only, I was so convinced it was you."

"Of course you were." Draco drawled, looking more than a little flattered.

"You're not mad?" Harry asked, a bit sheepishly.

"No." Draco laughed. "Completely understandable. Besides, I was pretty sure it was you."

"You thought it was me?" Harry asked. "I'm not a pureblood."

"True." Draco agreed. "But, you were always hanging around when someone went stiff, and there was that whole talking to snakes bit." Draco said. "So yeah, I did. And so did everyone else, until you pulled that sword out of nowhere and killed the basilisk."

"The Sorting Hat." Harry offered.

"What about it?" Draco asked, bewildered.

"I pulled the sword out of the Sorting Hat." Harry explained.

"What the shit was the Sorting Hat doing under the school?" Draco demanded, fixing Harry with a quizzical look.

"Fawkes brought it." Harry said.

Draco raised an eyebrow, then abruptly held up a hand. "You know what, never mind. I don't think I want to know."

"Probably not." Harry said cheekily.

"You found anything, yet?" Draco asked, after a bit.

"No." Harry said. "You?"

"No." Draco replied.

Then, Draco's eyes went wide, and he looked very much like he wanted to kick himself in his own arse.

"Of course!" He said. "*Cartus!*"

The room light up briefly, washed in a bright flash of light a shade of

orange it was almost red. It disappeared as quickly as it came. Harry could not see what it had done, but Draco looked pleased with himself.

"There." Draco said, pointing. "Just behind you."

On the back wall, a thin tracery of the same orangish-red light was etched into the stone, in the shape of a door.

"Brilliant!" Harry exclaimed. He may have all the fun, but Draco knew all the good spells. "What was that?"

"Map-making spell." Draco said.

Harry glanced over to see the same orange light was outlining the opening they had come in through. He wondered if this was the same spell the Marauders had used to make the map. He also wondered where Draco had learned it. Most of his interesting spells had come from his father, but cartography was not quite what sprang to mind when Harry thought of the Dark Arts.

"How do we get in?" Harry asked, pushing in the center of the door-shaped space experimentally.

"The old-fashioned way, no doubt." Draco said. "*Alohamora!*"

Nothing.

"*Admitimante!*"

"*Abiertus!*"

"*Adaperio!*"

The stone still defiantly did nothing.

Harry, frustrated and out of unlocking charms, did the only other thing he could think of-- kicking the stone wall with all his might. This immediately proved to be a bad idea, as not only did the wall not move, but sharp, white hot pain exploded in his foot and shot up his leg.

"Bugger!" He swore, wincing. He leaned into the wall, resting his forehead against the rough stone. "Bloody fucking Hell, that hurt!"

"Some hero you are, breaking your foot before we've even done anything." Draco griped. He sighed indulgently, and walked over to Harry. "Take off your shoe."

"It's fine." Harry said irritably. It wasn't quite fine, but the pain was already subsiding to a dull ache. He heard Draco chuckle behind him, and allowed Draco to turn him around to face him.

"We'll get in." Draco soothed, stroking Harry's hair.

"How?" Harry demanded.

"I'm sure I know some more unlocking charms." He informed. "I just can't think of any right now."

This did not improve Harry's mood. "But..." Harry started.

"Shhh." Draco interrupted, grabbing a handful of his shirt. "You talk too much."

With that, Draco kissed him, a slow, soft exploration of his mouth that made him flush hot and cold in waves. The song was a sudden jolt to his system, he hadn't been able to touch Draco in days, not under Madame Pomfrey's watchful eye. He'd been wanting this, desperately, not that now was the time or place.

Draco didn't seem to care that they were supposed to be finding the Crystal Sword, that there were people waiting for them above ground, or that Draco probably wasn't well enough for this kind of thing. He deepened the kiss, coaxing Harry's mouth open with his tongue, and sliding his hands up to Harry's shoulders.

"We can't do this now." Harry complained, more than a bit half-heartedly.

"Of course we can." Draco said, his lips moving along Harry's jaw and down his neck. "We already are."

Abruptly, Harry stopped arguing, because Draco's hand was slipping inside his pants, and his long, clever fingers were curling around his cock.

"I've missed you." Draco hissed in his ear, his voice quiet and hoarse.

Suddenly, the mouth on Harry's neck and ears was gone, because it was around his cock, sweet, wet suction that made his knees feel weak. He tried to protest one more time, but it came out as a moan, so he gave up. He leaned back into the stone wall and let the song cloud his mind.

Draco's hands wandered up his legs and thighs. somehow hot on his skin through the material of his jeans. They moved around to his arse, Draco's fingers sliding between him and the wall, squeezing and kneading and pushing him farther into Draco's mouth.

"Fuck, Draco." Harry mumbled, as Draco's tongue swirled around him.

Then, there was loud noise, like a lightning crack, and Harry was falling. He wall he was leaning on gave way, sending him flat on his back with a loud thump and a large cloud of dust.

"What the fuck?" Draco spat, looking around from where he was sprawled on top of Harry.

Harry didn't reply. He gaped at where the wall had been for a bit, then scrambled out from under Draco. He hauled Draco to his feet by a hand, walked through the new doorway.

Inside, the new chamber was smaller than the last. The walls were lined with the same kind of stone as the outer chamber, and the ceiling was so low Harry's head almost brushed it.

Against the back wall, the Crystal Sword lay on a low, flat stone. It was, in fact, crafted of crystal; flawless, perfectly transparent crystal that glittered in the soft, yellow wandlight. It was shaped exactly like a sword, from the ornately carved handle to the long, flat blade and extremely sharp-looking point.

"This is it, then." Draco asked.

"Guess so." Harry said.

"Good, we found it." Draco drawled.

With that, he spun Harry around and started lowering him to the floor.

"What are you doing?" Harry asked.

"Finishing what I started." Draco said, smiling wickedly. He pulled Harry's jeans down past his knees, and wrapped his hand around his cock. "Now, where was I?"

"Oh fuck." Harry gasped, as Draco's mouth enveloped him.

They shouldn't do this, not here, and not now, but the song was loud and coaxing, as if telling him it was fine. The small portion of his brain capable of rational thought supposed it was fine. They had found the Crystal Sword, it was just across the small chamber. Another five minutes wouldn't hurt anything.

And that was all it was going to last, if Draco did not stop doing *that* with his tongue.

But, Draco did it again; swirling around his head and teasing his slit before swallowing him back down. Harry sat up, leaning himself on his elbows, so he could see Draco, so he could watch his cock disappear into Draco's mouth.

Draco returned the gaze, his gray eyes dark and heavy with arousal. Harry could see through the tangle of their limbs that Draco's pants were undone, that Draco was touching himself while he sucked him. This sent a new, burning wave of heat to his belly, but it also seemed incredibly unfair, that Draco was touching Harry and himself and Harry didn't get to touch anything at all.

"Come here." Harry breathed, reaching down to tug Draco around by his arm.

Seeming to understand, Draco moved, shifting and twisting himself until they were lying side by side, head to toe, and Harry could get his mouth around Draco's cock.

Draco hissed when Harry's tongue darted out to sweep over the head of his cock, and he arched into Harry, urging for more contact. Harry obliged, taking him in all the way, and felt Draco moan around him when his cock hit the back of Harry's throat.

The song was even more beautiful than before after not hearing it for several days, a striking, lilting melody that seemed to resonate from inside Harry's body. It grew louder as Harry's hands wandered Draco's legs and thighs, grew stronger as lips and tongue worked over Draco's cock.

Draco's breathing was ragged now, every hitch and catch vibrated around his cock. Harry's hands skirted around to Draco's arse, mapping out the perfect, pale flesh. He brushed a finger over Draco's entrance, not entering, just massaging it gently, and Draco came, with a low, rumbling growl around Harry's cock that made him shake.

Then, Draco did the same to him and his he broke apart, the song roaring loudly in his ears the moment before his vision came back.

Suddenly, he was on his feet, with Draco's arms wrapped around him. Draco was kissing him, trading their tastes back and forth with gentle, languid swipes of his tongue.

"Mister Potter?" Dumbledore intoned, his voice echoing through both chambers. "Mister Malfoy? Everything alright down there?"

"Everything is fine." Harry called back, his voice a bit shaky as he tried to right his clothing.

"Are you sure?" Remus asked. He sounded amused. "Should I come down there?"

"We'll be right with you." Draco returned, his voice dripping with irritation.

Harry snickered at that, and turned his attention to the Crystal Sword.

He wasn't sure what to expect when he laid his hand on it, but he had figured he would feel something. He did not-- no strange tingle or surge or magic. It was simply cold, and, he discovered when he tried to lift it, a bit heavy.

A Levitation spell from Dumbledore, aimed through the entrance to the chamber, brought him back aboveground, and Draco came up right behind him. He was acutely aware of his disheveled appearance, but he did his best to ignore it, and tried desperately not to blush.

Harry could have, however, down with the wry, knowing smile from Remus.

"Good work, Mister Potter. Mister Malfoy." Dumbledore said, his eyes twinkling a bit to merrily. He reached out, and took the Crystal Sword from Harry. "Good work, indeed."

"What are you going to do with it?" Harry asked.

"Take it to Hogwarts, of course." Dumbledore said. "It's the safest place, I believe."

Harry hoped, fervently, that Dumbledore's plan to keep it safe did not involve one of Hagrid's pets.

"If you prefer, Albus, I will take it, myself." Caiohme offered. "There is no place safer than Avalon."

"Once again, Lady, I am in your debt." Dumbledore said, bowing his head to her. "It would be a great weight off my shoulders, to know it is no longer in the world of men."

Caiohme merely smiled her serene, ageless smile, and nodded in return.

"Gather around, then." Dumbledore said, pulling the portkey out of his robes. "It is best we get going. The priestesses will need to close the chamber, now, and I am sure they would rather do it in private."

Draco captured one of his hands, making the song hum softly. Just as Draco laid their clasped hands on the portkey, Harry ventured one last look at the priestesses, over Remus' shoulder. Then, the familiar hook yanked at his navel and he felt himself being pulled away; a myth ringing in his ears, and a legend disappearing before his eyes.

Epilogue Happy Birthday, Mister Potter

"Surprise!"

There was a flash of light as Draco stepped into the Burrow behind Harry that could not be blamed on the Floo. Then, there were several explosions, a shower of confetti, and veritable throng of people looking at Harry expectantly.

Harry looked a bit sheepish. Lupin, Hermione, and several Weasleys looked happy to be there. Draco, on the other hand, was extremely confused.

"Harry Birthday, mate!" Ron offered, punctuated by another shower of confetti.

"It's your birthday?" Draco asked, mortified. "Why didn't you say something?"

"Right." Harry mumbled. "I forgot."

"You did not." Draco snapped.

"Harry." Fred chided. Draco watched him warily as he approached, expecting another explosion. "You didn't tell the Ferret it was your birthday?"

"It never came up." Harry offered lamely.

"Bad show, mate." George said. "Very bad show."

"I didn't get you anything." Draco complained, as Harry was led to a rickety looking table covered in gifts.

"Granger." Draco hissed, catching her by the arm. "Keep him busy."

"Where are you going?" Hermione asked.

"Diagon Alley." Draco replied.

"You most certainly are not!" Hermione protested. "It's not safe."

"But." Draco started.

"No." She said firmly. There were cheers and chuckles from the assembled crowd as Harry opened his gift from George, which fittingly, was a stuffed Ferret. "I'll go, if you'd like."

"I don't think so." Draco snorted. "You'll come back with books. On potions, or some rubbish."

Hermione made an indignant sound, but she looked like she knew he was right.

"Ten minutes." Draco pleaded.

"No. You are not going to Diagon Alley!" She said, in a fair imitation of

Mrs. Weasley. Clearly, they had been spending too much time together.

"Hogsmeade?" Draco offered.

"I said no." Hermione said. "If you get killed getting him a silly birthday present, he will be very upset."

"It'll be fine." Draco insisted. "My father is dead, if you remember."

He paused, eyeing the black, silk trolleys Ginny had given him. He didn't know what she was on about, giving his boyfriend underpants. Evidently, he and Ginny Weasley needed to have a chat.

Though, he had to admit, Harry would look nice in them.

"Your father..." Hermione started.

"Of course! My father!" Draco said. "I'm going to the Manor. I am sure there is something lying around there I can give him."

"Draco." Hermione warned.

"Just keep him busy." Draco admonished, before diving for the Floo.

Draco was, in fact, back at the Burrow in eight minutes, not that it had any effect on the murderous glare Hermione was favoring him with when he came back through the Floo.

Granted, it might have had something to do with the rather large snake wrapped around his neck.

"Bloody Hell!" Ron shouted, eyeing it fearfully.

"Happy birthday, Harry." Draco said sweetly, handing over a tan and black python.

Harry, Draco noted, looked pleased. The snake twisted itself around to face Harry, its tongue flicking out to touch Harry's nose.

"Where did you get it?" Harry asked, smiling.

"It's mine." Draco said. "Was mine." He corrected. "I figured you might as well have it. I can't talk to it, or anything."

Harry smiled again. Then, to both Draco's amusement and horror, he talked to it. Draco had wanted to hear Harry talk to a snake since that one time in second year. Unfortunately, he had not expected that low, sibilant hissing to have such an unwarranted effect on his cock.

"He says you named him Mephistopheles." Harry announced.

"Fitting." Hermione said, with a snort.

"Harry." Draco said quickly, ignoring her, and the tightness in his pants. "I have something else for you, too."

Draco snapped his fingers. There was a crack, followed by the appearance of a house-elf. The house-elf eyed the group of people for a moment. When her eyes landed on Harry, they widened a bit, then she walked over to him purposely.

"Master, I is Dipsy." The house-elf announced. "Old Master Draco says I belong to you, now. He says I is to obey you in all things, just like I did for him."

Harry looked stunned.

"DRACO MALFOY!" Hermione screeched, rounding on him with all the fury he had expected. "I KNOW YOU DID NOT GIVE HIM A HOUSE-ELF FOR HIS BIRTHDAY!"

"It's your fault." He drawled. "You should have let me go to Diagon Alley."

~*~

A loudly cleared throat brought Remus' attention to the doorway, and he gave a start at what he saw. Albus Dumbledore was standing in his room, and there was a twinkle in his eyes that, from Dumbledore, frankly worrying.

"Headmaster." Remus said, smiling. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Mister Lupin." Dumbledore said cheerfully. "I am glad you are in." He added, as if Remus had the habit of disappearing for days at a time. "I need a word."

"Won't you come all the way in?" Remus offered. "Tea, perhaps."

"No tea." Dumbledore declined. With a wave of his wand, he conjured a large, chintz armchair and sat down. "I don't have the time. Just a quick question, and I will be on my way."

Dumbledore paused. Remus wondered if this was where the mad twinkle in his eyes would come into play.

"I need a favor, Mister Lupin." Dumbledore said finally. "It would seem that I am, once again, without a Defense Against the Dark Arts professor."

Remus had a fleeting moment of confusion, wherein he didn't understand what this had to do with him.

"I was wondering if you would be willing to help me out, in that regard." Dumbledore finished.

"You can't be serious." Remus managed, after gaping at Dumbledore in disbelief for more than a few moments.

"I am afraid I am." Dumbledore said airily. "Good help is difficult to find these days."

"But, Headmaster, I'm..."

"Mister Lupin, don't tell me you are a werewolf." Dumbledore interrupted, with a dry smile. "Shockingly, I already know." He quipped. "You'd be surprised at the kinds of things I notice over the course of twenty-five years."

"Do you think it is safe?" Remus asked, undeterred.

"As long as you take your potion every month, I do not foresee a problem." Dumbledore insisted.

"Are you sure you don't want to ask someone else, first?" Remus asked.

"Of course not." Dumbledore replied. "If I did, I would not be in your room."

Remus continued to gape, and Dumbledore smiled.

"My only other option is Severus." Dumbledore went on. "But then, I would be without a Potions Master, and you are dreadful at potions."

Remus let out a single bark of laughter, and shook his head at Dumbledore.

"You're mad, you know that?" Remus asked.

"Indeed." Dumbledore replied.

With that, he stood, and the armchair disappeared. He paused at the door, and looked back at Remus.

"I'll see you September the First, then?" He asked.

Remus opened his mouth to tell him no, but shut it with a snap. There was suddenly a warmth around him he could not explain, almost if someone was leaning over his chair behind him, with their arms wrapped around his neck.

"Of course." Remus said, though for the life of him, he did not understand why.

~*~

Being inside Draco was better than any present he had received. Tight, pulsing heat that swallowed him whole, coupled with a chorus of phoenixes singing in his ears so loud and sweet he understood why people thought it was a myth.

"I love you." Draco murmured, wrapping his arms around him tightly.

"I love you, too." Harry whispered, leaning in to kiss him.

Draco writhed under him and he thrust, arching his hips into Harry in a way that buried Harry impossibly deep inside. He loved the way Draco felt; the soft-over-hard play of muscles and skin underneath him, the velvet-hot heat around him. It was too much, too wonderful, every single time, and on days like today, where everything else had been perfect, it seemed almost too good to be true.

He moaned as Draco's mouth found his neck, a sweet slide of lips over skin that made him shiver. Draco's fingers raked his back, pulling him close, and he thrust harder, wanting to be closer, wanting to crawl inside Draco and never come out.

Harry wanted to go slow, wanted to make it last forever, but he couldn't stop himself, couldn't control the way his body was moving. The song was loud in his ears, needy and desperate, and Draco was begging with his voice and his body; low, breathy words tumbling out of his mouth, and hard, bucking movements that met Harry's thrusts.

He shifted, lifting Draco's hips to move to his knees, angling himself in a way he knew would hit Draco's prostate every time. Draco cried out underneath him, moving his body in perfect rhythm with Harry's thrusts.

Harry fucked him harder, wanting to make Draco scream, wanting to hear Draco shout his name the way he always did, right before he broke apart. He slid his hands over Draco's body; one curling around his cock, the other teasing a nipple, and Draco did, Harry's name ripped out of his throat with a hoarse cry as he came in Harry's hand.

The chords of the phoenix song shifted into a pure, single note, and Harry came, filling Draco with a low moan and a shudder.

"Happy Birthday." Draco said quietly, kissing Harry's neck.

"Hermione's going to kill you, you know." Harry said, with a chuckle. "A house-elf?"

"Serves her right." Draco insisted. "She wouldn't let me go to Diagon Alley, and I had to get you something."

"No, you didn't." Harry replied, kissing him. "I already have everything I want."

~*~

FIN